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"Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani"

Compiled from writings of Samuel Zwemer,
August Van Ryn, and J. Oswald Sanders

"I delivered unto you first of all," says the apostle Paul, "that which I received, that Christ died for our sins" (1 Cor. 15:3). The Greek word translated "first" can also be rendered "before all," or at the "forefront of all truth." The death of Christ on the cross is of first importance and is the weightiest article of the faith. It is fundamental. It is the keystone of the arch, the cornerstone of the temple of truth. That is evident from the place the death of Christ occupies in the Scriptures and in the apostolic message. The evidence is cumulative and overwhelming. The cross is not merely a universal symbol of Christianity, it is Scripture's universal and unmistakable message. It is the very heart of the gospel. Nothing convicts of sin like the cross. The cross of Christ is the searchlight of God. It reveals God's love and man's sin; God's power and man's helplessness; God's holiness and man's pollution. As the altar and propitiation are "first of all" in the Old Testament, so the cross and atonement are "first of all" in the New.

Consider the place the account of the crucifixion occupies in the New Testament. It is mentioned in every book except in three short epistles, Philemon and the Second and Third of John. The Synoptic gospels devote more space proportionally to it than to any other aspect of Christ's life or teaching. Matthew relates the cross of Christ in two long chapters of one hundred forty-one verses. Mark gives one hundred nineteen verses contained in two chapters, the longest of the sixteen. Luke devotes two long chapters to describe the arrest and crucifixion. Nearly one half of John's gospel deals with the Passion Week.

The Cross and the New Testament

In the Book of Acts, all the preaching centers in the death and resurrection of our Lord. This is the "Good News." "He showed Himself alive after His passion" (1:3). The climax of Peter's sermon at Pentecost was Jesus "delivered up by the determinate counsel and the foreknowledge of God," crucified and slain "by the hand of lawless men." "This Jesus whom ye crucified God hath made both Lord and Christ" (2:36). Again, in the temple, Peter has the same message: "Ye asked for a murderer...and killed the Prince of Life." Philip opened his mouth and, from Isaiah 53, he preached the death of Christ to the Ethiopian eunuch as the good tidings (8:35). Cornelius received the same message about the One "whom they slew, hanging him on a tree, whom

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**Samuel M.
Zwemer**

(1867-1952)

Missionary Scholar

God raised up the third day”(10:40). Paul at Antioch tells of Jesus “who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried, and on the third day rose again from the dead”(13:28-29).

In the epistles of Paul, we are overwhelmed by the wealth of evidence and abundance of proof that his one message was the Cross. He had been preaching this good news for fifteen years before any of the New Testament epistles were written. It is the heart of his message to the Romans as well as to the Thessalonians. He writes, “Jesus gave Himself for our sins;” he then warns, “Though we or an angel from heaven preach a gospel to you contrary to what we have received, let him be anathema” (Galatians 1:8).

If Jesus of Nazareth were merely a man and not, as He is, the Son of God and our Savior, His tragic death would still be the greatest event in human history. The wealth of detail given in the biblical record of His suffering and crucifixion, the seven words from the cross, the effect on all who saw it and on all nations and all ages — these all indicate its universal importance. Of all the Lord’s sayings on the cross, His so-called “orphan’s cry” is the most searching and the most profound.

“Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani”

“Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour”(Matthew 27:45). Man had done his worst, and now he is through. The Son of God is now shut in, in deep darkness, alone with God as the fearful problem of sin is settled before God. All of man’s awful sin is borne by divine love. And from the darkness comes that solemn cry: “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”(Matt. 27:46). That question did not ring out from our Savior’s very soul for His own sake. He knew He was forsaken of God because God is holy. His cry had been answered long ago in prophecy, in the twenty-second Psalm. In that hour of supreme dread, God Himself forsook His only Son, so that those who trust Him for salvation might never be forsaken — now or forever. There are three unique features in this cry:

1. “My God” — *It is the only time*, as far as we know, during His entire life that the Lord Jesus Christ ever addressed God as “My God.” On earth He always spoke to God as “Father,” which was Christ’s claim to deity. When He cried on the cross, “My God,” it demonstrated Christ’s claim to perfect humanity. Only as Man could He truly be said to have a “God.” On the cross He took my place, man’s place, and so addressed God as “His God,” not as “Father.” There on Calvary, He took the guilty sinner’s place, and so, was forsaken of God, as He bore our sins in His own body on the cross.

2. “Why” — *It is the only time* the Lord ever asked “why” in regard to Himself. He never needed to ask why, because, as Peter so well said, “Thou knowest all things.” On the cross Jesus asked “Why,” not because He did not know, but that we might never forget why He was forsaken there. It was because he took our — guilty sinners’ — place.

3. “Forsaken” — *It is the only time* anyone ever has been forsaken of God this side of eternity. Hereafter, the sinner shall hear those solemn words: “Depart from Me, ye cursed,” but not on this side of the grave. He was forsaken that we might never be; He died that we might live.

