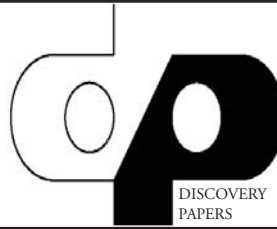


TRUST AT THE CROSS

SERIES: SEVEN LAST WORDS



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Luke 23:46
7th Message
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The sister of Steve Jobs has recently reported that his last words just before dying were, “OH WOW. OH WOW. OH WOW.”

Henry Beecher Ward’s last words are reported as being, “Now comes the mystery.”

Leonard Bernstein’s last words are said to be, “What’s this?”

Lord Byron’s last words: “Now I shall go to sleep. Goodnight.”

When Voltaire died, it is said that a priest asked him to renounce Satan and he replied, “This is no time to be making enemies.”

Emily Dickinson said, “I must go in. The fog is rising.”

George Washington said, “I die hard, but am not afraid to go.”

Oscar Wilde’s last words were less intense. He is reported to have said, “Either that wallpaper goes or I do.”

There is something powerful about last words. The idea that the last thing you say might sum up your life in some way. We are fascinated by last words. They say something about a person’s life; they say something about a person’s death. And somehow they say something about our lives and our deaths as well.

This morning we are wrapping up our seven week series looking at the last words of Jesus on the cross. We’ve called this series *Seven Last Words* and we’ve been considering the seven statements that Jesus said from the cross just before he died. I’ve heard from many of you that you’ve appreciated the chance to reflect so deeply on the cross. That has been my experience as well. It’s amazing that after seven weeks, there is so much that we haven’t said. There is so much depth to this moment. Today we come to what is traditionally considered the seventh and final word that Jesus spoke on the cross. His last words.

As we’ve looked at these statements of Jesus, we’ve talked about a lot of things. Forgiveness. Paradise. Family. Pain.

Desire. Completion. But we haven’t talked too much about death. That seems like a reasonable thing to think about in this context. Jesus was, after all, dying. He was facing the moment that each of us will face at some point unless Jesus returns sooner.

So this morning as we consider Jesus’ final statement we will be talking about death. How did Jesus approach death? How does that relate to how he approached life? What does that mean about how we might face death. What does that mean about how we should live?

Some people’s last words seem to embody the idea of mystery. Some seem to suggest resignation. Some keep laughing even at the end. Jesus’ final words are words of trust, dependence, and faith. Jesus faced death by laying his life in the hands of God. As we consider these words, we’ll think about the kind of trust that Jesus had and whether that kind of trust is possible for us as well. We will observe that Jesus died the way he lived. We’ll talk about how we can live the way we’d like to die.

Face Death with Faith

The statement for this morning is from the Book of Luke. Luke’s gospel records three statements of Jesus with this as his last statement.

Luke 23:46:

⁴⁶Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last.

Once again, Jesus is recorded as crying out with a loud voice. The final cries of Jesus are strong proclamations. This is incredible given what he has been through over the past 18 hours. Jesus died, not with a whimper, but with a shout. We started out by thinking about famous last words. Rarely are last words so strong or so confident.

You can’t watch someone die without thinking about your own death. We will all have to face death. The question is not whether we will die, but how we will die. We live in a world filled with media portrayals of death:

movies, news reports, video games. But we have mostly insulated ourselves from real death by creating hospitals and hospice programs. We are surrounded by death and yet most of us rarely think about it.

This morning we read of Jesus dying; breathing his last. It's an incredible picture. Incredible that God himself, who is defined by immortality, would allow himself to die. Jesus faced death. We would be forgetting something if we spent seven weeks thinking about the Son of God dying and never once thought about the fact that we too will die.

Jesus' death forces us to confront the very dark fact that most of us want desperately to avoid thinking about it. We will die. Life on this planet will not go on forever. So this morning, my first encouragement to us is to allow these words to remind us of our own mortality. We try so hard to insulate ourselves from death. But we must face it.

In order to learn how to face death, we look at how Jesus faced his death. How did he die?

