

DONALD SCHMIDT

Death of Jesus

A FIVE SESSION STUDY GUIDE

FOR
Progressive
Christians

APPENDIX 3

The “Seven Last Words”

Copyright © 2019 Donald Schmidt
Published by Wood Lake Publishing Inc. All rights reserved.
www.woodlake.com

Unless otherwise noted, scripture quotations are
from the *Common English Bible*, copyright © 2011,
Abingdon, Nashville, TN. Used by permission.



WOOD LAKE

**Death of
Jesus**FOR
Progressive
Christians

APPENDIX 3

**The “Seven
Last Words”**

Let’s clarify one thing right off the bat – Jesus did *not* utter seven last words from the cross. However, sometime in the 16th century it became common to preach on the various things that the gospels report Jesus speaking from the cross, and the tradition began that they must all have been spoken by him, and that they could all be somehow rolled together. Little could be further from the truth.

Generally, scholars assume that none of these “words” were actually spoken by Jesus, with the possible exception of the phrase reported in Matthew and Mark, where Jesus quotes Psalm 22. The other phrases – and quite possibly this one as well – are given to us to further the points that the gospel writers seek to make. Let’s look at them individually and ponder what the gospel writers might have wanted us to take from them.

My God, my God, why have you left me? (Mark 15:34 and Matthew 27:46)

Many people will be familiar with the wording from the *King James Version* of the Bible, which also carried through in the *New Revised Standard Version*: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In *Jesus Christ Superstar*, it is rendered as, “Why have you forgotten me?” and, in *The Message*, as, “Why have you abandoned me?”

The phrase is given in Aramaic by Mark: “*Eloi, eloi, lema sabachtani.*” Matthew offers the same quotation, but uses Hebrew, and thus it begins, “*Eli, Eli...*” While treatises have been written on the topic of the differences between the two versions, they are too minor to merit consideration here. In both cases, the words are a quotation from Psalm 22:1. Both words, in their respective languages, mean “my God.”

It seems ludicrous that anyone in the throes of a horrible and agonizing death would pause, let alone have the wherewithal, to quote scripture. Having said that, one school of thought posits that this quotation in Matthew and Mark may in fact have been spoken by Jesus, the argument being that it was a fairly common expression; many Jews would have heard this a number of times, and thus it is possible that Jesus repeated the popular saying here.

A more interesting question, perhaps, is why Matthew and Mark included this saying in the first place. For the Messiah, the supposed Son of God, to utter a phrase that suggests he is feeling abandoned by God is intriguing. The apparent lack of faith this statement implies has led some scholars to assume it is literally accurate; after all, they ask, who on earth would invent such a statement?

A reflection from the Ukrainian Orthodox/Greek Catholic Church describes something the suggests a possible motive: “While the nails in the wrists are putting pressure on the large median nerve, and the severely damaged nerve causes excruciating pain, the Lamb of God experiences the abandonment of the soul by God, a deeply excruciating pain that is the essence of eternal condemnation in Hell.” Such a statement tells us that Jesus is in agony, and is – at least in this moment – seen as very human by the gospel writers.

Many people find in this phrase a strong sense of identification with Jesus. Even Jesus had moments of extreme doubt! And yet, in the midst of that doubt, he has faith. After all, he obviously still believes in God’s presence, or he would not address God in the statement. How often have we found ourselves crying out to God in a similar fashion?

**Death of
Jesus**FOR
Progressive
Christians

APPENDIX 3

**The “Seven
Last Words”**

- Do you think these are actual words of Jesus?
- If not, why would the gospel writers have included them?
- Why do you think these are the *only* words from the cross that Mark and Matthew include?

Luke

Luke includes three phrases that are not found in any of the other gospels. They speak of Jesus showing incredible compassion, even while hanging in painful agony on a cross. This is certainly in keeping with Luke’s overall desire to emphasize that Jesus is about justice and compassion.

Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing (Luke 23:34)

Many people are struck by this line, where Jesus forgives those who are crucifying him. Some see it as a bold statement that seems to let us off the hook for things we have done wrong. After all, we (like the soldiers) can simply claim we didn’t know what we were doing. At the same time, Jesus offers forgiveness unconditionally; the soldiers did not ask for forgiveness; they did not repent; they did not admit to any wrongdoing. They are simply forgiven because in their ignorance they did something they might otherwise not have done.

