

“The Last Words of Jesus: #7 - Release”

⁴⁶ και φωνησας φωνη μεγαλη ο ιησους ειπεν πατερ εις χειρας σου παρατιθεται το πνευμα μου τουτο δε ειπων εξεπνευσεν.

*Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”
When he had said this, he breathed his last (Luke 23:46).*

Psalm 31:1-5; Luke 23:44-49; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20 ¹

Dale Durie’s grandparents were at home on a quiet fall afternoon when they heard a knock on the door. When Dale’s grandfather answered the door, he met a neighbor who said, “I was out feeding the horses, and I felt like God was prompting me to come and thank you for the difference you’ve made in my life.”

Dale continued, “The neighbor sat down and began to tell stories about many times when my grandfather had been kind to her as a widow and cared for the cows and horses and did all of kinds of practical things. She went through this litany of good deeds, including bringing peace in relationships with some of her children. She finished with, ‘I just felt like God wanted me to tell you that.’

“My grandfather paused and looked at her and said, ‘It was the Lord Jesus Christ who did it.’

“There was another pause, and my grandmother struck up a conversation with this lady. A few seconds later they heard a cough and saw my grandfather slumped over. He was with Jesus. My grandfather’s last words were, ‘It was the Lord Jesus Christ who did it.’”²

Have you ever been present to hear the last words someone spoke before they died? Such moments reveal much about the core of a person’s life and faith. John Wesley’s last words were, “The best of all, God is with us.” Voltaire, the famous infidel who spent most of his life fighting Christianity, said, “I am abandoned by God and man; I shall go to hell.” R.G. Lee, the famous Baptist preacher from Memphis, said, “I can see the other side, and it is more beautiful than I ever dreamed.”³

The daughter of missionaries to the Congo told Pastor Leith Anderson this story: “As a little girl, I participated in a daylong rally to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the coming of missionaries to the Congo. At the close of a long day of speeches and music, an old, old man stood before the crowd and insisted on speaking. He said, “I will die soon, and there is something very important that I alone know, and I don’t want to take it to my grave.”

“Long ago, when the missionaries arrived,” he said, “my people thought them strange and their message dubious. The tribal leaders decided to test the missionaries by slowly poisoning them to death. Over a period of months and years, missionaries and their children died one by one. It was as we watched how they died that we decided we wanted to live as Christians.”⁴ . . .

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last (Luke 23:44-46).

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on April 8, 2012.

² Dale Durie, from the sermon, *Mission Possible* (6.1.03), www.preachingtoday.org.

³ James McCluskey, “The Seven Last Words of Jesus,” *Proclaim*, January-March, 1985, p. 12.

⁴ Leith Anderson, “Mystery Martyrs,” in *Men of Integrity* (January/February 2004).

“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” was Jesus’ seventh and final Word from the Cross. These were His last words during His incarnation. *And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, “Surely this man was the Son of God”* (Mark 15:39).

Jesus’ seven last “words” before His death were memorable, inspiring, and persuasive, and Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ* powerfully chronicled the final hours leading up to that moment. But if Jesus’ story had stopped at the cross, not much else would have happened. The disciples had already faded away with their aspirations of Israel’s restored glory crushed into Calvary’s bloody soil. If Jesus’ story had stopped at the tomb, you and I would probably never even have heard of Him.

So why have we heard of Jesus? What’s up with Gibson’s movie about Him that has made \$612 million dollars around the world? The answer to these questions is found in 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul wrote:

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

*For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ **died** for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was **buried**, that he was **raised** on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he **appeared** to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born (1 Corinthians 15:1-8).*

My friends, the only reason why you and I have gathered in this place today is because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. In a moment, we’ll consider the staggering implications of this fact, but first we need to give some thought to the fact itself.

How sure are *you* that Jesus is alive? How sure . . . and why? Let me suggest three reasons *why you can be sure*.

Reason Number One: Nobody dies for what they know is a lie. People lie for all kinds of reasons, but chiefly as an attempt to make dishonest profit or to stay out of trouble. Our daily news provides countless examples of this. People also change their stories and tell “what really happened” when this becomes the only avenue of escape from unpleasant consequences.