Our text says he "committed" his spirit into the hands of the Father. This word that the NIV translates "commit" is an interesting one. It means to set something before someone; to offer it up. It's used frequently of ideas. I offer you an idea and see what you think of it. Several gospel authors use it when Jesus tells his parables. He offered people his parables to see what they would do with them. But it's also used of people; entrusting them to someone else. At the end of his life, Paul uses it during his goodbye speech to the elders of the church at Ephesus. He says, in Acts 20:32, "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace." The idea is that I've done all I can do and now I trust that God will do something with it.

As Jesus dies, he says, "God, here is my life. I have finished my part and now I give it to you to do with as you see fit." We have a word for this kind of attitude toward God. It's faith. In his last moment, Jesus had faith in God. It seems a bit odd to say that Jesus had faith, doesn't it? We think of having faith in Jesus. He is the object of our faith. It doesn't make that much sense for Jesus to have faith. And once again, as we've seen happen all throughout this series, we are confronted with what it means that Jesus was fully human. What does it mean that Jesus had faith? Did he need faith even though he was God himself?

Have you ever heard your parents talk about growing up? I've heard my dad tell stories of what he did when he was a boy and frankly, I don't believe it. It doesn't make sense to me that my father was ever a boy. I see the same look of disbelief in my kids' faces when I tell them stories

of my growing up. They'll be scared of something and I'll tell them that when I was a kid, I was scared of the same thing. And they'll look at me like, "that's a great story dad, but you were never a kid. That doesn't make sense."

But I was a kid once. And Jesus was and is a man. Just as Jesus really asked God "Why?" and really felt pain and really had desires, he really had to have faith here. He really had to trust God at the end of his life. Jesus faced death with faith. Facing death means we have to ask the questions, "Is there someone out there that I can trust? Is God trustworthy? Can I face death as Jesus faced death?"

Death always seems to bring up questions like this. What else is there? What happens when we die? For us, facing death has to mean facing these questions. It has to mean being willing to wrestle with whether I really trust God or not. Facing death has to make us think about our lives.

These words don't come out of nowhere for Jesus. If we look at his life, we realize that this is the way he lived his entire life. Jesus faced death the same way he faced life.

Luke begins his gospel with a story of Jesus' trust in God being tested. Right after Jesus began his public ministry, Satan tried to get Jesus to distrust God. He got Jesus really hungry and really tired so he had the best opportunity. Then he paraded before him many of the things that get us to abandon trusting God: sensual pleasures like food, power over others, and the insistence that God prove himself. But Jesus didn't give up trusting. He began his life trusting God: just as he ended his life trusting God.

This is the normal way things work. There are stories of people making dramatic changes on their deathbed. But most people face death in the same way that they face life. That's because our decisions and attitudes throughout life build on each other and create a pattern that we tend to live by. You might say that as we get older we become who we are, only more so.

Again, this is not to say there aren't dramatic exceptions to the rule. We do change. We can repent. We can turn around. Our lives can make dramatic changes. That's at the heart of the message of the gospel. There is always the possibility for change. But the normal state of events is that each decision we make builds from the pattern of life that we've established. Our choices create a sort of momentum that drives us forward.

That means that facing death begins now. We don't spend our lives preparing for what we might say on our

deathbed. We spend our lives living the way we want to die. Jesus' life and death show us that, clearly and powerfully. Facing death with God happens by living life with God.

Follow Examples of Faith

Now the question becomes how we might trust God in life and in death. We see Jesus doing it, but how does he do it? It can't be enough to say that Jesus was God and faith came easily for him. That would strip him of part of his humanity and make him worthless as an example to us. How did Jesus have faith?

As with many of the statements that Jesus made from the cross, this one is a quote from a psalm. These words show up in Psalm 31, a psalm attributed to David that begins by talking about finding refuge in God. In the psalm, David is the object of unjust punishment. He is what theologians call the "righteous sufferer." But even in the midst of that kind of suffering, David expresses faith. He asks God in verse 4 to "Free me from the trap that is set before me." In the next verse he declares his faith that God will do just that by saying in verse 5, "Into your hands I commit my spirit; redeem me, O Lord, the God of truth."

As the psalm progresses, we see the result of David's trust. It works out in the end. In verse 8 he declares "You have set my feet in a spacious place." In verse 22, "You heard my cry for mercy when I called to you for help." The psalm ends with the psalmist telling others that because God was faithful to him, you can trust that God will be faithful to you. Verse 24 concludes, "Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the Lord."

