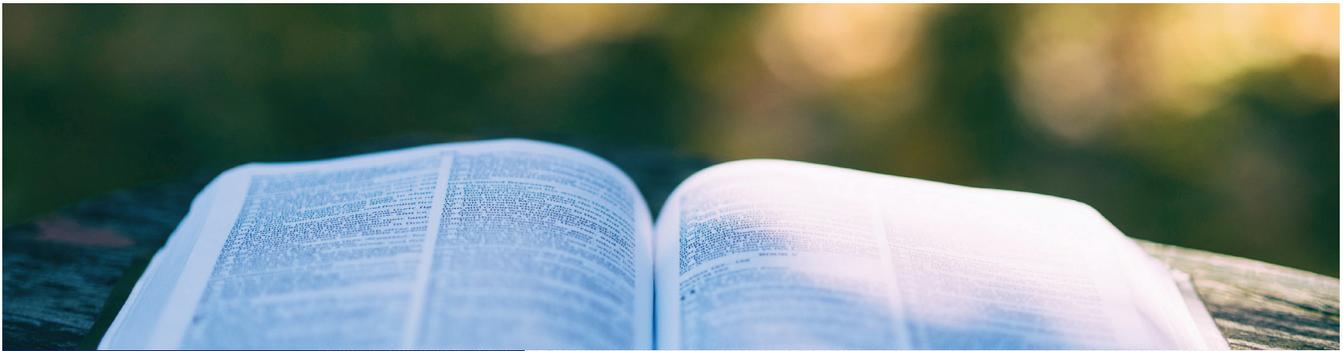


THE
LAST
WORDS
of CHRIST

BY J. OSWALD SANDERS

Bestselling author of *Spiritual Leadership*
(over 1 million copies sold)



THE *LAST WORDS* of CHRIST

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EDITORS NOTE //

The *LAST WORDS* of Jesus have been studied and written on by countless Christian teachers and leaders throughout the course of history. They are simple words, yet they are profound words. They are timeless words, spoken by the timeless Lord. Therefore, any exploration of these words that stands the test of time is worthy of our attention. That is why we commend to you these words of J. Oswald Sanders.

Sanders, a 20th-century lawyer who became a missionary statesman, was a man who encountered Christ in a powerful way and who appreciated Christ's works and words as a perfect demonstration of God's never-failing love for humanity. What follows is Sanders' devotional exploration of the final utterance of Christ just before His death on the cross. It is for the devoted believer who longs to know and love more deeply the crucified and risen Savior. It is for the religious seeker who wants to know more about the Man of Nazareth, for the final sayings of Jesus reflect powerfully who He is and what He accomplished in His earthly ministry. And it is for the skeptic, as it is a call to recognize Jesus for who He truly is—the only Redeemer of mankind. Our prayer is that as a result of reading Sanders' words, you are drawn closer to Christ, who died so that you may truly live.



THE *LAST WORDS* of CHRIST

by J. Oswald Sanders

CHRIST'S WORDS *of* COMFORT //

LAST WORDS are always impressive, especially when they come from the lips of one dearly loved. The atmosphere of the approaching end charges them with added solemnity and meaning. In the light of eternity, the trivial and nonessential are usually abandoned. It is recorded that when Lord William Russell mounted the scaffold, he took his watch from his pocket and gave it to Dr. Burnett with the remark, *“I have no further use for this. My thoughts are in eternity.”*

Because they were Christ's last words, and spoken under such tragic circumstances, the seven sayings of our Lord from the pulpit of the cross are of special significance. In them He laid bare His inmost soul, and in them He exemplified the spiritual principles He had been teaching. They are a luminous interpretation of His sufferings.

It is significant that He spoke seven times from the cross—a complete interpretation of the stupendous event that was being enacted. Each of these sayings is an ocean of truth compressed into a drop of speech and warrants close and reverent study. It is to be expected that utterances on a cross would be staccato, and yet that monstrous moment was transformed into the most eloquent pulpit of the ages.

