

22 “Last words.”

Seven sayings
c from the heart
of Christ on—
the cross.

¹ Robert J. Nash

"I found *Last Words* by Rob Nash to be full of gospel encouragement. When the world is so full of distractions to the soul and spiritual life, it is refreshing to read and think about what God accomplished on behalf of his people through the death of his Son, Jesus Christ. *Last Words* makes a great devotional tool as it provides reasons to give thanks and praise to God on almost every page."

Norm Wakefield, President of Elijah Ministries

"Pastor Rob Nash offers helpful insights into the background and context of Jesus's final words. *Last Words* is a spiritually refreshing treatise for anyone who desires to reflect more deeply on Christ's experience on the cross."

Brian Weber, Executive Minister of Converge MidAtlantic

"Other than the Bible itself, *Last Words* is the most insightful, interesting, compelling, and profound book I've ever read about the cross. As I pondered this in-depth exploration of the last statements of Christ, my mind was challenged, my heart was warmed, and my faith was strengthened. Rob Nash has written a biblically precise masterpiece—one that not only brings forth a more thoughtful, thorough understanding of the redemptive work of Jesus, but also encourages God's pattern for Christian living."

Ginger Hubbard, Best-selling author of *Don't Make Me Count to Three* and *I Can't Believe You Just Said That!*

"I find *Last Words* an excellent resource for every serious student of Scripture desiring to wrestle with the last words of our Savior. The book is filled with rich truths, deep meditations, and strong practical applications. Be prepared to think deeply and be stretched personally."

Gary Rohrmayer, President of Converge MidAmerica

“Rob Nash explains that the brief and sometimes cryptic final words of our Lord on the cross unpack profound realities in heaven and on earth. This warm devotional work will take you beyond the surface to explore the depths of the gospel. As you read it, your passion for God will be inflamed, your gratitude deepened, and your worship of our great God and Savior enriched, all to the glory of God.”

Craig Parro, President of Leadership Resources

“This book reads with the immediacy and richness of a film. The seven phrases Jesus gasps out on the cross serve as touch points for Nash to explore layered flashbacks to Old Testament rituals, Hebrew prophecies, and the Gospel stories. But the real beauty of Nash’s method is this: he personalizes each phrase right down into the nitty-gritty of the reader’s present life. While this book is short enough to read in a single sitting as I did, it is full enough to provide seven weekly meditative chapters leading up to Easter, which is how I intend to read it next!”

J. A. Myhre, Author of The Rwendigo Tales series; physician serving with Serge in East Africa

“We are fascinated by the last words a person speaks. We ponder them, even dissect them, looking for meaning. Since the church’s earliest days, Christians have pondered the last words the greatest Man ever spoke as a mortal. Here Rob Nash joins this ancient succession of meditation, dissecting the dying words of the divine Son. And he shows us that in them is a world of profoundly personal meaning, for Jesus meant them for each of us.”

Jon Bloom, Author; board chair and cofounder of Desiring God Ministries

“Robert J. Nash’s exposition of the last words of Jesus is faithfully and vividly presented, drawing from the other passages of Scripture in order to show their theological implications. These gospel-saturated truths are then helpfully applied to the reader, who is encouraged not only to apply the truth personally but also to share it with others. I heartily recommend this book.”

Jim Newheiser, Director of the Christian Counseling Program and Associate Professor of Practical Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC

“I truly enjoyed this fresh look into the last words of Jesus. When you study them deeply, you will see what the Roman soldier who stood at the foot of the cross saw: surely, Jesus is the Son of God! In these last words of Jesus, we see that hanging on the cross was not just a good man, but the God-man who died to pay the price that God demands for the sin and rebellion of humanity. This book is not just for Easter; it is for everyone to read and reread year-round to have your heart and your mind grounded in the awe of the cross. You will never partake of the Lord’s Table the same way again.”

Steve Leston, President of To Every Tribe

Last Words

Seven Sayings
from the Heart of Christ
on the Cross

Robert J. Nash



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DEDICATED

TO MY LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST.