Yet nearly every one of the Twelve Apostles—and many other early Christians with them—went to their deaths claiming that Jesus was *alive* and that they had seen Him and talked with Him. Beyond this, more Christians have been killed in the last one hundred years—just for claiming that Jesus is alive and that they actually know Him and talk with Him—than in all of the previous centuries of Christian history. And people don’t choose to die for something that they know is a lie.

Reason Number Two: Some of Jesus’ fiercest opponents became His disciples after having met the *risen* Christ. Saul of Tarsus was an absolutely rabid opponent of the followers of Jesus, persecuting all he could find and putting many of them to death. Yet as the passage we just read demonstrates, Paul completely reversed himself, suffering shipwreck, torture, and eventual execution because he continued to claim that he had met the risen Christ.

Jesus' half-brother, James, made fun of Jesus during His ministry, but after having met the risen Christ, James became the leader of the Jerusalem church, and he, too, was eventually executed for his testimony *that Jesus was alive*.

Reason Number Three: The persistence of the Church. From generation to generation for two thousand years, people all over the world, in every culture, from all kinds of backgrounds—women and men, well-educated and not, rich and poor—testify that they have met the risen Christ. Even in the face of persistent persecution and death, Christians have testified—and continue to this day to testify—that Jesus Christ is *alive* and has transformed their lives.⁵

And these three reasons don't even *begin* to do justice to the evidence that is available. Sir Edward Clarke, a judge on the British High Court, did a thorough analysis of the evidence for the Resurrection, and then wrote, "To me the evidence is conclusive, and over and over again in the High Court I have secured the verdict on evidence not nearly so compelling."⁶

Sir Lionel Luckhoo was a brilliant attorney whose astounding 245 consecutive murder acquittals earned him a place in *The Guinness Book of World Records* as the world's most successful lawyer. Knighted not once, but twice by Queen Elizabeth, this former justice and diplomat subjected the historical data about the Resurrection to his own rigorous analysis for several years before declaring, "I say unequivocally that the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is so overwhelming that it compels acceptance by proof which leaves absolutely no room for doubt."⁷

Several years ago, Professor Antony Flew, the most famous atheist in the world, debated Professor Gary Habermas from Liberty University on the subject of the Resurrection. Not only did independent judges conclude that Habermas won the debate, but one of them added, "I was surprised (shocked might be a more accurate word) to see how weak Flew's . . . approach was. . . . I was left with this conclusion: Since the case against the resurrection was no stronger than that presented by Antony Flew, I would think it was time I began to take the resurrection seriously."⁸ And since that debate, Dr. Flew has himself become a believer in God.⁹

Atheist Lee Strobel, a decorated legal reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*, made an extensive analysis of the data in an effort to debunk his wife's conversion to Christ and later wrote that "The atheism I had embraced for so long buckled under the weight of historical truth. It was a stunning and radical outcome, certainly not what I had anticipated when I embarked on this investigative process. But it was, in my opinion, a decision compelled by the facts."¹⁰

Well, so what? So Jesus came back to life. Don't people have near-death experiences all the time? Let me respond to that in two ways. First of all, people do have near-death experiences, but I doubt that you've heard the whole story about them.

Dr. Maurice Rawlings, a cardiologist at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, has documented over 300 interviews with persons who reported near-death experiences,

⁵ J.P. Moreland in Strobel, p. 255.

⁶ Strobel, p. 237.

⁷ Strobel, p. 255.

⁸ Gary Habermas and Antony Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), xiv.

⁹ Antony Flew, *There IS a God: How the World's Most Famous Atheist Changed His Mind* (HarperOne, 2007).

¹⁰ Strobel, pp. 266-267.

interviews conducted not months later, but immediately after the experiences occurred, many of them either in the Emergency Room or in surgery. According to Dr. Rawlings, nearly half of these people reported encountering images of fire, of tormented and tormenting creatures—a place very different from what usually gets reported. Dr. Rawlings wrote, “Just listening to these patients has changed my life. There is a life after death, and if I don’t know where I’m going, it is not safe to die.”¹¹

Second, *Jesus did not have a “near-death” experience.* As *The Passion of the Christ* demonstrated so powerfully, and as Dr. Paul Stanton, a physician who served for many years as the President of East Tennessee State University, has testified on a number of occasions—and others with him—there is absolutely no question that Jesus was as dead as dead can be.

