

LAST WORDS

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WORDS OF COMFORT

We have been talking throughout Lent about some of the last words of Jesus. Now we come to the very last words – his words spoken from the cross. All four gospel writers include words spoken by Jesus as he was being crucified. Put together, we have Jesus speaking seven times. Each time of speaking is called a word, thus the seven last words of Jesus.

It comes as no surprise that his first three words were for the benefit of others. Well, maybe it should come as a surprise. After all, the religious leaders had falsely accused him. The crowd had turned against him. The government had wrongly sentenced him. The soldiers brutally executed him. He had every right to despise them all. Yet, as he painfully and humiliatingly hanged from the cross dying, his first words were for the benefit of others.

The very first word was for all we just mentioned, all who had harmed him. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” They know not what they do? Really? The religious leaders knew darn well they had framed him. They were jealous and did not like him, so they knowingly and intentionally arranged to have him killed. The crowd may well have been bought off, asking for Barabbas instead of Jesus. They would let an innocent man die for a few coins or for the chance to look good to the powerful. Pilate himself said that Jesus was innocent; yet he condemned him to death just to silence the crowd. The soldiers could have done their duty without adding torture and mocking him. Forgive them for they know not what they do?

What they were doing was sinful, and maybe that was the point. Sin overpowered their virtues, their judgment, their moral center and caused them to act in terrible ways. Sin blinded them to the truth, making it possible to rationalize all that they were doing. If they truly grasped that they were putting to death the very Son of God, would they have gone through with it? Jesus clearly thought that they failed to understand the enormity of their actions, and thought that, on the deepest levels, they did not know what they were doing.

Still, arranging for someone’s execution is not a casual, “oops, bad decision.” There was maliciousness here that for all but the greatest of saints would be impossible to forgive. Jesus did, and not just for himself. That alone would be amazing. He asked God to forgive them. He asked God to forgive the ones who were murdering God’s son. Don’t hold it against them, he was saying. Wow!

Another being executed joined in mocking Jesus. Seriously, he too is hanging on a cross soon to die, and he uses his last moments to mock another. I cannot wrap my head around that. A third man, though, also on a cross, rebukes the mocker and asks Jesus to remember him when the kingdom comes. This thief did not take the fact that Jesus was being crucified to mean that Jesus was a charlatan. Even in that weakest moment he perceived it was not the end for Jesus and that the Lord would somehow ultimately triumph. He wanted to be part of that victory. Jesus, recognizing faith, assured him he would saying, “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

Then Jesus saw his mother. Though we hear nothing else about Joseph after the birth

story, or maybe because we hear nothing else about Joseph after the birth story, the consensus has always been that Joseph had died before Jesus began his ministry. Jesus, the oldest child, would be charged with the care of his mother. Clearly that would not now be possible. From the cross he arranges for that care. His disciple John was standing with Mary. To him he said behold your mother. To her he said behold your son. In other words, John was to take Mary into his family and assure her welfare. We can be sure of this meaning because this is exactly what John did.

First Jesus seeks God's forgiveness for all who had harmed him. Then he assures a criminal who asked for grace that salvation would be his. Then he arranges for the care of his mother. Before calling out in anguish, before expressing discomfort, and before breathing his last, Jesus looked out for others. Once again his love for others meant putting others first. From the horror of the cross, he spoke words of comfort. It is comforting that he did.

WORDS OF ANGUISH

It was common to quote the Psalms, sometimes just the first line. Just that first line would communicate to others a fuller meaning. For instance, to say, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," immediately puts everyone into the mind of The Tale of Two Cities by Dickens and the dichotomy of living conditions between the rich and the poor during the French Revolution. "Four score and seven years ago" conjures up the Gettysburg Address by Lincoln and the message of that amazing speech. Sometimes just the first line of a book or speech or psalm communicates the larger message.

Jesus spoke the first line of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" I want you to close your eyes and picture the scene of the crucifixion. Jesus is hanging from the cross bar, suspended there by nails through his hands. His clothes were stripped off of him, exposed so as to be humiliated. People are laughing at him and mocking him. It is a terrible scene, but do not protect yourself. Picture it in all of its goriness, and hear the psalm Jesus referenced. [Read Psalm 22]

"Future generations will be told about the Lord and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it." This is the fuller meaning. Jesus surely felt like he was God-forsaken at that moment and yet trusted that this was the way to deliver God's people. Anyone who has ever taken up the cross, denied themselves, and followed Jesus knows how it is possible to feel God-forsaken and confident in God at the same time. Is this not why the cross is our most prominent symbol? We should be repulsed by this instrument of death and the chosen torture for our Lord. It should be a symbol of forsakenness. And it is. It is also the symbol of Christ's amazing victory made possible by great faith and self-sacrifice. Jesus embodied on the cross both a feeling of forsakenness and confidence in God. Here we see Jesus as truly human and truly divine.

Then he said he thirst. For relief? For righteousness? For water? Yes. In all cases he was in the driest dessert and he longed for life-giving water.

He began with words of comfort. He continued with words of anguish. I'm glad. They were real. They keep us from trying to pretty up an ugly moment.

WORDS OF FAITH

Make no mistake. Jesus was not on the cross because others got the best of him. There are many ways he could have avoided this. No, he was on the cross because this had been the plan all along. Christ came to save God's children from the power of sin and death. This was a battle. God's love and grace would have to triumph over hate and sin. At stake was eternal death or eternal life.

When Jesus said it is finished, he did not simply mean that death had arrived. It was the mission that was finished. What began in Bethlehem was now accomplished. Everything to this moment was prelude. Jesus wanted a different way. We know that he asked if the cup could be passed. But he stayed committed to the plan, to the will of God. All that happened before would have been to no avail had he run from the cross. He did not. He walked the path set before him until the end, until the job was finished.

And then? And then he gave it over to God. "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." He had done what he could. He had done all that had been asked of him. He would now go to the grave. Would he stay there? Would God raise him up? Jesus put that into the hands of God.

Jesus did not barter at the end. Jesus did not say remember the agreement. Jesus did not say you owe me, God. He simply commended his spirit to God and breathed his last. He did so in the sure and certain faith that God would raise him up.

It seems to me that our calling is no different. Oh, we are not called upon to fight the powers of sin and death and win salvation for all. We are, however, called upon to walk the path God has set before each one of us, to fulfill the mission and purpose God has given to each one of us, and to walk that path to the very end, regardless of where it leads, even if it leads to the cross. And if we do that, when we come to that day when, in the words of the spiritual, it is time to lay our burdens down, we too can say it is finished, and mean not just our lives, but our missions.

And then? And then we put the rest into God's hands. It strikes me that these are words every Christian should work to be able to say. It is finished. Father, into your hands I commend my spirit. They represent a lifetime of faithful living and an embracing of death with faith.

These are the last words of Jesus. They are lasting words that lead to everlasting life.

Lord, have mercy on us. Amen.