

Safe in the Father's Hands

Luke 23: 46 (44-54)

A young preacher was asked by a funeral director to hold a graveside service at a small country cemetery. It was just the committal, because sadly, no family or friends were left in the area. He started early for the cemetery, but got lost on the back roads. After backtracking, he finally arrived, a half-hour late. The hearse was gone. The only people in sight were workmen eating their lunch under a shade tree. He went to the open grave. The vault lid was already in place, but he took out his Bible and dutifully conducted the service. As he returned to his car, one of the workmen paused between bites and said, "Think we should have told him that's a septic tank."

When I think of a committal service, I think of some designated "committal type" – a preacher, a priest, a ship's captain – saying respectful words to survivors over the grave of a deceased comrade or loved one. But, the most hopeful committal service is one by which we die to ourselves before the actual moment of physical death. With perfect calm, Jesus could pray, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit," because He had already entrusted His future into the hands of the Father when, in Gethsemane, He had prayed, "Not my will, but yours."

Man is typically uneasy with the idea of death. At some point, some creative, but macabre imagination conjured up an image of death as a "grim reaper" – tall skinny guy, hooded black robe, sickle, really bad manicure. He sneaks up behind people and taps them on the shoulder when their "number's up." For a really creepy experience, visit www.deathclock.com. Enter your age, sex, personality type and body mass index, and the site will calculate an estimated day of your demise with a descending clock showing the seconds you have left. What makes a human naturally recoil from death? Is it the finality? Is it the unknown? Is it a fear of judgment?

On the other hand, a troublesome phenomenon of our day is an apparent indifference towards death. This indifference can be accounted for in several ways. Because suffering in life can be so severe, some people decide that death simply ends suffering, but they have no idea what kind of suffering death may or may not bring. Idle speculations about the serenity of death, testimonies regarding journeys toward the light, world religions – these have secured for others a sense of peace in facing death that might not be justified for such notions are unreliable. Christians believe that death is the consequence of human sin in the world. It is separation from God. Without some truly reliable basis for believing that our Maker will not hold our sins against us, it is normal for a man to fear death.

For a Christian, Jesus is that reliable basis for trusting that we have been reconciled to God. The aura surrounding death is altered when Jesus enters the picture. A "peace that surpasses understanding" reigns powerfully at the death of a believer. This peace cannot be convincingly manufactured by natural man's syrupy speculations about death. This is because God's peace is not natural. It is sown in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. The counterfeit peace of human speculation is wishful thinking, a shaking of our puny fists in the face of the unknown, but based on imagination. I don't wish to leave anyone speculating. The certainty and the demeanor with which Jesus faced physical death are the entitlement solely of those who belong to Him.

I. The Venue of the Prayer

A. Matthew Provides a Fuller Picture of the Attending Circumstances

Luke mentions a darkness that covered the land and that the temple curtain was torn, but he doesn't really develop either. Matthew, on the other hand, weaves these things into his narrative.

A Jew writing to Jews, Matthew wrote to establish that the Jews had crucified their long-awaited *messiah*. The nation had long equated light with God's presence. This bizarre darkness at midday could only be interpreted as meaning that God had withdrawn His presence from the land and even from Jesus Himself as He bore the guilt of the world's sins when He hung on that cross. This bizarre darkness served as a backdrop for Jesus' poignant cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" A Holy God was looking away from the aggregate sin of humanity.

Matthew's Jewish audience was more familiar with the temple veil than were Luke's readers. The Jews understood that this curtain separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple. They knew that only on a single day of every year, the great Day of Atonement, did a lone high priest venture behind that veil to represent the people in the presence of *YAHWEH*. Matthew tells how that veil was torn "from top to bottom," an unnatural way for a hanged curtain to tear. This supernatural tearing occurred at the precise moment of Christ's death. Such details are of interest to us, but they would have had an even greater impact on a Jewish audience.

B. Luke Tailored the Facts for His Own Audience

Luke wrote to one "Theophilus" which means "lover of God." This may have been a real man's name, or, it may have been a name the author gave to a person or a church in need of an "orderly account" (1:3) of the life of Jesus. In any event, the audience is Gentile. Luke tells of the darkness, but he provides no hint as to what significance that might have on a theological level. To Gentiles, the darkness would just mean that it was a strange and ominous day. Luke's reference to the torn temple curtain would communicate to Gentiles only that God was no longer confined to the Jewish temple, but he presupposes no prior knowledge of Jewish theology on the part of his readers. He is intent to communicate only the sacred sobriety of the moment.

