

FINDING HOPE  
*in the*  
LAST WORDS OF  
JESUS

GREG LAURIE



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## *Introduction*

# FAMOUS LAST WORDS

A number of years ago, I read a newspaper article about opera tenor Richard Versalle of the New York City Metropolitan Opera. During a performance, he climbed up on a ladder for a special scene and sang these words: “Too bad you can only live so long.” At that moment, Versalle fell from the ladder and died on the spot. He couldn’t have known that those would be his last words.

In every life there will come an end. We all will have a last meal. We all will take a last breath. Of course, we all will give a last statement. We may have the luxury of knowing what our last statement will be. Then again,

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we may not. No one knows with any certainty when the end will come. I think that we each will die pretty much as we have lived, and our last statements will tend to sum up what our lives were all about.

Such was the case with a very successful businessman who had opened up a chain of restaurants across the country. When his time to die had come, and as his family surrounded him on his deathbed and realized he had only seconds to live, he gave his last words. Everyone leaned forward to hear what he would say. They could barely hear as he spoke in but a whisper, "Slice the ham thin." That summed up his life, didn't it?

Lou Costello of Abbott and Costello had a strawberry ice cream soda as his last meal. The last words he was recorded to have said were, "That is the best ice cream soda I've ever tasted."

History tells of the famous eighteenth-century atheist Voltaire, who was one of the most aggressive antagonists of Christianity. He wrote many works in his attempts to undermine the Christian church. He once said of Jesus Christ, "Curse the wretch. In twenty years, Christianity will be no more. My single hand will destroy the edifice it took twelve apostles to rear."

But Voltaire was less than successful. In fact, a nurse who attended him on his deathbed remarked, “For all of the wealth in Europe, I would not watch another atheist die.” According to the physician who was sitting with Voltaire at the time of his death, Voltaire cried out in utter desperation with these words, “I am abandoned by God and man. I will give half of what I am worth if you will give me six months of life. Then I will go to hell and you will go with me, oh Christ, oh Jesus Christ.” Voltaire pretty much died as he had lived—miserably.

In contrast, consider the difference faith can make in someone’s deathbed experience. We think of the words of the first martyr of the Christian church, young Stephen. As he was being stoned and his life was draining away, he said, “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” (Acts 7:56).

The final words of D. L. Moody, the great evangelist, were: “I see earth receding and heaven is opening. God is calling me.”

As we’ve considered the last words spoken by some well-known figures in history, I want to look together at the last words of Jesus, the most famous last words of all time.

Of course, we know that these words were spoken as Jesus was crucified on the cross. Death by crucifixion was death by suffocation. Although the spikes driven through the hands and feet, the whipping, and all the rest of a crucifixion were incredibly painful, these were not really designed to bring a person to his immediate death. They were really designed to humiliate and torture the prisoner. Death actually came when the one being crucified could no longer breathe. While spikes had been pounded through Jesus' hands and feet, there was a small step at the base of the cross whereby our Lord could push Himself up to get a much-needed breath. While breathing was incredibly difficult, speaking was even more so.



## *Statement One*

# FATHER, FORGIVE THEM

**A**s Jesus hung on the cross, He gave seven profound statements. The first of these was, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34). The fact that Jesus’ first words from the cross consisted of a prayer does not surprise us. Jesus always had been a man of prayer. Even those who generally refuse to pray will usually do so in their hour of crisis.

But we would have expected Jesus to pray, “Father, help me!” Or, even His later statement being His first: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matt. 27:46). But knowing Jesus like we do,

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it was only fitting that He should say what He said in the very order He said it.

He did not pray in that dark hour for His loved ones first, or for His friends. He prayed for His enemies! He modeled exactly what He taught. What He'd spoken one sunny day on the Mount of Beatitudes, He modeled on this very death day at Mount Calvary the words of Matthew 5:44: "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you." Jesus had told Peter to forgive seventy times seven. Now He was doing just that. But when we pray under such circumstances, it is usually for ourselves: "Lord, help!"

When Samson came to his dying hour, he used his great strength to destroy his enemies. In contrast, Jesus showed meekness, which is power under constraint.

We also see from this example of Jesus that no one is beyond the reach of prayer. Jesus was actually praying for the very people who had whipped, beaten, and crucified Him. Talk about "loving your enemies"! Who could have seemed more hardhearted than these people, yet Jesus prayed for them. You may know someone that you cannot imagine being

a Christian. Follow the example of our Lord on the cross, and no matter how hopeless it may look, keep praying for that person!

But Jesus also recognized the enormity of their sin, even if they didn't. It was as if Jesus were saying, "Father, forgive them, for they need forgiveness so desperately. . . . Forgive them, for they have committed a sin that is wicked beyond all comprehension. . . . Forgive them, for they have committed a sin that is black beyond all their realization."

When Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, he spoke of the fact that some of those present were personally involved in the actual crucifixion of Jesus Christ!

"Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, *whom you crucified*, both Lord and Christ." Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"

Acts 2:36–37 (emphasis added)

They were "cut to the heart." This phrase appears only in the New Testament, and it means "to pierce"

or “to stab,” and thus depicts something sudden and unexpected. It suddenly dawned on them that they had been responsible for the very death of their long-awaited Messiah on the day Jesus died. Can you imagine being guilty of such a thing, to realize that you personally had pounded the nails in His hands?

The One for whom they had longed for centuries, the One who was the hope of their nation and personal lives, had finally come.

Instead of welcoming Him, however, they rejected Him and handed Him over to their bitter and hated enemies, the Romans, for execution. To make matters worse, they realized they personally had done it. Overwhelmed with guilt and remorse, they cried out, “What should we do?” So, we know that this prayer of Jesus was ultimately answered.

Maybe you’re praying for someone right now to see his or her need for God. You’ve brought that friend to church, but there’s no apparent interest in spiritual things. Keep praying!

Next to Jesus were two criminals being crucified. It may be that they were more than common thieves, possibly revolutionaries like Barabbas. If so, that means they were militant and dedicated to

overthrowing the power of Rome through violence and anarchy.

They were there for their personal crimes, but Jesus was there for the crimes of all humanity. They were there against their wills, but He was there because He willingly went. They could not have escaped, but He could have, with just one word to heaven. They were held to their crosses by nails, but Jesus was held to His cross by love! It's fascinating to see how these three men reacted as they looked death squarely in the face.

Initially, as Jesus was nailed to the cross, the two thieves momentarily forgot their personal pain and joined the chorus of the voices from the onlookers:

“He saved others,” they scoffed, “but he can’t save himself! So he is the king of Israel, is he? Let him come down from the cross, and we will believe in him! He trusted God—let God show his approval by delivering him! For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”

Matthew 27:42–43 NLT

How this mockery and unbelief must have pained the tender heart of Jesus. Even here at the cross,

they persisted. He was atoning for the very people who were spewing this venom.

Matthew's gospel tells us that both thieves joined the crowd in mockery, yet Luke tells us that one of them joined in but was rebuked by the other (see Luke 23:40). Was it a contradiction? No, it was a conversion. Something significant happened to change the heart of one of these thieves, bringing him to his spiritual senses. This one thief had watched with amazement as Jesus suffered the same crucifixion as he and the other, yet without any complaint, angry protest, or cursing. Then He breathed those unbelievable, unexpected, incomprehensible words: "Father, forgive them. . . ."

These words reverberated through the thief's hardened heart. His rebellion, bitterness, and anger that no doubt had driven him all these years dissolved. His heart melted.