

THE WORD OF CERTAINTY**LUKE 23:44-49**

Were you ever taught a bedtime prayer? For example, “Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake; I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to take.” Perhaps you learned that simple prayer when you were a child and recited it before drifting off to sleep. Maybe you taught it to your children. It’s likely that Jesus’ final statement on the cross just before He died was a prayer every Jewish mother taught her child before going to sleep at night. It’s likely Mary taught Jesus this prayer when he was a little boy. It’s found in Psalm 31:5 (NIV), “Into your hands I commit my spirit; deliver me, Lord, my faithful God.”

Jesus made several statements over the six hours He hung on the cross. We’ve considered them in a series of messages I’ve called *Cross Words: Jesus’ Statements Before He Died*. The scene on that day, however, was not a comforting time of prayer next to a child’s bed. Anything but. It was cold and dark. Blood, death, and pain were evident everywhere. The execution of Jesus was all but complete. But just before He breathed His last, he made a final statement. Let’s call it the word of certainty for reasons that will become clear as we reflect on its significance together. Jesus’ first statement was a prayer, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” His last statement was a prayer, also. “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” (Lk 23:46 NIV) It was a paraphrase of Psalm 31:5 (NIV), “Into your hands I commit my spirit; deliver me, Lord, my faithful God.”

Can you imagine being there at the cross and watching Jesus take his last breath and die? A Roman soldier called Jesus a righteous man. Those who only hours earlier had shouted “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” seem to have been strangely speechless now. Some of them even appeared to have mourned His death. His followers were likely overwhelmed with grief. I suggest there was something unique and unexpected about it all. Despite Jesus’ immense physical and spiritual suffering He seemed to be in command, oddly enough. He knew and accepted what was happening to Him and why. It was as if Jesus permitted and surrendered to it. Jesus was as unique in His death as He was in His life. No one ever lived like Jesus lived. No one ever died like He died either. Jesus’ death accomplished what His life, His miracles, and His teachings couldn’t do. It broke the hearts of hardened people gathered there at the cross to watch him die. There was and is a spiritually magnetic power in the cross. It was forever unleashed upon a world of sinful men and women when Jesus made his final statement from the cross. Jesus’ word of certainty. When something is certain, it’s secure. It’s real. You can count on it. There are at least three certainties – three secure spiritual realities - I want to underline for us today from Jesus’ statement. Here’s the first one...

A CERTAIN RELATIONSHIP.

“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” (Lk 23:46 NIV) Jesus began his final statement with the word, “Father.” It pointed to a secure and certain relationship. Yes, Jesus was likely quoting Psalm 31, but there’s an important difference. The word

“Father” doesn’t appear in that psalm, however. Jesus was the One who first taught us to call God Father, to think of God as Father, and to relate to God as Father.

Many people find it very difficult to think of God as a father. Some think of God as a remote and aloof Supreme Being. They might say, “Sure, I believe there’s a God, but He’s too big and too far away to know anything about me or take any interest in my life.” Others appear to have a problem even thinking of God as a person much less as a father. Eastern religious thought – which many Americans have adopted – doesn’t believe in a personal God. It says, “All things are God and God is all things. He’s not a person at all. He’s more like a force and we need to be absorbed into it.” For still others, the concept of God being a father is tainted. Their earthly father was the one who beat them senseless or abused them sexually. The word “father” makes some people feel afraid, angry, or sad rather than secure, happy, or comforted.

But Jesus recognized the nearness of God and the personhood of God in the same way you know the nearness and personhood of someone you love dearly and have known for many years. But Jesus’ experience of God was even more than that. Jesus had experienced God with all the warmth, closeness, firsthand experience, and trust a small child conveys when they see their own father. Jesus offered a kind of intimacy and connection with God no one had ever thought possible before Jesus came.

This is the certain relationship that’s the birthright of every child of God. God is now your Father. It’s made certain and secure because of Jesus’ death on the cross. Today we read the great curtain in the Jewish Temple that hung between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place was rent in two from top to bottom at the moment of Jesus’ death. It was as if God Himself grasped the top of it with both hands and ripped it open. Yes, God had been a remote, aloof Supreme Being until then. Only the Jewish high priest could approach Him personally and only then once a year. But now the way was open for any and all. But more than just gaining access, a whole new and wonderful kind of relationship was offered. The first Christians were quick to understand this fact because in the New Testament we read, “You received God’s Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, ‘Abba, Father.’ For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God’s children.” (Rom 8:15-16 NLT) It also says, “Because we are his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, ‘Abba, Father.’” (Gal 4:6 NLT) “Abba” was the Aramaic word for father – the language Jesus spoke. It was the familiar, everyday name you called your father. It means quite literally – “Daddy” or “Pops.” Imagine calling God “Daddy!” Jesus did. And we’re invited to enter into the same kind of certain relationship.

When my son, Ian, was a young boy he’d occasionally point to me with a big smile and say, “My Daddy!” His facial expressions told me that despite his young age he recognized the relationship. As a result, he brought me all of his childish joys and sorrows. Nothing makes a parent happier than when your kid recognizes the relationship you share with them is unique and special. Over the years your kid will know many people. Some may even make a great impact on them. There will be many friends and acquaintances along the way, but you alone are Dad. You alone are Mom.