- What does it say to you that Jesus would forgive someone who was in the process of killing him?
- What do you think Luke wants to convey by including this statement?

I assure you that today you will be with me in paradise (Luke 23:43)

While the other gospels portray people mocking and condemning Jesus, Luke presents a lone affirming voice. Tradition has painted this individual as St. Dismas, the “good thief,” but both the name and the description are fabrications. This small conversation, though, gives us more insight into what is important to Luke. Just as Jesus forgives those who crucify him, here he takes time to offer forgiveness and support to one of the criminals crucified with him.

People have struggled to reconcile the timing in this statement – “*today*” you will be with me in paradise – with the traditional understanding (based on 1 Peter) that Jesus went “somewhere” between his death and resurrection to preach to souls in prison. Such a problem exists only if we try to take one or more of the statements literally, as historical fact. Setting the words free from the idea that Jesus actually spoke them enables us to delve more deeply into *why* Luke wants to present this image of Jesus.

- Why do you think Luke presents this brief conversation between Jesus and the criminals who are crucified with him?
- What does it mean to you to imagine Jesus offering forgiveness and affirmation to someone – in this case, a criminal – right up until he died?

Father, into your hands I entrust my (Luke 23:46)

Many people may be more familiar with the *King James Version* of this statement: “Into your hands I commend my spirit.” Here Luke is quoting from Psalm

**Death of
Jesus**FOR
Progressive
Christians

APPENDIX 3

**The “Seven
Last Words”**

31:5, which is a strong clue that we should not take this as a literal, historical statement. Surely, after everything Jesus has suffered and *is* suffering at this point, it seems unlikely that he could recite (accurately, at that!) part of a psalm just before he dies.

■ What does it say to you to hear these words at this point in the story?

John

Just as Luke’s phrases are unique to his gospel, so are the phrases found in John’s gospel, which is hardly surprising. John tends to differ from the other gospels at many turns, and the words he presents Jesus as speaking from the cross are no exception. However, they continue to put forward John’s emphasis that Jesus is in total control of everything. Even as he is being crucified, it still feels like Jesus is controlling the situation, perhaps submitting out of necessity.

**Woman, here is your son ... [Son,] here is your mother
(John 19:26–27)**

The content of these lines has been dealt with in the guide portion of *The Death of Jesus for Progressive Christians*, but let’s look at them again briefly. It appears that John wants us to see that Jesus, even in the act of dying, shows compassion for others; he tells Mary that she now has a male relative who will take care of her, or he tells John that he now has a mother whom he must care for. However one reads it, the point is that Jesus is focused *not* on his own suffering, but rather on caring concern for others.

■ What does it say to you that Jesus would exercise compassion for others at a moment such as this?

I’m thirsty (John 19:28)

In Psalm 69:21, the psalmist decries how he has been abused by his enemies and, as part of this, he points out that they fed him poison and gave him vinegar to drink when he cried out in thirst. Given that the story of Jesus’ death contains a reference to Jesus being offered vinegar, which was commonly given to those who were crucified, John adds the element that this was to fulfill scripture. Without quoting more of the psalm, this may well be John’s way of reminding his readers that the people doing this are clearly Jesus’ enemies and that they abused him until the very end. Jesus does not ignore them, but calls out anyway – again, implying that he is in absolute control.

It is completed (John 19:30)

In John’s gospel, Jesus is in control until the very end. He does not cry out in extreme pain, but rather declares – calmly and almost anticlimactically – that “it,” presumably his life and his work, is finished.

Other translations of the Greek verb *tetelestai* suggest a more formal sense of “it is accomplished,” which may be John’s way of having Jesus say, “I’ve done what I set out to do.” In other words, the people who killed Jesus do not have the last word, Jesus does. And, as shall be seen on Easter Sunday morning, God ultimately has the most final word of all.

■ Why do you think it’s important for John to show Jesus as being in control throughout the story of his arrest and death?

■ What does it say to you that Jesus is in control of the final outcome?