

## LIVING WORDS FROM THE DYING CHRIST

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Barnaby Conrad has written a little book called Famous Last Words. Over the course of two hundred and some pages he gives us famous last words that people in history have said as they were dying – from old times to modern times.

He gives the dying words of Buddha who passed away in 483 B.C. – talking to one of his disciples says “Never forget it. Decay is inherent in all component things.” A marvelous word to die on!

Queen Elizabeth I, dying in 1603, silenced the archbishop of Canterbury who was reciting the achievements of her reign for her as she lay near death. She, with a wave of her hand, stopped him and said, “All my possessions for a moment of time.”

Nathan Hale, captured behind British lines during the American Revolution was hanged said “What a pity it is that we can die but once to serve our country.”

The great American evangelism Dwight L. Moody at his death bed in 1899 suddenly said, “Earth recedes, heaven opens. I’ve been through the gates. Don’t call me back. If this is death, it’s sweet. Dwight! Irene! [The names of his dead grandchildren] I see the children’s faces.” With that he entered the Lord’s presence.

William Henry Vanderbilt passing away in 1885, the sons of Cornelius Vanderbilt who left at his death an estate of about 200 million dollars said “I have had no real gratification or any enjoyment of any sort more than my neighbor on the next block who is worth only half a million.”

And Socrates, ready to drink the hemlock “No one knows whether death is the greatest blessing a man can have but they fear it as the worse and now it is time to go – I to die and you to live. But which of us goes to a better thing is unknown to all but God.” Socrates as wise as he was did not know what lay ahead as he faced death.

The gospels have given us the words of the dying Christ. There are seven such words – phrases. “Father, forgive them,” from the gospel of Luke. “Today, thou shalt be with me in paradise” also from the gospel of Luke. “Woman, behold thy son. Son, behold thy mother,” from John’s gospel. “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me,” from the gospels of Matthew and Mark. “I thirst,” from the gospel of John. “It is finished,” from the gospel of John. And “Father, into thy hands I commend my Spirit,” from the gospel of Luke.

Each of the gospel writers has his own remembrances of Christ and therefore none of the gospels contain all seven of the words. But the words are windows through which we can look into the soul of the Savior as he died.

The first word is this “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” Luke 23:34.

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Father – the address speaks to us of the fact that Jesus enjoyed a personal relationship and present relationship with the Father. All through his life Jesus had lived in conscious recognition of the Father. The first words which we have of him saying anything are when he is a boy of twelve. He says, “Do you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” Jesus lived with a conscious recognition of Father-God. Whereas in the Old Testament God in prayer is called many things, very rarely is he called Father. But Father is Jesus’ favorite name for God.

Therefore the invocation at the cross is personal. It is not like Ghandi’s words which he said when he was shot, “Oh God! Oh God!” Jesus knows who God is and he is Father. He has definition. In a word in which Jesus had lived and the cross upon which he had died, there were so many things that his mind and heart could be upon at that moment but his first thought on the cross is of his Father. And it is a tip off to the whole six hours that are going to be lived out and died out in the presence of the Father.

The Father is present to him. Present in the midst of loneliness. How terrible it would be to be in a world peopled only by thieves, cruel soldiers, crooked politicians and bankrupt religious leaders. But in that hour Jesus was not alone. The Father is with him.

It’s been said that the word “Father” proves that the faith of Jesus was unshaken by all through which he passed and by what he was now suffering. When righteousness is trampled under foot and wrong is triumphant faith is tempted to ask if there really is a God, loving and wise, seated on the throne of the universe. But when the fortune of Jesus was at the blackest, when he was baited by a raging pack of wolf like enemies, and when he was sinking into unplumbed abyss of pain and desertion he still said, Father.

I don’t know what your particular life situation might be today and how distressed you might be to anything happening to you. But there is something great about a relationship with God, which allows us to say to him, Father. He has promised never to leave us alone.

Father forgive them. Notice it is not what everyone else has had to pray either in living or in dying if they want to have relationship with God. All of us have had to pray, Forgive me. Jesus has no need to say that on the cross.

Father, forgive them. “them”? Who is the them? The passers by certainly, they would be included. Matthew 27:39-40 said that “Those who passed by hurled insults at him shaking their heads and saying, Save yourself, come down from the cross if you are the Son of God.”

All the people that were passing by really didn’t know him but saw the crucifixion as a sport. As in the case of many countries where public execution is displayed and you can be present and a lot of mocking and jeering and taunting goes on. Those words must have stung at Jesus. If they only knew. Come down from the cross, they were saying to him in jest. But if Jesus had come down from the cross it would have meant that there was a limit to the love of God. We would have never known what the love of God is if Jesus had obeyed the summons to come down from the cross. If he had come down we would have known that there was a line beyond which the love of God does not go. But because he remained on the cross we know there is absolutely no limit to the length that God will go to in winning us and loving us.

