

FAMOUS LAST WORDS

SEVEN EVERLASTING WORDS FROM THE CROSS

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DEDICATION

To my five children that they might know
the mind and heart of their father
concerning his relationship to Jesus the Christ.



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INTRODUCTION

Very early in its history, the church recognized that the celebration of world-changing events requires careful and prayerful preparation. The

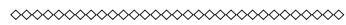
resurrection of Jesus from the grave is certainly one of those events that changed the world. How can we adequately prepare to experience the full impact of an empty tomb? It was in answer to this question that the church

devised a period of forty days, from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday, not counting the Sundays in between. They called this Lent, which simply means spring.

Forty is a significant number. You will remember that Moses was forty days on Mt. Sinai, preparing to receive the laws of God. Jesus was forty days in the wilderness of temptation, preparing for his public ministry. How can we use this golden opportunity to best prepare ourselves for Easter?



*The celebration of
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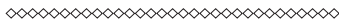


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Rather than giving up something trivial, my recommendation is that we add something transcendent—a deeper understanding of the meaning of Jesus’s death. The

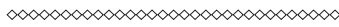


*Nothing can draw
us nearer the cross
than meditating
on the seven last
words of Jesus.*

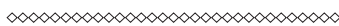


that fateful Friday. I like to compare these famous last words to the seven days in a week, the seven notes in a musical chord, or the seven colors in a rainbow.

The creation story in the first two chapters of Genesis informs us that God created the world in seven days. On Friday, the sixth day of creation, God made humankind according to his likeness and in his image. The first five days were “good,” but the sixth day was “very good.” The Deity was so pleased with the creation that he rested on Saturday, the seventh day.



*Something happened
that disturbed
God’s Sabbath rest.*



closer we are to the crucifixion, the better prepared we are for the resurrection. The more real Good Friday is, the more wonderful Easter Sunday will be. There is nothing that can draw us nearer the cross, than meditating on the seven last words that were spoken on

But, something happened that disturbed the Sabbath rest of God. Man disobeyed and fell into sin. Adam’s divine image was marred and

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I suggest we think of the Bible as a chord. The Old Testament could be summarized in four words: man's ruin in sin. The New Testament completes the chord: God's remedy in Christ. Christ is the high C that makes everything complete.

Then there are the seven colors in a rainbow from red to violet. Raindrops act as prisms, reflecting and refracting the light into its seven-fold bands of color. I suggest that we think of the cross as a prism, which receives the white light of divine truth and breaks it down into a rainbow

of colors that shine forth the glory of God. The rainbow, after the rain, proclaims the hope of a brighter day.

The seven last words present a living hope.

The seven last words present a living hope. Through this prism of pain, we can see the empty tomb, not as a prison, but a passage to life eternal. As we launch into our devotionals on the seven words, let's take with us these metaphors of the rainbow, the musical chord, and the days of the week.

Hopefully these meditations will lead us to the same conclusion of the temple guards who were sent out to apprehend Jesus and bring him in for questioning. When they were asked by the Jewish high court why they had not completed their mission, the guards declared: "No one ever spoke the way this man does" (John 7:46). When



THE WORD OF FORGIVENESS

Scripture: Luke 23:24-34:

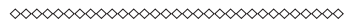
So Pilate decided to grant their demand. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will.

As they lead him away they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus turned and said to them, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, ‘Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ Then they will say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us!’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us!’ For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

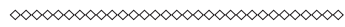
THE WORD OF FORGIVENESS

forgiveness works. Until we close the circuit by getting grounded to our own needs and the needs of others, forgiveness can't flow into our lives. A critical, condemnatory attitude is a circuit breaker to the flow of forgiveness. The door of the kingdom of God swings open on the hinges of forgiveness.

In this devotional, I would like to turn our attention to the first word from the cross: "Father forgive them," Jesus prayed, "for they know not know what they are doing." In practicing forgiveness in the most difficult circumstances imaginable, Jesus revealed himself as a superconductor: the energy of God's pardoning grace flowed through him without resistance.



*The door of the
kingdom of God
swings open on the
hinges of forgiveness.*



Imagine, the best man who ever lived, perfect in word and deed, in attitude and action, betrayed by a kiss from a close friend, accused by false witnesses, condemned at night by an illegal trial, the victim of the most unjust act ever inflicted upon an innocent person, praying for the forgiveness of his persecutors. The power of such a prayer is still at work in our world.