In this chapter we shall consider the first through the third of the last words of Christ; in the next chapter we shall consider the fourth through the seventh words.

FORGIVENESS //

“When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, ‘*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*’” (Luke 23:33–34 NIV).

“*Forgive them.*” To whom did our Lord intend His prayer to apply? There are varying views. One scholar applies it to the Romans, another to the Jews, another to both Jews and Gentiles, and still another scholar to all mankind. Is it too much to think that His petition included not only those around the cross, but also the world of sinful men? Are not we all implicated in the death of Christ? Was it not the sin of the world that nailed Him to the cross? At the very moment of His prayer, He was dying that the sins of all men might be cleansed.

He therefore cried out that their action was due to ignorance—not of the **FACT** of their crime, but of **ITS ENORMITY**.

“*For they do not know what they are doing.*” It seems as though He was trying to find some extenuating circumstance that might lessen their guilt. His sense of justice was not held back by His agony, and He assigned degrees of guilt. This plea limits His “forgive them,” so that Judas and Pilate and some of the religious leaders are excluded from the benefits of His intercession. Unlike the majority, they had not acted in ignorance. Judas and Pilate knew what they were doing. They had both weighed Jesus’ claims and had acted deliberately. But to the minds of many of the Jews, blinded by hatred, Jesus was no more than a blasphemous impostor. He therefore cried out that their action was due to ignorance—not of the *fact* of their crime, but of *its enormity*.

In keeping with our Lord’s plea, Peter later said to his own kinsmen, “I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders” (Acts 3:17). Paul too conceded that if “they had [understood it],

they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2:8). But their ignorance did not excuse their guilt, or Christ would not have needed to pray, “Forgive them.” Even those who did not know needed forgiveness. Ignorance may mitigate the criminality of sin, but it never exonerates. Their ignorance did not make their sin excusable, but it meant that they themselves were forgivable.

“We must beware of supposing,” wrote Bishop J. C. Ryle, “that ignorance is not blameworthy, and that ignorant persons *deserve* to be forgiven for their sins. At this rate ignorance would be a desirable thing. All spiritual ignorance is more or less culpable. It is part of man’s sin that he does not know better than he does. On the other hand we cannot fail to observe in Scripture that sins of ignorance are less sinful before God than sins of knowledge, and that no case is so apparently hopeless as that of the man who sins willfully against the light.”

The sacrificial system of the Old Testament and the New Testament commentary on it make clear that in God’s sight atonement is just as necessary for sins of ignorance as for sins of willfulness. God never scales down His demands to the level of our ignorance. In grace, He does have compassion on the ignorant, as Paul himself testified: “I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief” (1 Tim. 1:13).

THE EXAMPLE. It is instructive to note the uniqueness of our Lord here as everywhere else. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, noble though he was, falls far below the standard of his martyr-Lord. Stephen thought first of himself and only then of his enemies. “While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them’” (Acts 7:59–60).

ASSURANCE //

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

Three men were hanging upon three crosses. All three appeared to be criminals, for around the neck of each hung a board on which was written a record of their crimes. Two of them were patriots, doubtless associates of Barabbas in his ill-starred insurrection. In order to achieve their ends, they had resorted to robbery and even to murder.

And the One on the center cross—what was His crime? Surely something revolting for Him to be found in such company. Yet the record of His life is strangely out of keeping with such a character: “He went around doing good” (Acts 10:38). “All . . . were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips” (Luke 4:22).

One of the most incredible facts of the whole event is that those seasoned criminals became anxious for their reputations through being crucified in His company! Lest they be credited with being His friends or associates, they joined company with the passersby, the chief priests, scribes, and elders. As they taunted and mocked Him, the thieves “cast the same in his teeth” (Matt. 27:44 KJV). Hurling their abuse at a fellow sufferer when they were so near their own end indicated the depths of their depravity. Their animosity toward One who had done them no ill was a revealing demonstration of the enmity toward God of the carnal mind (see Rom. 8:7).

