

Seven Last Words Part 4

This is the fourth Sunday of our Lenten series, Seven Last Words. This morning we are looking at what has been called the “Cry of Dereliction”. It is the darkest and perhaps most mysterious words Jesus uttered from the cross. It is a cry that upon examination, we can’t begin to comprehend the searing pain and anguish behind it. It is also a direct quote from an ancient Psalm that once again reminds us what was happening on the cross that afternoon was no coincidence or accident. The death of Jesus for our salvation and for the salvation of the whole world had been fore-ordained by God before the foundations of the world and had been spoken of by the prophets centuries before Jesus’ birth.

This fourth word is recorded in both Matthew and Mark. Reading from Mark’s gospel, the Scripture tells us, **“At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachtani?’ – which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ Mark 15:33-34**

Just a couple of words of explanation. Mark tells us “it was the third hour when they crucified him.” According to Jewish custom the third hour was roughly 9:00 a.m. That means the sixth hour would be around noon. According to the gospels then from roughly 12:00 until 3:00 p.m. darkness covered the whole land. We will talk about why the darkness a bit later. It was at 3:00 that Jesus uttered this anguished cry of abandonment.

The gospel writers give us a Greek transcription of the Aramaic words Jesus spoke. If you go to Israel today you will hear people speaking Hebrew, Arabic, English and a host of other languages. If you had been there in the first century, you would have heard people speaking Aramaic, Greek, Hebrew, and a host of other languages so that can explain why the next verse says some thought he was calling for Elijah. The Hebrew would have been “Eli, Eli” and the Roman soldiers might have had difficulty translating the Aramaic. Most scholars believe Jesus spoke Aramaic as well as Hebrew. Mark simply translates the passage for his readers and for us.

What Jesus cried is the opening verse of Psalm 22. That particular Psalm is a dramatic description of the crucifixion written by David almost a thousand years before Jesus. No doubt during these hours upon the cross Jesus was reciting this chapter in his heart and mind and what we hear are only the parts he was able to speak or the parts the writers were able to hear. Consider too that when he cried out that opening verse, all of the Jews would be familiar with

this entire passage of Scripture. (There were no chapter numbers. The passages were often identified by the opening verse so as soon as Jesus spoke those words, they immediately knew the passage to which he referred). They too would have to consider how this applies to Jesus. Look with me at Psalm 22 and think of Jesus quoting this Psalm as he suffers on the cross. (Read verses 1-18).

So many questions arise. Why is all of this happening? Why is Jesus dying on the cross? Is Jesus truly forsaken by God? Why would God the Father forsake God the Son? Why did the sky darken for three hours? What does this all mean?

The truth is, we are staring into the greatest of mysteries as we look at the cross of Jesus Christ and his sacrifice. Here at the cross the forces of the universe all come together. Humanity is here in our sinfulness and depravity, nailing the innocent Son of God to a cross. Satan is here, doing his best to defeat God and crush Jesus our Savior. Jesus is here, pouring out his life for us, the innocent dying for the guilty in order to save us from our sins. God the Father is here, administering justice, pouring out his judgment upon sin but at the same time showing his love by placing all our sins upon Jesus and allowing him to die in our place. **Justice, judgment and love all coming together at Calvary.** It is beyond us to understand. Charles Wesley, the great hymn writer gave us these wonderful words, **“And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior’s blood? Died He for me, who caused His pain? For me, who Him to death pursued? Amazing love! How can it be that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?”...Charles Wesley**

Let me give you another picture of what is happening as Jesus takes our place. I borrowed this from Pastor Brian White with his permission. (By the way, if you aren’t attending New Community on Wednesday night, you should be. Brian is a great communicator of the gospel). Let’s think of this in a courtroom setting. At the time Brian preached this he had been stopped for speeding through a school zone (he had just moved here and was unfamiliar with the neighborhood mind you...) So he had actual, courtroom experience. Keep in mind, Brian was speeding. He was guilty!

Imagine if the judge looked at him and said, “I know you were speeding through a school zone, but you look like a nice enough guy, why don’t we just forget about it and you just have a nice day.” That would be great, right? I mean, what a great judge! He let Brian off the hook!

But imagine if the next defendant came before the judge and the judge said, "I know you were driving drunk when you sped through a school zone and struck and killed that child, but you look like a nice guy and I think you've learned your lesson. Just make sure you don't let it happen again." All of a sudden this guy doesn't sound like such a great judge anymore, especially not to the family of the child that was killed.

