

INTRODUCTION

I have a book in my library entitled *Dictionary of Famous Last Words*. It contains the last words uttered by famous people just before they died. I came across some humorous last words. Since I don't tell Aggie Jokes, I call this list the last words of an Alabama Redneck.

An Alabama Redneck's last words are: (1) Hey, ya'll, watch this! (2) Don't worry, I turned the power off. (3) I wonder where the mother bear is. (4) That was a dud. I'll relight it. (5) Tyson? That sounds like a girl's name!

You may be surprised, but the actual last words of famous people aren't always exactly profound. Here are some examples:

- (1) Before he died in 1891, circus entrepreneur P. T. Barnum said: "How were the receipts today at Madison Square Garden?"
- (2) French grammarian Dominique Bouhours' (1702) last words were: "I am about to -- or I am going to -- die: either expression is correct."
- (3) The writer Oscar Wilde (1900) said, "Either that wallpaper goes, or I do."
- (4) Some last words are sad. Actress Joan Crawford (1977) said to her housekeeper who was praying for her: "**** it! Don't you dare ask God to help me."
- (5) Thomas Jefferson, who died on the fourth of July in 1826 asked: "Is it the fourth?"
- (6) Civil War General John Sedgwick stood in front of his troops in 1864 and said, "They couldn't hit an elephant at this dist...."
- (7) Mexican revolutionary leader Pancho Villa's last words in 1923 were "Don't let it end this way. Tell them I said something."
- (8) After Civil War General Stonewall Jackson was fatally shot in 1863 he said, "Let us cross over the river and sit in the shade of the trees."
- (9) American inventor Thomas Edison, who died in 1931 said: "It is very beautiful over there."
- (10) Perhaps all of us would like to say what Lord George Byron said before He died in 1824: "Now I shall go to sleep. Goodnight."

Jesus hung on the cross for six hours. During this time He made seven profound statements. First, He looked at the people and said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." Next, He looked at the thief beside Him and said, "Today, you will be with me in Paradise." Then He looked at His mother and said, "Woman, look at your son." To John He said, "John, take care of her like your own mother." As the agony increased Jesus yelled, "I thirst." Later He shouted, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Moments before He died He cried, "It is finished." Then as He died, His last words were, "Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit." Truthfully, these weren't the last words of Jesus because after three days, He was raised from the dead and He spoke many more words to His disciples before He returned to His Father's side in heaven. But because these words were spoken before He died for the sin of the world, and they are profoundly important to you.

Let's read about these last words beginning in Luke 23:44:

It was now about the sixth hour, [12:00 noon according to the way the Romans kept time] and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, [3:00 p.m.] for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. [Mark 15:38 adds the important nuance that it was torn from top to bottom]

Jesus called out in a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last. The Centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "surely this was a righteous man." When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

In our culture, we use the word "extreme" a lot. We have extreme sports and extreme stunts that take it to the limit of human performance. I'm calling this message "The Extreme Love of the Cross." When I think of the cross I think of the extreme measures God took to show His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. There are three extreme aspects of the cross that I want us to examine.

I. JESUS' EXTREME SUFFERING - HELL

Mark 15:25 records Jesus was crucified at the third hour. The Romans started counting the hours of the day beginning at 6:00, so Jesus was nailed to the cross around 9:00 a.m. He hung there for six agonizing hours. From 9:00 a.m. to noon, it was daylight and it was during these first three hours Jesus most likely spoke the first four sayings from the cross. At noon, it became dark. During these last three hours, Jesus experienced the extreme suffering of bearing the sin of world. In those moments He endured hell for me and for you. There are at least three ways in which Jesus experienced my hell on the cross:

1. Hell is a place of torment

Not many preachers talk about hell anymore. Many people have decided Hell is simply a figurative place and can't be taken literally. Dr. R.G. Lee used to have a sermon entitled, "Is Hell a Myth?" He said, "Is hell a myth? Hell is a myth if a canary bird can fly across the Atlantic Ocean with the Washington Monument tied to its tail." He said, "If hell is a myth, then Jesus was 'myth-taken' and 'myth-understood' because He talked about it as a literal place of eternal punishment.

