

His Final Words

John 18:1-19:42

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church
1001 W. Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616

March 30, 2018 — Good Friday

Pastor Tom Thews

Someone has penned an obituary that could have appeared in the Jerusalem Post, on a certain Saturday in the year 33 A.D. The obituary reads like this:

“Jesus Christ, age 33, of Nazareth, died Friday on Mount Calvary, also known as Golgotha, “the place of the skull.” Betrayed by the apostle Judas, He was crucified by order of ruler Pontius Pilate. The causes of death were asphyxiation by crucifixion, extreme exhaustion, severe torture, and loss of blood.

“Jesus Christ, descendant of Abraham, was a member of the house of David. He was son of the late Joseph, a carpenter of Nazareth, and Mary, His devoted mother. Jesus was born in a stable in the city of Bethlehem, Judea. He is survived by His mother Mary, His faithful Apostles, numerous disciples, and many followers.

“Jesus was self-educated and spent at least three years of His adult life working as a teacher. Jesus occasionally worked as a medical doctor and it is reported that He healed many patients. Until the time of His death, He was sharing the Good News of the Kingdom of God by healing the sick, touching the lonely, feeding the hungry, and helping the poor.

“Jesus was most noted for recounting parables about His Father's Kingdom, performing miracles, such as feeding more than five thousand people with only five loaves of bread and two fish, and healing a man born blind. The day before His death, He held a last supper celebrating the Passover feast at which He foretold His death.

“The body was buried in a grave donated by Joseph of Arimathea, a family friend. By order of Pontius Pilate, a boulder was rolled in front of the tomb and Roman soldiers were stationed on guard.

“In lieu of flowers, the family has requested that everyone try to live as Jesus did. Donations may be sent to anyone in need.”

No such obituary appeared, of course, in the Jerusalem Post the day after Christ died. Jesus died a rather obscure death. But think what an impact His death had. Two thousand years later we are still telling the story. And to think it was all in our behalf.

Pastor Anthony Evans tells about a Sunday school teacher in his church who was telling her preschoolers about Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion. She had their undivided attention — even Michael was listening. When she finished the lesson and asked for questions, Michael's hand shot into the air; the teacher was thrilled.

“I just want to know one thing,” Michael said. “Where the heck were the State Police when all this was going on?”

Good question. There was nothing just about Jesus' death. Even Pilate confessed that he could find no basis for a charge against Him. That's why Pilate wanted to wash his hands of the whole affair. But the mob would not be deterred. "Crucify Him! Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" they shouted. Pilate was a politician, and like all politicians, his main concern was to protect his own position — not necessarily to see that justice was done. So Pilate caved in to the fury of the crowd.

The Roman soldiers led Jesus to a place called the Skull. There they crucified Him, along with two criminals — one on His right, the other on His left. And they mocked Him and sneered at Him. Jesus' response? "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing (Luke 23:34)."

The contrast could not have been greater. The crowd, including some of the soldiers, spewed out hatred as crowds often do, and the Master responded with a prayer for their forgiveness.

Pastor Adam Hamilton suggests that Jesus could have prayed this prayer for their forgiveness in silence, but He chose to pray it aloud. He wanted us to "overhear" this prayer. Christ not only wanted us to know we're forgiven; He wanted to teach us what it means to be His follower.

One of the criminals who hung there alongside Christ hurled insults at Him: "Aren't you the Messiah?" he shouted. "Save yourself and us!"

But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise (Luke 23:43)."

I wonder how many people in prison these past 2,000 years have taken comfort in Jesus' words. I wonder how many of us respectable church folks have taken comfort in them as well. The criminal confessed his unworthiness. Yet Christ offered the ultimate absolution, "Today you will be with me in paradise." What sweet words they would be to any guilty party regardless of their sin.

Near the cross of Jesus stood His mother, His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw His mother there, and the disciple John whom He loved standing nearby, He said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, John took Mary, Jesus' mother, into his home.

From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").

