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**Luke 23:44–46, ESV, abbreviated.**

*<sup>44</sup> And the sun's light failed. The curtain of the temple was torn in two. <sup>46</sup> Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last.*

**John 19:28–30, ESV, abbreviated.**

*<sup>28</sup> Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said, "I thirst." <sup>29</sup> A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. <sup>30</sup> When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*

**Matthew 27:46–50, ESV, abbreviated.**

*<sup>46</sup> Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" <sup>47</sup> Some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, "This man is calling Elijah." <sup>48</sup> One of them ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, gave it to him to drink. <sup>50</sup> Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.*

**Mark 15:34–37, ESV, abbreviated.**

*<sup>34</sup> At the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" <sup>35</sup> Some of the bystanders hearing it said, "Behold, he is calling Elijah." <sup>36</sup> Someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine and gave it to him to drink. <sup>37</sup> And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last.*

**The last words.**

I'm giving an unusual Palm Sunday sermon. The reason is that we often think of

Jesus' ride into Jerusalem as being triumphant – which it was. But while the

people who witnessed it were joyous and laid down palm branches for Jesus, they, to a large extent, were missing the point. This was indeed their messiah, but they were underestimating his true power and the eternal significance of his mission. Jesus' ride was actually far grander than they thought. So, let's do it.

When people talk about the "last words" of Jesus Christ, they often get into a debate about which Gospel has it right. Matthew reports Jesus' last words on the cross as being: *"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"* Mark tells us that Jesus' final words on the cross are the same as what Matthew tells us. John lists Jesus' last words on the cross as: *"It is finished!"* Luke tells us that Jesus' final words were: *"Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!"* In truth, there's a possibility that Jesus said all three of these things, because it isn't explicitly stated that Jesus didn't say anything else after he made whatever remarks the given Gospel writer attributes to Jesus. Most scholars believe that the authors of Matthew and Luke had the text of the Gospel of Mark to use as a starting point for their Gospels, so it makes sense that Matthew and Mark would agree on Jesus' last words. There are scholars who have concluded that perhaps Luke's version of Jesus's last words is the true last-last, as this Gospel seems to make the strongest statement that these were his absolute last words, that Jesus died right after saying them. Very complex arguments have been made trying to order the

last words of Jesus, as given by the four Gospels. Indeed, the goal of many people over the centuries has been to analyze the four Gospels in order to find a way to argue that the Gospels do NOT conflict on Jesus' true final words, that he could have actually said all these things. But remember that the Gospels were written from both written sources and oral sources. They are bound to be imprecise, and there is no denying that they conflict with each other. My opinion is that the Gospels tell us the spirit of what Jesus said, and perhaps not literally his last words. In fact, we need to remember that the text of the Gospels as a whole have taken a complex path to us. Jesus' final words were spoken in Aramaic, then decades later they were written in Greek by authors who were using as sources various unknown written and oral sources. Jesus' last words were then translated into English – with our version having gone through multiple layers of translation. But let's take Jesus' various last words as they are – and look at them.

Have you ever wondered what you would say as your last words, if you had an opportunity to carefully engineer what you said, knowing that they would be forever recorded, that many millions, perhaps billions of people would read them over the course of human history? I met a patient at the hospital where I serve as a chaplain who had this as his goal. Well, not exactly. He was a kind, humble man, and he wasn't arrogant. He didn't think that all of humanity should read his

last words. He just wanted his adult children to know what he said before he died. They couldn't be there when he passed, so he asked me to write his words down and pass them on to his children. This man was dying of COPD. I sat with him through much of the night while he passed away. As always, I'm changing details of this story to protect his privacy. I'll get back to him.

Let's look at Jesus' last words as he was dying on a cross. Death by crucifixion took a long time. Because you cannot support your body with your legs for more than some number of hours, your legs eventually give out and you begin to suffocate. You also lose body fluids; Jesus asked for water at the end and was tortured by being given vinegar. Various organs begin to fail, as well. The Romans used crucifixion because it was also a form of torture. There is evidence that the Persians might have developed crucifixion. It could have been even earlier than this; perhaps the Babylonians or Assyrians are responsible for this form of capital punishment. What is Jesus attributed to having said as he was very slowly dying this way? 1. *"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!"* 2. *"It is finished."* 3. *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

Let's start out with what many feel is the most bizarre statement of the three, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*. Why would Jesus say this? There are a couple of theories. One is that he was feeling the agony that

any person would feel at this moment. He was symbolically dying for us, absorbing our evil, accepting a horrible human death so that we could come to understand the importance of living forgiving, loving, and gentle lives. By having this extraordinarily kind person, who valued the lowest of humans as equals of the most wealthy and powerful, accept this barbarous death, we have come to understand the importance of living the way he did. Another theory is that Jesus was quite obviously quoting the very first line of Psalm 22: <sup>1</sup> *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?* <sup>2</sup> *O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest.* Notice that when Jesus said this, people responded with: *“This man is calling Elijah.”* They recognized this as a reference to this Psalm, which happens to contain many parallels with the eventual crucifixion of Jesus. He was making it clear that he was indeed the Messiah promised in the ancient Israelite scriptures. Another theory is that by referring to this Psalm, he was doing what Jews of the time did when experiencing anguish. He was praying out a biblical lament, a Psalm of David declaring total dependence on God.