Then a sudden change came over one of the thieves. Had he been a spectator of what transpired in Jesus’ trial before Pilate? Had he been so impressed by the contrast between his companion and Christ that he could explain it only on the basis of deity? Had the Holy Spirit in response to his penitence revealed our Lord’s true identity to him?

The Scripture does not say, but the suppositions may be true. In any case, he turned on his brother robber: “Don’t you fear God, . . . since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” Then, turning to Jesus, he pleaded, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:40–42 NIV).

If the first word from the cross was the intercession of our Lord as High Priest, praying for the forgiveness of those who crucified Him; this second, in response to the thief at His side, was His promise as King of Glory: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

It should be noted that Jesus did not answer the exact petition of the thief. He did something better. He granted the desire of his heart. The thief knew little that his request, as he had worded it, postponed the desired boon for the two millennia or more that would elapse before Christ came into His kingdom.

Among others, four comforting truths emerge from this word from the cross.

The survival of the soul after the death of the body. One writer has pointed out that each of the seven sayings from the cross is the deathblow of an error. This word refutes the dogma of soul-sleep. Death is no sleep of the soul. Death is not the end of life but the gateway to new life. It also deals a deathblow to the doctrine of purgatory. If ever a man needed the cleansing of the purgatorial flame, it was this man.

The separate existence of soul and body. “With me.” The body of the thief was not in the tomb with that of Christ, but his soul was in conscious presence with Him in the place of departed spirits. This was Paul’s longing. “I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far” (Phil. 1:23, emphasis added). What a joyous anticipation—not unconscious sleep, but conscious union. If the dead are unconscious, this assurance would afford little comfort.

THE WORD *of* ASSURANCE

The sudden entry of the redeemed into the bliss of eternity. “Today.” Anderson Berry points out a correspondence between the thief’s request and Christ’s response. The form of the response appears to be designed to match in its order of thought the robber’s petition.

And he said to Jesus
And Jesus said to him

Lord
Verily I say unto thee

Remember me
Shalt thou be with me

When thou comest
Today

Into Thy Kingdom
In Paradise

—*Author Unknown*

Our Lord can never
resist the *PLEA* of
a penitent sinner.

By this arrangement of the words, it is seen that “today” is the emphatic word. “Absent from the body, present with the Lord.” Not purgatory but paradise.

The Savior’s prompt response to penitence. Our Lord can never resist the plea of a penitent sinner. To the taunts and jeers of the mob He gave no answer, but the plea of the repentant thief drew an immediate response.

The thief asked only a place in Christ’s memory. He was granted a place in His kingdom.

DEVOTION //

“When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son,’ and to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ From that time on, this disciple took her into his home” (John 19:26–27).

Mother-love illustrated. “Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother” (John 19:25). Where else would one expect to find such a mother? It was her very own Son who was suffering. The outstretched arms and nail-torn hands once had clung around her neck. The head now tortured with a crown of thorns was once pillowed on her breast. The mouth on which she had once lavished her kisses of love was now parched and swollen. Though powerless to help, she could at least be beside Him in loyalty and love.