So what? Well, here are ten things that derive from the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was actually raised from the dead:

1. Jesus’ resurrection is God’s validation that Jesus is indeed who He said He was—God in human flesh.
2. Jesus’ resurrection is God’s validation that everything Jesus said, did, and promised is True, and that you can confidently build your life upon these things.
3. Jesus’ resurrection means that there is an objective standard for morality and human behavior, a rock-solid foundation for daily decisions, and a standard by which we will all be judged.
4. Jesus’ resurrection means that Jesus is alive today, and you can know Him personally.
5. Jesus’ resurrection proves that God really does love you.
6. Jesus’ resurrection demonstrates that God really does have a purpose for your life.
7. Jesus’ resurrection means that because you can be forgiven, you can also forgive.
8. Jesus’ resurrection proves that Jesus has a just claim to your allegiance, your obedience, and your worship.
9. Jesus’ resurrection means that you have nothing to lose and everything to gain by putting your life in His hands.
10. Jesus’ resurrection proves that this life is just the prelude, just the preparation for the Real Story that follows in the life to come.

In January, 2000, the leaders of Charlotte, North Carolina, invited Billy Graham, their city’s favorite son, to a luncheon. Billy initially hesitated to accept the invitation because he was struggling with Parkinson’s disease, as he does still. But the Charlotte leaders said, “We don’t expect a major address. Just come and let us honor you.” So he agreed.

After wonderful things were said about him, Graham stepped to the podium, looked at the crowd, and said, “I’m reminded today of Albert Einstein, the great physicist who this month has been honored by *Time* magazine as the Man of the Century. Einstein was once traveling from Princeton on a train when the conductor came down the aisle, punching the tickets of each passenger. When he came to Einstein, Einstein reached in his vest pocket. He couldn’t find his ticket, so he reached in his other pocket. It wasn’t there, so he looked in his briefcase but couldn’t find it. Then he looked in the seat beside him. He couldn’t find it.

¹¹ Maurice Rawlings, *To Hell and Back: Life After Death, Startling New Evidence* (Thomas Nelson, 1996), see www.freeevangelism.com/testimony/hellandback.htm.

The conductor said, 'Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. We all know who you are. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry about it.' Einstein nodded appreciatively.

"The conductor continued down the aisle punching tickets. As he was ready to move to the next car, he turned around and saw the great physicist down on his hands and knees looking under his seat for his ticket. The conductor rushed back and said, 'Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, don't worry. I know who you are. No problem. You don't need a ticket. I'm sure you bought one.' Einstein looked at him and said, 'Young man, I, too, know who I am. What I don't know is where I'm going.'"

Billy Graham continued, "See the suit I'm wearing? It's a brand new suit. My wife, my children, and my grandchildren are telling me I've gotten a little slovenly in my old age. I used to be a bit more fastidious. So I went out and bought a new suit for this luncheon and one more occasion. You know what that occasion is? This is the suit in which I'll be buried. But when you hear I'm dead, I don't want you to remember the suit I'm wearing. I want you to remember this: I not only know who I am, I also know where I'm going."¹²

My friend, do you know where you're going in this life and the next? Are you sure? The message of Jesus' Resurrection is that JESUS IS ALIVE. HE IS HERE. HE LOVES YOU. AND HE WANTS TO CHANGE YOUR LIFE.

Because the fire of God's holiness consumes any sin that comes into God's Presence just as fire consumes paper, you and I, as sinful persons, are forever prevented from experiencing the intimate, eternal relationship with God that God planned for us, and there's nothing we can do about it. But because of God's unbelievable love, *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God* (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The Bible tells us that "The wages of sin is **death**, but the gift of God is eternal **life** in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). The Bible also says, *If you **declare** with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and **believe** in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved* (Romans 10:9).

Jesus' last words on the Cross were, "*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.*" Today's question is, will you commit your spirit into His hands?

¹² John Huffman, "Who Are You, and Where Are You Going?" www.preachingtoday.com