*He is my greatest treasure, only hope,
and the one whom I trust.
May you get glory through these words.*

Foreword



The final words of our Lord are brief and sometimes cryptic, perhaps not surprising given, as Rob Nash explains, the suffocating cruelty of the cross. Yet he also explains that these simple words unpack profound realities in heaven and on earth.

Rob helps us grasp a far fuller understanding of the seven last words of Jesus. Like a wise guide, he takes us back into the Old Testament Scriptures which inform these last words. Rob also reintroduces us to the characters who experienced the horrors of that first Good Friday—the co-crucified thief; the sneering religious leaders; Mary, the grieving mother of Jesus; and the centurion who was perhaps the first to understand what it all meant.

This warm devotional work will take you beyond the surface to explore the depths of the gospel. As you read it, your passion for God will be inflamed, your gratitude deepened, and your worship of our great God and Savior enriched, all to the glory of God.

Craig Parro, President of Leadership Resources

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Introduction



The last words of a hero or heroine in a story pack a punch. The final chapter of a book ties up loose ends. Epitaphs and eulogies have a summarizing power. Phone calls, visits, and whispers of those on hospice become riches locked away in the fading memories of those left behind. Jesus shared seven last thoughts as he died that contain a wealth of meaning we should not forget or neglect. This book seeks to mine those words to challenge the soul.

The idea for this book began on a cold spring in 2003. Newly married, I was living in Minneapolis, studying at Bethel Seminary in St. Paul. It was Friday night. My wife and I drove from our apartment on campus to church. That evening I experienced one of the most powerful messages I have ever heard. The words of the homily blended darkness, passion, and melody to the pain of the day Jesus died. The stone church's sanctuary was dimly lit, the music set to a minor key, and the majority of us wore somber colors of black. At the end of the service, we were asked to exit quietly. Year after year, the pastor shared that same message with

similar effect. Each time it struck a chord in the heart. In the following decade, I began to wonder if I could explore more of the meaning behind Jesus's last words. I believe Jesus's final words have a larger message that the church needs to hear today.

I am a happy optimist. Life is comfortable with fresh starts and cups half full. Each morning is filled with beauty, blessings, coffee, and new beginnings. I am amazed at the sunrise, the fresh breeze, the dew drops, the song of the cardinal, the blue skies, the crashing waves, and the rest of God's creation. However, as a pastor, counselor, elder, and chaplain over the years, I have seen the harsher side of life. I have met death in the emergency room. I have walked into divorce court. I have heard stories of abuse, listened to heartache and suffering that rips one's heart out and uses up all of one's tears. My role has given me a passport into a world that is unkind and often downright evil. It seems that everyone has hurt and pain, even optimists. Jesus's last words meet us in those moments. His scant words connect our longing for forgiveness, need to be loved, yearning for someone to understand, and offer us hope and so much more.

What does God's Word say to those who are stuck, bound up, or wounded? God speaks to those in agony at the cross. He understands. He endured death. Good Friday, the day Jesus died, takes us on a journey of despair, desolation, and transports us to a place of comfort, and consolation. Meditating on his last words helps us, puts difficulties in perspective, sin in its place, and opens our eyes to the expanse of God's affection for us.

Here are Jesus's seven last statements made while on the cross:

- "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).
- "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

- “Woman, behold, your son!” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” (John 19:26–27).
- “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).
- “I thirst” (John 19:28).
- “It is finished” (John 19:30).
- “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 23:46).

These last words dynamically teach who Jesus is, what he was about, and why he came. They offer solace and instruction for all who will listen. Will you listen? Explore them with me as you read and reflect on your own spiritual journey.

1

Forgive

*“Father, forgive them,
for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34)*



What we see today as a beautiful cross, an expression of religious art set in precious metals or stained glass, was a sign in Jesus's day of wickedness, punishment, and judgment. The cross meant humiliation and prolonged suffering, torture, and shame.

Jesus carried the massive top beam, weighing about a hundred pounds, on his shoulders as he marched to his death. Sleepless, beaten, and frail, he fell under its weight. Soldiers seized a nearby man, Simon of Cyrene, who was likely in town for Passover. They forced him to help a different Passover sacrifice, Jesus, carry his beam up a hill of death.

