

FATHER INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT

Luke 23:46

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Who can remember the bedtime prayer they were taught as a child? One version starts "Lord before I rest I pray..." A Dutch version starts "Ik ga slaapen, ik ben moe..." (Similar Afrikaans?) Who was taught the prayer "Now I lay me down to sleep I pray the Lord my soul to keep..."? In that prayer we entrust our soul to the Lord. Now, note, we are not saying that we are dying and our soul goes to heaven. It's about life; about trusting God to watch over us as we sleep, to protect us until morning when we get up again and enjoy a new day. Now you may wonder where I am going with this. It's Easter Sunday morning and I am starting out talking about bedtime prayers for children. How come? Well, because in many ways Jesus' last saying on the cross, his seventh, is a bedtime prayer? Did you know that? The last words Jesus spoke, just before he died were: "*Father into your hands I commit my spirit.*" Sometimes preachers, in wanting to expound on these words, paint the picture of a person on a death bed surrounded by his family. And creating a sombre mood, it is explained that Jesus says his last word, his farewell speech before he dies. Now if a person has a chance to speak before he dies, he would try and make it significant, an ultimate word for his family. But this is not the case with Jesus here in our text. What Jesus says is the very ordinary, every day stuff of some one who is going on in life.

Yes, Jesus is about to die. But with the words of our text we see that for him it is not the end. Death is the next milestone in his saving work. Christ is not leaving forever. His deepest suffering is over and his greatest work is just begun. A couple of days ago, at Good Friday, we remembered Jesus' horrendous experience on the

cross, especially the three hours when he experienced God's total rejection in hell. There Jesus had carried the guilt of sin and felt its awful punishment. There he had thirsted for the living God. He did not reject God but hung onto his Lord as he cried out "*My God...*" He had come out of those three hours of living hell thirsty but jubilant. His conscious suffering was over and he had cried out: "*It is finished!*" Now the sun was shining again; it broke through the darkness. And Jesus had one last thing to do. He had to offer his life. So he '*commits*' his '*spirit*' to the Lord. He sets it before God. We notice that he gives his life as a gift. His life does not ebb away while Jesus is unconscious. Our text tells us that "*Jesus called out with a loud voice 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. When he had said this, he breathed his last'.*" In Matthew 27:50 we read "*And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.*" Jesus' death was not an accident, it was an appointment. He delivered up his spirit to the father because his mission had been completed. But we need to understand that his death is not of the greatest importance. It's part of the curse for sin. But the greatest of his suffering was hell. That being dealt with, "*It's finished*", as Jesus said he can now move on. It is in that vein that we see these last words of Jesus on the cross. And we see that it's not the final word of one dying, but the word of one in the midst of life; ongoing life! It reminds us of Jesus' words in John 10:17-18 where Jesus said "*The reason the father loves me is that I lay down my life- only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay down my life of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again*".

To understand Jesus' words in our text, we need to note that they are a quote from Psalm 31. We have seen how everything about the death of Jesus was exactly according to his father's plans. His death by crucifixion fulfilled numerous Old Testament prophecies.

So when Jesus utters his last cry from the cross we shouldn't be surprised that his words quote another scripture passage. Now, this psalm of David is about David being in the midst of life. He is rejoicing in his day of deliverance. (Psalm 31:4,5,7,8) *"Free me from the trap that is set for me/ for you are my refuge/ Into your hands I commit my spirit/ redeem me, O Lord, the God of truth.../ I will be glad and rejoice in your love/ for you saw my affliction and knew the anguish of my soul/ You have not handed me over to the enemy/ but have set my feet in a spacious place."* You can sense there David's struggle but also his ultimate triumph over his enemies. In Jewish rabbinical literature verse 5 was prescribed as a short evening prayer. The pupils in the Jewish schools prayed it before going to bed: *"O Lord, into your hands I commit my spirit..."* In other words, as we might say: "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep." It was also advised that every Israelite use the verse as one of the evening petitions. So it is likely that Jesus, too, prayed the prayer, as well as his disciples on a regular basis. So it was the common evening prayer of those who expect to go on in life, to be up for the new day in the morning. Now, as we said, people may want to eulogize and say something grand for their last words before they die. Jesus could have quoted a word from the grand prophecy of Isaiah; or a word from a messianic psalm extolling his kingship. But, instead, he quotes a very common saying from an ordinary psalm; the evening prayer of the little children of Israel. Why? What is he saying by doing this?

