

Anthony J. Carter & Lee Fowler

DYING

to

SPEAK

MEDITATIONS FROM THE CROSS



D Y I N G

to

S P E A K

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To Tony Jr. and Getch.

May you listen to the words of Jesus,
for they are spirit and life.

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Introduction

LAST WORDS, LASTING IMPRESSIONS

THE preacher reminds us in Ecclesiastes 3:1–2, “For everything there is a season . . . a time to be born, and a time to die.” Death is the inevitable consequence of being alive in this world. In fact, the Bible tells us that death is an appointment we all must keep sooner or later (see Heb. 9:27). As true as this is for each of us, it was never truer than in the life of Jesus Christ. Literally and thankfully, Jesus was born to die.

During the years for which we have an account of Jesus’s life, we see that everything he did and everywhere he went pointed to his death on the cross. Ironically, the agony and shame of the cross was the culmination of a life well lived, a life in submission and obedience to the will of God. Gloriously, the life of Christ was for the dying.

Introduction

There were no random events or incidental conversations or accidental encounters. The deliberate way in which Christ lived his life was amazing. His purpose was clear. His vision focused. His mind singularly consumed. From the cradle he was heading to the cross. The path was already set before him. There was no doubt; he was going to walk the road ordained for him even though it was the path marked with the severity of sin—sin not his own, but ours. Amazingly, he willingly and joyfully walked it (see Heb. 12:2).

Every step was one step closer to the hour of agony, the moment of consequence. Every step increased the intensity. Every encounter with the religious authorities heightened their animosity and resolve to see Jesus discredited and put to death. Increasingly his conversations with his disciples anticipated the hour of his suffering and crucifixion. Nothing and no time was wasted. From his last meal with his disciples to his agonizing prayers in Gethsemane to the cries due to the penetrating nails, every word and action was purposeful in revealing who Christ is and what he came to do. Even on the cross, as he hung in rejection and shame, his words were not wasted. Instead, each was calculated to press upon the world the meaning of his life and the consequence of his death.

No one was ever more conscious of his death than Jesus was. Unlike any other person, from the beginning

Jesus acutely knew he was born to die. He knew when he would die. He knew how he would die. He knew what his death would accomplish, and he knew why and how he would accomplish it. With the nature and time of his death so eminently on his mind, we can be assured that every aspect of it was in accord with God's will and that Jesus knew it. Therefore, when we read the words of Christ on the cross, we can be assured that his last words, like his life, were full of meaning. They were not accidental, casual, or arbitrary. Rather, his words were intentional and had redemptive significance.

His final words made a lasting and far-reaching impression.

JESUS AND GEORGE FLOYD

From time to time in history, last words have sparked movements, become anthems, and been used as a battle cry of hope for succeeding generations. History has taught us that last words can be the impetus for change, even revolution. Arguably, the most famous last words of our time were uttered by a man as he lay handcuffed on the asphalt streets of Minneapolis, Minnesota.

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was arrested by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin for allegedly trying to pass a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill. During

the arrest, Officer Chauvin subdued George Floyd. And while Floyd lay facedown on the ground with his hands handcuffed behind his back, Chauvin applied his knee and consequent body weight to the back of Floyd's neck. This pressure would eventually lead to the unfortunate and unnecessary death of George Floyd. Before he died, Floyd uttered three unforgettable words: "I can't breathe."¹

Remarkably, Floyd's final words would become the anthem of a worldwide movement for social justice, police reform, and the end of racism. Unintentionally, his last words moved people to demonstrate for change. His last words would be repeated again and again by protestors around the world as they marched for equality and justice. Like Jesus, George Floyd's last words made a lasting and far-reaching impression. Unlike George Floyd, Jesus's last words intentionally did so.

UNREMARKABLY REMARKABLE

Last words can cause us to take note of a life that prior to death went unnoticed. They have a way of making an unremarkable death remarkable. Interestingly, there was nothing remarkable about the crucifixion of Jesus.

Crucifixions were common enough in that day for people to expect and anticipate them at certain times of

the year. In fact, so unremarkable was Jesus's crucifixion that two others, common criminals, were crucified alongside him. From this standpoint, Jesus's crucifixion, while unjust, was not unusual. Arguably, the most remarkable aspect of Jesus's death wasn't the crucifixion itself, but what he said as he died. His last words have become remarkable in and of themselves. His last words have become anthems and anecdotes. His last words have been the source of comfort and controversy. His last words on the cross have fueled the flames of revolution and renewed the world over.

Jesus died in a common way, but his words were anything but common. On the contrary, they were words of conviction, clarity, and control.

