

The Seven Last Words of Christ

The Fifth Word: Suffering

John 19:28

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Introduction

It is often profitable to study the last words of dying men.

Many sermons have been preached on the last words of Jesus. As he hung on the cross on that first Good Friday he uttered seven short sentences or phrases. We usually call these “the seven last words of Christ.”

For the past few Good Fridays we have been examining these so-called “last words” of Christ.

The first word that Jesus uttered was a word of *forgiveness* addressed to the Father on behalf of those who were crucifying him: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

The second word that Jesus uttered was a word of *salvation* spoken to the thief on the cross: “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

The third word that Jesus uttered was a word of *affection* addressed primarily to his mother who he entrusted into the care of the apostle John: “Dear woman, here is your son” (John 19:25-27).

The fourth word that Jesus uttered was a word of *anguish* addressed to the Father: “‘*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*’—which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Matthew 27:45-46).

Tonight I want to examine briefly the fifth word that Jesus uttered, which was a word of *suffering*. It is found in John 19:28:

²⁸ Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I am thirsty.” (John 19:28)

Lesson

In his book, *Reaching the Invisible God*, author Philip

Yancey tells the story about his wife, Janet, who leads a weekly “Christian Circle” at a local nursing home. An Alzheimer’s patient named Betsy faithfully attends, led there by a staff worker, and sits through the hour. Every week Janet introduces herself, and every week Betsy responds as if she’s never seen her before.

After a few weeks, Janet learned that Betsy has retained the ability to read. She has no comprehension of what she is reading and will repeat the same line over and over, like a stuck record, until someone prompts her to move on. But on a good day she can read a passage straight through in a clear, strong voice. Janet began calling on her each week to read a hymn.

One Friday the senior citizens, who prefer to sing the older hymns they remember from childhood, selected “The Old Rugged Cross” for Betsy to read.

“On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross, the emblem of suff’ring and shame,” she began, and stopped.

She suddenly got agitated. “I can’t go on! It’s too sad! Too sad!” she said.

Some of the seniors gasped. Others stared at her, dumbfounded. In years of living at the nursing home, not once had Betsy shown the ability to put words together meaningfully. Now, obviously, she did understand.

Janet calmed her: “That’s fine, Betsy. You don’t have to keep reading if you don’t want to.”

After a pause, though, she started reading again, and stopped at the same place. A tear made a trail down each cheek.

“I can’t go on! It’s so sad!” she said, unaware she had said the same thing two minutes ago.

She tried again, and again reacted with a sudden shock of recognition, grief, and the exact same words.

Finally, when Betsy seemed tranquil, Janet led her to the elevator to return her to her room. To her amazement Betsy began singing the hymn from memory. The words came in breathy, chopped phrases, and she could barely carry the tune, but anyone could recognize the hymn:

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On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross
The emblem of suff'ring and shame.

New tears fell, but his time Betsy kept going, still from
memory, gaining strength as she sang:

And I love that old cross where the dearest and best
For a world of lost sinners was slain.

So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,
Till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross,
And exchange it some day for a crown.

Somewhere in that tattered mind, damaged neurons had tapped into a network of old connections to resurrect a pattern of meaning for Betsy. In her confusion, two things only stood out: suffering and shame. Those two words summarize the human condition, the condition she lives in every day of her sad life.

Who knows more suffering and shame than Betsy?

For her, the hymn answered that question: Jesus does.¹

Jesus entered into a world of human suffering and shame when he was born some 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem. And although he was fully divine, he was also fully human too. Jesus became one with us in our humanity.

The Bible affirms the full humanity of Jesus in many ways.

For example, the Bible teaches that Jesus had a human body. And his body had human limitations.

Jesus was born just as all human babies are born. Luke 2:7 says that Mary “gave birth to her firstborn, a son.”

Jesus then grew through childhood to adulthood just as other children grow (Luke 2:4). Moreover, Luke tells us that “Jesus grew in wisdom and stature” (Luke 2:52).