This is what Jesus tried to do. He tried to be strong and take heart. We can imagine that he had this entire psalm in mind. He knew that David had to trust God and that trust worked out. So he said that he was going to trust God in the same way, knowing that he was trusting the same God and there was a good chance it would work out the same way. Jesus followed the example that David set of trusting God, because for David, it worked.

How many of you have used Yelp sometime in the past month? You use Yelp for the same reason that Jesus quoted Psalm 31. When you're looking for a good restaurant to eat at, you check Yelp, other online reviews, or you talk to your friends because you want to know what others have experienced. You base your decisions on the experiences of others. That's what Jesus did. At the end of his life, he based his decision on who to trust on the experiences of those who went before him. God was faithful to David.

So Jesus put his trust in the same God.

And then Jesus died.

But three days later, he comes back to life. The life that Jesus put in God's hands is returned to him. Next Sunday, we will gather to celebrate that event. We will rejoice because God brought Jesus back to life. We celebrate because the resurrection proved that Jesus' trust was well-founded. On Friday, Jesus put his faith in the Father. His death is like a last minute hail-mary pass to win a losing football game. The crowd falls silent. And the ball is caught. On Sunday, Jesus' faith is vindicated. He rose from the dead.

So Jesus followed the example of David. Then he set a new example of his own. The experience of Jesus teaches us that God can be trusted. Listen to how the author of Hebrews says it in Hebrews 12:2, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

The faith of Jesus becomes an example for us. We learn to trust God by watching Jesus. David was Jesus' example. Jesus is our example. So as we are faced with questions of life and death, we can learn from those who have gone before us. We can follow examples of faith.

This idea of following in the faith of others was so well understood by the early believers that our first story of a Christian martyr plays out in exactly this way. When you get to the book of Acts, you hear about a guy named Stephen. He first shows up in Acts 6 when he was selected to serve as what we would call a deacon in the church at Jerusalem. Soon after that, Stephen was arrested for preaching about Jesus to a crowd of people. He was tried before Jewish courts, convicted of blasphemy, and stoned to death. This was how he died, according to Acts 7:59-60, "While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he fell asleep."

Stephen trusted God with his spirit and he trusted God for justice to be done, even as he was being executed for something he didn't do. Stephen had the courage to trust in Jesus because Jesus had the courage to trust in the Father and that trust was vindicated. Stephen followed in the example of Jesus, who followed in the example of David. All of these become examples for us. We follow the examples of faith that we have been given.

So think about the examples that you have. We have examples in Scripture. We have examples in church history. Some of us have family members who have been examples to us. There are current day examples of people trusting God in amazing ways throughout the world. We have examples in this church of people taking risks for the sake of the gospel and God continually demonstrating that he is trustworthy.

But sometimes these examples can have the opposite effect. Instead of inspiring us, they can overwhelm us or intimidate us. I remember how I used to think about pastors and leaders in this church. The incredible respect I had for them. Now, I'm not saying that I was wrong back then. It just feels a lot different being a leader than I thought it would feel. I thought I'd feel much more mature. Or maybe I'm not as mature as they were.

Remember what we said about our lives building momentum. You make decisions in your life based largely on how you've lived up to that point. You don't often make huge monumental decisions out of nowhere. You build up to them. You practice trust, you stumble, and you learn from it.

This is how we help each other. We start small and we grow together. We provide examples for each other: big and small. We encourage each other. We learn together. A huge part of Christian growth is learning to trust God in different circumstances. One of the ways that God helps us is by giving us examples. Jesus followed the example of David. Stephen followed the example of Jesus. We follow the example of Jesus. We face death by facing life. We learn to live by following in the footsteps of those who have gone before us and those who go with us.

Trust God as Father

So as we watch Jesus' death on the cross, it becomes an example for how to die and how to live. There's one particular aspect that I want us to think about this morning in terms of how Jesus trusted God. When Jesus expresses his trust in God, he addresses God as Father.

Of the seven statements on the cross, three of them were addressed to God. One of those three was a desperate cry to God asking him why Jesus was there. But the first and the last statement were heartfelt prayers. In each of them, he addressed God as Father. His words from the cross began and ended with a prayer to the Father. He started by praying to the Father for the sake of those who were killing him. He ended by praying to the Father in a radical

statement of trust.

