

Into Your Hands . . . It Is Finished

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

The Sixth and Seventh Last Words

April 13, 2014

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Five Days before Jesus' Crucifixion

John 12:12–19 (NIV)

¹²The next day [the Sunday before Jesus' crucifixion] the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. ¹³They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting,

“Hosanna!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Blessed is the king of Israel!”

¹⁴Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written:

¹⁵“Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion;

see, your king is coming,

seated on a donkey's colt.”

¹⁶At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that these things had been done to him.

¹⁷Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. ¹⁸Many people, because they had heard that he had performed this sign, went out to meet him. ¹⁹So the Pharisees said to one another, “See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!”

Jesus' Death on the Cross

Luke 23:44–46 (NIV)

⁴⁴It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.

⁴⁶Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last.

John 19:28–30 (NIV)

²⁸Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I am thirsty.” ²⁹A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips.

³⁰When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

There are two words left: The Word of Reunion and the Word of Triumph.

With these words, Jesus passes from life to death. It is not his end, for in it lies the salvation of all humankind and the rebirth of God's creation.

The moment of Jesus' death has come. The darkness that has engulfed the world sits in stark contrast with the events of six days prior. On that day, Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem on a colt to waving palms and adoring crowds. He had been welcomed as Messiah, the Anointed One of God, the long-awaited King of the Jews.

But just who was this carpenter from Nazareth? This is the Palm Sunday question. It was the question for Jerusalem 2,000 years ago and it is the question for our world still. But it is a question that we can answer only through the lens of Good Friday and Easter.

The palm-waving crowds rightly expect that Jesus is God's Messiah, his anointed one. In John's brief telling of Jesus' welcoming, the crowds shout “Hosanna,” which means “save us” in Hebrew. They sing out “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the king of Israel.” This is from Psalm 118, a song of God's victory, the day when God has finally acted. The crowds expect that Jesus is to be a warrior King and that the anticipated confrontation with Rome has finally come.

But John helps us to grasp that things are not as the crowds expect. The crowds thought they knew Jesus, but they did not (John 1:10). John's quote about the donkey is taken from Zechariah 9:9. This is a passage about the coming ruler of God's people – very messianic in other words. But there is much more at work here than even the arrival of God's Messiah.

John changes the opening words of the Zechariah quotation from "*Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion*" to "*Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.*" Here, John evokes Zephaniah 3: ¹⁵"The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more . . . Do not fear, O Zion . . ."

It is not just the Messiah whom the crowds welcome into the city, it is the LORD God himself. God had once been their king and now God would be their king again: God incarnate in Jesus.

Centuries before, Ezekiel had brought to the people terrifying visions of God's departure from the temple in Jerusalem before its burning by the Babylonians. In the centuries since, despite the rebuilding of the temple, there wasn't really any sign that God had returned. The Jews believed that their exile to Babylon (their trip to jail) had been punishment for their sin. Though they had returned to the land they were certainly still in jail, with the Romans being the latest in a long line of jailers. They

Why "Good" Friday?

The etymology of the "Good" here is not clear. Some think it comes from "God's Friday." Other scholars believe it simply derives from the German, *Gute Freitag*. But regardless of where the English term came from, the theology carried by the phrase, "Good Friday," can be embraced by all Christians.

Calling it "Good Friday" acknowledges that out of the horror of Jesus' crucifixion came the greatest possible good – God's victory over sin and death and our reconciliation with God.

Standing at the foot of Jesus' cross on Friday, it would have been impossible to see any good in it at all. Without Easter, Jesus' story would have been a tragedy. The memory of his actions and teachings might have been cherished by his immediate followers, but he would have gone down in history as one of several well-meaning but failed messiahs in the first century.

But Jesus' resurrection meant that he had triumphed over death and, because death was the consequence of sin, he had triumphed over sin as well. Jesus' resurrection meant that God had acted in the present world to restore humanity and all of creation to a right relationship with himself. What could be a greater "good" than that?

would not be released from jail until their sins had been forgiven. The coming of the Day of the Lord, to be ushered in by God's Messiah, would entail such forgiveness and, hence, the restoration of Israel. Thus, the Jews still awaited the fulfillment of God's promise: "See, I am sending a messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple" (Malachi 3:1).

What must the crowds of followers have thought when, on the next day, Jesus didn't head for the Antonia Fortress to confront the Romans but to the temple, where he would invoke the words of Jeremiah pronouncing judgment on the people and *their* temple.

The image of Jesus riding into the city is one that stirs our hearts, but we can't escape the truth that this Messiah, this King, the very Lord God of Israel, would soon hang broken and battered on a cross, would soon, indeed, die on that cross.

"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

By Friday, the triumphal procession of palms has receded far out of view. In their depictions of Jesus' death on the cross, the gospel writers John and Luke bring us complementary interpretations of those climactic moments. John draws our attention to the completion of Jesus' work, of God's work. Luke, though, emphasizes that in his dying moments, Jesus trusted the Father utterly, completely, in full measure, holding nothing back. We can't help but see the connection to the trust expressed in Psalm 31:

- ¹ In you, LORD, I have taken refuge;
let me never be put to shame;
deliver me in your righteousness.
- ² Turn your ear to me,
come quickly to my rescue;
be my rock of refuge,
a strong fortress to save me.
- ³ Since you are my rock and my fortress,
for the sake of your name lead and guide me.
- ⁴ Keep me free from the trap that is set for me,
for you are my refuge.
- ⁵ Into your hands I commit my spirit;
deliver me, LORD, my faithful God.