History is filled with the deathbed accounts of famous and infamous people. Often in their time of death we find them disillusioned, distressed, and even defiant. They remind us that even the best that the world has to offer are brought to helplessness and often despair when face-to-face with their own mortality. We discover that in the end we really have little control. Death often makes cowards of the mighty.

Yet with Jesus we see a different story. We see one who even in the hour of death remained aware of who he was and the role even death played in the divine drama that would be the redemption of the world. Unlike others,

Introduction

Jesus experienced no mindless disillusionment, hopeless wandering, or moral collapse at the time of his death. Instead, our Lord was full of intellectual clarity, moral conviction, and theological certainty.

According to the Scriptures, on the cross Jesus spoke seven times. Each time he addressed the immediate nature of his suffering. And yet his words were also transcendent. They spoke to those in his immediate presence, and they still speak to us concerning his passion and our faith and life in him today. If ever a man had significant final words before dying, it was Jesus. His words were not self-serving or self-promoting. They were not words of fear or frustration. They were not purveyors of doubt or despair. Rather he spoke words of victory, selflessness, forgiveness, faith, and confidence in the purposes of God. He spoke them not just for himself but for all who would believe in him.

Our Savior's last words on the cross reveal who he is—the Son of God, Messiah, Shepherd of our souls, Savior of the world. His words also tell us what we are to be in him—forgiven, saved, loved, reconciled, refreshed, complete, and satisfied. This book seeks to remind us of these passion-wrought truths.

In these pages we will take a pastoral, theological, and devotional look at our Savior's final seven sayings on the cross. You will notice that the chapter titles are in

the form of the imperative *to be*. This is to communicate the imperatives of the gospel (who we are to be in Jesus) that naturally result from the indicatives of the gospel (what Jesus has done). We are who we are because of who Jesus is and what Jesus did. In other words: we be because he did.

The work and words of Christ accomplish and announce the good news of salvation by grace. Our response is the joy of living and loving in light of that good news. Our goal at this time is to show that Christ, in dying, spoke words full of the ongoing saving and redeeming power of God in our lives. The result of the work of Christ is the Christian life. We will see that these are words that only Jesus could say—and that Jesus could say only as he died. And thus, Jesus was dying to say them. May we live to hear, rejoice, and follow him in them.

BE FORGIVEN

*And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them,
for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34)*

ON the morning of October 2, 2006, Charles Carl Roberts IV walked into an Amish single-room schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, armed with a deadly arsenal and the intent to inflict bodily harm. That day, he shot ten schoolgirls, killing five and seriously wounding the others. The world was shocked by the unbelievable tragedy. The isolation and simplicity of Amish life was shattered as the world rushed to this small community. The world saw senseless death and unforgivable madness, and many of those who observed and reported on the tragedy focused on those themes.

Yet as shocked as many were, some were even more shocked by the Amish and their reaction. Because of their deep commitment to their Christian faith, the

Amish moved in forgiveness and demonstrated it by reaching out to the family of the killer and serving Roberts's widow and children. Even while grieving over the loss of their daughters, the Amish exemplified Christian forgiveness. Many did not understand such sentiments. Some voiced not just their animosity toward Roberts but also their frustration with the Amish.

One newspaper columnist said that in freely forgiving, the Amish ignored reality out of a belief that they "inhabit a hopeless universe where senseless massacres are accepted. Not even the charming old-fashioned horse and buggy can make up for that."¹

Some in the world might have thought such forgiveness foolish. Yet in the Bible it is the world that is declared foolish. Indeed, the Bible says that the cross, the crucible of the greatest crime and the greatest forgiveness, "is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18).

THE CROSS AND FORGIVENESS

As the curtain lifts on Christ on the cross, we see humanity at its worst. Yet we see the Son of God at his best. The world had done all it could to him. We beat him. We spit upon him. We humiliated and disgraced him. We mocked and abused him. We refused to acknowledge

what the demons knew from the very beginning—he was the Son of God.

We did everything we could except what we should, and that was to worship him. And in light of all the unwarranted abuse, we must stand amazed, in awe, and even ashamed at our Lord's response.

The first word Jesus speaks on the cross is not a word of rebuke toward his captors, though rebuke was what they deserved. It was not a word of correction to his accusers, though they stood in need of correction. It was not even a word of reproof for his tormenters, though reproving was warranted. Instead of cursing those who cursed him, he blessed them. Instead of accusing those who falsely accused him, he pleaded for their souls. Instead of destroying those who sought to destroy him, he prayed for them: *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*

This is a most remarkable word in light of the surrounding circumstances. Who would have begrudged Jesus for a word of vindication or malice? Who would have thought wrong of him if he had decided to curse these ungrateful sinners? Surely the Lord of glory, the one who gives breath and life, would be right and just to take the life and breath of those who curse and mock him rather than worship him. In fact, this is what many would have expected. After all, those who are hurt are in the right to hurt back, aren't we?