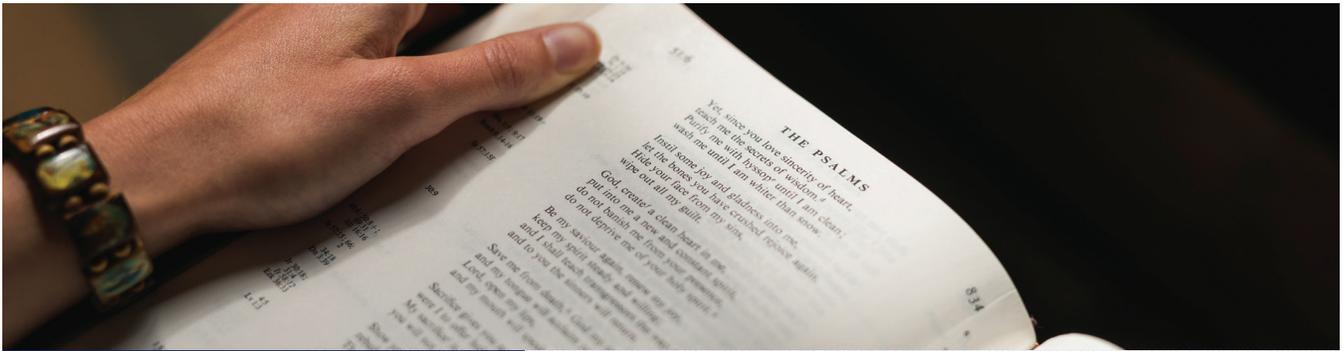
Sympathetically she entered into all His sufferings. The spear would pierce her heart as it rent His flesh. With joy she had followed His career, had feared and prayed for Him, had rejoiced in His successes and wept over His disappointments. But now He was dying as a criminal, not as a hero! What an end to the life of such a Son! Lest she add to His sufferings, she did not give way to uncontrolled weeping but repressed her grief as the sword pierced her soul. She did not faint or swoon; she “stood.” He had enough suffering of His own without her adding to His overflowing cup of sorrow.

Filial devotion exemplified. “When Jesus saw his mother there, ... he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’” Our Lord’s use of the word woman implied no disrespect. It is rather the equivalent of our *lady*. One suggestion concerning its use is that Jesus did not call her “mother,” lest identification with Him should expose her to insult, a suggestion in keeping with His innate courtesy and considerateness.

There is a yet deeper significance in Jesus' refusal to use the word mother, the word above all others she would be longing to hear once again from His lips. Jesus was breaking to her the painful truth that henceforth the special relationship between them no longer obtained. From that moment she could be to Him no more than any other woman. He must have no rival in His mediatorial ministry. Was this the sharpest shaft that pierced her heart? But after Pentecost she was to have sweet compensation when she discovered that she had been led from the natural union with Jesus to the mystical union *with Christ*.

In every relationship of life, Jesus was the pattern Man. As child and as man, He always honored His father and mother. His last thought was to make suitable provision for the one from whom He had derived His human nature. Her husband was dead. He could no longer make provision for her Himself. His brothers were evidently still unbelieving. He had nothing to give her. Mary would find a congenial home with the disciple who dearly loved Him. These two, of similar temperament and united by a common love, would be able to live over again together the hallowed days of His companionship and derive comfort from their recollection.

This word from the cross marks the close of the human aspect of His work. He had prayed for His enemies. He had given assurance and comfort to the penitent thief. He had made loving provision for the care of His mother. Soon the veil of darkness would fall as He entered upon the last, the most costly phase of His atoning work



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CHRIST'S WORDS of CONSUMMATION //

THE FIRST THREE WORDS from the cross were addressed to men. Now Jesus addresses Himself to God. For the previous three hours His Father had shrouded the sun in kindly darkness. His body had been exposed to the burning rays of the pitiless Eastern sun. During the three hours of darkness His soul had been exposed to the merciless assaults of the powers of evil. Worse, infinitely worse than that, He had for the first time experienced the averted face of His Father. At the end of the sixth hour, the moment when He reached the very nadir of His misery, He broke the silence with a shuddering cry of desolation.

DERELICTION //

“Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ (which means ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’)” (Matt. 27:46).

“*My God, my God.*” G. Campbell Morgan wrote, “There is no experience of life through which men pass so terrible as that of silence and mystery, the hours of isolation and sorrow when there is no voice, no vision, no sympathy, no promise, no hope, no explanation; the hours in which the soul asks, why? There is no agony for the human soul like that of silence... When I am asked for a theory of the atonement, I reply that in the midst of the mighty movement the Lord Himself said, ‘why?’ and if He asked that question, I dare not imagine that I can ever explain the deep central verities of His mystery of pain.”

It was no new experience for the Lord to find Himself forsaken. His own brothers neither believed in Him nor followed Him. His fellow citizens in Nazareth had tried to kill Him. The nation to which He came would not receive Him. Many of His disciples went back and no longer walked with Him. Judas betrayed Him. Peter denied Him. “Then *everyone* deserted him and fled” (Mark 14:50 emphasis added).

