

CALVARY ... THE PLACE OF PRAYER

Father forgive them; for they know not what they do. (Luke 23:34)

J Allistair Smith was one of the earliest pioneer missionaries of the Salvation Army; from his lips I heard the story I am about to write. The founder and first general of the Army visited South Africa in 1891, and quickly realized the African hinterland was a place of darkness. Millions of tribesmen had never heard about Jesus, and everywhere the power of the witch doctor went unchallenged. The general decided to change this situation, and in August of the same year, commissioned five Salvationist missionaries. Allistair Smith was appointed as leader of that expedition. He was twenty-five years of age, and his first effort was made approximately one hundred miles north of Durban. The magistrate's clerk summoned the chiefs of the tribes and commanded them to attend to hear what the white teachers would say.

On Sunday, November 22, 1891, the first meeting was held. It was eleven o'clock in the morning, and stalwart Zulus had come from every direction. The missionaries stood in the shade of a great mimosa tree, and the huge crowd of Zulus waited expectantly. The Scriptures were read, and then Allistair Smith explained very simply the meaning of the words. At the close of the service, he asked whether any person would like to serve Nkulunkulu (God the Great-Great), and two men lifted their bare arms, saying, "I am willing." The next day they returned to say, "Now, Teachers, you made us Christians yesterday, and we are showing our fathers that we are Christians because we are going away to earn money for them to pay taxes." The missionary said, "Children, if ever you should be in doubt how to act, pray to Nkulunkulu and He will teach you what to do."

After a time of prayer, the young Zulus commenced their five hundred mile walk to Johannesburg. Three months later, a letter arrived from one of those men. In it he stated, "My wife, you know what I did

143

on the hilltop of the teachers before I left Zululand. That thing that I did has brought me much peace, and joy, and happiness. I wish you, my wife, and my brother Usengetshe to get the same thing. Remember, you are my wife for whom I paid ten cattle, so do as I tell you. Take my brother and go with him to the Salvation teachers and ask them to make you Christians. I have spoken. Your husband, Mbambo Matunjwa." He had given five cents to another native who could write the letter. It was another nine months before they were seen again in their native haunts. They returned bringing with them eight other Zulus whom they had won for Christ.

Many wonderful things could be written about that faithful African Christian, Mbambo Matunjwa. At the time of my visit to Zululand, the old warrior was approaching the end of his earthly journey and was over eighty years of age. He was an honored major in the Salvation Army and was beloved by all people. I was thrilled to hear the details of the man's amazing testimony. Yet the most important thing I heard concerned an event that took place in Rhodesia where the African went as a missionary.

Matunjwa was instrumental in saving the life of a child about to be sacrificed. The people were determined to throw the boy from the edge of a precipice but, with great courage, Matunjwa rescued him. The people were incensed, and their leader arranged that the missionary's food should be poisoned. The members of his family became seriously ill and one son died. Instead of seeking revenge for his lost son, the

CALVARY ... THE PLACE OF PRAYER

saintly Zulu adopted the boy he had saved from sacrifice and took him as a replacement for the son he had lost. He fed and clothed him and taught him to serve the Savior. He believed that if Jesus could forgive His enemies, he should emulate the Lord's example.

The Prayer of Forgiveness... Pardon

The Savior's prayer for the forgiveness of His enemies provided an example to be emulated by all Christians. It seems incredible that Jesus asked forgiveness for the hypocritical Pharisees, who ignored the basic principles of their faith, and sought pardon for the soldiers who nailed Him to the cross. Jesus said, "Father forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). When He said "them," for whom was He praying? Was He thinking of the Jewish leaders or of the soldiers who were obeying the orders of superior officers? The qualifying clause in the petition appears to be "for they know not what they do." That could not describe the Pharisees for they insisted on the crucifixion of their

`44

captive; they knew what they were doing! Could they remain unrepentant and be forgiven? Had their guilt been cancelled, it would have been contrary to the law of God. Even He cannot forgive people if the sinners deliberately reject His message.