Let’s look at John’s version of Jesus’ last words: *“It is finished!”* This one is straightforward. Jesus had a mission. He came to earth as a human. His job was to teach us how to live. And he had done that. It was indeed finished. Here is

the third and last “last words” attributed to Jesus: *“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!”* This is another quote from a Psalm, this time, Psalm 31. <sup>3</sup>

*For you are my rock and my fortress; and for your name’s sake you lead me and guide me; <sup>4</sup> you take me out of the net they have hidden for me, for you are my refuge. <sup>5</sup> Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.* The first part of this Psalm is a beautiful statement about how we must put our total trust in God at all times. When our enemies have laid nets as traps for us, we must put our faith in God. So, that’s what Jesus did at the end. He reminded us that he lived as one of us, as a human, because he had a job to do. That job was to serve us. Jesus also reminded everyone that he was indeed the Messiah and we should remember that. Jesus turned to God in his agony, as we should, and Jesus at the very end expressed his total trust in the grace, the comfort, and the eternal love of God. All of this served as a final, compelling statement of how important it is for us to always forgive, to help those in need, and to treat all people as having been made in the image of God.

But why am I talking about the last words of Jesus on Palm Sunday? We’re supposed to be celebrating Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which is the beginning of that final countdown that ends with Jesus’s arrest and crucifixion. Here is how the Gospel of John describes the behavior of the crowds as Jesus

rides into Jerusalem: *they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!"* Do you know why they are shouting this? Hosanna translates literally as "Save now". It means "Save us now." They are calling him the King of Israel. These people were Jews who thought that Jesus was an Earthly Messiah who would establish a new, independent Israel and push aside the colonial empire of Rome. People at this time still did not understand that Jesus wasn't going to start a new kingdom on Earth. So, keep that in mind for a moment.

Back to the man who was dying from COPD. He was a homeless man. His nurse had called me in the middle of the night because he wasn't going to live until the morning and nurses are deeply kind people who don't want anyone to die alone. His nurse had another, critical patient she had to care for and she asked me to step in and be with the dying man because she couldn't. The man with COPD had some things that he wanted me to pass on to the son and the daughter whom he had not seen since they were in high school. They were now in their late twenties. He was gasping and wheezing, and it was difficult for him to speak to me. But he managed to tell me to tell them that he was going to be with God and "everything was fine". He also asked me to tell them that he knew that their mother had raised them to believe in God and to always follow Jesus.

That was his phrase, “to always follow Jesus”. He told me to tell them that he was sorry that he hadn’t been able to do for them what they wanted from him, that he hadn’t been able to be a good father for them in this life. He said it that way, “in this life”. He told me to tell them that he would be waiting for them in the next life and he was sure that at that time, he would no longer fail. He’d be able to be whatever they needed him to be. Not long after he told me this, he fell asleep and then became unconscious. He never woke up again and he died a few hours later. I waited until the next day, after a physician had called his ex-wife to tell her that he was dead. Then I called her myself. I told her that her ex-husband had had something to pass on to his children. She arranged for one of them, their daughter, to call me. I had written down his words, just as he had asked me to do. I read them to her, reminding her that he was very sick and had been dying. This man’s daughter told me that he had been schizophrenic. And indeed, I already knew this; I had read this diagnosis in his medical record. She told me that she was very happy that her father had died in peace - because her father certainly did not live in peace. This man’s daughter also said that she and her brother did indeed walk in the footsteps of Jesus, that they were believers. She said that she would pass on her father’s last words to her brother. She said that she knew that what her father had said was true. She and her brother had



tried to get him to be someone he couldn't be, and that was an earthly father. I told her that someday she would see her father again. He would no longer have COPD or schizophrenia. He would be a great father – for all of eternity.

That's why I talked about the last words of Jesus. His last words said it all.

1. *"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!"* 2. *"It is finished."* 3. *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* He was a human while on earth. He felt the pain of a human. It was time to die. His mission on Earth was over. We know something that the people who laid down palms when he rode into Jerusalem didn't know. He wasn't going to be able to do the job that people wanted him to do on Earth – because he had a far more important job to do. He was here to lead us not into a new earthly empire, but into the Kingdom of God. When Jesus was riding into Jerusalem, he was mistakenly being celebrated as a human savior. But he was coming into Jerusalem to die, so that he could be an eternal savior.

Yes. The people there wanted Jesus to stay alive and be their earthly king. But something truly eternal was going to happen. When we look back at Jesus riding into Jerusalem, we have the gift of hindsight. We can look back and see what happens just a short period of time after that entry into Jerusalem. We know his ride into Jerusalem isn't the beginning of some mundane empire-building mission on Earth. Earthly empires don't last. We celebrate Jesus' entry

into Jerusalem because only by dying could he show the world that his true empire would not be established on Earth. His last words are the completion of his entry into Jerusalem. He entered as a savior, but not as an earthly one. He was God and not just a man. At the very end, Jesus suffered the desperation of being a dying human. He also put his total trust in God. And he announced that the job here was finished. He rode into Jerusalem not to live as a king, but to die as a king. Amen.