General William Booth said, “It’s precisely because he didn’t come down that we believe in him.”

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Forgiveness to the by-standers.

Forgiveness to the soldiers. Romans were used to crucifixion, Roman custom was for soldiers who would attend a crucifixion. they would divide the prisoner's garments among them. Every Jewish person wore five garment – a pair of shoes, turban, girdle, inner garment, and an outer cloak or tunic. They evidently each one of them had taken the first four items. One the shoes, the other the turban, another the girdle, another the inner garment. For the more expensive outer garment they cast lots. They were shooting dice while Jesus was dying. They had nailed him to the tree and yet his words are "Forgive them."

I think maybe there's something deeper about his word of forgiveness. Jesus' mother we know is standing right close by. The soldiers do not even have the common human grace and courtesy to take one item of apparel of the dying Jesus to his mother.

Forgive them. Forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.

The religious and political leaders are forgiven. The disciples who failed him are forgiven. And the indifferent who never even showed up at the crucifixion, who never even were interested – forgiven. All are embraced by the Lord's forgiveness.

Jesus teaches us how we ought ourselves to respond to personal injustice. We could retaliate or threaten. Jesus could say, I'm hanging here now but three days from now I'm going to have all power and authority and I'll get you then! Just wait! Just wait and you'll see.

Jesus never threatens, never retaliates. In fact he never closes his fists. That strikes me that all the physical gestures of Jesus you never find him with a clenched fist. His hands are open as on the cross to receive.

Jesus did not threaten, retaliate or resent. He chose to forgive. When you forgive you pick up the tab. If somebody does you wrong financially and you forgive them, that means they're free and they don't have to pay you. You footed the bill for their wrong. That's true all across the board. In all kinds of wrongs that are done that maybe aren't financial in nature but they're wrongs nevertheless. The person who forgives picks up the tab and says I'll pay it. You don't have to. You're free. The reason: they do not know what they are doing.

Jesus knew the Old Testament well. Jesus knew that the Old Testament distinguishes between capital offenses that were premeditated first degree murder, the Old Testament calls them sins of the high hand. And sins that were not of premeditation which were in the nature of sins of ignorance so called in the Old Testament.

Under Old Testament law and the sacrificial system a person could be forgiven if they had committed capital crime out of ignorance. But there was no forgiveness if it was a sin of the high hand. If it was first degree, pre meditated. Jesus takes all the wrong that is done against him and says it's all out of ignorance. God, forgive it all! Let it all be pardoned.

Peter picks up this theme on the day of Pentecost when he is preaching in Acts 3 and says "Now brethren I know that you acted in ignorance as did your rulers." Even the rulers acted ignorantly.

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Paul who had deliberately persecuted Christians says in 1 Timothy 1:13 “I acted ignorantly and in unbelief.”

When we come into the company of Jesus we come to one who has a wide and a deep heart. We come to a group of people who are under the cross of Jesus Christ who have a wide and a deep heart. We pick up our spirit from Jesus of Nazareth who taught us to forgive. Then in the moment on the cross when his teaching was put to the test by what he would do, did forgive.

Therefore we have the word of Paul speaking as an echo from the cross, “Be ye kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another even as god for Christ’s sake has forgiven you.”

Father, forgive.

The second word of the cross would literally go something like this, “Amen [or truly or verily] today with me you shall be in a paradise.” The emphasis is it’s going to be with me. You shall be in paradise, a walled garden – Eden, the new Eden, the garden of God.

The criminal to whom that word is given is a man who comes to a remarkable conversion while on the cross. In fact there are four aspects to him that are imitable in every life. Especially every life that wants Jesus to say the words to them that he said to that dying man.

This dying criminal – and he’s a thief, a criminal – has first of all a concern about his companion’s wickedness. Other gospels, other than Luke tell us that both the thieves reviled Jesus while he was on the cross. But evidently during the course of the crucifixion one of them has a change of heart. It’s that one whom Luke picks up and talks about. When the unrepentant criminal was hurling taunts across the way at Jesus the repentant thief rebuked him. He had a concern about his companion’s wickedness.

A second beautiful quality in him was he had full acknowledgement of his own sin. “We are punished justly. For we are getting what our deeds deserve.” It might be argued that nobody deserves crucifixion. It may be argued that a person is what their family has made them and what society has made them. But the only people to whom salvation comes are the people who take responsibility and say, “I am what I am. Not simply because of family or background or training. But I am what I am because I have chosen to be who I am. And what I am without God I do not wish, I do not like, I do not want.” He takes responsibility in fully acknowledging his own sin.

