

Seven Words: Word of Release Luke 23:44-49

Introduction

One of the earliest prayers that most of us learned to pray probably sounded like this:

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.

This little poem was first printed in *The New England Primer*, the first reading textbook in the American Colonies. That primer eventually became the most successful textbook published in the 17th century and was a central part of every public school prior to the 1790s.

If you can get past the worrisome wording about dying in your sleep, it's a beautiful sentiment about how God watches over His children. The prayer was inspired by Psalm 121:

I lift up my eyes to the hills—
 where does my help come from?
² My help comes from the Lord,
 the Maker of heaven and earth.
³ He will not let your foot slip—
 he who watches over you will not slumber;
⁴ indeed, he who watches over Israel
 will neither slumber nor sleep.
⁵ The Lord watches over you—
 the Lord is your shade at your right hand;
⁶ the sun will not harm you by day,
 nor the moon by night.
⁷ The Lord will keep you from all harm—
 he will watch over your life;
⁸ the Lord will watch over your coming and going
 both now and forevermore. (Psalm 121)

Jewish historians who lived and wrote during the days Jesus walked the earth tell us that Jewish mothers at that time also had a bedtime prayer they taught their little children. It was a simple, one-sentence prayer. As mom's have down for many centuries, these moms would lovingly tuck their children into bed and listen as that soft little voice would say their prayers.

Like our childhood prayer, their prayer also quoted a verse from a psalm. This time it was Psalm 31:5. As the child would drift off to sleep, that child would pray:

Into your hands I commit my spirit (Psalm 31:5)

Sound familiar? With His mother Mary close to His side, listening to the words He spoke, just like she had done every night of His childhood, the only begotten Son of God prayed the bedtime prayer He had been taught as a child:

Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. (Luke 23:46)

And then the text adds:

When he had said this, he breathed his last. (Luke 23:46)

Jesus went to sleep and woke up in heaven. In the first sermon of this series I make the observation that of the seven statements Jesus spoke on the cross, three of them were prayers. Over the now seven sermons I have preached, we have heard Jesus pray:

- Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing
- My God, my God why have you forsaken me?

And now the most endearing of them all: A child's bedtime prayer: "Father, Into your hands I commit my spirit."

I make three observations:

#1: FATHER

Think about it. Every other child who prayed that prayer that day would be praying it to his/her God. As the only begotten son, Jesus alone prayed it to His Father. I find that to be incredibly intimate.

As I reflected on that thought, I also thought about his mother Mary standing there, listening as He prayed. She knew – she had known for a long time – who the father of Jesus was. I wonder if when she taught Him to pray, she taught him to quote Psalm 31:5 or to add the word "Father."

You may recall that in an earlier statement from the cross, Jesus did not use "Father" as He prayed. We called that the moment the time when the eternal relationship was broken. Then it was only "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?" But once again the relationship was restored. The Son knew the presence of the Father in this moment. Jesus felt He could call Him "Father" again.

How quickly God forgives our sins!

Because of the cross each of us can know what it means to have God as our Father. Jesus introduced that relationship when He taught us to pray, and so we always begin:

Our Father who art in heaven

John 1:12 reminds us:

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God ... (John 1:12)

This same John would later write in one of his epistles:

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! (1 John 3:1)

And so when we pray, we also pray to OUR FATHER.

#2: I COMMIT MY SPIRIT

Throughout His life Jesus had committed His Spirit to the Father.

The first words we ever heard Him say were words of commitment spoken to his earthly parents:

And He said to them, "Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" (Luke 2:49)

Every statement and action of His life was aimed at focusing attention on God, not Himself.

- He delayed going to see the dying Lazarus so that God would be glorified.
- He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane "Not my will but Your will be done."

And you will see that throughout the Gospels. Even when it was difficult to do so, Jesus kept true to His commitment to the Father. I commit my Spirit to you.

That's the call for all of us: to live lives that are always commitment to the Father.

Kenneth Bailey tells the story of teaching some short courses at the Lutheran Church of Latvia. While there, he observed the interviewing of prospective students and inquired of the interviews what questions they asked. They said, "The most important question is 'When were you baptized?' And he asked why is that so important? They answered, 'If they were baptized during the period of Soviet rule, they risked their lives and compromised their futures by being baptized. But if they were baptized after liberation from the Soviets, we have many further questions to ask about why they want to become a pastor.'" And then he writes, "the master challenges his servants to live boldly and publicly as his servants, using his resources and unafraid of his enemies, confident in the future as His future."

His lifelong commitment to the Father led Him to the cross. It would have been easier to do otherwise. But because He had lived that way throughout His life, the commitment at this moment was so much easier.

#3: INTO YOUR HANDS

If you were to read the rest of Psalm 31, you would find these words:

Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am in distress;
my eyes grow weak with sorrow,
my soul and body with grief.

¹¹ Because of all my enemies,
I am the utter contempt of my neighbors
and an object of dread to my closest friends—

¹³ For I hear many whispering,
“Terror on every side!”
They conspire against me
and plot to take my life.

¹⁴ But I trust in you, Lord;
I say, “You are my God.”

¹⁵ My times are in your hands;
deliver me from the hands of my enemies,

For the past few days Jesus had been in the hands of his enemies. They had beaten Him, whipped Him, humiliated Him, unjustly accused Him and now crucified Him.

Now the transition is being made from the hands of those enemies to the hands of God: “Into Thy hands,” He prayed.

These were the hands that created the universe. The Psalmist proclaims:

When I consider your heavens,
the work of your hands,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them? (Psalm 8:3-4)

The hands that created us:

Yet you, Lord, are our Father.
We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand. (Isaiah 64:8)

The hands that protect us from all evil:

So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41:10)

When the time of your death comes, you will find yourself in someone's hands, either the hands of man or the hands of God.

APPLICATION

When the explorer Cortez landed in Mexico with his 500 men, the first thing he did was to burn the ships that had carried them there. He wanted his men to realize that they were fully committed to staying and to succeeding there. There would be no turning back.

That's the life we sing about in the simple little chorus:

I have decided to follow Jesus
No turning back, no turning back.

All of His life Jesus lived what He prayed from the earliest days of His childhood.

Into Your hands I commit my Spirit.

The prayer we were taught doesn't express that sentiment very clearly, does it? But did you know the prayer actually has two more stanzas? These are ones I didn't know until I prepared this sermon. Hear it in its entirety:

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.
If I should live for other days,
I pray thee, Lord, to guide my ways.

Amen.