But in this cry, it is as though He was saying, “I can understand my kinsmen and fellow citizens and my nation forsaking Me, for darkness has no fellowship with light. I can even understand My own disciples, because of the weakness of the flesh, forsaking Me. But this is My agonizing problem, ‘Why did *You* forsake Me?’”

Up till this moment, when He was forsaken by men, He had been able to turn to His Father, but *now* even that refuge is denied Him, and He is absolutely *alone*. Who can plumb the depths of that anguish?

THE WORD *of* DERELICTION

“*Forsaken me.*” When an expression is sought to describe a scene of utmost desolation, it is termed “God-forsaken.”

The word means the forsaking of someone in a state of defeat or helplessness, in the midst of hostile circumstances. Who can assess the content of that word when applied to our Lord?

A child forsaken by its parents, a friend forsaken by a friend in the hour of need—those are poignant enough sorrows. But a man forsaken by his God! And what shall we say of the sinless Son of Man when He was forsaken by the God with whom He had enjoyed eternal fellowship?

For the first time, an eternity of communion had been broken. The wrath of hell had already broken upon His soul in wave upon wave, but now it is the wrath of heaven! The psalmist claimed, “I have never seen the righteous forsaken” (Ps. 37:25), but the only One who was truly righteous is now forsaken. Ineffable love made Him willing to endure even this desolation of soul for our salvation.

Personal grief brought this personal cry from Him. There would be no mystery in God’s forsaking us, for we would be receiving only “the due reward of our deeds” (Luke 23:41 KJV). But why should God forsake His Son who “knew no sin,” “did no sin,” “in whom was no sin,” the Son in whom He testified that He found perfect delight? There is only one explanation. He was taking my place—and yours. He was being forsaken that we might be forgiven.

It was **NO NEW**
experience for the Lord to
find Himself forsaken.

AGONY //

“Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst” (John 19:28 KJV).

An example of prophecy fulfilled. Now, even in the hour of extreme agony, His mind was free to travel the well-trodden paths of sacred Scripture. He had prayed for the pardon of His enemies. He had made provision for His mother’s future. And now, as He reviewed the crowded events of the past few hours and the thirty years that had preceded them, He had the assurance that the task He had come to do was accomplished. Every prediction of Scripture concerning the Messiah had been fulfilled in Him—except one.

Up until now He had accepted His sufferings with noble silence. But in the prophetic word of the psalmist, He saw an indication of His Father’s will. Had not the psalmist written, “They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst” (Ps. 69:21 NIV)? Then it would not be contrary to His Father’s will if He gave vocal expression to His physical agony. Perhaps, even among the callous soldiers at the foot of His cross, there might be one who would alleviate this burning thirst.

When hungry in the wilderness, He had resisted the seduction of the devil and had refused to perform a miracle for His own benefit, for He had no indication of His Father’s will. But now He was free to open His parched lips and cry, “I thirst!” Thus the prophecy was fulfilled.

An exhibition of self-control. Only once did a cry of pain come from Him during the long, excruciating ordeal, and then it required the recognition of His Father’s expressed will to open His mouth. No plea for sympathy or word of complaint crossed His lips. He lost Himself in care for others and in communion with His Father.

Suffering does not always sanctify us. It sours some people's tempers and makes them selfish and demanding. This is the sin of some invalids—to become absorbed in their own miseries and to make all about them the slaves of their whims. But many triumph nobly over their temptations and follow the example of the suffering Savior.

Did Christ not thirst to be thirsted after? He still thirsts for the fellowship and devotion of those for whom He thirsted on the cross. His was a thirst that could satisfy the thirst of the whole world.

Suffering does not always

SANCTIFY us.

“I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,” He said to His surprised listeners. “Lord, when did we see you ... thirsty and give you something to drink?” they replied in amazement. “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:35, 37, 40).

TRIUMPH //

“When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished” (John 19:30 KJV).