Jesus, the Nazarene, went to Golgotha, the place of the skull. Naked, he was laid down on the wood. Large nails, like railroad spikes, were pressed against his skin. A soldier raised a hammer. Blow fell again, and again, one after another, rupturing wrists and feet, exploding nerves, binding Jesus in place. Can you imagine how that felt?

When you died on a cross, it was not from bleeding to death. Death on a cross came slowly, from asphyxiation. Every time a crucified person took a breath, he would have to lift himself up by the nails pressing down on wounds, stressing bones and tendons and ligaments. Nerves would detonate with pain. Air would fill lungs and then, in exhaustion, the crucified would fall back on those same nails holding him up. Up and down, up and down they went. This could go on for days. To speed up the process, soldiers would break the legs of the crucified so they could not get any more air to breathe. So Good Friday went: Jesus gasping for air, pain in the wounds, gasping for air, and pain in the wounds, on and on and on and on, until he saw his final breath. Exhausted, abused, hungry, and choking, he gave up his life.

Why? Why would the Son of God suffer excruciating misery? I think we can answer that question best by exploring each phrase he uttered. The first thing he said on the cross was a prayer for the Father to forgive the very people who were killing him. Why? The injustice, the atrocity, the insanity of that pivotal moment in history—yet, he spoke a word of clemency? His breath did not come cheaply. He choked those words out. Why would he spend a breath asking his Father to forgive, of all people, those executioners?

JESUS AND FORGIVENESS

To answer that question, let us look at what Jesus had earlier said about forgiveness. In his ministry, he talked about it dozens of times. I think he did so because people carry loads of guilt, shame, bitterness, and hurt. People regret things from decades past and often run from it all. People need forgiveness.

At the same time, people hold onto grudges. They shut down paths of peace, and embrace generational feuds. Some avoid church because of guilt, while others switch churches because

they would rather start over than forgive. People make jokes, tell lies, and brainwash themselves into thinking they are fine, or events never happened or if they did, they are not that big of a deal. However, people don't really move on, they just bury their problems. As a pastor, I see it and hear this regularly. People come up with do-it-yourself solutions to their hurt and sin, and miss God's remedy.

Jesus confronts our attempts to fix ourselves and presents the only path of peace. We see the first hint of this in Jesus's teaching at the Sermon on the Mount. He taught that our attitude toward other people indicates our understanding of God's forgiveness. He said, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14–15). Not only do we need forgiveness, we need to learn to offer it.

This can seem impossible. However, Jesus says more is at stake than we may know when we refuse to forgive. God's forgiveness is connected to ours. Jesus taught that God will hold us to the standard we hold others. He wants us to be merciful, kind, and forgiving as God is. He wants us to let go of bitterness, anger, and grudges. How?

Forgiveness does not come easy or naturally. How can we forgive as we have been forgiven? In the abstract, Jesus's teaching seems simple. It is easy to be forgiving if it is merely words. However, how do we forgive when we have been blindsided by injustice? Think about real wrongs done to you. How do you obey Jesus in light of those? How do we comply with Jesus's teaching or even come close to his example? We know how important forgiveness is, but when we are swimming in pain, this call to forgive can seem insurmountable.

Happily, Jesus's teaching on and his example of forgiveness did not end with a sermon. As we explore further, he explains

how we can love our enemies to the point of even offering them forgiveness.

Peter, the disciple, heard Jesus's teaching, and it confused him. He asked Jesus how often a person should forgive. Maybe there is a limit, or a point where people just exhaust forgiveness? To Peter's chagrin, Jesus basically answered that if a person repents (turns away from his or her sin), forgive him every time. Literally, he said "seventy times seven." That was more than a three-strikes-and-you're-out policy. In a parallel account Jesus says if the offender sins and repents seven times in a single day, forgive every time (Luke 17:4).

Every time? How in the world can we offer forgiveness to what looks like a half-hearted apology? Are we really going to think they mean what they say after the third time? They probably are going to just sin again, don't you think?

Jesus responds to this question about forgiveness with a wonderful story. He tells a tale of a servant who had an astronomical debt. The servant came to his king and asked for relief. What did the king do? He released him of his obligation. Simple and astounding, that huge debt was forgiven. Not too long afterward, that same servant ran into a man who owed him a comparable pittance. The man could not pay. Furious, the servant had his debtor thrown into prison. News traveled fast. The king heard about this turn of events and called the servant back.