Well, we must let David, the psalmist, speak first. Jesus in quoting the psalm would not mean anything different to David, only he would apply it more deeply. We notice that David is not resigning himself to death. He is in the midst of life and petitions God to keep his life. David is struggling because of the enemies that surround him. But he knows God will protect him. He knows that he will

enjoy the favour of God, and so he sings a hymn of life. He says: "Into your hands I commit my spirit". Let's focus on those two words: 'hands' & 'commit'. Repeatedly throughout the Bible, hands are used as a symbol of power, especially when speaking of God. Obviously God is spirit and so doesn't have a physical body with physical hands, but when the writers of the Bible wanted to describe the power of God they frequently wrote about the hands of God. Over 20 times in the scriptures God's power is described in terms of his '*mighty hand*.'" Throughout the Psalms God's creation is referred to as the work of his hands. In God's hands are all things. That which is in God's hands no one can touch or harm. David knows that he is surrounded by enemies. So he entrusts his life into God's care. The word '*commit*' means to put yourself completely into the care or protection of some one else. It means to 'give over' and 'trust'. The term literally means 'to make a deposit' or to 'entrust something of great value to some one for safe keeping'. It's like making deposits in a savings account. In doing so you entrust your assets to the bank, you trust them to keep it safe, let the interest accumulate and its value increase. That's what David did, and what Jesus did. David fully trusted God. With God to deal with his enemies, he knew he could look forward to more life! David was like the child who prays: "I pray the Lord my soul to keep..." The child can peacefully go to sleep because she trusts God will guard her life in the night. So Jesus, too, he is about to give his life, but he knows it is not the end. His father will watch over him. Christ's enemies may think that they have determined the outcome of Jesus' life. They may mock and sneer. But Jesus knows that God determines all things. The future is in his fatherly hands. The powerful hands of wicked men had beaten him and nailed him to the cross. But when he died Jesus committed His spirit to a much greater power; the hands of God. Because it was only in God's hands that a resurrection could take place. Paul described that

awesome power in his letter to the Ephesians "(Ephesians 1:18-21) *"I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come."*

Jesus prays the child's prayer. No longer is there the anguished cry of one who is separated from God. That is finished. Now Jesus and His Father are at one again. So when Jesus quotes the Psalm he adds the word "*Father*", "*Father, into your hands...*" As a child who is right again with father, Jesus peacefully says his evening prayer. He falls asleep till the new day. Jesus is not emphasising his death, but proclaims his onward march to life. Jesus is confident, not in himself, but because he trusts God. He shows himself to be a needy one; a child trusting Dad. A confidence proved true when God, on the day we celebrate today, Easter, raised him from the dead.

When you think about it, we would have to say that the cross was a strange place to say "Good night, Lord." Yet through Christ's death on the cross and his resurrection we Christians can see death in a very different light. Jesus as our saviour and teacher shows us how to see death and how to die. We do not fear death as the final word to our living. Ever since Jesus' death, the Christian's death has been seen differently. The Bible in the book of Acts speaks of believers "*falling asleep*". We notice in Acts 7:60 that as Stephen was stoned he spoke his last. We read: "*When he had said this he*

fell asleep.” Elsewhere the New Testament speaks of those who *“have fallen asleep in the Lord”*. This is not just a euphemism. It tells us something about the nature of death. It is not the end. For the Christian, as for Jesus, life goes on. We are not annihilated. Our spirits go to God the Father. Our lives are committed into God’s hands; into the hands of him who is faithful in all he says; who has promised eternal life on the new earth. Jesus by quoting a very common children’s bedtime prayer shows his confidence in God. He shows the changed nature of death. It is now a milestone passed along in the journey of eternal life with God. And by saying this common, very ordinary word as his final word on the cross it implies that we very ordinary people can also repeat these same words with the same trust.

The story is told of a little boy who needed serious surgery. His doctor, who was fond of the boy, needed to give him a needle to prepare him for the operation. He explained to the boy that he would feel a sharp prick and then would be going to sleep. The little boy said “Oh, if I am going to sleep I must first pray”. So he wriggled off the operating table and knelt down. “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” With quiet and complete trust in God he calmly laid down ready for the needle. The operation did not go well. The little boy never woke up. He really “fell asleep”. That night the doctor, deeply moved by the faith of the boy, also knelt and prayed: “God into your hands I commit my life.” May we all trust like that child with his bedtime prayer. May we all trust as Jesus did, expressed in his seventh word on the cross. Jesus was humble and obedient, trusting in his father. And by his obedience the way has been opened to God. Now that forgiveness and eternal life are ours through faith we can do nothing less than imitate Jesus- being humble and obedient,

trusting deeply in the Father. For Jesus in his seventh saying on the cross teaches us that the Father's hands are trustworthy. Jesus had no problem putting his spirit into his father's hands because he knew there were no better hands than his father's and he knew he could totally trust his father. Like a child falling asleep in his father's arms, there was total trust. We need to know that we can entrust our spirit, we can entrust every part of our lives into God's hands because no one is more trustworthy. Jesus' trust was shown to be valid when on Easter Sunday morning, God, in his awesome power, raised up Jesus from the dead. It is because of this astonishing act that we can look forward to life eternal. Each time we commit a loved one who has died to their final resting place we pray with absolute assurance: "Almighty God, into your hands we commend your servant, in the sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Have you committed your life into the hands of God? Then you are in safe hands!