This sixth of the Seven Last Words is a statement of faith and trust, like the trust that a small child has in her parents. For too much of my adult life, I failed to grasp that this simple yet profound trust is what God asks of us above all else. Such trust makes concrete our profession of love for God. Will we trust him? Do we turn over every moment of every day to him? Do we put ourselves in his hands every time we lay our head on the pillow? Richard John Neuhaus caught me off guard on this when he wrote that many of us prayed a similar prayer of commitment as children.¹ It went something like this:

*Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray thee, Lord, my soul to keep.
If I die before I wake,
I pray thee, Lord, my soul to take.*

I remember learning this prayer. Do you? Would we pray it now? Can we learn to trust God as a child trusts her mother? Will we commit every bit of ourselves into his care?

“It is finished”

The words here are simple. They could be understood to mean that Jesus’ execution is now complete; the punishment has been meted out and endured. The words could mean that Jesus’ own life is now at its end. They could mean that Jesus’ vocation to do and be for Israel what only God could do and be has now completed. Jesus has been faithful to the mission given him by the Father, faithful to death, even death on a cross.

The words, “It is finished,” could mean all these things and probably do . . . but John’s central point is this: God’s rescue project has now been completed, the project that began nearly two millennia before with Abraham. God had promised Abraham that all “the families of the earth” would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3). Now, in Christ’s faithfulness all the way to the cross, that promise has been kept: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Or as John wrote earlier in his gospel, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). It is finished. It is completed. Not yet consummated or fully realized – but finished. The salvation of humanity is a done deal.

I’ve found that Christians often mistakenly assume that the resurrection of Jesus is the climax of the story, the central moment in God’s work from which all else must flow forward and backward. But no. Though we are Easter people, the climax of the story is on Friday, on that Good Friday. Easter is the proof that Jesus’ death was not in vain, that he was who he said he was, that Palm Sunday was not a fraud but the welcoming of the Lord Almighty to Zion. Easter is the proof; the cross is the place of God’s victory over sin and death. Praise be to God. Alleluia.

¹ From his book, *Death on a Friday Afternoon*. The book will reward a thoughtful reading. Neuhaus was a Lutheran pastor who converted to Catholicism, became a priest, and then the founder and editor of the influential opinion journal, *First Things*.

Stanley Hauerwas on “It is finished”¹

“It is finished” is not a death gurgle. “It is finished” is not “I am done for.” “It is finished” will not be, as we know from the tradition of the ordering of these words from the cross, the last words of Jesus. “It is finished” is a cry of victory. “It is finished” is the triumphant cry that what I came to do has been done. All is accomplished, completed, fulfilled work.

The work that is finished, moreover, is the cross. He will be and is resurrected, but the resurrected One remains the One crucified. Rowan Williams reminds us of Pascal’s stark remark that “Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world.” This is a remark that makes unavoidable the recognition that we live in the time between the times— the kingdom is begun in Christ but will not be consummated or perfected until the end of the world. Williams observes that Pascal’s comment on Jesus’s ongoing agony is not an observation about the deplorable state of unbelievers; it is instead an exhortation to us, those who believe in Christ. It is an exhortation not to become nostalgic for a supposedly less compromised past or take refuge in some imagined purified future, but to dwell in the tension-filled time between times, to remain awake to our inability “to stay in the almost unbearable present moment where Jesus is.”

The Gospel of John makes explicit what all the Gospels assume— that is, the cross is not a defeat but the victory of our God. Earlier in the Gospel of John a voice from heaven responded to Jesus’s request that the Father’s name might be glorified through his obedience, saying “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” Jesus tells us this voice came for our sake so that we might know that “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12: 28– 32). That “lifting up” is the cross, the exaltation of the Son by the Father, making possible our salvation.

This is, moreover, as Pilate insisted, the King of the Jews. That kingship is not delayed by crucifixion; rather, crucifixion is the way this king rules. Crucifixion is kingdom come. This is the great long-awaited apocalyptic moment. Here the powers of this world are forever subverted. Time is now redeemed through the raising up of Jesus on this cross. A new age has begun. The kingdom is here aborn, a new regime is inaugurated, creating a new way of life for those who worship and follow Jesus.

1. Hauerwas, Stanley (2005-01-01). *Cross-Shattered Christ: Meditations on the Seven Last Words* (p. 72). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In his brief telling of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, John wants us to see that the crowds rightly welcome Jesus as a king, as God’s anointed. But he also wants us to see that the crowds do not understand how God’s work to redeem them will move forward. They can’t imagine that in a few days, this humble donkey-riding Messiah will be dead on a cross. There was *zero* expectation of a suffering Messiah. They think they know what their problem is and how to fix it (a warrior King) – but only because they were listening to the world, not to God.

- When we welcome Jesus into our congregation, into our lives, what do we expect?
- Are we really ready to embrace Jesus as “the way, the truth, and the life?”
- We Americans are a pragmatic lot. We want to know how to fix what is wrong. Our theology too often devolves into “if it works, it must be true.” But is this all there is to the Gospel?

2. Many of us were raised to trust in ourselves, our abilities, our education, our savings, even our family. How much of your trust do you really place in God? What do you think this would even look like? What in your life would change if you trusted God fully – not just at the moment of death, but today and tomorrow and the next? What is holding you back?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Psalm 118 A song of God's victory. See esp. v. 26	Tuesday, Zechariah 9:9-13 The coming of the King (this passage is why Jesus rode a colt into Jerusalem)
Wednesday, Zephaniah 3 How do you think these passages would have been understood by the Jews of Jesus' day? See esp. verse 15	Thursday, Psalm 31 A prayer for deliverance when David has been abandoned by his friends and allies.
Friday, Matthew 27:27-56 Matthew's story of Jesus' crucifixion and death	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Sermon Notes