There exists a secure relationship with you that's special, unique, and important. I believe it warms the great heart of God your Father when you also recognize that because your relationship with Him is secure it's special, unique, and important, too. He is your Father. Your Daddy. His heart is wounded when you treat your relationship with Him as being of just marginal importance or refuse to seek His forgiveness when you mess up. But He's delighted when you bring to him all your human joys and sorrows.

A story is told of a Quaker family who lived in Pennsylvania during the Civil War. Quakers – or they're sometimes known as Friends – are pacifists. Against the father's wishes, the son – Jonathan – ran off and enlisted in the Union Army. Time passed and no word came to the family at all from Jonathan. One night the father had a dream his son was wounded in action, was in great distress, and needed the care of his father. So this Quaker father left his farm and eventually discovered where and with whom his son was serving. He found the commander and asked about his son, Jonathan. The commander replied there'd been a major battle earlier that day and things were still in chaos. Many soldiers had been wounded and some were still out on the battlefield. He gave permission to the father to go out and try to find his son.

It was getting dark by the time this father started his search. He lit a lantern. While searching for his son, he came across many wounded young men. Some were calling out for help. Others were too seriously wounded to cry out at all. Finding his son seemed impossible. All he could think to do was to call out loudly, "Jonathan Smythe, thy father seeketh after thee!" He would walk on a little further and call out again, "Jonathan Smythe, thy father seeketh after thee!" Here and there he'd hear a groan. One wounded soldier said, "I wish that was my father." Finally, he heard a faint, barely audible reply, "Father, over here." He heard Jonathan say, "I knew you would come." His father knelt down, took that broken boy in his arms, comforted him with his presence, dressed his wounds, carried him home to safety, and nursed him back to health. God is just like that father. He, too, seeketh after thee. Especially when you're wounded and busted up by life's battles.

"Father." Jesus was not uncertain about His relationship with God. You shouldn't be either. Jesus died and rose again so you might come to know God as your Father – to experience and to enjoy a secure and certain relationship with Him. "Father," said Jesus, "into Your hands....The next part of Jesus' last statement reveals another kind of spiritual certainty made possible by His death and resurrection.

A CERTAIN REST.

"Father, into Your hands." Even on the cross, Jesus died like a child falling asleep in His Father's arms. It was a prayer full of trust and confidence in His Father. I'm convinced your own death and mine will test the reality of our relationship with God like nothing else. For example, I'm personally challenged by what many of the Christians aboard the *Titanic* did as that great ship slipped below the icy waters of the Atlantic Ocean over a century ago. They sang the hymn "Nearer My God To Thee" together as

death claimed them. If you're a follower of Jesus, then – just like Jesus – you believe death is the opportunity to draw nearer to God your Father.

But, fortunately, you and I can also find a place of confident rest and security in the hands of our Heavenly Father before we come to the moment of physical death. And, again, it's the death and resurrection of Jesus that forms the basis for that certainty. One of the wonderful results of Jesus' cross is that we can now have confidence that the Father's hands are loving rather than cruel. In fact, being in His hands is the only real place of safety and the only ultimate security that exists. Because of what happened nearly 2,000 years ago, we can live trustfully all of our lives.

Of course, life will have its dark moments. Yes, there will be times of confusion, sorrow, trial, anxiety, weakness, and pain. Count on it. But, whenever you say in your heart, "Father, into Your hands," you recognize your Father will ultimately bring meaning out of confusion, joy out of sorrow, spiritual power to meet every trial, peace to overrule every anxiety, strength in the midst of your weakness, and His comfort and relief for your pain. There will be struggles, yes, but there will also be victory beyond them. There's a promise in God's Word that we can claim every day we live, "No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love.... Indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom 8:37-39 NLT) What a promise! And you can be certain of it.

When a man by the name of William Munser was a small boy, he and his family would often visit his grandparents who lived about nine miles away. One night a very thick fog settled over the hilly countryside before the family started back in their car to their own home. Young William became afraid of the fog and asked if they shouldn't be going even slower than they were. His mother said, "Don't worry. Your father knows the way." William's dad had walked that same road when there was no gasoline during World War 2. He'd ridden that blacktop on his bicycle to court his future bride. And for years he'd made those weekly trips back to visit his own parents. William's father knew the way. My friend, there will be many times when you and I can't see the road of life ahead of us clearly. You might feel a surge of panic rise up in your heart. Yes, life is uncertain. But your Father isn't. Don't give in to worry. Your Father always knows the way home.

One of my greatest struggles in following Jesus isn't getting up and doing something for Him. Instead, it's more often letting go of my own life and trusting Jesus with it. Often the biggest challenge in your life won't be serving Jesus, but making it a daily habit to surrender to Him. I find comfort in these verses, "So there is a special rest still waiting for the people of God. For all who have entered into God's rest have rested from their labors, just as God did after creating the world. So let us do our best to enter that rest." (Heb 4:9-11 NLT) "Father, into Your hands." What should we put in the Father's hands? The hard to understand stuff of life... the unanswered prayer stuff... the still really painful stuff we haven't figured out yet. Sometimes the hardest thing to do is to give up, give in, and allow God to be God. "Father, into Your hands." Can you pray like that? Can you live like that? Jesus could and did. Even up to and including the

moment of death itself. Jesus' final statement is all about certainty. It speaks of a certain relationship, a certain rest, but also...