Matthew wrote to prove that Jesus was the *messiah*. Luke wanted to connect Jesus to mankind on a universal level. Jesus was not just a Savior for one nation, but for the whole world. Luke honors those least esteemed in Jewish society. Women are prominent, including those who financed Jesus' ministry. Luke alone records a parable that makes a heroic neighbor out of a despised Samaritan, contrasting him with an indifferent priest and Levite. Jesus is a friend of tax collectors like Zacchaeus, and sinners in Luke. Only Luke records Jesus' promise of paradise to a condemned thief. And now, only Luke records this lesson of universal appeal – how to face death by trusting God perfectly.

II. The Voicing of the Prayer

A. Jesus Uttered a Common Bedtime Prayer Taught to Children

Matthew and Mark tell of a loud cry before Jesus died. John tells us part of what was said: "It is finished," speaking of Christ's life's work of atonement. Luke records what logically follows, the trusting surrender of an obedient life into God's hands. "Into your hands, I commit my spirit" (Psalm 31:5) was taught to Jewish children as a bedtime prayer. Something like: "Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep"? As child-like as it sounds, it is profound. God keeps faithful souls safe. Jesus demanded a similar child-like trust in God from all of us:

"I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Luke 18:17).

When all is said and done, only child-like trust can compel believers to stand for specific values and truths in a world of shifting values and relative truths. Simple trust compels us to worship God in His church on the Lord's Day as the world pokes fun at us from the beach. Simple trust compels Christians to monitor what is set before their children's eyes while our acquaintances call us fanatics. We came to Christ as children, but simple, child-like trust is crucial for every step we take through this jaded world. The reward of such trust is that we can face eternity unafraid.

B. Prayer or No Prayer, Jesus Intended to Be Heard

The text says that Jesus "called out in a loud voice." Ordinarily, Jesus urged us to pray privately. He criticized the Pharisees harshly for the showiness of their prayers. But, Jesus had to pray loudly at this juncture, for the lessons of His prayer were crucial for everyone to hear.

Lesson 1) "The Creator wants us to know Him as our Father!" Jesus actually added "Father" to the original quote from Psalm 31. Jesus horrified the religious leaders of His day by constantly referring to God as His Father. Now, He got the last word on the matter. He taught His disciples to pray, "Our Father in heaven ..." He showed us that God was never like the mean-spirited, capricious gods of the Greeks and that He was always more than the terrifying Lawgiver of Sinai. He is our Father, our Life-giver, and not just physical life, but new life as well. Christians are even given the Holy Spirit, Who reminds us of who and Whose we are:

¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." ¹⁶The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. – Romans 8:15, 16

Lesson 2) "God can be trusted!" I "commit" my spirit. *Paratithemai* was a common banking term that meant simply to commit or entrust some asset into the care of another. The word is used of the resources God gives us for which He holds us accountable as stewards. He taught, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been *entrusted* with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:48). Stewardship is the principle that we own nothing, but rather, manage God's stuff that He has entrusted to us.

Paul used a form of this word in 2 Timothy 1:12: "I know whom I have believed and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have *entrusted* to him for that day." Paul is speaking of his very life as a precious deposit "entrusted" to God. Jesus' final words of child-like trust have taught many of His people through the ages how to face life and ultimately death.

Stephen was stoned for defending the Christhood of Jesus in first-century Jerusalem. John Huss was burned at the stake for, among other charges, advocating bringing the Bible out of ancient Latin and into the languages of the people. John Knox, a major figure in the Reformation Movement in Scotland, died peaceably. But each of these men, and countless others, died with a prayer on their lips similar to this prayer of Jesus: "Father, in your hands I commit my spirit."

Lost on a back road in Alabama, a motorist asked an old farmer, perched on his fence, how to get to Mobile. The man paused and then, gave explicit instructions. An hour later, after following the directions to the letter, the man found himself where he started. The farmer was still sitting on the fence. "What's the idea?" asked the driver. The farmer answered, "I didn't aim to waste time telling you how to get to Mobile 'til I was sure you could follow simple directions."

The simplest direction of life is "Trust God." Sometimes, I feel like God's leading and peace in a certain matter may seem elusive. When I search my heart, I usually discover that I have been circumventing simple trust of Him in other matters. Where trusting myself seemed to do it, that's the route I would go. So, when I run to God with the really big stuff of life, should it come as any great surprise that I cannot trace His hand? All of life is to be entrusted to God.