Suffering was ended. Some have read Christ’s “It is finished” as a cry of despair, “It is all up! I have tried and failed!” But that is exactly the reverse of its meaning. True, there was a sigh of relief in that the anxiety of the cross was now over and that His absence from His heavenly home was now at an end. He knew that never again would He experience the turning away of His Father and that the burden of a world’s sin had been removed. There was no note of disappointment or despair in this cry.

To Him it had been a foregone conclusion that He must suffer and that He would bear the accumulated guilt and sin of a lost world. He would experience the loneliness and rejection, the sneering and scoffing, the physical agony and mental anguish which were part of His taking on our humanity and our guilt. The cup of suffering was indeed full for Him, and as Maclaren aptly puts it, “Having drained the cup, He held it up inverted when He said ‘It is finished!’ and not a drop trickled down the edge. He drank it all that we might never need to drink it.”

The Father’s will was fulfilled. Of all mankind, Jesus alone at the close of life could say, “It is finished!” Early in His ministry He had claimed, “My food... is to do the will of him who sent me *and to finish his work*” (John 4:34, emphasis added). At the close of His ministry, He claimed, “*I have finished the work* which thou gavest me to do” (John 17:4 KJV, emphasis added). He alone could review His whole life with approval, aware that in every detail His Father’s will had been faithfully carried out. He had done what the first

The victim on the cross
became the victor
THROUGH the cross.

Adam had failed to do—He had kept the law of God perfectly and so obtained a righteousness that is now available for all who believe in Him.

Compare our Lord's triumphant words with the great Cecil Rhodes's cry of frustration as he lay dying: "So much to do, so little done." Christ entertained no regrets, for no ground for regret existed.

Satan was defeated. The continued conflict between God and Satan forms the unifying theme of the Scriptures. From the very hour of man's Fall in Eden, the adversary of God and man channeled all his hellish ingenuity to frustrate God's purpose of grace for mankind.

His slimy trail may be traced throughout the Old Testament, but with the advent of Christ, his assaults became more direct and open. On the cross he launched his final attack against the seed of the woman who was to deal him his deathblow (see Gen. 3:15), and at Christ's death it looked as though he had been the victor. But it only seemed so. The Resurrection demonstrated that Christ was victor.

The moment of Satan's triumph was the moment of his defeat. The victim on the cross became the victor through the cross. The joy set before Him (Heb. 12:2) was already in sight, and now He could gladly summon His servant death and dismiss His spirit.

CONFIDENCE //

With awe and reverence we now approach the watershed of the final struggle. The eternal Son of God dismisses His spirit. “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 NIV). The body that had housed the Christ was about to be laid in Joseph’s tomb, but before He took leave of the earth, Jesus uttered His last word from the cross, and not in subdued tones but with a loud, triumphant voice.

The habits of a lifetime are not easily shaken off. The Master was a man of prayer and a man of the Book. How natural that His last words should blend both characteristics, for this word is at once a prayer and a quotation from the Old Testament: “Into your hands I commit my spirit” (Ps. 31:5). He could not have spoken more appropriately in the moment of His death. He ended His ministry as He began it—with a quotation from Scripture on His lips.

His death was voluntary. In Matthew’s account of the crucifixion (27:50), it is stated that He dismissed His spirit. Although from one point of view it is true that His adversaries *did* take His life from Him, it was only by His permission. Before allowing His tormentors to arrest Him, Jesus demonstrated His divine power by causing them to fall backward. But having done this He steadfastly refused to exercise this power to deliver Himself from death. He *chose* death on the cross. He could have saved Himself, but for our sakes He refused to do so.

The bitterest ingredient in the cup of His suffering had been the midnight gloom that enveloped not only His body but also His soul, when His Father made the iniquity of us all to be carried by Him (see Isa. 53:6). Three hours of torture at the hands of His own creatures were succeeded by the infinitely darker three hours into which an eternity of suffering was compressed.