Let's turn our attention to the divine *source* from which all forgiveness flows, "Father . . ." My opening illustration might suggest that God is like an electric current that

THE WORD OF FORGIVENESS

compassion. Forces do not forgive; they merely work by the physical laws that govern them. If you happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, they will work you over, with no thought whatsoever to your health or welfare. Having been on the outskirts of tornadoes and in the midst of severe earthquakes, I can tell you from experience, the forces of nature are intrinsically uncaring and impersonal.

Force are notoriously unforgiving.

Other people like to think of Deity as the Divine Designer, the Supreme Architect who set this universe in motion and then left it to run by its own laws. A mathematical mind is certainly one step above a force. Even designers, however, and mathematicians, are not necessarily forgiving. Jesus had it right when he taught us to pray, "Our Father in heaven" (Matt. 6:9). Our God is everything a good, caring, compassionate parent is, times infinity.

Others like to think of Deity as the Divine Designer.

I remember hearing about a five-year-old boy who was having trouble sleeping. He asked his dad to come up and hear his prayers. After that, he wanted Dad to tuck him in and read him a bedtime story. After all of that he said, "Dad, leave the light on: I'm afraid of the dark." Dad said, "You don't have to be afraid of the dark; God is with you."

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The boy said, "I know, Dad, but I want someone like you, someone with a face."

Our God is more than an oblong blur. On the authority of the first word from the cross, I'm here to tell you that our God has a face. Now we have only a baffling reflection of reality. As the scripture says: "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12). Another scripture tells us that the light of the glory of God shines in the face of Jesus. "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). The smiling face of our Savior, which radiates the unconditional love of God, is the ultimate source of our forgiveness.

We have sinned against others. That being the case, if we could secure their forgiveness that would be the end of it. We have also sinned against ourselves. If we could

learn to forgive ourselves that would be the end of it. But the effect of our sin goes beyond others and ourselves. Our sin has broken the heart of a loving heavenly Father.

As King David cried out when he was conscience stricken by his adultery with Bathsheba: "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Ps. 51:4). Ultimately

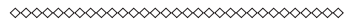
THE WORD OF FORGIVENESS

God is the offended party, so, our forgiveness must come from him.

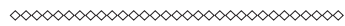
In addition to the source, I would like to draw your attention to the *sacrifice*, which is so essential to bring forgiveness from the highest heaven to the human heart.

When Jesus prays, “Father forgive them,” is he not asking, “and condemn me?”

Jesus could not, and would not, pray for our forgiveness without being willing to bear our sins and die in our place. As he took the place of Barabbas in a literal sense, so he would take the place of mankind in a spiritual sense,



*Jesus would not
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dying for every sinner and for every sin that has ever been committed, past, present, or future.

But how could one man die for all mankind? Only our Savior could stand in the gap and bridge the gulf. Only a person of infinite worth could provide a sacrifice of such infinite value. Exactly! The Bible says, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself” (2 Cor. 5:19 KJV). When Jesus suffered, God suffered, and through that supreme sacrifice, God is able to forgive freely, without compromising his justice or violating his holiness.

The question theologians wrestle with is, “How can a just God, who is holy and righteous, forgive an

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said: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:6). Paul proclaimed it when he wrote, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor. 5:21 KJV). Just think of it: the Son of God became the Son of man in order that the sons and daughters of men might become the children of God.

The perfect sacrifice has been made. The Father stands ready to answer the prayer of his Son. What yet is lacking? So often it is a sense of the *seriousness* of sin.

When Jesus prays, “For they do not know what they are doing,” is he implying that ignorance is an excuse? I think not. Ignorance and innocence are poles apart. Ignorance is never an excuse under human law. If you try to plead ignorance to a traffic policeman when you are pulled over saying, “I’m sorry officer; I just moved here from out of state and am ignorant of your laws,” that will get you nowhere. It’s your responsibility to know the traffic laws. If you don’t, there is no excuse. I would quickly add, however, ignorance is a mitigating factor that a forgiving God takes into account.

The fact is, neither the people nor the leaders knew what they were doing; otherwise, they would not have done it. “Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders” (Acts 3:17). “None of the rulers

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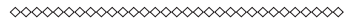
like to call the first gospel sermon in the new age of grace. You will find a brief outline of it recorded in the second chapter of Acts.