Why did Jesus shout His prayer? Everyone in earshot needed to know that He was welcoming His death. Because of what Jesus accomplished on the cross, death for the believer is now just a single step into eternity. Without Jesus, death is sin's victorious moment. People can put all the wishful, positive spin on it that they can imagine. Only by the death of Jesus coupled with His Resurrection is the sting of death broken. Death holds a cruel finality for those without hope. But, to all who receive Jesus, death becomes a mere gateway from the temporal to the eternal.

III. The Value of the Prayer

A. The Calloused are Softened

The centurion overseeing the execution made two observations. Matthew records him saying, "Surely he was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:54) Luke records him saying, "...this was a righteous man." Why does Matthew feature one thing the centurion said and Luke, the other?

Matthew wanted to prove that Jesus was the one depicted in prophecy as "like a Son of God." That He claimed to be God's Son was the basis for a death charge as far as the Jews were concerned. Rome did not grant them the authority to execute anyone, so they sent Jesus to Pilate and couched the charges in terms of insurrection; "He claims to be a king." This might get Rome's attention. They did not care if He called Himself a "son of God." They threw that term around loosely. Their mythology had all sorts of characters who were offspring of the gods.

Luke emphasizes Jesus' purity. He died as an innocent for others. This veteran soldier, no doubt calloused by many crucifixions, had probably heard every man on death row declare his innocence. Now, he was engulfed by a magnificent realization: Jesus really was innocent though He said nothing in His own defense. Luke alone tells us that Pilate publicly acknowledged Jesus' innocence three times. Luke alone tells us that a guilty thief defended Jesus' innocence to another guilty thief. Now, as Jesus dies with a noble demeanor of grace and silent majesty, this centurion has no choice but to acknowledge the obvious, "Surely, this was a righteous man."

B. The Guilty Are Broken

Zechariah 12:10 foretold: "They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him ..." Now, Luke tells us that the onlookers beat their breasts in deep despair. They had been incited by their leaders and had come to witness the crucifixion with all the decorum of a lynch mob. Now, the obvious righteousness of Jesus shamed them to a point of self-disgust, and rightfully so. Of course, it was not God's plan to abandon them over to despair. In Acts, the sequel to Luke, many of these same people were present seven weeks after Jesus was raised from the dead, and Peter put everything together for them. They had crucified *messiah*.

³⁷When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

³⁸Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

... ⁴¹Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. – Acts 2:37-38, 41

C. The Loyal Are Prepared

Jesus' fearful disciples watched from afar. "Watching" in verse 49 emphasizes not only physical sight, but mental contemplation as well. This was an excruciating moment for the companions of Jesus, but soon they would witness His Resurrection. They would learn that the apparent defeat of hope means nothing in the light of a God Who can be trusted to keep His promises. It would serve them well to contemplate this scene. One day, they might face martyrdom. They could die as Jesus died, in full trust that God holds the sacred deposit of their very souls.

D. The Timid Find Courage

Luke tells how Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin, goes to Pilate and asks for the body of Jesus that he might bury Him properly. Ordinarily, the victims of crucifixion were simply tossed over Jerusalem's southern wall into the burning municipal waste site, *Gehenna*. But, *John* provides additional details, noting that Joseph, because of fear, had been a secret disciple. *John* also tells us of Nicodemus, a Pharisee who visited Jesus at night, implying his fear. However, both of these men step forward when the vile deed of crucifixion was completed. Joseph provides a tomb and the linen for burial. Nicodemus provided seventy-five pounds of spices. These were extravagant personal sacrifices. Their loyalty to Jesus was no longer a secret.

When Jesus opens our eyes, calloused hearts are melted, guilty hearts are broken, devastated hearts are calmed and timid hearts find courage. These are the perspectives that the grace of God brings to us when we realize that God holds our souls in the safety of His hand. Not only are life's hardships put into perspective, but when eternity is settled, even death loses its sting.

So softened by the work of Jesus was physical death that the Bible often speaks of it as "sleep." When Jairus' daughter died, Jesus told the mourners, "The child is not dead but asleep" (Mark 5:39). When Lazarus died, Jesus told His disciples, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up" (John 11:11). Paul spoke of death in the same way. Jesus' death was far too brutal for any of the Gospel writers to call it sleep. Still, do you not find it telling and fascinating that when Jesus died, He died with a bedtime prayer on His lips?

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