The Bible used painful words to describe the horrors of hell. It is called a lake of fire of brimstone. (Revelation 20:15) In Luke 16 Jesus told about a rich man who died and woke up in Hades and said, "I am tormented in this flame." I take the Bible literally except where there is obvious symbolism used; then I look for the literal truth behind the symbol. I believe hell is a place of literal fire, but if fire is the symbol then the literal truth behind it is that it is a place of torment.

On the cross, Jesus experienced excruciating torment. In the last two messages we have examined the physical pain of the scourging and the act of crucifixion. But the worst torment

Jesus experienced was that His soul was soiled with the filth and foulness of sin. Imagine an innocent, pure soul being contaminated with the horrible garbage of wickedness—that's extreme love.

2. Hell is a place of separation from God

The worst thing about hell is not the fire. Its horror is aggravated because it is a place where people are alienated from the loving presence of God. As Jesus was hanging on the cross He experienced this separation, this alienation from His Father. He cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" On every other occasion when Jesus addressed God He always said, "Father." But in the moments in which He bore our sin, He used the impersonal title, "My God."

This is such a mystery we can't totally comprehend it. When Martin Luther considered this he was so confused he went into seclusion to try to understand it. He came out of his seclusion as confused as ever and cried out, "Mystery of Mysteries! God forsaken by God. How can it be?" It's beyond the capacity of our tiny minds to grasp, but this much we can know. From the beginning of the beginning, God the Father and God the Son had been perfectly united. Jesus said, "I and my Father are ONE." But for these three hours on the cross, Jesus experienced a temporary break in this perfect oneness—that's extreme love! Like Martin Luther King, I don't understand it. But perhaps since Jesus is an eternal God with no beginning and no end, He experienced for me in a temporary period of time (3 hours) what I, being a finite creature, would otherwise have experienced for eternity. That's extreme love!

3. Hell is a place of darkness

Many people laugh and make jokes about hell. They don't really believe in hell, but if hell exists they think it's going to be one long, wild party. They think there'll be plenty of good music and plenty of other people to party with. But Jesus said in Matthew 8:12 that hell is a place of extreme darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

That's why there was darkness at midday at the cross. In movies, it may be portrayed as a thunderstorm or a perhaps an eclipse. But neither of those explanations can explain how there was "darkness over the entire land" for three hours. The word Luke uses for land could mean "the earth." There are a number of extra-biblical accounts of a brief world wide darkness that was experienced by different cultures around this time.

Remember, there was a supernatural light when Jesus was born. It moved and led the magi right to the very house where Jesus was—stars don't do that. Even so, I believe there was a supernatural darkness that occurred when Jesus died. Can God do that? Certainly.

Exodus 10:21 tells us God sent darkness over the entire land of Egypt for three whole days. It was such an extreme darkness, that it could be felt—that's dark.

At the creation of the world there was total chaos and darkness and God said, "Let there be light!" And there was light. It's possible that since the cross was the culmination and climax of

the wickedness and evil of mankind, God could have said, "Let there be darkness!" And there was darkness. Nothing is impossible with God.

It was out of this darkness that Jesus cried, "Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani?" "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Can you imagine how thick the darkness must have been at noon on that day? People around the world must have wondered what was happening. The Jewish rabbis taught for years that the darkening of the sun would signal God's judgement against sin. This darkness is a divine object lesson about how much God abhors sin. When Jesus took on our sin, it was so horrible it was as if God had to look away. The prophet Habakkuk tells us something important about the nature of God when he wrote: "Oh Lord...your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong." (Habakkuk 1:13) God's judgement fell against sin at the cross—and Jesus was innocent. The great hymn writer, Isaac Watts wrote: "Well might the sun in darkness hide; and shut his glories in; when Christ the mighty Maker died; For man, the creature's sin." ("At the Cross" by Isaac Watts) That's extreme love!

II. JESUS EXTREME STRATEGY - THE CURTAIN

Not only did it become dark, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record that at that precise moment, the curtain in the Temple was torn. This curtain is described in Exodus 26 and Josephus wrote that it was thirty feet wide, sixty feet tall and woven as thick as a man's hand. It hung between the holy place and the Holy of Holies.

