

Father into your hands I commit my spirit. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 13 April 2016.

This week we conclude our series of talks on our Lord's so-called 'Seven Sayings From The Cross', for we have now come to the seventh 'Saying' – to the very last words which He spoke before He died.

And our short Bible passage for today comes from the Gospel of Luke, and reads as follows:

It was now about noon, and there was darkness over the whole land until 3 o'clock ... Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!' And, having said this, He breathed out His spirit.¹

When I introduced this series at the beginning of March, I pointed out that, to some extent, the first and the last of our Lord's 'Seven Sayings From The Cross' act as bookends to the rest, in that they, the first and the last, are both prayers beginning with the address, 'Father' ... the first being, as you may recall, 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do'.

When Mervyn spoke to us two weeks ago about the central cry of the seven, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?',² he explained that those words were, in fact, a quotation from one of King David's psalms.³ And I note that our text for today, 'Into your hands I commit my spirit', is a quotation from another of King David's psalms. Let me quote you David's words in their context; he opened his psalm by declaring, 'In you, O Lord, do I put my trust', adding a little later, 'Into your hand I commit my spirit:⁴ you have redeemed me, O Lord'.⁵

And immediately two points of contrast jump out at me between King David's words and our Lord's quotation.

The first is our Lord's introduction to David's words, addressing God, as He (our Lord) usually did,⁶ by an intimate title which David would never have dared use – namely, as 'Father'.

The second difference is that our Lord limited His quotation to David's one expression, 'Into your hand I commit my spirit', and did not continue (as David), 'you have redeemed me, O Lord'. Nor, indeed, could He have added those words. And this for the simple reason that, far from needing (as David) to be redeemed, it is to that very cross on which He then hung and prayed that we trace our redemption. For the New Testament makes it clear that it is in the Lord Jesus – and in Him alone – that, and I quote, 'we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses'.⁷

But, although there were differences, clearly our Lord chose to echo the substance of King David's words because they expressed well His own unbroken trust and confidence in God.⁸ Indeed, the very word He used, which we translate 'commit', means 'to entrust something to someone for safekeeping' – for its care and protection. Make no mistake, the Saviour died with the full assurance of His forthcoming resurrection on the third day, just as He had often foretold it⁹ – saying, in effect, 'Father, I place – I deposit – my spirit into your hands for safekeeping, knowing that you will shortly raise me up again'.¹⁰

Our Lord had spent the previous 18 hours or so¹¹ – as He had earlier expressed it – in 'the hands of men'.¹² But now, in stark contrast, He delivers His spirit directly into His Father's 'hands'.

To me, it is almost as if Jesus was reciting 'the words of committal' at His own funeral, for, shortly after, courtesy of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, His body would be given a respectable burial – except, of course, that He spoke in terms of His spirit and not of His body.

There is some evidence from early Jewish writings that devout Jews of Jesus' day prayed the words of David, 'into your hands I commit my spirit', as part of their evening prayers.¹³ And I suspect that my Lord was no exception. If that was so, I can't imagine more suitable words for Him to use as He brought His earthly life to a close than those with which He had brought each earthly day to a close before. And I note that Luke makes it clear that He prayed these words at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, which, as Luke tells us elsewhere, was the hour of the Jewish evening prayer.¹⁴

And I note also – from the apostle John's account of the crucifixion – that immediately after Jesus had prayed these words, 'He bowed His head and delivered up (He 'yielded up') His spirit' ... where the word translated 'bowed' indicates that He 'reclined' His head ... being the word He had used some time before when He had warned one impetuous would-be disciple that, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay His head' – no place, that is, for Him to rest His head.

John is telling us, not that our Lord's head fell helplessly onto His chest, but that He peacefully reclined His head, as if letting it sink into a pillow to sleep.

And then, we read, 'He breathed out His spirit'. To my mind, it is as if Luke – who was by profession a physician¹⁵ – as if Dr Luke wants us to know that, at that moment, Jesus simply decided to stop breathing. Dr Luke's description (in accord with the descriptions given by the other gospel writers¹⁶) draws our attention to the fact that, as our Lord Himself had once asserted, He (our Lord) 'laid down' His life of Himself – of His own accord.¹⁷

It is true, of course, to say that Jesus was killed, and He spoke Himself of His death in that way.¹⁸ But, in the final analysis, the Lord Jesus was no victim of circumstances. As He had declared, 'no one' would take His life from Him – that, at the moment of His choice,¹⁹ He would 'lay it down' willingly²⁰ – freely *giving away* for others what men thought they were *taking away* from Him.