When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah (Matthew 27:45-47)." He wasn't calling for Elijah as we know. He was calling for His Father God, just as you or I would have in such a situation. Jesus could not adequately have taken our place unless He came to that point, that each of us will one day come to, when we question whether God Himself has forsaken us.

To illustrate the pain and torment in Jesus' spirit, a story is told of a couple of missionaries in a far and remote place. They have their four-year-old son with them. The son enjoys a beautiful trust and love relationship with his father.

One day it is discovered that the boy has a nasty tumor growing on his body. His body is inflicted with fever from an infection and his life is threatened. Finally, a doctor on the mission field comes and examines the child. He tells the parents that the child needs to be operated on immediately to save his life. The only problem is that there is no anesthetic available in the mission hospital.

The father knows that operation has to be carried out. He takes his son aside, and says to him, "Son, there is this tumor on you that is making you sick. It is not your fault, but it has to be taken out. You are going to feel great pain. But I want you to know, even while you are feeling this pain, I love you and I will always love you. So be brave, my son."

The operation takes place, and the child is strapped to a makeshift operation table. As the surgeon's knife falls, the son screams with pain. He looks to his father who stands near the door to seek comfort from the one whom he has trusted and loved since birth. The father looks at his son in terrible pain, but there is nothing he can do. He turns his head from seeing the suffering of his son. Imagine the loneliness that little boy is experiencing. The trauma he is going through. That was the experience of Christ on the cross. That is the experience of His Father who watches it all.

Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, says John's Gospel, Jesus says, "I am thirsty." A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. When He had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished."

Author Max Lucado writes, "Are any words in history more splendid? Three words, at once shattering and victorious, 'It is finished.'

"The history-long plan of redeeming man was finished. The message of God to man was finished. The works done by Jesus as a man on earth were finished. The task of selecting ambassadors was finished. The job was finished. The song had been sung. The blood had been poured. The sacrifice had been made. The sting of death had been removed. It was over. A cry of defeat? Hardly.... No, this is no cry of despair. It is a cry of completion. A cry of relief. A roar of fulfillment. A shout of victory."

According to Luke's Gospel, at the end of this ordeal, Jesus made one last sound. He called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit (Luke 23:46)." When Jesus had said this, He breathed His last. And the terrible deed was done. It was a terrible deed, but like all things in creation, God used a terrible deed to save our souls.

Pastor Wayne Rouse helps put the events of Good Friday into perspective for us. He says the most sobering account of extravagant love that he knows of was demonstrated by a friend of his wife named Alice Rangal.

Alice and Pastor Rouse's wife grew up in Cozad, Nebraska. Alice's mother and grandmother had a reputation for being the "worst of the worst." They were known for drinking and sleeping around, and they made life miserable for Alice and her brothers and sisters.

One afternoon while in a drunken state Alice's mother and grandmother had all the kids in the car and they stalled the car on the train tracks. Off in the distance a freight train blew its whistle, and Alice could see the train racing toward them.

When Alice realized that her mother and grandmother were too drunk to understand the danger they were in, she began to get her brothers and sisters out of the car and to safety. She dragged both her mother and grandmother out of the car.

As she was pulling both of them to safety, the train hit the car at 60 mph. Alice's extravagant love saved her family's life, but it cost her own. As the train smashed into their car, Alice was too close, and she felt its entire force.

Wayne Rouse writes, "Our Lord and Savior expressed extravagant love for the unlovely, the wretched, the worst of the worst. He saved our lives while giving up His own. He experienced the full weight of sin as it smashed into Him at Calvary, while we stood at a safe distance and watched. Genuine extravagant love!"

So these were Christ's final words this side of the grave: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do — Today you will be with me in paradise — Behold your son: behold your mother — My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? — I thirst — It is finished — Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

And here is the glory of it all — Christ did it on our behalf. Ponder, if you will, the meaning of all that as we prepare to celebrate His resurrection. Jesus took our place. Thanks be to the Father, to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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