"A judge that ignores justice is not a good judge at all. God will not just ignore justice. The bible says we have all sinned and fallen short of the perfect standard that God's justice requires Him to hold us to. (Romans 3:23). It also tells us that the price or penalty for sin is death (The bible says the soul that sins must die – and that the wages of sin is death.) This is both physical death and an eternal spiritual death which is separation from God. **"The truth is, God will not simply ignore your sin. That isn't just. The penalty of death must be paid."**

...Brian White

So here we stand before the judge. We know he is just and honest so he has to declare us guilty and he has to impose the penalty. Think about Brian again. The judge says, "you pled guilty and I find you guilty. Your penalty is \$1,000." But then, to Brian's surprise and everyone else in the courtroom, the judge gets up from the chair, takes off his robe, and steps down from the bench to stand next to Brian. He takes out his checkbook, writes a check for \$1,000 and hands it to the bailiff and says, "I've paid the penalty for his crime myself and he is free to go."

"This is in effect what God did. God pronounced us guilty of breaking his commandments, violating the laws that He put in place for our own good and protection. We are guilty and worthy of our punishment which is death. But then God, the only righteous judge, got up from his chair, took off the robes of God and put on human robes and came down to stand with us. He became one of us, fully God and fully man. He lived a perfect, sinless life and then he died on the cross. [He, the judge paid the penalty but this time the penalty wasn't a \$1000 fine, it was death] Keep in mind, dying is the penalty for sinning and Jesus never sinned. He didn't have to die, but he died in our place. He paid for our sins. That's what this is all about. Jesus died, but he didn't have to die because he never sinned, that's why his death can be payment for your sins and my sins! (If the judge had a \$1,000 fine himself for speeding, his check couldn't apply to Brian's account, he would have to pay for his own crime. But if he had a clean driving record, Brian could get full credit. Paid in full.) That's what Jesus did for you and for me.

The bible says, **“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” John 15:13.** This is the love Jesus has for us – he laid down his life for us! But we start to get a glimpse of how deep that love is when we get a glimpse of the depths of his suffering. That’s where this cry from the cross comes in. “My God, why have you forsaken me?” Think about what this cry represents in terms of God himself. We believe that God is eternally existent and revealed to us in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We call this the Trinity, God the three in one. This in itself is a mystery, but somehow, without beginning or end, God has eternally existed in unity and in relationship with himself. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit have always been in perfect union and oneness. Imagine now that at this moment on the cross, for the first time ever, there is a separation. Jesus doesn’t stop being fully God and fully man, there is not a break in the “essence”, but there is a separation in terms of fellowship. It is the deepest separation we can imagine. Jesus was forsaken by his friends, by his family, by his nation, and he bore it all without crying out. But this was too much. For the Son of God who had known only fellowship and oneness with the father for all of eternity to be forsaken, this was unbearable. Unbroken communion with the Father is suddenly broken. Alone on the cross, bearing the weight of our sins and the sins of the world, Jesus is forsaken at a level beyond anything we could even imagine. God the Father, separated from God the Son who becomes sin for us in order to bring about reconciliation between us and God. What a sacrifice he makes, to experience this separation for our sake.

Let me say it again. Jesus took our place and bore the penalty for our sins. The bible says in fact, not just that he accepted the penalty for my sins and your sins, but it says, **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” 2 Corinthians 5:21.** In some way that we can’t quite understand, Jesus takes our sins, and then identifies with us so completely that it is as if he becomes sin. Jesus becomes the very thing that separates God from us and in that moment, as the bearer of our sins, he is forsaken, separated from the Father for us and on our behalf.

Jesus has always referred to God as Father. In every prayer, in every reference, he was “our Father in heaven”, but here, in the abandonment of this moment, Jesus cries out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?.” The intimacy between Father and Son tears away as Jesus becomes sin for us and dies as our substitute.

Arthur Pink explains for us, **“God is holy and therefore He will not look upon sin. God is just and therefore He judges sin wherever it is found. But God is Love as well: God delights in mercy, and therefore infinite wisdom devised a way whereby justice might be satisfied and mercy left free to flow out to guilty sinners. This way was the way of substitution, the just suffering for the unjust. The Son of God Himself was the One selected to be the substitute, for none other would suffice...”** “Thus we see that boundless love, inflexible justice and omnipotent power all combined to make possible the salvation of those who believe. At the Cross all our iniquities were laid upon Christ and therefore did divine judgment fall upon Him. **“There was no way of transferring sin without also transferring its penalty. Both sin and its punishment were transferred to the Lord Jesus.”** ...Arthur Pink

“My God, why have you forsaken me?” The answer of course is: For you and for me! It was all on our behalf. He bore our sin and suffered sins punishment in our place and for us. “Amazing love! How can it be that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?”