Then thirdly, he does a beautiful thing. There is an open confession of Christ’s innocence. This man has done nothing wrong. This man, Jesus. Why do we come to him? Because he’s perfect. He’s the perfect sacrifice given for us.

Then a fourth great quality in him is his faith. “Jesus, remember me when you come into the kingdom.” What a word! Here a man is bloodied and battered and in pain on the center cross just like them. But something dramatic happens that this man is able to look out on Jesus and have faith in him. What kind of a faith does he have? He has faith that the spirit does not die with the body. “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He believes that there is life after this bloody cross. What kind of faith does he have? He has faith to believe that this man who hangs on the center cross has a kingdom. What faith! Not even his accusers, not even Jesus’ family, not even the disciples at that point believe anymore that he had a kingdom. But

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this man believed. Surely a man who would die the way this man is dying has got to have a kingdom.

Thirdly, his faith believes that Christ's kingdom is a better world. So he doesn't ask Jesus to save him in the present. Remember me when you come into the kingdom.

Fourth, his faith believes that Christ could bestow that favor if Christ wanted to. "Remember me when you come."

This is the only request that is ever made of Jesus while he hung on the cross. It is a request that he's pleased to grant. In fact he's pleased to grant that request anytime it is asked of him by anyone in any country, in any century, any ethnic backgrounds. Jesus, the good Samaritan, on his way to save the world at Calvary takes time to save the individual who was next to him.

John Calvin, speaking of this dying thief says these beautiful words: "How clear was the vision of the eyes which could see in death, life. In ruin, majesty. In slavery, royalty. I doubt if ever since the world began there has been such a bright example of faith."

Mercy he asks, mercy is found. He had no time to reform. He had no time to make restitution. And he had no time to mature in his Christian confession. But he was saved by Jesus.

The response of Jesus: "Thou shalt be with me in paradise."

Jesus could have said other things. If Jesus were not the Son of God he could have disdained that and said "Don't pray to me. I have no kingdom to give. I have no paradise to take you into. Don't cry out to me." But Jesus gives us a remarkable understanding of his own perception of his personality and identity in that he receives the prayer. This man prayed to him and grants it.

With his answer "Today you will be with me in paradise," Jesus puts an end to any way of salvation other than the way of repentance and faith. Jesus lays to rest the sacramental view of salvation. That through water baptism or through keeping the communion or joining a church or doing good works you can be saved. Nothing at all about that. There's no time even for the man to do the sacraments. Jesus puts an end to the idea of purgatory. It's not in the by and by you can be with me. It's today thou shalt be with me in paradise.

Jesus puts an end to the view of soul sleep. After you die you go to sleep until the great end when Christ comes again. No. Today you shall be with me in paradise. The thief's request was for Christ to comfort like that supplied him by the angel in the garden. God would not allow his Son to be destitute of subjects. Now his church survived at the cross in this one man. Where the faith of Peter broke off the faith of the penitent thief began. Peter who had lost his faith at that particular moment is matched by the faith of the thief. "Amen, I say to you. Today with me you shall be in paradise." That is the word the Lord seeks to speak to every one of his people.

The third word from the cross is the word from John 19:26-27 "Woman, behold your son," and to the disciple, John "Behold your mother." John lets us know that there were four women at the cross. The mother of Jesus, Mary. Her sister. Then Mary the wife of Clopas. And Mary Magdalene. Three Mary's and an unnamed woman. They were loyal to him. And the group of four women was a contrast to the four soldiers who had crucified him.

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What is there in this word? First of all the sorrow Jesus must have felt for his own family. We know that there was more to Jesus' family than his mother. His earthly father, actually his step father, Joseph passes from the biblical record after Jesus' visit to the temple when he was twelve. We assume that somewhere since Joseph is never mentioned in Jesus' earthly ministry Jesus must have known the loss of Joseph when he was a teenager or in his twenties. We know from Mark 6:3 that Jesus had at least four brothers. James, Joses, Judas and Simon. We know that he had at least two sisters. Mark 6:3 tells us that he had *sisters* – that meant he had more than one. He had at least two. Therefore there were at least nine nuclear members of Jesus' family. Joseph and Mary and seven children. Jesus, four brothers, two sisters.

Out of that original group of nine only two are at the cross. One of the two is on the cross. The other, his mother, is watching. Where were the others? "He came to his and his own received him not." It must have been a great sorrow to the Lord at the cross to look down as a person wants to do when they're dying to be with family.

I have missed the moment of death for both my mother and my father. In both cases by about a half hour. I live with the wish that I could have been there at the last. Had I known the hour of passing I would have been there.

Jesus' family knew the hour of his passing and yet the brothers and sisters were not there.

Later we know that two of Jesus' brothers would come to faith. Jesus had to do things that were right even though they were misunderstood by his family. Even as we may have occasion to do the same thing.