As Jesus hung on the cross that afternoon, this thick curtain was suddenly ripped apart. It wasn't just partially torn—the word used is *schizo* from which we get our word "schism," meaning the curtain was ripped completely into two parts. Matthew and Mark tell us the curtain was torn from top to bottom. In other words, no one standing on the ground ripped it. Only a Hand from above could rip it from top to bottom. The rending of this curtain has tremendous spiritual implications for us. Because the curtain was torn, there are three important truths we can embrace:

1. No more barriers

God instructed the Jews to construct this curtain for the tabernacle and later for the Temple for a very simple reason. God's glory was so overwhelming that if anyone approached Him they would die. Once God invited Moses to see His glory—but it was so powerful Moses couldn't look directly, he could only glimpse the "afterglow" of God's Shekinah glory. But that was so powerful Moses came down from the Mountain looking like his face was sunburned!

The Jewish Temple was a series of barriers or walls. If you weren't a Jew, you could only go into the court of the Gentiles, if you were a Jewish woman you had to stop before you came to the court of the men. If you weren't a priest, you couldn't enter into the court of the priests. Only a few priests were allowed to enter the Holy Place, which was the room outside the Holy of Holies. On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the Jewish High Priest would lift the corner of this massive blue curtain and slip into the holy of holies with fear and trembling. Once inside, he would take the blood of a lamb and sprinkle it on the seat of the Ark of the Covenant. He was there as a representative of the Jewish people to seek forgiveness on their behalf.

But when Jesus died on the cross, this curtain was torn! God was saying, “There will no longer be any barriers between you and Me!” Now, you and I can approach God freely.

2. No more sacrifices

The Jewish priests had slain thousands of bulls and lambs in the Temple area. The temple was built on Mt. Moriah, where centuries before Abraham prepared to kill his only son Isaac. Instead, God provided a ram as a substitute. On this very mountain, a virtual river of blood had flown down the slopes to seek forgiveness of sins. Jesus died as the Lamb of God, and there is no need for anymore animal sacrifices. Aren't you glad we didn't have to bring a lamb or a goat to be slain today? The Lamb of God has already made the perfect sacrifice for our sins.

The writer of Hebrews puts it this way: “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices made year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. Those sacrifices are an annual *reminder* of sin, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins...but now, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body Jesus Christ once for all.” (Hebrews 10:1, 10). The curtain was torn in two to show us we no longer need a Temple in which to make sacrifices because Jesus made the final sacrifice for us when He died on the cross.

3. No more mediators

The average Jewish person could never enter the Holy of Holies. They needed a priest to enter in for them. But when the curtain was torn God was telling us we don't need anyone as a mediator between us except for the Lord Jesus Christ. The curtain was torn open so we can approach God on our own. You don't need to confess your sins to anyone except Jesus. He is our high priest, and through Him we have access to the Creator of the Universe. The Bible says, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5) “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence.” (Hebrews 4:16)

As Jesus was hanging on the cross the curtain ripped in two. Imagine the reaction of the priests who were on duty that day in Temple. They must have wondered what was going on. When they learned the curtain was torn at the exact time Jesus was dying, I'm certain many of them turned to Christ. Luke records in Acts 6 that a large number of the priests came to faith in Christ—I can see why!

III. JESUS' EXTREME STATEMENT - FINISHED!

Verse 46 reports Jesus cried out with a loud voice. John tells us Jesus shouted, “It is finished!” It was one word: *tetelestai*. It was not a cry of defeat, but a shout of victory. Jesus had finished the work the Father had given Him. Then in a quiet voice of resolve, Jesus uttered His final statement before He died, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” That was an extreme statement full of meaning for us.

1. “FATHER” – Re-connected with God

Instead of the impersonal title, "My God, my God," once again Jesus expressed His perfect relationship by calling God "Father." Jesus had become sin and suffered hell for us. He had experienced alienation from a Holy God. But now, just before He died, we see Jesus is reconnected to God as Father.

Jesus could call God Father with an ease hard to ignore. For instance, on the night before He was crucified, John records in John 13-17 that Jesus addressed God as Father 52 times. These are the last recorded words of Jesus just before He died, but do you recall the *first* recorded words of Jesus? He was only twelve years old and was in the Temple when He said, "I must be about my Father's business." From the start, He knew the special relationship He had with the Father. The word "Father" speaks of a relationship. Do you think of God as some impersonal Deity, or can you say you know Him as Father?

