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Lenten Meditation: The Farewell of the Cross, n.d.

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The Farewell of the Cross

It is three o'clock on the day of crucifixion—the hour of consummation. The strange, noonday darkness has ended and the last rays of the dying sun are gilding the three crosses on Calvary, but the sense of terror, the sense of vast spiritual forces in final conflict over the souls of men still hangs like a pall over the Universe. No bird sings in the olive trees of Gethsemane; no wolf howls on the plains of Judea; no man walks the streets of Jerusalem but with a sense of that great unknown terror which has covered the world with silence. The tides of time surge upward from the cross. The world's hour glass is turning. The sands of life once more sift into eternity of triumph. On the banks of the Nile men are telling each other that the great God Pan is dead; in the valley of the Kidron lies the body of a man who no longer has thirty pieces of silver; in Europe our ancestors look with wonder and fear at the darkened sky. In the great halls of heaven Cherubim and Seraphim bend their listening ear for the last line in the world's great drama of atonement. It comes. He is coming home, the long adventure over, brave banners down, a suppliant from pain; "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit." He is coming home. And the tall cities of heaven bend left and right as he comes. The choirs of eternity stand silent, and the only sound is the tearing of a veil. "Father into Thy hands I commend my spirit." That night, when the sun had gone down, the disciples gathered behind locked doors in hidden houses in Jerusalem and wept over His failure. He had been beaten by life, beaten by His enemies, torn and crushed on a cross. But in heaven the Holy City stood complete in glory—the city that has no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it, for the Lamb is the Light thereof. The shame of the Cross has changed into the splendor of the throne. And, on earth, hope, itself once dead, but now alive forever, looks into the future with the fullest confidence that earth's darkest days are over and that man has been drawn, finally and forever, to the vision of Godgiven righteousness and the consummation of God's eternal purposes in the person of the man whose weary head dropped under the crown of thorns as He said farewell.

My dear friend, I have never seen another man die like that. It was the world's easiest farewell. When you and I did it will not be easy to say farewell to life. There will be so many things which we shall have left undone—so many things which the pitiless light of eternity will reveal as small and useless—so many things which we should like to change and amend before we go into the valley of the shadows. But there was nothing like that for Him. His brief day had come to even tide in God's own good time. His farewell was the farewell of work done, of atonement completed, of sin forgiven. There was nothing more to do now He could come home. And as He came, all He had to show for the 33 years of loving a world that hated Him, for the crown of thorns and the long hours of agony and loneliness and blood—was one poor thief. And yet—all the morning stars sang together and all the angels of heaven shouted for joy because they saw in that one soul the first of a long procession of men and women who would storm the gates of heaven with His blood on their souls, His forgiveness in their hearts, and His farewell on their lips.

My dear friend, I am fully aware of the fact that the world "doctrine" is most unpopular today and that the world would fain be content with a vague, emotional response to religion without inquiring too closely into the ideas underlying it. And yet we shall never touch the meaning of Calvary until we see that it is essentially an idea. It is God's idea. Will you permit me to state it once more, clearly and definitely, and not in my own words? "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whatsoever believeth on Him should not perish but have everlasting life." Calvary is the execution of that plan, conceived before the world began, and carried out here in terms of
blood, and agony, and tears and the Cross. And the Savior's farewell. "Father into thy hands I commend my spirit" is the divinely imposed period on the historic execution of that idea. There was nothing more to be done. And so His farewell becomes the world's easiest farewell. His eyes, torn with pain and filled with blood, turn from the earth that had crowned Him with a crown of thorns to His Father in heaven who was waiting to crown Him with the many crowns of universal Kinghood. And as He comes He carries on His lips the one word which He has again given to the world in its highest and truest meaning: "Father."

My dear friend, there were several thousand people on that hill outside the gates of Jerusalem on that first Good Friday who heard that farewell ring out over the valley of the Kidron—and there were perhaps a half dozen who knew what it would mean to them and to the world. And today when there are millions of souls in all the churches of Christendom hearing the same words, the proportion is about the same. The sun went down on that first Good Friday many a man and woman turned away from the three crosses standing gaunt and bare against the evening sky—turned away and said farewell to the cross. And that was also an easy farewell—the farewell of carelessness, the farewell of indifference, the farewell of sin. And exactly 34 years later the living Christ returned once more to say His hardest farewell to them, the farewell which they had laughingly pressed to His eyes on Good Friday, the farewell which He had seen so clearly on Palm Sunday through eyes dimmed with tears. Jerusalem felt the bite of the scourge, the crack of the whip, and the sickening thud of stones striking human flesh. My Lord Christ had come back in the roar and confusion of war and before His crowned head and His uplifted arm. Jerusalem crumbled into dust and ashes. My friend, there is another farewell in the story of the eternal Christ—a farewell which I pray you will never hear. Judas heard it, Pilate heard it, Caiaphas heard it—and before God I tell you today they are not good company for you.

This is again my last opportunity to speak to your heart about these things—and I know that there is in this church today a man who has come once more to catch a fleeting glimpse of the faith of his childhood—there is a woman here today who is postponing any decision concerning Christ and the Cross until the children are grown and life becomes more quiet—there is a young woman whose jealousy of her friends has dimmed her vision of the Cross—there is a man who bears hatred in his heart against his fellowmen—there is another who has come to see if preachers are still preaching the same old story—and to all these—and to all of you no matter what your individual problem may be, no matter how far you may have wandered from Calvary and the Cross, my plea to you today is "come home." Do not spend the years of your life and strength and health building a wall of ice around your heart which will one day crash about your ears with the roar of eternal ruin. Many years ago the ambassador of Rome met the great King Antiochus and asked him whether it was to be peace or war. Antiochus asked for time to consider—and with his sword the ambassador drew a circle in the sand. Give an answer, he said, before you move out of that circle, or if you step out of it, your answer is war." And so I would to God it were in our power today to take the sword of the spirit and draw a circle about the place where you are in this church and ask you for God's sake and for the sake of your immortal, Christ-redeemed soul not to step out of it until you have made your peace with God—until you have stopped hurling the cross out of your life, until you have decided that you too will come to the proud gates of eternity with the great password of God's redeemed: "Father." One of our American preachers... My dear brother and sister—in the name of God—there is no sense in men dying like that. "Since the farewell of the Cross every man and woman had a God-given and blood-bought right to die as the Savior died, with a song of triumph on his lips and in his heart the blessed joy of coming home.

And now I am once more ready to get out of God's way to Him who commanded His
Spirit to His heavenly Father and who today is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, to Him I commend your soul and your body against the great day of His appearing. You may not remember much of what has been said here today but I pray God that in an hour of darkness and pain, or in the hour of death you will only remember:

"Hold thou, O Christ, Ehy