The sermon was so anointed by the Holy Spirit that the people suddenly became aware of the consequences of what they had done. “When the people heard this, they were *cut to the heart* and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do’” (Acts 2:37, emphasis added)? *God sent us his Son to be our Savior and we destroyed him. Is there anything we can do to atone for this terrible wrong?* In order for their sins to be forgiven, they first had to be convicted, “cut to the heart,” by the sinfulness of their sins.

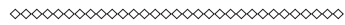
I find this element of conviction lacking in so many of us. The best way to cure it is to look at the faces around the cross. Do you see Pilate? He knew Jesus had done nothing worthy of death, but he didn’t have the intestinal fortitude to stand up to the people and insist that justice be done. Who among us has not been guilty of the sin of moral cowardice? We have known what to do, but because of popularity, or peer pressure, we have compromised our convictions. Look at the religious leaders. See the green-eyed monster of jealousy in their eyes? They envied the power and influence Jesus had with the people. Who among us has not been guilty of that? If we look closely at that cross-section of humanity standing around the cross, I believe we will find that we are no better or worse than they.

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The Negro spiritual asks: "Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble." I was not there personally, but my sins were there. My sins are the very same sins that nailed Jesus to a tree. That puts it in a different light. It reveals sin for what it truly is. When we realize the sinfulness of sin, we are in the best possible position to receive the forgiveness of God.



*My sins are the
very same sins that
nailed Jesus to a tree.*



Why did Jesus pray for forgiveness? Why didn't he just pronounce it? Remember how Jesus pronounced forgiveness over a paralytic who had been lowered to his feet by four stretcher-bearers through a hole they made in the roof? "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven'" (Mark 2:5). Faith is the switch that turns on the flow of forgiveness.



*Faith is the switch
that turns on the
flow of forgiveness.*



But, there was no faith to be seen anywhere around the cross, except in the repentant thief. A sign was nailed over Jesus head saying, "This is the king of the Jews." It was written in three languages, Greek, Latin, and Aramaic so all could read it and understand. But nobody believed it. Jesus's hands were tied; instead of pronouncing he prayed for forgiveness.

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In doing so he practiced what he had preached. He began his ministry with the Sermon on the Mount. In that inspired message he exhorted his disciples: “But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). Three years later on Mt. Calvary he practiced what he preached in the most difficult situation imaginable.

In praying for forgiveness, Jesus also fulfilled yet another prophesy. “He was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made *intercession* for the transgressors” (Isa. 53:12 emphasis added).

I would like to direct your attention to the Luke 23:34. “Jesus said.” In the original language that verb, “said,” is in the imperfect tense, which implies repeated action in the

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*We don't know  
how many times  
that prayer pierced  
heaven and touched  
the heart of God.*

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lifted the cross, and let it slip into the hole with a sickening thud that sent shivers of pain through his body, he prayed it again. Perhaps as a mocking mob scorned him—*See there, he saved others and he is helpless to save himself; if*

past. It could be translated, more literally, “Jesus kept saying . . .” We don’t know how many times that prayer pierced the blue sky of heaven and touched the heart of God. Perhaps as he opened his hand to receive the nails, he prayed it. Perhaps as they

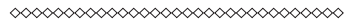
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he is really the Messiah, let him come down from the cross and we will believe him, he prayed it yet again.

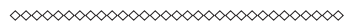
You know what I think? I think the risen, glorified Christ is still praying that prayer. We become a part of the answer when we get serious enough to do what we know is right. May this first word draw us nearer to the forgiving heart of God. That is the first step in our preparation for the glory of the resurrection.

When we lay aside the burden of getting even, we free ourselves to move on to a glorious Easter. When we harbor revengeful attitudes, carry a

grudge, and long to retaliate, we allow others to control us. While we stew in our own juices, they are free to enjoy themselves. See them having fun, singing and dancing, while we plot our revenge. Break free from the control



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of others by praying this first word from the cross. Let the power of this word, prayed from your heart, set you free from all desire to exact vengeance.

Forgiveness is the road less traveled. Most prefer to walk the path of retaliation and retribution. When we do this, we destroy the bridge over which we must travel to enter into the fullness of divine blessing.