One of the most revolutionary teachings of Jesus is that we can know God in an intimate. He said we can call God, "Abba, Father." The first word a baby utters is usually "da-da" or "ma-ma." The first word a Jewish baby spoke was usually, "Abba." Jesus taught we can know God as "daddy."

2. "INTO YOUR HANDS" – Perfect safety

On several occasions Jesus predicted He would be delivered into the hands of sinful men. Moments before He was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, He said, "The time is at hand, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinful men." What a contrast! The hands of sinful men had done their worst to Jesus over the previous twelve hours. The hands of sinful men had beaten Him, planted a crown of thorns on His head and had nailed Him to a cross. Now, as Jesus died He knew He would be in the hands of His Father. The hands of man had inflicted pain on Jesus, and now the Hands of God would offer peace to Jesus.

The hand of God is a safe place to be. Often when I pray for a person who is about to die, I will just place them in the hands of God because I know that's the safest place in the universe to be.

Jesus spoke of His Father's hands in John 10:29 when He said, "My Father who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand." When Laura Grace was only about two or three years old, we were walking out of a football stadium. She was walking beside me holding my hand. It was a hot, humid night and my hand was sweaty. Suddenly, her little hand slipped out of mine and she fell and hit her head on the gravel walkway. A sharp stone cut her forehead above her eye and she was crying and bleeding everywhere. I felt terrible for her. I wish I could have been the one hurting and bleeding instead of me. Later I thought about that, how she had slipped out of my hand. And I remembered the words of Jesus—we will never slip out of God's hands. In His hands we have safety, security, and satisfaction! Perhaps you've heard of the insurance company that says, "You're in good hands with Allstate." Well, you're in *better* hands with God!

3. "COMMIT MY SPIRIT" – He ex-pired

Jesus last words were: "Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit." The word "commit" is a financial term meaning to hold something in trust. These words are actually a quotation from Psalms 31:5. It was a verse every Jewish mother taught her children to pray at night. It's like our bedtime prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep; If I should die before I wake; I pray the Lord my soul to take."

Verse 46 says that He "breathed" his last. The word for the last breath literally means "spirit going out." Our word "ex-pired" carries the same idea of our spirit going out. Jesus was in full control when He died—He gave up His spirit to the Father. It was as if Jesus spent His entire life waiting to exhale and when He had finished the work of redemption, He exhaled.

Since the day we were born we have been inhaling and exhaling. On the average, you inhale 18 times per minute. I've been living 50 years, so I've inhaled over 45 million times. But if the Lord tarries, one of these times, I will inhale and exhale for the last time. The same is true for you. When you breathe your last will you be able to say, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Speaking of last words, many famous people have duplicated the words of Jesus when they died. St. Augustine's last words were, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." As John Huss was being burned at the stake he cried, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Those were the last words of Christopher Columbus. Have you ever heard of the great American evangelist D.L. Moody? He was the Billy Graham of the 19th century. As he was dying his last words were: "This is glorious! If this is death it is beautiful! Earth is receding. Heaven is approaching. God is calling me. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

CONCLUSION

The cross was a place of extreme love. As the American pioneers moved westward into the Great Plains, they sometimes experienced terrible wildfires, which swept across the land. These fires would speed across the plains driven by the wind consuming everything in their path. These brave pioneers soon learned how to survive these terrible fires. As the fire approached their home, they would go outside and ignite a fire, then as the inferno approached, they would gather their family and stand on the land that had already been burned. The only place that was safe from the fire was where the fire had already been.

God's judgement against sin is like a raging wildfire—nothing can stop it. The only way you and I can escape it is to stand where the fire of God's judgement has already fallen. And the only safe place is to stand at the cross of Jesus, where God's judgement against sin has already burned. Will you stand at the cross today and receive the extreme love God has for you?

OUTLINE

I. JESUS' EXTREME SUFFERING – HELL

Hell is a place of:

1. Torment
2. Separation from God
3. Darkness

II. JESUS EXTREME STRATEGY – THE CURTAIN

1. No more barriers
2. No more sacrifices
3. No more mediators

III. JESUS' EXTREME STATEMENT – FINISHED!

1. "FATHER" – Re-connected with God
2. "INTO YOUR HANDS" – Perfect safety
3. "COMMIT MY SPIRIT" – He ex-pired



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes