

The God who died for us

Let me try and grab your attention. Let me draw you together and we're going to focus on our big topic of tonight, which is "The God who died for us". And I thought I would start tonight by talking to you about famous last words.

Now I'm pretty sure that none of us have really seriously considered what our last words will be. Is that right? You haven't really considered what they will be? But the reason I mention it tonight is because over the last few days I've been reading a book that is crammed full of the final words of lots of famous people.

You might think that's a very interesting thing to do. That's what I've been spending my time doing. And I'll be honest with you: lots of the words are pretty ordinary, some are pretty sad, you get occasionally some that are very profound and now and again you get some that are very funny. So what I thought I'd do tonight is share with you two of my favourite final last words. Are you ready for them? Here they are.

One of my favourites is a man called George Kelly. George Kelly was an American playwright and he died in 1974 and on his deathbed, one of his nieces tried to give him a farewell kiss. And this is what he said to her: "My dear, before you kiss me goodbye, fix your hair. It's a mess." And that was it. That's his final words before he died. That's my first one.

My second one is a man called Conrad Hilton. He was responsible for the Hilton hotel chain that we see around the world today. And on his deathbed he was asked if he had any words of wisdom. And he did. And this is what he said: "Leave the shower curtain on the inside of the tub". And that was it! Now those famous last words, they may cause you to be amused for a moment, but they're not the kind of words that will change our life in the future, not at all.

But what I want to do now is to show you some final words, some last words of a person that I think if we understand them really are life-changing. Now you find them in John's Gospel. We're going to look at the final recorded words of Jesus before he died. Now technically they're not actually the last words of Jesus in John's Gospel because after he died he was physically raised from the dead. But we are going to look at the final words of Jesus before he died. So it will be a great help if you could grab your Gospel and turn with me if you would, to John chapter 19. And if you find the second half of verse 16, I'm going to read a few verses before, and then we'll finish with his final words. So John chapter 19 and the second half of verse 16.

"So the soldiers took charge of Jesus. Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). Here they crucified him, and with him two others — one on each side and Jesus in the middle. Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, 'Do not write 'The King of the Jews,' but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews.'

Pilate answered, 'What I have written, I have written.'

When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. 'Let's not tear it,' they said to one another. 'Let's decide by lot who will get it.'

This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled which said, 'They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.' So this is what the soldiers did.

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby,

he said to his mother, 'Dear woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, 'I am thirsty.' A 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. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished.' With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit."

Those are the final recorded words of Jesus before he died. Three words that are life-changing if we understand them. It is finished. And what we're going to try and do tonight is understand what Jesus meant when he said that before he died.

Now the first thing I want to point out to you is what he didn't say. What did he not say? He didn't cry out "I am finished". So it wasn't as if Jesus knew within himself that he was coming to the last moments of his life. It's not as if he could sense, well, this is it and then he cries out "I am finished". He cries out, "It is finished."

So what is he referring to? What's the "it"? Well, over these last few weeks here at Identity, we've been looking at this dramatic rescue mission of Jesus. We've discovered that he is the eternal Son of God sent on a glorious rescue mission from his Father. His Father so loved the world that he sent his only Son into the world to do everything necessary so that rebels like you and me could spend eternity with God in heaven. And now here at the end, Jesus is crying out, "It is finished!" It is done. It's been accomplished. Everything necessary for rebels like you and me to spend eternity with God in heaven - "It's finished! It's done! I have accomplished everything!"

Now tonight we're going to try and work out what had Jesus done to make sure that it was all finished. This cry of a triumph, not failure, not, "Oh no, it's over" but, "It's done, it's been completed". Well, tonight I want to focus on two of the most important things that Jesus did to make sure that everything was accomplished. What are they? The first thing is that he suffered on the cross. We're going to look at that. And then we're going to look at his perfect life. And I want to try and persuade you why both those things were necessary for us to spend eternity with God.

So first of all: the suffering of Jesus on the cross. Now it seems in our culture in the United Kingdom that the cross has become something of a fashion accessory for many people. That's about all for some people. You can check it out, go out of here tonight, have a look round the nearest shopping centre. I'd encourage you not to stare too closely at people. They might think you're weird. But just have a look around, just look at what dangles at people's necks. It might be gold or silver but there's a little cross maybe beneath their chin.

But in the time of Jesus the cross was seen very differently. It certainly was not a fashion accessory; it was a place of execution. It was a place where criminals were killed in a very public way. It was a place where other people were warned if you step out of line, this is where you will hang too.

Now I guess the equivalent today would be something like the electric chair. Can you imagine this? Your friend comes up to you tomorrow and they're very excited because they've got something to show you. They've just bought something at the jewellery shop. And you think what is it? And they expose it, and there it is, a nice silver electric chair. What would you do? Would the next thing you say to them be, "Oh, where can I get one too?" No, it's strange. And if you said to them, "Tell me, why are you wearing it?" And the person said, "It's to remember my Uncle John because he was executed a few years ago."

We wouldn't do that, would we? We wouldn't boast about that. And yet the early Christians and Christians ever since the time of Jesus have boasted about the sufferings of Jesus on the cross. They've not been embarrassed about the sufferings of Jesus. They've not tried to sweep them under the carpet. But they've tried to tell everyone, everywhere, Jesus suffered on the cross.

Now why is that? Well, they knew that he wasn't a criminal. They knew that he was innocent. But it was more than that. Because they knew, as we know as we read the Bible, that as Jesus was hung on the cross he was suffering in the place of rebels like you and me, suffering the judgement of God that we deserve so that we would never have to face it.

Now we don't understand everything about the sufferings of Jesus. We don't know exactly what it felt like for Jesus to suffer on the cross. But what we do know is that it was more than physical suffering. It's interesting when you read the Gospel accounts of the suffering of Jesus they pay very little attention to the physical agony of Jesus on the cross. In fact when we read from John chapter 19 it simply says, "And they crucified him."

Now he did suffer horrendous pain physically, but the Bible's trying to say to us that there was suffering at a much, much deeper level, at a very deep spiritual level. Now we don't understand exactly what Jesus felt, but here's what we do know: that before his final breath, before he died, he had suffered everything that he needed to suffer. It's not that Jesus died and then had to go to hell in order to suffer more, but everything he needed to suffer, he suffered on the cross. Now how do I know that? Because what did he cry before he died? "It is finished!" Not it is partly finished, there's still a little bit to do. No, no, it is completely and utterly finished.

Now in a few moments we'll think about the perfect life of Jesus, but before that I've got two questions that might be buzzing around in your head. And even if they're not they will be in a minute. Here's the first question: How could one man pay the price, suffer the punishment, of billions of others? Think about that. How could Jesus the man, how could one person possibly suffer in the place of billions of rebels across the ages? How could that be fair? How could that work?

Well, the answer? It's all about the identity of Jesus. Who was he? The eternal Son of God, infinitely valuable, priceless. And there was the eternal, infinite Son of God suffering in the place of people like you and me, billions of rebels. And yet there is Jesus paying a price that is high enough for us all. So that's the first question. How can Jesus pay the price for billions of rebels? Because of who he is – the infinite, eternal Son of God.

But another question is, well, why couldn't God just forgive us? For this I need a volunteer. I know you get nervous at this point. Let me see, who can I pick? Robert! He is my volunteer tonight. You look at Robert don't you, what do you think? Respectable man. He looks like a nice young man, very honourable, very respectful, you can trust him, can't you? Yeah? Excellent, there's a few nods Robert.

So Robert comes up to me one day and he says, "Lee, I would like to borrow your car." I think ok. He says, "I'll treat it well, I've had a few driving lessons, I've got my own insurance, I just need the keys. I've got to run an errand." I think fantastic Robert. Here's my keys, look after it, it's very precious to me. See how you get on. And he smiles at me. I close the door and he's in my car.

Now it turns out that Robert is a bit of a boy racer. He likes his speed, so he screeches away from the curb and he rallies my car around the streets. He doesn't avoid all the kerbs, occasionally he hits them, and he doesn't avoid all the walls. He has a fun old time, and there's scrapes, there's bashes. And he roars down the street and at the end of the day, handbrake turn, dramatic, and he hits the wall and smashes the whole thing. He gets out of the car. Rather sheepishly he comes to my door and rings the bell. And I look out and there's my car, and there's my wall! It turns out that he doesn't have any insurance, and he says, "Will you forgive me?"

What do I do? Now in my graciousness I do forgive him, but there's still a question remaining: Who will pay the price for the damage that has been caused? There is a price that needs to be paid for all that damage that we have caused in the world. But God has paid it himself. Now if this is a helpful phrase you can store it away: Forgiveness is free, but it's not cheap.

Jesus Christ has gone to the cross and now forgiveness is available to us. He has opened his arms and he can say to anyone of us today, "Come as you are, put me in charge and forgiveness is available." But it's not cheap. What was the cost of our forgiveness? It was Christ himself suffering on the cross. So that's the first thing that was essential for us to live forever with God in heaven. Jesus had to suffer on the cross.

The second thing we're going to look at tonight is the perfect life of Jesus. Now there's no doubt, is there? You read through the Gospels and Jesus lives a completely perfect life. All the time he willingly, joyfully obeys his Father. There is never a moment when he never does what his Father says. Completely and utterly perfect. But the question is: Why did he have to live a perfect life?

Well, there are many things I could say but the big thing I want to focus on tonight is connected with the entry requirements of heaven. The Bible assures us that the entry requirements for heaven are 100% obedience in this life. Not 50%, not 75, not 85, not 95, but 100% obedience to what God has said. Those are the entry standards of heaven.

Now I don't know how you hear that. Sometimes people hear that and think, "That's a bit high, isn't it? That seems a bit unfair. Surely God's asking a bit much of us. Surely he should lower the standards." But my question is, why should we expect any less than 100%?

Think about this. Just suppose that I decided to go to America to make my fame and fortune. Would you like that? Do you think it'd be nice for me to go off and leave you all and go to America? But there I am, I head off to America making my fame and fortune. And when I'm there I decide I want to study at one of the top American universities. What am I going to find when I apply to those top universities? I'm going to find entry requirements that are really, really high. Now that's okay, isn't it? Because those high standards are a reflection of the quality of the institution. That's okay, that's what you would expect. The entry requirements for heaven, 100%, are a reflection of the quality and perfection of God.

Now what is our problem? Our problem is not simply that we have lived in such a way to deserve the punishment of God. That is one big aspect of the problem, but there's something else. Not only have we deserved punishment but we have not lived in such a way to meet God's perfect standards. And yet here is the wonderful, and I mean this wonderful, offer from Jesus Christ. He is saying to us that not simply have I suffered in your place, but I have lived in your place. Not simply do I offer you a pardon for all your wickedness but I offer you the possibility of joining me and gaining from my perfection. Pardon and perfection. These are the two aspects of what Jesus Christ is offering to us. And he is saying to us that as we come to him personally we can benefit from all that he has done.

How do we understand this? I think that one of the best illustrations to understand what's going on is the illustration of marriage. Now I know that every time I get near marriage in these illustrations some of you go, "Oh no, there he goes again, he's going to talk about his wife." I love speaking about my wife, you know that. But I do think that the Bible uses this illustration of marriage to help us understand our unity with Jesus.

What happens in a marriage? On the day various promises get made. I remember saying to my wife something like, "All I have I share with you. And she said the same to me. And at that moment a new legal and profound relationship begins. And there is a great sharing between us. So I brought everything I had to bring to my marriage, and she brought everything that she had to the marriage, and we shared. What did we bring? Vicky brought loads of money, it was wonderful, it was really good. We have this chat about it now and again. We're still trying to work out what I brought to our marriage. But what happened is on that day a new legal and profound relationship started. And we shared.

The Bible says that when we come to Jesus, when we come to him personally, come as we are and surrender to him, something new and legal and profound happens – a relationship of such

closeness. And there is a great sharing. Now in this new relationship, what do I bring to that relationship with Jesus? I bring my track record. I bring my wickedness. And what does Jesus say to me? "I've paid for it." And I say to him, "How much have you paid?" And he says, "I've paid for all of it." "All of it?" "Yes, all your wickedness – past, present and future. I have paid a price that covers it all." And I go, "Fantastic!"

But, he says, "That's not it, because I also bring my perfect obedience and in this new relationship of perfect unity you benefit from that. And now you can be certain of heaven all because of what I have done." So it's not at all about what I do, it's all about what Jesus has already done.

At this point you might be thinking to yourself, "Hang one, if that's true, if I have understood you, surely that means that I can live as I want. Come on, free forgiveness, perfect obedience of Jesus, surely that means that my place in heaven is guaranteed?" Yes, it is. "But surely that means I can now live as I please." Well, let me give you two reasons why you should never want to do that. Think about marriage again. When I married my wife and the ring was on her finger, I'll tell you what I wasn't thinking. I didn't think, "Great, the ring's on her finger. Fantastic, I can do whatever I like." I didn't say that. I thought I now want to live to please her. Well, the same is true with a relationship with Jesus. We want to live to please our great King who has died for us.

But the other reason is, remember what life is like without Jesus. It's not that life with Jesus is the really dull and boring life but life without him that's where all the fun and joy is. No! We've already seen that's not right. Why would we want to go back? Remember the whale on the beach who gets rescued and put in the ocean? Wow! They don't go right I'll better go on the beach again, that's really where the action is. No, life with Jesus is where the fullness is. And so what Jesus Christ offers to us is the possibility of living life as it was intended to be lived, but also with the certainty of a future in heaven. Why? All because of what he has done.

So those are I think final famous last words. They're not trivial are they? But if you understand them they are life-changing. Three words that can change your life: it is finished.

There's a lot to think about there, why don't you go back on your tables and have a chat about that?

Identity – Who is God? Who are we?

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