But now He was in the light again. In the midst of His awful abandonment there came the renewed realization of His complete union with His Father. “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). He does not now cry, “My God, My God!” but, “Father.” The communion He had enjoyed from eternity was restored, never again to be interrupted. Small wonder that He cried with a loud and triumphant voice.

Some may question whether Christians sufficiently realize that our Lord’s life on earth was a life of moment-by-moment faith and trust in His Father. John’s gospel especially reveals the extent of His dependence on His Father. Such characteristic statements as “By myself I can do nothing” (John 5:30) and “The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority” (John 14:10) reveal the important part trust played in His relationship with His Father.

He shows His disciples in every age how to handle themselves in the hour of death—not yielding to fear, but maintaining an attitude of calm, assured **CONFIDENCE.**

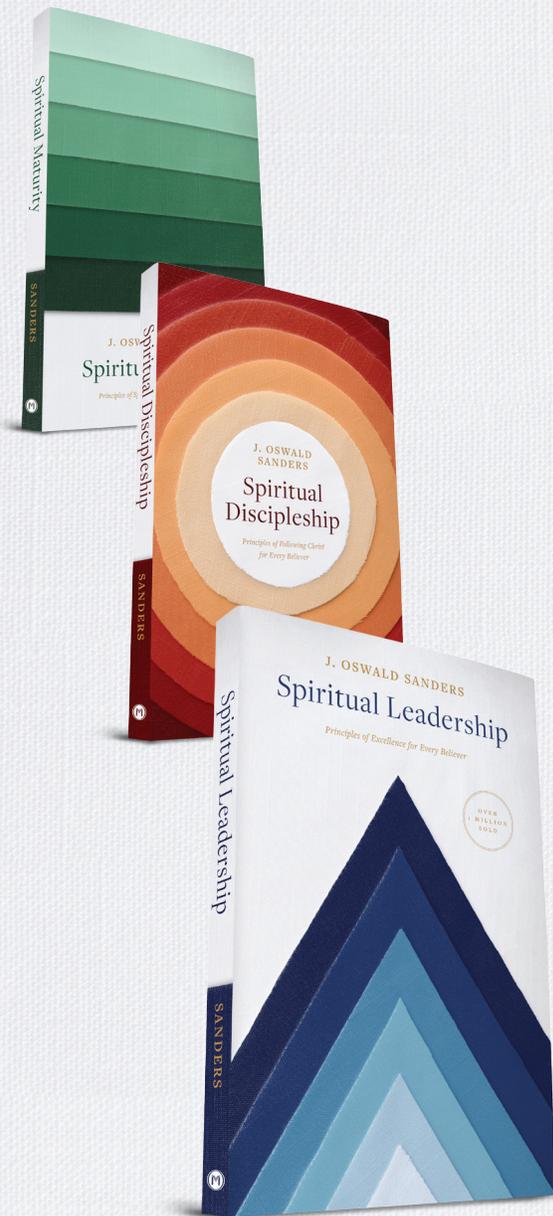
Did He trust Him fully in the hour of death? Has His trust been impaired by the awful experience of the cross? Here as at all times He is our example. He shows His disciples in every age how to handle themselves in the hour of death—not yielding to fear, but maintaining an attitude of calm, assured confidence.

The secret of our security. Our Lord obviously entertained no thought that death ended existence. He had assured the penitent thief of a place with Him in paradise. Now He speaks as though He was making a deposit in a safe place, to which, after the crisis of death was over, He would come and recover it.

Who would be afraid of death when it means that our spirits are in His hands? How safe and strong they are! “My Father, who has given them [his sheep] to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch

them out of my Father's hand" (John 10:29). When we are called upon to face that last enemy, death, let us look on it in the same way as our Lord.

As our Lord closed His eyes in death, His spirit rested in His Father's hands as restfully as a baby on its mother's breast. His final act of self-committal was a simple and genuine act of faith. Nothing more remained to be done. It was completed perfectly according to the divine plan, so by an act of His will He dismissed His spirit. Redemption was completed, awaiting only the Resurrection as God's seal of final acceptance of His Son's sacrifice.



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