SEVEN EVERLASTING WORDS FROM THE CROSS

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

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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?

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.

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

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.

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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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scarred. In his shame, Adam hid from the creator in the Garden of Eden. God went in search, calling out, "Adam, where are you?"

The creator's search for his lost creation was consummated on the Good Friday of redemption. It culminated in the cross. Our perfect mediator reached out and took the hand of the Eternal Father; with the other hand he reached out for erring humanity. He brought them together in reconciling love. "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ" (2 Cor. 5:19).

The Father was so pleased with the atoning work of His Son that on the seventh day, the Holy Saturday of redemption, the Son rested in the tomb. On Sunday, the first day of the week, he came forth in his resurrection glory to usher in a new day of salvation. When we put our faith where our sins are, in the cross, that new week of re-creation begins for us.

In addition to the seven days in a week, I like to think of the seven last words as the seven notes in a chord. The eighth note resolves the chord, giving it a sense of completion. If we are playing in the key of C where

there are no sharps or flats, the C above middle C could represent Christ. He resolves the dissidence in our lives and brings about harmony in our relationship with God.

The seven last words are like notes in a chord.

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

The seven last words present a living hope.

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. 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

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we come to the cross and listen to the last words of the suffering servant of God, we cannot help being impressed by the truth of these words.

In our study of the cries from Calvary, may we find ourselves at the foot of the cross, alongside the centurion. He was the captain of the guard who commanded the squad of Roman legionnaires as they carried out the crucifixion. "And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God'" (Mark 15:39).

May we come to the conviction that "this man" was not a victim, he was the Victor whose victory lives on in the

power of the resurrection. Like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, may our hearts burn within us (see Luke 24:32) as we open the Scriptures and tune into the cries from the cross.

May our hearts burn within us as we tune into the cries from the cross.

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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?"

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

As a boy, my favorite hobby was raising homing pigeons and watching them fly with such effortless grace. Before returning to the coup, they would often perch on high-wire lines. I could see that the insulation had worn thin. I was afraid that one of my birds would touch a bare wire and be electrocuted. Dad said, "Not to worry; the pigeons are not grounded." He told me: "There is something mysterious about electricity. It can't get into you unless it can get out of you."

What about the flow of forgiveness? Is it based upon the same principle? Jesus taught us to pray: "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors," (Matt. 6:12). "Forgive us... as we have forgiven." It surely sounds

Electricity can't get into you unless it can get out of you.

as if one must be forgiving in order to be forgiven. This is not because a loving God withholds forgiveness from anyone. This is because of the spiritual laws by which

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

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

flowed through him without resistance.

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

flows in and out of our lives. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The fact of the matter is, God is not a

God is not a force, but a Father.

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force, but a Father. In the very first word, from the lips of the crucified, we find our best and our brightest hope for forgiveness.

Remember back to the early eighties, when Star Wars packed the movie theatres? There was something about that space mythology that appealed to my theologicallytrained mind. I guess I saw myself as a ministerial version of Luke Skywalker, entering the realms of Darth Vader to rescue those who had been captivated by the Dark Side. It was my mission to help them escape the Death Star and come back to the Force. I went through a period when I would greet my friends with, "May the Force be with you." Often they would reply, "And also with you." It was the "in thing" to do and it was a fun way to start or end a conversation. One day, as I said this for the umpteenth time, this question crept into my mind: Would I want a force to be with anyone? The answer was quick in coming: not unless it had the face and the heart of our heavenly Father. To the best of my knowledge, I never used that expression again, except as an illustration.

Forces are notoriously unforgiving. Many people think of God as the First Cause, the unmoved mover of the universe. But movers and causes have no capacity for

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 what-

Forces are notoriously unforgiving.

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soever 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.

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."

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

The smiling face of our Savior is the ultimate source of our forgiveness.

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

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
pray for our
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die our place.

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

unrighteous sinner, without violating his perfect righteousness? The solution for me is in the incarnation of God in Christ. The Supreme Judge of the universe stepped down from his throne and became flesh in the personhood of Jesus. The Eternal Word who was with God and was God (John 1:1) "became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). As our perfect sacrifice, of infinite value, he was able to take upon himself the sins of the world. When we put our faith in the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, God can justify us without violating his standards of perfect justice.

The thing that amazed me most about my homing pigeons was their uncanny instinct to fly, straight as an

When we put our faith in the Lamb of God, God can justify us without violating his standards of perfect justice.

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arrow, back to the nest. Sometimes Dad would take me on long trips and I would take two or three of my birds along. Just before returning home, I would release them. They would circle overhead two or three times as though they were getting their bearings. Then they would make

a beeline for home. They always arrived long before we did.

Can we get our bearings this morning and home in on this truth? Forgiveness, human or divine, is costly. A casual, easy forgiveness is no forgiveness at all. The most

difficult thing in all the world is to forgive. That's because love makes us vulnerable. The more we love, the more we run the risk of being hurt. The more we are hurt, the more difficult it is to forgive.

The most difficult thing in all the world is to forgive.

The more difficult it is to forgive, the greater the sacrifice required. The greater the sacrifice, the more love is needed to make that sacrifice. But, the more love we have, the more it hurts.

Are you flying around with me trying to get your bearings? It's like an ascending spiral of love, hurt, sacrifice; more love, more hurt, more sacrifice; that eventually reaches the heart of God. His infinite love required a sacrifice of infinite value, the sacrifice of himself in his only Son.

The Old Testament knew that well. Hebrews 9:22 says, "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." The prophet Isaiah saw it seven hundred and twenty years before it happened. He

The Son of God became the Son of man that we might become the children of God.

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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

of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not

have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8). The apostle Paul, looking back on his years of persecuting the church, realized he was "shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief" (1 Tim. 1:13).

A forgiving God takes into account ignorance as a mitigating factor.

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Their ignorance did not excuse them, however, it was a mitigating factor, which had to be taken into account. I believe this first word, "Father, forgive them," takes this into account and asks God to withhold his wrath and judgment until the people can come to realize what they had done. The Father could have sent 1,000 angels to avenge the death of his Son. The Son's prayer is that all retribution be withheld until the people might be convicted of the seriousness of their sin.

The answer to this prayer was not long in coming. Forty-nine days later, on the day of Pentecost ("penta"

meaning the fiftieth day after Passover), the people came to a shocking realization of the enormity of having murdered their long-expected Messiah. It was on that day that the apostle Peter preached what I

The people suddenly became aware of the consequences of what they had done.

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.

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

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

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realize the sinfulness of sin, we are in the best possible position to receive the forgiveness of God.

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.

But, there was no faith to be seen anywhere around the Faith is the switch that turns on the flow of forgiveness.

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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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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.