¹ Philip Yancey, *Reaching the Invisible God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Co., 2000), 286-287.

Jesus became tired, just as we do, for we read that “Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well” in Samaria (John 4:6).

Jesus became hungry. After he had fasted for forty days in the wilderness, we read that “he was hungry” (Matthew 4:2).

Jesus was at times physically weak. When he was on his way to be crucified, the soldiers forced Simon of Cyrene to carry his cross (Luke 23:26), most likely because Jesus was so weak following the beating he had received that he did not have enough strength to carry it himself.

And Jesus became thirsty, for when he was on the cross he said, “**I am thirsty**” (John 19:28).

The culmination of Jesus’ humanity is seen when he died on the cross (Luke 23:26). His human body ceased to have life in it and ceased to function, just as ours does when we die.

All of these passages show that, as far as Jesus’ human body is concerned, it was like ours in every respect. Jesus became one with us in our humanity.

Father Damien was a priest who became famous for his willingness to serve lepers. He moved to Kalawao—a village on the island of Molokai, in Hawaii, that had been quarantined to serve as a leper colony.

For 16 years, he lived in their midst. He learned to speak their language. He bandaged their wounds, embraced the bodies no one else would touch, preached to hearts that would otherwise have been left alone. He organized schools, bands, and choirs. He built homes so that the lepers could have shelter. He built 2,000 coffins by hand so that, when they died, they could be buried with dignity.

Slowly, it was said, Kalawao became a place to live rather than a place to die, for Father Damien offered hope.

Father Damien was not careful about keeping his distance though. He did nothing to separate himself from his people. He dipped his fingers in the poi bowl along with the patients. He shared his pipe. He did not always wash his hands after bandaging

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open sores. He got close. For this, the people loved him.

Then one day he stood up and began his sermon with two words: “We lepers. . . .”

Now he wasn’t just helping them. Now he was one of them. From this day forward, he wasn’t just on their island; he was in their skin. First he had chosen to live as they lived; now he would die as they died. Now they were in it together.

One day God came to Earth in the person of Jesus Christ and began his message: “We lepers. . . .” Now he wasn’t just helping us. Now he was one of us. Now he was in our skin. Now we were in it together.²

But, someone might ask, “Why did Jesus become one of us? Why did he suffer? Why did he cry out, ‘**I am thirsty**’?”

Jesus became one of us and suffered in order to become our substitute. Jesus suffered and died in order to take the wrath of God—that should rightly fall on us—upon himself. By his death he shielded us from the eternal death and hell that we deserve.

On August 16, 1987, Northwest Airlines flight 225 crashed just after taking off from the Detroit airport, killing 155 people. There was only one survivor: a four-year-old from Tempe, Arizona, named Cecelia.

News accounts say when rescuers found Cecelia they did not believe she had been on the plane. Investigators first assumed Cecelia had been a passenger in one of the cars on the highway onto which the airliner crashed. But when the passenger register for the flight was checked, there was Cecelia’s name.

Cecelia survived because, even as the plane was falling, Cecelia’s mother, Paula Chican, unbuckled her own seat belt, got down on her knees in front of her daughter, wrapped her arms and body around Cecelia, and then would not let her go.

Nothing could separate that child from her parent’s love—neither tragedy nor disaster, neither the fall nor the flames that followed, neither height nor depth, neither life nor death.

² John Ortberg, *God Is Closer Than You Think* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Co., 2005), 103-104.

Such is the love of our Savior for us. He left heaven, lowered himself to us, and covered us with the sacrifice of his own body to save us.³

Conclusion

Jesus left the glory of heaven and became a man. He endured the suffering of the cross so that he might pay the penalty for our sin.

My favorite commentator, John Stott, said,

I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the cross. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I turn to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness.

That is the God for me. He set aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death.⁴

On this Good Friday, let us thank God for sending Jesus to this earth. Let us thank him that he suffered our pain so that we could be reconciled to the Father. Amen.

³ Bryan Chapell, *In the Grip of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992).

⁴ John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986).

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develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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