A CERTAIN RELEASE.

“Jesus called out with a loud voice, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.’ When he had said this, he breathed his last.” (Lk 23:46 NIV) The word that’s used to describe Jesus’ death right there is a unique one. It means literally to blow out a candle. And it implies Jesus voluntarily released His spirit from His body by an act of the will after his last statement. Yes, of course, Jesus would have died eventually because of the experience of crucifixion itself. Nevertheless, the way it was depicted by Luke implied Jesus willed out His own life or gave up His spirit. And as He did so, He entrusted His soul – His essential inner being or spirit – to the Father. Additionally, that word “commit” means to hand over something to someone else. Before the crucifixion, Jesus had said, “No one can take my life from me. I sacrifice it voluntarily. For I have the authority to lay it down when I want to and also to take it up again.” (Jo 10:18 NLT) Here at the very end, Jesus didn’t so much lose His life or have it taken from Him unwillingly, as He Himself dismissed it. “Father, into Your hands, I commit my spirit” – a certain, definite release, to be sure.

Jesus was absolutely unique when He did this. You and I can’t just dismiss our lives by an act of the will like Jesus did at that moment. Someone might argue, “But isn’t suicide dismissing your own life?” Perhaps, but what Jesus did here wasn’t suicide. We can’t just release our inner spirit to God the way Jesus did here. Be that as it may, there is a way in which we can release ourselves to God spiritually even while we remain alive physically. I’m thinking of this well-known verse in the Bible, “My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal 2:20 NLT) That verse calls you and me to release ourselves to God every day we live. Following Jesus is more than just believing certain facts to be true about Jesus. It also means we give up our inner selves to Jesus in faith and obedience every day we live.

Yes, that happens the moment you first say “Yes” to Jesus as your Savior and Lord. But it keeps on happening often in your everyday walk with God. Or, at least, it should. In fact, it becomes a spiritual way of life for a true follower of Jesus. As a child of God, you find yourself saying, “Father, into Your hands, I commit my life today. Father, into Your hands, I commit my attitudes today. Father, into Your hands, I commit how I treat other people today. Father, into Your hands, I commit my actions and reactions today. Father, into Your hands, I commit my plans and my priorities this day.” That prayer – that kind of spiritual surrender and release – needs to be on our lips and upon our heart every day and every hour. We just keep on placing ourselves in the Father’s hands – a release that’s certain and definite every hour of every day.

Paul Stanley was an American infantry commander in Vietnam back in 1967. He saw Viet Cong soldiers surrender many times. As they were placed into custody, Stanley observed the differences in their attitudes by their body language and facial

expressions. Most hung their heads in shame, stared at the ground, and refused to make eye contact with American soldiers. Others stood erect, stared defiantly at those around them, and resisted any attempt to control them. They'd surrendered physically but not mentally yet.

On one occasion, Stanley remembers coming up on several American soldiers who had surrounded a wounded Viet Cong soldier. He'd been shot through the lower leg. He was hostile, helpless, and frightened. Any time an American soldier attempted to approach him in an effort to help him, he threw mud and kicked out with his other good leg. This soldier hadn't surrendered yet either. A soldier asked Stanley, "Sir, what do we do? He's losing blood fast and needs medical attention. Stanley looked again at this Viet Cong soldier and realize then he was looking into the face of a 16 or 17 year old teenager. He unbuckled his pistol belt and hand grenades so the boy couldn't grab them. Then, speaking gently, he moved towards the wounded soldier.

With tears in his eyes, he allowed Stanley to slide his arms under him and pick him up. As Stanley carried him to a waiting helicopter, the young man began to cry and actually squeezed Stanley in a kind of embrace. During the helicopter ride, the young man sat on the floor and clung to Stanley's leg. He was afraid as the helicopter gained altitude and flew over the trees. Stanley smiled at him reassuringly and put his hand on the boy's shoulder. After landing, the commander picked up the young soldier and carried him to the medical tent for treatment. As they crossed the field, he could feel the tension leave the young man's body and his tight grip loosen. His head actually leaned against his captor's chest. His fear and resistance was gone. He had finally surrendered.

Sometimes things can happen in your life that make you wonder if God is your enemy. God is never your enemy, but – just the same - He does demand our unconditional surrender to Him. And when He takes you captive and you surrender, He brings healing, comfort, and care. Easter Sunday is one week away. Have you surrendered your life to Jesus yet? I realize most of us here today have done that, so here's a different question for the rest of us. Do you need to surrender your life to Jesus again today all over again? When you do that, you release your life afresh and anew to Jesus the crucified and risen Lord. "Father, into Your hands, I commit My Spirit." Jesus' word of certainty. It speaks to us of a certain relationship, a certain rest, and a certain release.