Hear what words Jesus has the king speak:

"You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." (Matthew 18:32–35)

The point is clear: we must understand the spiritual debt God has forgiven us. This should aid us in forgiving the debt others owe us. That is how we can obey Jesus's teaching. Understanding the sin originally forgiven us gives us the power to extend mercy to those who wrong us and make a poor attempt to get right. If we have been forgiven a million dollars in debt, then remembering whose turn it is to pay for lunch is not as important. The key is perspective.

Jesus beautifully illustrated the importance of this perspective again at the home of a Pharisee named Simon. Everyone was eating and having a grand old time. A woman of the city entered. She took some expensive perfume and started anointing Jesus and wiping his feet with her hair and tears. The host was beside himself. She had barged into his home and threw herself on his guest. This woman was presumably known for her loose living, hence Simon's revulsion. Add to that, the grassroots religious superstar didn't show any reservation with this over-the-top affection. Addressing Simon's thoughts with a lesson, Jesus said:

"A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who

is forgiven little, loves little.” And he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” (Luke 7:41–48)

He who is forgiven little, loves little. Forgiveness was personal and specific in Jesus’s day, as in ours. Jesus forgave this woman her sin against God. This audacious assertion and ability shocked the dinner party, but even more stunning was the key to forgiveness he taught here. We *can* become people of gratitude and love amidst our hurt and pain. Jesus says those who have a tangible understanding of their forgiven spiritual debt become more attuned to gratitude and love. That makes sense. The woman obviously is so much more appreciative of Jesus than Simon. The forgiven sinner has a better perspective of Jesus than the religious leader.

Have you experienced forgiveness from a friend or family member and seen how it healed the relationship? Have you been overwhelmed by God’s love and forgiveness? Have you wept tears of appreciation and contrition? This woman had.

Maybe you find yourself relating to Simon. You don’t feel like you have been that bad or need forgiveness. Maybe you find it easy to look down on others. Remember the story of the unmerciful servant. Paul taught in 2 Corinthians 5:14, “The love of Christ controls us.” Some versions translate the word for control as “compels.” The love of Christ compels us. The rocket fuel for forgiving others is a keen awareness of our own forgiven debt. How do we forgive when it is hard? We must move toward the perspective of the forgiven. We must see ourselves as we are.

JESUS AND SINNERS

All of us are debtors, even if we don’t believe it. This can be hard to grasp in a culture that tends to avoid admission of guilt and ownership of sin. Sin is any thought, word, or deed that falls short

of God's ideal. We sin in doing things we should not and in not doing things we should. We sin in big ways and little ways. We sin consciously and unconsciously. Our sins add up. Centuries before all this, the prophet Jeremiah commented on humanity's depravity. He wrote, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). We all are debt holders in need of Christ's forgiveness.

We hear Jesus's heart for sinners like us in his words of grace and mercy on the cross. We owe him everything. Some might think that is not a big deal, but forgiveness does not come cheap. Forgiveness acknowledges sin and hurt and brokenness and pain. It does not ignore the hurt or pretend everything is back to how it used to be. Instead, it absorbs the hurt and the cost. Jesus did not forgive with mere words; he forgave *on the cross*.

Jesus pointed to this hours before, in an upper room Pass-over celebration with his disciples.

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." (Matthew 26:26–30)

What purchased our forgiveness? Jesus's blood was poured out. He took the bread and cup and infused new meaning in them. Instead of remembering the Jewish tradition of lambs slain in Egypt (Exodus 12:1–28), Jesus said the bread and wine represented his body and blood. He was the lamb to be slain to take away the sin of the world once and for all. His body and blood

were a new covenant, echoing the past and looking forward to the future. The cross was a fulfillment of a promise, God's promise to bless every nation and offer forgiveness for the many who would believe (Genesis 12:1–3; John 1:29; 3:16–17; Hebrews 9:22–28).