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August Van Ryn

(1890-1982)

Author and preacher

This saying of the Lord on the cross is recorded in both Matthew and Mark; the same words occur in the opening verse of Psalm twenty-two, yet neither gospel writer refers to them as a fulfillment of prophecy. That there is something of singular force and feeling in these words of Jesus on the cross is evident from the fact that both Matthew and Mark give us the very words in the language the Lord used while here on earth. The cry expresses suffering that was never at any other time felt in this world and never will be again. To the believer, however, this cry is a revelation of the deep suffering and anguish our Savior bore, and a proof of His deep love for sinners. It challenges us, with all the saints, to sound the depths of "what is the length and breadth and height and depth of the love of God which passes knowledge."

The Answer to our Lord's Question "Why"

Never before in addressing the Father had this word crossed His lips, nor did it ever again. This experience was unique and unparalleled. We find in part the answer to this question in the early verses of Psalm 22. The answer to the "why" in verse one is found in verse three: "But Thou art holy, O Thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel." He was forsaken that we might learn from the anguish of His experience the greatness of our sin that made it necessary, and that we might know how entirely He took it and bore it away. During the hours of darkness "He who knew no sin was made sin for us" (2 Cor. 5:21). That was the cause of His Father's averted face. It was not that God was ever hostile to His well-beloved Son — it was holiness turning away from sin.

The exact time of the uttering of this statement is not absolutely clear. It is possible that this cry occurred at the close of the three hours of darkness — if indeed they did not terminate them. The word "hast" could be appropriately rendered "didst." With the agony of desolation now past, the Savior looks back at the woe and sorrow of that which He had experienced. He could redeem us from the curse of the law only by being "made a curse for us" (Galatians 3:13). This necessarily involved His being forsaken of God who "hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6).

It was no new experience for the Lord to find Himself forsaken. His own brothers neither believed in Him nor followed Him. His fellow-citizens in Nazareth had tried to kill Him. The nation to which He came would not receive Him. Many of His disciples went back and walked no more with Him. Judas betrayed Him. Peter denied Him. "They all forsook Him and fled." In this cry it were as if He was saying, "I can understand my kinsmen and fellow-citizens and my nation forsaking Me. I can even understand my own disciples, because of the weakness of the flesh, forsaking Me. But why didst THOU forsake me? " Up till this moment, when He was forsaken by men, He had been able to turn to His Father; but now even that refuge is denied him, and He is absolutely ALONE. Who can fathom the depths of that anguish?

When an expression is sought to describe a scene of utmost desolation, it is termed "God-forsaken." The word means the forsaking of someone in a state of defeat or helplessness, in the midst of hostile circumstances. Who can assess the content of the word when it is applied to the Lord? A child forsaken of his parents, a friend forsaken by a friend in the hour of deepest need—those are poignant enough sorrows.

"The Psalmist claimed, 'I have not seen the righteous forsaken' (Ps. 37:25), but the only One who was truly righteous is now forsaken. Ineffable love made Him willing to endure even this desolation of His soul for our salvation."

J. Oswald Sanders
from *Incomparable Christ*,
Moody Press



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But a man forsaken by his God! And what shall we say of the sinless Son of Man when He was forsaken by the God with Whom He had enjoyed eternal fellowship?

Conclusion

It is recorded of the Reformation leader, Martin Luther (1483-1546), that he once set himself to a study of this profound saying of the Lord Jesus. For a long time he continued without food, in deepest meditation, and in one position on his chair. When at length he rose from his thoughts, he was heard to exclaim with amazement, "God forsaken of God! Who can understand that?"

For the first time, an eternity of communion had been broken. The wrath of hell had already broken upon His soul in wave upon wave, but now it is the wrath of heaven! The Psalmist claimed, "I have not seen the righteous forsaken" (Ps. 37:25), but the only One who was truly righteous is now forsaken. Ineffable love made Him willing to endure even this desolation of His soul for our salvation.

There would be no mystery in God forsaking us, for we would be receiving only "the due reward of our deeds." But why should God forsake His Son who "knew no sin," "did no sin," "in whom was no sin," the Son in whom He testified that He found perfect delight? There is only one explanation. He was taking my place — and yours.

While the gospel story was being told to a South African tribe, the chief listened with great interest. He called for a repetition of the story of the cross. While the missionary was again preaching, the chief rushed forward crying, "Hold on! Hold on! Take Jesus down from the cross — I belong on the cross!" The Lord Jesus Christ was forsaken that we might be forgiven.

Sources:

Compiled from: Samuel M. Zwemer, *The Glory of the Cross*, (Oliphants: London, GB, 1959); August Van Ryn, *Meditations in Matthew*, (Walterick Press, Kansas City, KS, 1995); J. Oswald Sanders, *The Incomparable Christ*, (Moody: Chicago, IL, 1971)