And why so? Oh, we know it so well, but let Him tell us again Himself. Speaking as the Good Shepherd, He announced, 'I lay down my life for the sheep' – for His people, that is.

And that is why every true believer – every follower of His – is entitled to adapt His prayer for themselves when they confront death, possibly 'calling out' with the first Christian martyr of whom we know – by name Stephen – 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit'.²¹

As it happened, at the end of last week I was reading about the martyrdom of John Huss back in the 15th century.²² John Huss, an early Reformer from Prague, was burned at the stake by the then Roman Catholic Church.

Among his supposed crimes²³ was that he defended and spread the teachings of the then-dead English Reformer John Wycliffe,²⁴ which included the belief that all people should be free to read the Bible in their own language, contrary to the doctrine of the Catholic Church, which threatened anyone possessing any Bible other than a Latin Bible with execution.

At his trial before his execution, one of the Catholic bishops declared, 'Now we commit your soul to the devil'. At which point, Huss (we read), 'lifted up his eyes towards the heavens', and prayed, 'But *I* commit my spirit into your hands. Lord Jesus Christ, to you I commend my spirit which you have redeemed'.²⁵

And, when the time comes for us to bid farewell to this present life, may we each be able to sincerely pray that same prayer:²⁶ 'Lord Jesus Christ, to you I commend my spirit which you have redeemed'.

Notes

¹ Luke 23. 44-46.

² Matt. 27. 46; Mark 15. 3.

³ Psa. 22. 1.

⁴ To give 'it over into His hand as a trust or deposit', Franz Delitzsch on Psalm 31. 6 in 'Commentary on the Old Testament' by C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch.

⁵ Psa. 31. 1, 5.

⁶ See Matt. 11. 25; John 11. 41; 17. 1.

⁷ Eph. 1. 7.

⁸ We can hardly miss the Lord's 'loud voice', Luke 23. 46; scarcely what one would have expected from a man about to die. But then the Lord was determined that His final and confident words should be heard.

⁹ Matt. 16. 21; 17. 23; 20. 19; cf. Luke 13. 32.

¹⁰ Cf. Acts 2. 25-31; Heb. 2. 13a with Isa. 8. 17.

¹¹ 'The disciples did as Jesus had appointed them; and they made ready the passover. Now when the even was come, He sat down with the twelve', Matt. 26. 19-20. 'The Passover meal could not be eaten till after sundown; and for those living within Palestine, it had to be eaten inside Jerusalem or not at all. That is why we find Jesus

reclining at a table in a room in the city "when evening came", D. A. Carson, 'Expositor's Bible Commentary', on Matt. 26. 20-22. Judas 'having received the sop went immediately out: and it was night', John 13. 30, with John 18. 1-12.

¹² See 'Jesus said to them, "The Son of man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him"', Matt. 17. 22-23 ... and 'He came to the disciples and said to them, "Sleep and take your rest later on. Behold, the hour has drawn near, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners"', Matt. 26. 45 ... and compare, 'Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you took, and by the hands of lawless men, nailing Him to a cross, you killed Him', Acts 2. 23.

Now, in contrast, He speaks – not of the 'hands' of mere angels, Matt. 4. 6 (Psa. 91. 12) – but of His Father's hands (cf. John 10. 29).

¹³ 'The quotation was used as part of an evening prayer', I. Howard Marshall, 'The Gospel of Luke' (The New International Greek Testament Commentary, page 876).

'Jesus' words are from Psalm 31. 5 (LXX 30. 6), which was used by the Jews as an evening prayer'. W. L. Leifield, Expositor's Bible Commentary, Luke 23. 44-46.