Most of us probably don't think twice about addressing God as Father, but that wasn't always the case for God's people. It may come as a surprise to learn that God was rarely pictured as Father in the Old Testament. God is referred to as the Father of his people a handful of times and he makes promises to both David and Solomon that he will be their Father. But no one addresses God as Father; until Jesus.

Jesus changed the way God's people thought about him. Jesus opened up a new image for God's people. He allows us to see God in a personal, relational, even intimate way. Jesus came as our brother which opened up the way for us to call God our Father. Listen to what Paul says in Galatians 4:6, "Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.'"

God gives us his Spirit that helps us to follow the examples of faith we have been given and cry out to God as our Father. We can trust God as Father just as Jesus did. That's the encouragement that these final words of Jesus ultimately lead us to. Trust God as Father.

The idea of God being our Father is a powerful image for everyone, but it is not a positive image for everyone. For a lot of people, fatherhood is a bad thing. Some fathers are angry. Some fathers are demanding. Some are distant and cold. Some are abusive. Some are absent. That's not to say that there aren't some great fathers out there. I'm hopeful for the possibility that you can be a good father. But in general, fatherhood is a mixed bag at best. If you read the Bible, you realize that fathers weren't any better back then. So why would God choose to associate himself with fathers? Why would he want to be known as Father? Why would Jesus address him that way? Does that really help us learn to trust God?

I think the answer is that God has built the desire for a father deep inside each of us. In a weird way, the fact that so many people have been hurt by their fathers is a powerful proof of this. You might hear a tough kid say "I don't care about what my dad thinks." But we all know he is lying. I've heard men, whose fathers have long since died, talk about how the driving force in their life was to please their dad. All of us long for a dad who loves us; a dad who is proud of us; a dad who knows us.

But I think what we long for the most in our fathers is to be able to trust him. We want to know that we can crawl into our father's lap and he will protect us. We want to know that our father can be trusted to provide for us.

We want to know that our father is on our side. We want a dad we can trust.

Just two weeks ago, I was driving home from work in a great mood. It had been a good day, I'd gotten a lot done and had some meaningful conversations. I was looking forward to getting home and enjoying the evening. Then I got a call from Rachel telling me that I had forgotten to pick up one of our kids from their afterschool activity. They were there with the teacher waiting for me, twenty minutes after I was supposed to be there. Needless to say, my great mood vanished. I had forgotten my child. How could I do that?

I don't know what happened. I'm usually really on top of my schedule. I can tell you my next week's schedule by heart. But I had proved untrustworthy. I had failed.

But even in my failure, you can see the reason why God would have us trust him as a father. My failure makes it clear that I know what a good father is like. A good father doesn't forget his children. That seems pretty basic. But I know more than that about what fatherhood is supposed to be because I've seen examples of good fathers and I've seen examples of bad fathers. The ways that my father loved me well help me to understand what God is like. The ways he failed to love me well also help me to understand that God fills those holes.

When I lead small groups, I often have each person tell their life story. I have heard examples of people saying that God blessed them with a great father who helped them to understand how God really loves them. I have heard others say that their difficult relationship with their father made them realize that they longed for another Father who would love them perfectly. That drove them to God.

We can trust God as our Father, regardless of what our personal experience has been. God is the perfect Father. He cares for us. He defends us. He protects us. He disciplines us. He teaches us. He clothes us. He feeds us. He loves us. He sacrifices for us. He makes the first move to initiate with us. He doesn't run away from difficult situations. He doesn't leave us alone. He doesn't force himself on us. He loves us as a father ought to love us. Trust God as your Father.

For some of you, that might mean trusting him for the first time. Maybe you're here because you're curious or you've been thinking about this or you have questions that you've been looking for answers to. There are a lot of options out there for where to put your trust, but none of them is as good an option as the God who created you,

who sent his Son to die for you, and who invites you to call him Father.

In this moment, Jesus served as a model for how to trust, but he also demonstrated himself as the one to trust in. He was dying here for the sake of the world. He took on the sin of the world and died to remove that sin from us. In doing so, he declares victory over sin and death. Jesus offers us a new way to face death: with hope. In doing so, he offers us a new way to face life. If you haven't trusted in Jesus before, now is a great time to do so.