When the reports of those Amish girls reached the media, many a talking head declared that anger and bitterness, and even vindication, is not only right but also necessary for healing. Yet the response of the Amish community was anything but bitterness and hatred. Instead, they reached out and visited the killer's family. Remarkably, the Amish consoled and, yes, even prayed for them. This was reflective of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Instead of what the world would expect him to do, Christ prayed. At the time of his agony, he prayed. At the time of his torture, he prayed. At the time of his pain, he prayed. He prayed not for himself. He prayed for those who sinned against him. He prayed for the mob that said, "Crucify him!" (Luke 23:21). He prayed for those who caused his pain. He prayed for the authorities who plotted to kill him. He prayed for those who spit on him. He prayed for the soldiers who hammered the nails. He prayed for those who knew not who he was or what he came to do and, even worse, knew not what they were doing.

Is that not you and me? How many of us have acted in this life as if we did not know the Lord of glory? Have you behaved in such a way as to disrespect his love for you and his Word to his people? Have you sinned against Christ and brought the crucified one all the more pain this day? Has not your sin been a betrayal of his grace and

evidence of your ignorance? Might I say that he is today, right now, saying as he said then, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” We should not only rejoice that he stayed on the cross for our sins but also that he prayed on the cross for our sins.

Remarkably, Christ even in dying made intercession for sinners. Yet this is not the only amazing blessing of prayer afforded the beloved of Christ. The Bible also tells us that even after the resurrection he continues in this ministry of intercessory prayer for his beloved. The writer of Hebrews says in Hebrews 7:25 that by rising from the dead and ascending to heaven, “[Christ] always lives to make intercession for [us].” Today, Christ is alive. And Christ is praying for his people.

Today, if we would hear the Spirit of God and behold the wondrous cross, we would be reminded of the pain and agony that our sins caused the perfect Son of God, and we would hear the John the apostle saying, “Let us sin not.” But if anyone does sin, let us know that we have an advocate, one who pleads our case before the Father; he is Jesus Christ, the righteous (see 1 John 2:1). Regardless of our failures and sins, remarkably our Savior stands today, at the right hand of the Father, praying the same as he prayed then, hanging scourged and bleeding on the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

The power of Christianity is the power of forgiveness. Make no mistake about it. God's most magnanimous act is his forgiving rebellious sinners. Forgiveness is his delight, and it stands as the chief outworking of his exceedingly exalted attribute: love. We are reminded in the Bible that God is slow to anger and abounding in love, grace, and mercy, and these cause him to stand ever ready to forgive (see Neh. 9:17). This is his posture. He positions himself as the God who not only heals our diseases but also forgives all our iniquities (see Ps. 103:3). In fact, the reason that God desires all people to repent (see Acts 17:30; 2 Peter 3:9) is so that he might display his glory in forgiveness.

When Christ prayed from the cross, "Father, forgive them," he was appealing to the innately merciful, inexplicably kind, and abundantly forgiving character of the Father,² while accomplishing the loving basis on which the appeal would be answered—namely, his suffering and death. Therefore, when we hear that on the cross Christ prayed for God to forgive rebellious sinners, we should also hear him saying to us, "Repent and be forgiven." We should hear him saying, as he said on other occasions, "Forgive and be forgiven" (Matt. 6:14). On the cross, Christ not only sought forgiveness for us but also demonstrated how we, who are forgiven, are likewise to forgive.³

The principle of the Bible is consistent: *that which God offers to us, he commands us to offer to others*. We who have received mercy are commanded to be merciful (see Matt. 5:7). We who are the objects of God's love are to love others in return (see 1 John 4:11). And we who have been forgiven must in turn forgive (see Col. 3:13). The power of the cross is not just that we are forgiven *through* Christ but also that we are enabled to forgive others *just as* Christ has forgiven us.

He forgave us. We can forgive one another. The forgiven life is the forgiving life.

This is why Christ bled—so that we would be forgiven. This is why he died—so that we would be forgiven. This is why he prayed—so that we would be forgiven. Jesus prayed, “Forgive them.” Would you pray today, “Father, forgive me”? Christ has guaranteed your forgiveness.

Be forgiven.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Why were the critics frustrated and even incredulous over the Amish community's attitude following the massacre at Nickel Mines? What makes biblical forgiveness so remarkable and inexplicable in the eyes of the world?

Be Forgiven

2. The power of the cross is the power to forgive. How did Jesus demonstrate this? Why is forgiveness such a powerful, life-changing virtue?
3. How should Christ's forgiving posture on the cross inform how we should forgive others?