But the only Jewish source authority which I have been able to trace is:

'R. Nahman, however, says: If he is a scholar, then it is not necessary. Abaye (*) says: Even a scholar should recite one verse of supplication [on his bed = at the time when people lie down to go to sleep], as for instance: Into Thy hand I commit my spirit. Thou hast redeemed me, O Lord, Thou God of truth', Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Berakoth, Folio 5a. Accessed at ... http://www.come-and-hear.com/berakoth/berakoth_5.html, and see ... [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berakhot_\(Talmud\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berakhot_(Talmud)), note Mishnah x to chapter 1.

(*) 'Abaye (Hebrew: אביי) was a rabbi of the Jewish Talmud who lived in Babylonia [לבב], known as an amora [אמורא] born about the close of the third century; died 339 CE (see Talmudic Academies in Babylonia). His father, Kaylil, was the brother of Rabbah bar Nachmani, a teacher at the Academy of Pumbedita. Abaye's real name was Nachmani, after his grandfather', <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abaye>.

In his Daily Study Bible (on Luke 23. 44-49), William Barclay claims, "Jesus died with a prayer on his lips. 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' That is Psalm 31:5 with one word added-- Father. That verse was the prayer every Jewish mother taught her child to say last thing at night. Just as we were taught, maybe, to say, 'Now I lay me down to sleep,' so the Jewish mother taught her child to say, before the threatening dark came down, 'Into your hands I commit my spirit.' Jesus made it even more intimate, for he began it with the word Father. Even on the cross Jesus died like a child falling asleep in his father's arms" ...

<https://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/dsb/luke-23.html>. But Mr Barclay offers no source authority!

¹⁴ Acts 3. 1. Which Luke called also, 'the hour of incense', Luke 1. 10. At the hour of the evening sacrifice the people stood outside in prayer, while the priest within offered the sacrifice and burnt the incense. Compare 'Let my prayer be set before you as incense, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice', Psa. 141. 2. The priests did 'in the morning and about the ninth hour, offer their sacrifices on the altar', Josephus, 'Antiquities of the Jews', Book 14, Chapter 4, Paragraph 3.

¹⁵ Col. 4. 14.

¹⁶ He 'sent forth', 'yielded up', He 'dismissed' His spirit, Matt. 27. 50. He 'expired', Mark 15. 37. He 'gave up', 'delivered up' His spirit, John 19. 30. 'He gave up His life because He willed it, when He willed it, and as He willed it', Augustine.

¹⁷ John 10. 18. It was the one thing which Christ claimed to do 'of Himself'; contrast John 5. 30; 7. 28, 8. 28, 42. His death was entirely voluntary.

¹⁸ Mark 8. 31; 9. 31; 12. 8.

¹⁹ The Romans don't decide when He dies; the Jews don't decide when He dies; He decides when He dies.

²⁰ John 10. 18. A spontaneous act.

²¹ Acts 7. 59. This is hardly sufficient support for the statement of John Wesley, 'The Father receives the Spirit of Jesus: Jesus Himself the spirits of the faithful'.

²² Martin Luther said, 'Oh! that my name were worthy to be associated with such a man', Letter to Otto Brunfels, 1524. Quoted from 'The Church by John Huss', Introduction by David S. Schaff, page xxxvi.

²³ He also opposed indulgences authorised by Pope John XXIII, taught that the scriptures and not the Church provided the sufficient standard of faith and conduct, taught that neither the Church nor the Pope was infallible, taught that Papal degrees were not always to be obeyed, and had the temerity to attack the pomp, pride and avarice of the pope, cardinals and prelates of the Church.

²⁴ John Wycliffe had died on 28 December 1384.

²⁵ This was at the general session of both ecclesiastical and temporal lords at the 'Council of Constance' (in Switzerland) over which Emperor Sigismund presided. It took place on 6th July 1416. Source: 'The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe: With a Preliminary Dissertation by George Townsend', Volume III, pages 486-493 ... accessed at ... <https://ia801408.us.archive.org/23/items/actsmonumentsof03foxe/actsmonumentsof03foxe.pdf>. This can also be accessed at ... <http://www.exclassics.com/foxe/foxe106.htm>. See also ... <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07584b.htm>. Also http://logosresourcepages.org/History/huss_b.htm.

²⁶ For we know that He (our Lord Jesus) has promised concerning His 'sheep', 'I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand', John 10. 29.