For others, this might be a simple reminder that you need to trust God. I love the picture of placing our lives in the open and capable hands of God. Maybe you're facing a difficult situation and you don't understand how God could let you get there. Maybe you're having doubts. Maybe you're just apathetic and have found your relationship with God more distant and stale than it has been in the past. Take Jesus' example as a model to spur you on to trust.

There are so many ways that our renewed commitment to trust can be played out in our lives. Trusting God that reconciliation in a relationship is possible. Trusting God that he will provide for your needs. Trusting God that even when things look dark, there is hope on the other side of whatever you're experiencing. Trusting God to take a risk and follow him in a way that seems uncertain.

Regardless of whether you need to trust God for the first time or you need to recommit your trust in him in some new area of your life, the invitation is the same. The question is the same. Will you trust God? Will you trust Jesus?

Next week we will celebrate Easter, the surprising and exciting resurrection of Jesus from the dead. If you haven't been baptized, but you have faith in Christ, this is the time to do it. At PBC, we believe that baptism should happen soon after you proclaim faith in Christ. In baptism, you proclaim your trust as you are lowered into the water, symbolizing Jesus' death. Just as Jesus' trust is vindicated, your trust is vindicated when you are raised up out of the water to live the new life of faith in Christ. If you consider yourself a follower of Jesus and haven't been baptized, next week is a great time.

Wherever you are in your spiritual journey, the invitation is the same: trust God as your Father. Follow the example Jesus set and know that God is a Father who can be trusted.

Conclusion

And so Jesus dies. This week, we celebrate Holy Week—the week before Easter Sunday. For the past seven weeks we've been reflecting on Jesus as he hung on the cross. This week we walk through those final days together as a community. On Thursday we think about the last supper of Jesus as he dined with his disciples just before being betrayed and arrested. On Friday we remember the crucifixion in a dramatic re-telling of the story. On Saturday we wait, not knowing how it will all turn out. Then on Sunday we celebrate the surprise of Jesus rising from the dead.

We have seen a lot of Jesus these past seven weeks. We have covered some of the most central themes in what we believe as Christians.

We started by realizing that we need forgiveness and seeing Jesus offer just that on the cross. Jesus asked for forgiveness to those who crucified him as he did what was necessary for the Father to forgive all of us.

Then we saw Jesus talk about what we all long for: the promise of paradise. We realized that at the center of paradise lies the tree of life. We've been trying to get back to it our whole lives, but Jesus shows us that the way back to the tree of life is not by the way we came, but by the way he makes clear. We get to the tree of life by following him through the tree of death.

Next we saw Jesus respond to two people whom he loved that were watching him die on the cross; his beloved disciple John and his mother Mary. Jesus gave them each other as mother and son. As he cared for two individuals, he proclaimed that he was creating a new family out of those who would follow him.

The next two weeks we watched Jesus deal with two of the most powerful forces in our lives: pain and desire. We saw that Jesus didn't take the common routes of avoiding pain or ascending above it. He faced pain head-on and through his death opened up the way for us to hope for the day when pain would be no more. He was honest about his pain, but he was also honest about his desire. He admitted his thirst. He didn't serve his desire, but he didn't stifle it either. He experienced desire as a way of identifying with us. We too can embrace our desire as he is there with us in the midst of it.

Last week, we saw Jesus proclaim that all his work—everything the Father had given him to do—was finished. Jesus completed atonement for all of us. He reconciled us to the Father. He redeemed us. He justified us. He became our perfect sacrifice. And he won the victory for us. His work is complete and we can rest in that.

Today we saw him die with words of trust on his lips. He trusted God his Father and he gave us an example to follow. We can trust God. He is worth it. Put your trust in him.

And so after looking at these words of Jesus on the cross, we prepare for Holy Week and Easter morning. Next week, as we gather to celebrate the resurrection, we'll look at some words Jesus spoke after he was raised again. We saw what he said on the cross. Next we'll see what he says after being raised. Those words are just as powerful and speak directly to our hearts.

Let's end by remembering why we've been looking at these seven last words and what we've hoped to gain. Here is what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:2, "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." He then proclaims this in Phil 3:10-11, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead."

May we enter into the death of Christ this week so that next Sunday we can rejoice all the more at the surprise of his life.