

On Death and Dying: The Character of One Who Died Perfectly

Reflections on the Seven Last Words of Christ

Introduction – Let us end our series of meditations on death and dying by looking directly to the words Jesus spoke while dying on the cross. Much has been written and preached on the Seven Last Words of Jesus and I am indebted to many others (as I have been on the entire series). For the sake of our time here, we will focus on learning something about how to die well by considering the character of the One who died perfectly. And in learning how to die well, we will certainly learn something about how to live well.

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34) – The readiness to forgive is a mark of faithfully dying well. Jesus knows who has perpetrated this injustice and He knows He can entrust all vindication to His Father. This justice is fully paid in the death of the One Whose blood is being shed. Forgiving is dying, but it is not dying in a vacuum for the one who trusts the Father. And so Jesus is saying those words about all who will come to Him. In Him we are already brought through future judgment and enter a world where God's mercy is the rule; we die well when we are assured of God's readiness, willingness, desire and full provision to forgive. In this new humanity, grace abounds more (Rom 5:20). This lays the foundation of being a forgiving people, as Stephen testifies to at his martyrdom (Acts 7:60), as Peter learned from Jesus (Matt 18:21-22), and as Paul instructed us to live (Col 3:13). Jesus looks ridiculous in how far He goes, impaled on a tree and forgiving those who put the nails in His hands and feet. We should be so ridiculous.

"Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43) – While dying, Jesus turns and grants hope to one dying alongside Him. In the worst of possible situations, this thief is given full assurance that it will be the best day of his existence. What is this hope when we find ourselves at death's door? As long as we, or a loved one, still reside on this side of that portal, it is never too late to receive grace. Deathbed conversions are not something one should ever count on and therefore delay one's repentance, but they are not something that should be doubted could still take place in any situation. This verse also grants incredible peace as to where our souls go immediately upon our death if we are found in Christ. Finally, in God's providence, this was the only place where this thief could have heard such words. Great blessings are still present even in the midst of dying.

"Woman, behold your son!... Behold your mother!" (John 19:26-27) - Jesus is dying and He is dying for the sins of the world. There, on the cross, He is doing what He is doing for others. Considering other's needs more important than His own, even in the more earthy and mundane issues, Jesus continues to look away from His own suffering to the concerns of others. There is strength and grace in Christ to avoid being consumed with one's own afflictions, but only if one has the same faith as Christ in the goodness of His loving Father. Dying well and faithfully includes looking past oneself and providing, as one is able, for the well-being of those you will be leaving behind.

"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46) – The first three words were probably spoken during the morning before noon. The fourth came at the end of the three hours of darkness in the middle of the day. In His deepest darkness, our Savior sings the Psalms – and so should we. While crying out in torment, Jesus' cry was not of despair, but of vindication – because He knew the whole Psalm; He was the fulfillment of that Psalm (see Psalm 22:1, 17-18). Yahweh was His God and the Father, Who was taking Him through this terrible death, had not forsaken Him even though it felt like it (22:24). Jesus teaches us (and permits us) to lament, looking heavenward and finding hope in God's promises.

"I thirst" (John 19:28) – Not only an honest cry, John records these words as bookends of quotations or allusions to Psalm 69. "Zeal for your house will consume me" (John 2:17) quoted Psalm 69:9, and now we see how Jesus is being consumed as He alludes to 69:3, "my throat is parched," and was fulfilled, "they gave me vinegar to drink" (69:21). Some people, as Jesus Himself did, die as a result of horrible injustice, victims of unjust violence. This imprecatory Psalm turns judgment over to God. Again, note the kind of judgment that is taking place on the cross. It is substitutionary atonement, grace and mercy filled the world that day. When He was reviled, He did not return the insult; He did not return evil for evil. Instead, He takes on the just imprecation and dies on behalf of those who crucified Him.

"It is finished" (John 19:30) – One word, *"tetelestai"*. This was not a cry of defeat but of victory. Just when the devil and his minions thought they had won, Christ proclaims that in fact they had just participated in the salvation of the world (1 Cor 2:8). Jesus was only about 33 years old; who would have thought this was a complete life? Jesus did (John 17:4). We learn that there are no untimely deaths, no lives cut short of God's perfect purposes. God has ordained every one of our days, including our last day, and we can live like we believe that as the day approaches. We can join with Paul in saying, *"I have finished the race"* when we say, *"I have kept the faith"* (2 Tim 4:7).

"Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit" (Luke 23:46) – The "great cry" was probably the sixth word, and "breathing His last" is probably connected to this seventh word. Again, Jesus is quoting the Psalms. This one, from Psalm 31:5, was a part of a common prayer spoken by Jews as they prepared to sleep. Taking that last breath of consciousness has been done time and again in this life, and that last breath of life is very similar to the one who has put his hope in God. He lays down to rest only to rise in full refreshment and Sabbath peace. Jesus' relationship to the Father is unbroken to the end, as is ours.

The man who can look death in the face and say "you are conquered" is the man who is now free to live. But to do so, that man must follow Christ to the grave. He must die to himself and his trite little idols of works and self-justifying salvation plans. He must die to placing God in the dock and on trial for being unfair or unjust. He must die to his own self-exalting or self-loathing for he must simply die to self. But the man who has died like that rises up and lives as though he will never die – for he never will (John 11:25-26).

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