Jesus said to His disciples, "Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you. do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matt. 5:43-44). The Lord's statement suggests the reaction of a saint when confronted by the treachery of another. It would be a greater violation if a person condoned deliberate murder. The Romans were not as responsible as the chief priests and Pharisees; perhaps they were unaware of the infamy of their deeds. The same might be said of the people who stoned Stephen. Did they kill the first Christian martyr because they truly believed he was an enemy of Jehovah? Paul never forgot how he had persecuted the Christians, but he said this was done "ignorantly in unbelief" (see I Tim. 1:13).

There remains another possibility. When Christ died, He carried the sins of the entire world—all nations, for all times. He fulfilled the law that offenders might be liberated from guilt. Thereafter, salvation depended upon the SON question and not upon the SIN question. An era had commenced in which sinners would be presented with a new challenge, when the Holy Spirit used the disciples to preach the gospel of the grace of God. It might be claimed that sinners can be forgiven for crucifying the Son of God, but there is no pardon if, finally, they refuse to enthrone Him in their hearts. It is written: "It pleased the LORD to bruise him" (Isa. 53:10). Calvary was God's provision for eternal salvation. To reject that message is to crucify afresh the Son of God (see Heb. 6:6). Jesus never prayed without receiving an answer, but even He could not ask for something impossible to grant.

The Prayer of Futility ... Pitiful

"And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us" (Luke 23:39). Evidently this thief had violated the laws of the country, and had been apprehended by the Roman authorities. After being sentenced to death he was taken to the place of execution, nailed to a cross, and left to die an ignominious death. He was destined to be at the center of the greatest drama ever witnessed. "Nothing is known of the early life of this man except that in the Apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, the thieves are

145

called Dysmas and Gyamas, and these names appear still in Calvaries

CALVARY ... THE PLACE OF PRAYER

and stations in Roman Catholic countries" (quoted from The Pulpit Commentary, vol. 16 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950], 241).

Entirely Selfish

It is sad to remember that within moments of his decease, the criminal thought only of himself and the possibility of avoiding his punishment. The Bible says he was a thief, but what he had stolen remains unknown. It is of little consequence; he took what he desired and had no compassion for the original owner. When he was about to die, he desperately desired a reprieve and turned to Jesus hoping He would intervene on his behalf. Possibly the man never prayed for any other man or woman; he was dominated by self-desire.

Unfortunately, many people resemble that man. Self-sufficient and self-centered, they never think of other people and seldom pray unless they want help. People in great physical danger ask for healing; others facing financial ruin desperately seek a means of solvency. Many other situations could be cited, but few people pray "Not my will, but thine be done."

Extremely Sinful

Unlike the other criminal who said, "We receive the due reward of our deeds," this man never acknowledged his guilt; he died as he had lived—unrepentant. It is interesting to compare the attitude of the two prisoners. The one, addressing his comrade said, "Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss" (Luke 23:40-41). Probably they had been apprehended together, but their reactions were totally different. The one confessed he deserved punishment for his crime; his comrade remained embittered. How was the repentant thief convinced that Jesus had "done nothing amiss"? It is unlikely that he had heard the Lord preaching. The reactions of the two criminals were conflicting; only one man was convinced of the innocence of the Savior. It remains a mystery why his companion was content to grasp for stones when he was surrounded by diamonds!

The Amplified Bible translates the text: "One of the criminals who were suspended kept up a railing at Him." The Living Bible says, "One of the criminals hanging beside him scoffed, 'So you're the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you're at it.'"

146

Phillips Translation is even more suggestive: "One of the criminals.. covered him with abuse." The New English Bible supplies an even stronger interpretation: "One of the criminals ... taunted him." The New International Version says the prisoner "hurled insults at him." The thief was suffering intense pain, but there was no excuse for his unpardonable behavior. Jesus was not the cause of the man's predicament. Unfortunately, some people hide their arrogance behind criticism of other people.