That word reflects the sorrow of his family. But it also reflects that word to his mother and to John the disciple reflects the consideration for Jesus for his mother. "Woman behold your son, son behold your mother." Some Protestant commentators, I think in over reaction to the catholic emphasis upon Mary, say here that Jesus here is really showing Mary her place. That's what he's doing on the cross – severing the relationship. Instead of calling her "Mother" which he never calls her interestingly enough in the gospels, he calls her "Woman." Meaning that he disdained the emphasis that would later be placed by the church on her being the mother of the church.

I'm not for sure at this point that Jesus is all that concerned about all those theological matters that he was putting down Mary. I think what he was doing was showing consideration for his mother. He was moving out of his pain into her pain which is the beauty of Jesus and the beauty of the Christian life. It's meant to give us the strength and the resiliency that even when we are hurting we can move out of our hurt into somebody else's hurt. Jesus could have died on the cross without ever saying a word to his mother and she would have been provided for. In fact he could have just waited for a few days until he was raised from the dead and then make everything straight. He doesn't have to say that from the cross to provide for Mary. But he knows that Mary has got to have fears at that moment. Mary is away from home. Her home is in Galilee. Who's going to get her home? Who's going to take care of her? Who really believed in him? Her other children didn't. So Jesus moves out of his grief into hers and lets her know in that moment of grief "It's ok, Mary, you'll be taken care of. And John you have responsibilities. You leaned on my breast. Now I want my mother to lean on yours. Take care of her."

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There's something infinitely moving in the fact that Jesus in the agony of the cross, in the moment that the salvation of the world hung in the balance, thought of the loneliness of his mother in the days he would be taken away and cared for her. Jesus was not so busy to save the world that he didn't have time for his family. He took time for his family on the cross.

One other thing about that third word. That is the poverty of Jesus is eloquently witnessed. In speaking to Mary he had nothing to leave her. In fact, his last items of ownership were his clothes. And they had been taken by the soldiers. It is the wish of many to leave their family something when they pass. But the one life who made the world the most rich left absolutely nothing of a material nature. Nothing.

If we really want to make life rich for others we'll have that mentality of Jesus that does not identify happiness with things but identifies the true riches of life as being love that is given away. Mary could look at Jesus and know in her heart there was never a moment when Jesus had not loved her. He left the world rich. But he left absolutely nothing of a material nature.

These are his first three words on the cross. They are words that focus on others. We live in a world that is kind of a me-first kind of a society. I am alarmed by the me-first emphasis in our culture. Even within Christian circles. The scripture "Love others as you love yourself," says rightly so that if we don't have adequate self love we cannot properly love others. But that scripture can be bent and twisted so that loving yourself comes so far ahead of loving anyone else that you love yourself so well that there's never time to love others.

Jesus had a healthy self love. But you see that love being expressed in that tremendous way he reached out to serve others. It's only natural that he who served in life would serve in death. So his first words from the cross are not from himself and not about himself. They reach out to others. They reach out for the many – forgive them. They reach out for the malefactor – Today thou shalt be with me. And they reach out for his mother – Woman, behold your son.

His concern is for others.

The death of Jesus is a risk he took. What if no one would respond? What if no one would believe? All that would have been in vein. But he risks that there would be people such as are in this room who would respond to his love and to the sacrifice which he gave for us.

Christ won for us on his cross. He won for us salvation. He won for us eternal life. And he won for us the title of sons and daughters of the living God. Have you heard his living words?

Our Father, as we have meditated upon the cross a million things go through our mind. some of them relate to us. Can we have your attitude, Lord, toward anyone around us who's done us wrong? Father, Father forgive them. There are people sitting in this sanctuary today whose life has grown stale and old like an old loaf of bread that's molding on the kitchen sink for months. The reason their life has grown moldy is that absent from it is this word of yours about forgiveness. God, freshness goes out of our life when we do not forgive. We would enter in with Jesus' prayer to be both the forgiven and the forgivers. We think too, Lord, of that prayer that Jesus assured the dying thief of being answered. Like him, Lord, we place our entire salvation in your hands. Like him we pray "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." And like him we receive the assurance that our request is granted unconditionally, completely. Thank you, Lord, that when we came to you, you

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never put us on probation. You never said to us, We'll see if it will work out. You never said to us, It'll take me time to see if you're going to measure up to my demands. But of your own free grace and love you completely saved us when you saved us. We thank you. And your third word, Lord, points us to our own families, focusing upon their needs and asking, Lord, that we may have your dying grace as a living grace to reach out to be attentive. Who in our family has been waiting for a word from us to span the distance. Who has been weeping in their heart? Lord, can we come out of our pain into their pain and speak a word of healing to them? Help us, Lord, to be with you on the cross in our living. We ask through Christ, our Lord. Amen.