The gospel tells us that from 12:00 to 3:00 darkness covers the earth. What is the darkness all about? Darkness is often associated with God’s judgment in the bible. Judgement falls upon the earth as sinful men nail the giver of life and light to a cross. Jesus was the light of the world, it only makes sense that as he is dying, so dies the light. But as darkness suggests God’s judgment, remember that judgment falls upon the one who hangs on that cross as our substitute.

It’s interesting that in Exodus 10:21, the last plague that fell upon Egypt before the plague on the firstborn and before the Passover lamb was slain was a darkness that spread over the whole land. God said it would be a “darkness that can be felt.” I think it was a darkness that could be felt that fell upon the whole earth as the once and for all Passover Lamb was slain for us.

Can you imagine what those three hours, from noon to 3:00 were like for those standing about? An eerie darkness in the middle of the day? What were they thinking? We know all of this is having an effect upon at least one of the Roman soldiers because when Jesus died this soldier cried out, “Surely this man was the Son of God!”

We can try to imagine what the soldiers were thinking as the skies darkened. We can try to imagine what Mary and John and the other women standing nearby were thinking as they

watched Jesus suffering. But we can't begin to imagine what Jesus is thinking. It's the ninth hour, the Jewish hour of prayer. (Remember Peter and John at the beautiful gate in Acts 3? They were going to the temple to pray at 3:00. Time for the afternoon sacrifice.) Time for prayer and Jesus lifts up his voice and begins to pray the 22nd Psalm, knowing that it fulfills the Scripture concerning him as the Messiah and Savior. The opening verse expresses the reality we have just described, the moment of abandonment and being forsaken. But thankfully, the Psalm doesn't end there and Jesus knew that. At that hour of abandonment by God, Jesus abandons himself to God knowing that God alone is able to redeem and keep all that we give to him, even when we find ourselves alone in the silence and the dark.

Jesus abandons himself to God. Even though he didn't call him Father, he refers to him as "My God", clinging to the certainty of the resurrection to come. In that moment of being forsaken for our sakes, he gives himself completely to God as a sacrifice and rests where we all must rest, in the only hope we have, in the saving mercy and grace of our God!

Psalm 22 begins **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me?...I cry out by day but you do not answer..."** Desperate. Alone. Forsaken. He prays from verse 11 "...trouble is near and there is no one to help." But at that ninth hour, in the midst of the darkness and separation and hell, Jesus looks beyond the abandonment of the cross to remind himself of the rest of the Psalm. It starts with being forsaken, but it doesn't end there. Look at verse 23-24 **"You who fear the Lord, praise him!...For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help." Psalm 22:23-24.** There is hope. The Father has heard his cry and the ultimate proof of that will come on Easter Sunday morning!

This cry of dereliction, this cry of abandonment leads to shouts of victory for us. It is a lesson we need to remember. Jesus was forsaken, abandoned, so we would never have to be forsaken. The Father has promised us, **"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." Hebrews 13:5** Jesus knew the ultimate expression of being forsaken and he assures us it will never happen to us. It may feel that way at times. We may feel lonely, but the truth is, we will never be alone. Hear the words of Jesus to us today, **"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Matthew 28:20.**

When it feels you've been abandoned, when it seems all is lost, remember Psalm 22,

remember Jesus, remember the cross. Henri Nouwen wrote, **“Where God’s absence was most loudly expressed, God’s presence was most profoundly revealed.”** ...Henri Nouwen. On Calvary, where it seemed God had abandoned this world, it was at that moment he was most truly and profoundly present, redeeming us, setting the world right side up, providing the means of reconciliation for all that will believe and receive him. You haven’t been abandoned. You haven’t been forsaken. It was all for you! Arthur Pink wrote, **“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Let every believing soul make answer: He entered the awful darkness that I might walk in the light; He drank the cup of woe that I might drink the cup of joy; He was forsaken that I might be forgiven!”**...Arthur Pink

All Christ did at Calvary he did for you, so you could be saved, your sins forgiven, so you could have everlasting life, so you would never have to be alone or forsaken, so you could know his peace and his presence now and forever! It was all for you. Are you ready to open your heart and receive Jesus as your personal Savior and Lord? He gave his all for you. Don’t turn him away. Open your heart and life to him today.