Excessively Stupid

Let it be admitted that even if the unrepentant thief had no knowledge of Jesus, he knew his companion in crime. Perhaps they had been members of the same outlaw band, and if that were the case, had lived and worked together for a considerable period of time. If they had not met prior to their capture, they probably shared a prison with other offenders. On their day of execution they were taken to Calvary, and the change in the repentant thief became obvious. Guilt was replaced by gladness, despair by deliverance; the prisoner almost became a preacher! The man who was about to pay for his crimes was convinced death was not the end of life. Ahead was an eternal kingdom into which he desired to enter. His prayer indicated a new hope was filling his soul.

CALVARY ... THE PLACE OF PRAYER

He was a changed man, and everybodyÄexcept the other thiefÄwas aware of that fact.

The unrepentant man missed his final opportunity to escape the consequences of his crimes; he was at the entrance to the kingdom of God, and a prayer for forgiveness would have changed his life forever. He was dying, desperate and defenseless; apart from an intervention by Jesus he was beyond redemption. Yet instead of seeking pardon, he foolishly abused the only One who could have helped him. A miracle might have lengthened his lifeÄtemporarily, but the end result would have been unchanged; he would have lost his soul.

The Prayer of Faith ... Peace

Paul wrote, "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). His testimony corroborated the truth he expressed. The grace of God transformed a persecutor into a preacher, and the same fact was clearly demonstrated in the conversion of the penitent thief who had been changed from a blasphemer into a believer. He listened, learned, and loved. His story can be considered under four headings.

147

The Sudden Change

"The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth" (Matt. 27:44). The sounds of the hammer driving nails through the body of Jesus had ceased; the silence of that terrible day was broken only by the groans of the prisoners. Intense pain came from every part of their bodies; their minds were a prey to anguish. It is difficult to comprehend what the sufferers were thinking, but it was astonishing that two thieves should insult their companion. Why should they abuse One whose kindness had helped thousands of people? Charm emanated from the soul of Jesus and spread itself as a soothing mantle over the tortured mind of one of the criminals. He had heard Jesus praying for the forgiveness of His enemies and had ceased complaining. When a man listens to Christ, wonderful things become possible.

The Special Cry

"And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." At that moment he was the only person who saw in the Savior royalty, resurrection, and redemption (consult the author's book Bible Cameos [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1985], 125Ä26). His prayer provided a striking contrast to his earlier insults. This was completely incomprehensible apart from the fact that the criminal had heard and seen the Lord. He became aware of his tremendous guilt, and with the simplicity of a little child, asked the Savior to help him. His vision embraced eternity; he saw the kingdom of Christ, and desiring to become one of its citizens, asked Jesus to endorse his application. How could he have discovered so much in such a short time? The Lord said, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:44). Evidently "God, who was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself" was seeking a convert.

Prayer is the soul's sincere desire

Uttered, or unexpressed:

The motion of a hidden fire,

That trembles in the breast.

O Thou by whom we come to God,

The Life, the Truth, the Way,

The path of prayer Thyself hath trod,

Lord, teach us how to pray.

Ä James Montgomery, 1771Ä1854

148

The Splendid Concern

"And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). The Savior was thrilled to hear the request of the thief and knew the prediction made by Isaiah was being fulfilled: "Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand" (Isa. 53:10, emphasis mine). There was no greater proof that God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were bringing to a triumphant conclusion the planning, types, and predictions that began before the commencement of time. Each member of the Eternal Family was present at the greatest moment in history. The sound of the criminal's voice was the sweetest music Jesus ever heard. Even the Lord's pain was momentarily forgotten when He replied, "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise."

The Satisfied Convert

Incredulity shone in the eyes of the thief as peace filled his soul. He had listened to amazing words and knew Jesus was supporting his request for citizenship within the kingdom of God. He would be with Jesus—there was no need to worry about his sin. Whatever might be recorded in God's book, the Lord would attend to those details; He had promised they would be together. He would be with Jesus—there was no need to worry about death, for if he accompanied the Lord into His kingdom, he would be raised from the grave. He would be with Jesus—there would be no need to worry about meeting God. He had an advocate who would represent him before the Almighty. All he needed was found in his Master. The peace of God was filling his soul, and as long as he remained with Jesus—he would be safe anywhere! That is a lesson all of us need to learn.

149□

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