Forgiveness was infinitely expensive. Jesus gave his life. He embraced the cross out of love. He did that for you. It was the plan from the beginning of time. He knew it. His action resonated within his heart. His heart was one of compassion, not rancor or rage or revenge. We eavesdrop on his plea for forgiveness at the cross and hear his heart of mercy for his persecutors. He has a fierce love for wayward people. Justice and mercy collided in those moments.

Moses taught, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life” (Leviticus 17:11; see also Hebrews 9:22). Jesus knew that principle. He offered up his life as an atoning sacrifice to wipe debts clean. He gave his blood for his people, for forgiveness, for you. He believed in mercy, and lived out what he believed. He thought not of hunger or loneliness or injustice or pain or complaints in that moment, but of you.

At his core was compassion for those who were his enemies. Luke records that, days before, “when he drew near and saw the city [Jerusalem], he wept over it” (Luke 19:41). He wept over the city that would soon demand his death. Why? It was because of his compassion for people who knew not the full horror of what they do. We see this all through the Bible: God shows mercy on Adam after his rebellion in the garden of Eden, promising future redemption in the curse on the serpent. God shows mercy on Noah, preserving him through the flood and promising never to flood the earth again. God shows mercy on Abraham, promising to bless all people through him. God shows mercy on David, promising a future king who would reign forever—and be

crucified on a Friday during Passover week, just outside David's capital city. David writes in Psalm 103:8, "The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." And so Jesus prayed, "Forgive them for they know not what they do," reflecting that heart of mercy.

God's justice and forgiveness unite at the cross. He executed justice and applied forgiveness. Jesus's prayer showed this disposition to God's followers. His heart was like his Father's. Peter wrote, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). As Jesus was murdered, he thought of you. He loved you. He cared for you. He knew you. He died for you. That was the first thing his lips uttered, but not the last.

RESULTS

By day's end, the Father would answer Jesus's prayer, and some would believe in Jesus. A thief would be among that number, and a centurion in charge who declared, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:54).

Forgiveness became available through Jesus's blood shed for you.

Grab it.

Take it.

Hold it.

Embrace it.

Embrace forgiveness. It was meted out in mercy on a wooden beam two thousand years ago. The wrath of God was poured out on the Son, so it would not be poured out on you. Justice was satisfied. Jesus chose it. He went to the cross willingly. Good Friday was good because it means your sins, condemnation, guilt, and

shame were obliterated if you trust him. God forgives it all: pride, jealousy, envy, idolatry, laziness, lies, gossip, slander, suspicion, hatred, theft, fraud, abortion, addictions, violence, pornography, adultery, immorality, and perversion—by faith in Jesus’s death. You do not have to live under the bondage of the past, or the fear of being found out. You are not shackled to old skeletons, dark deeds, or nagging regrets. Jesus suffered and died for it all and offers you mercy. He died to forgive.

REFLECTION

Reflect now on those first words of Christ on the cross. Take a moment to think through each step below:

See Your Need. What sins have you committed, or keep committing, that you fear Jesus won’t forgive? Why do you think he won’t forgive you?

See Jesus. Think about how far Jesus went to forgive even his executioners. Which aspects of Jesus’s death on the cross most encourage you to come to him for forgiveness?

Go to God. When was the last time you asked God to forgive you for something? Describe that experience. What sin can you confess to God right now and enjoy forgiveness anew? What can you say to thank him for sending his Son to suffer and die in your place?

Go to Others. What grudges, bitterness, or shame comes between you and others? What makes it hard for you to forgive? What part of Jesus’s teaching about the woman who anointed his feet might encourage you that you *can* have enough love to forgive? How might you move toward forgiveness of a person who has wronged you in the coming days?

Pray.

God, help me to know your grace and forgiveness today as I think about who you are and what you have done. Thank you for giving up your life for mine. Thank you for suffering betrayals, insults, false accusations, abuse, and death for my sin. Bring to mind my wrongs, my sin, and my rebellion that made the cross necessary for me to be right with you. Help me to grasp your mercy and forgiveness demonstrated on the cross. Help me to see your heart of mercy specifically for me. Help me to offer that kind of forgiveness to others. Help me to love my enemies as you loved me. Thank you for Good Friday and your last words of forgiveness and love.