

**With Jesus
His Final Breath**

**Tom Harrigan
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There's something in us that's moved by a really good story, especially when that story has great ending, like when Dorothy clicks her ruby slippers and goes home to Kansas, or when Luke Skywalker tries to rescue his father, Darth Vader. What about when Marty McFly finally gets back to 1985, or when Frodo, at long last, destroys the Ring of Power, or when Tony Stark snaps fingers with the Infinity Stones, defeats Thanos, and restores what was lost? We love a great ending to a story!

If you're visiting with us online or here in person, we're so glad you decided to worship with us today, because for the past 19 weeks we've been journeying through the gospel of Luke. Over the next two weeks, we'll see the powerful ending to Jesus's story on earth.

In 1633, the artist Rembrandt painted "The Raising of the Cross," depicting the crucifixion of Jesus. Many who've observed this painting have realized something that stands out a bit. If you look closely, you can see that at the foot of the cross there's a man with a blue beret. Obviously, berets weren't in fashion in the first century. What Rembrandt did was paint himself into the story of the cross! That's what we want to do today—we want to see ourselves with Jesus at the end.

This ending has been building for a long, long time—not just for our 19 weeks in Luke, but since the beginning of recorded history, in Genesis 3, in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve had everything they needed, including the ability to live in relationship with God, their creator. There was one rule: God said, "Don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; if you do, you will die." If you know the story, Adam and Eve chose not to trust God, they ate from the tree, and as a result of their sin, their ability to live in close relationship with God was lost. They were cast out of the garden, away from God's presence, and ever since, the whole story of the Bible has been building and building to the powerful and redemptive moment we'll see together today.

We left off last week with Jesus praying in the garden. Immediately after this, Jesus was betrayed by Judas and arrested. He was disowned by one of his closest followers, Peter. He was then beaten, mocked, and flogged—which means that soldiers took whips embedded with bone, glass, and metal, and slashed his body with them. This alone often killed people. Jesus was then led to trial. A crown of thorns was jammed onto his head; he was spit on and beaten more, then was sentenced to death and forced to carry a heavy wooden beam to the place of his execution. Jesus, who was placed in a wooden manger at his birth, was left hanging on a wooden cross to die.

Before we look at Jesus final words, which is where we'll spend most of our time together, I want to look quickly at two events that happened while Jesus was on the cross. The first is in Luke 23:44: "It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining."

This isn't something you see every day—darkness over the whole land for three full hours. In 52 AD, Tacitus, a secular Roman historian, detailed this event and credited it to what happened to Jesus. He wrote: "...in the time of Tiberius Caesar, at full moon, there was a full eclipse of the sun from the sixth

hour (noon, 6 hours from sunrise) to the ninth hour (3pm) . . . it was a darkness induced by God, because the Lord happened then to suffer.”

Darkness in the Bible is a symbol of sin and judgement. It’s no coincidence then, that at Jesus’ birth, a star appeared in the sky, and now at his death, as Jesus takes on the full weight of God’s judgement for our sins, the sun disappears for three hours. Darkness fills the whole land because the light of the world is about to die!

Look at what else happened. In the next sentence we read, “And the curtain of the temple was torn in two” (Luke 23:45).

This would have shocked anyone standing in the temple, and it has deep meaning for us. You see, from the time Israel was freed from slavery in Egypt, God designated the temple as the place where his presence would dwell on earth. Once a permanent temple was built in Jerusalem, people from all over the world traveled there to be close to God. This temple had several layers of accessibility to it, based on race, gender, and religious status. And only one person, only once a year, could go through a very large, very thick curtain into the innermost room of the temple called the “Holy of Holies,” where God’s presence resided.

Now, as Jesus is dying on the cross, that curtain is torn in two. Matthew’s and Mark’s gospels give an extra detail: they record, “The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (Matthew 27:51, Mark 15:38), as if the hands of God took this 60-foot high, four-inch-thick curtain, and ripped it in two from top to bottom. Jesus’ death was permanently restoring the relationship that was lost in the Garden of Eden, providing unrestricted access once again of us to God and God to us.

And we come now, to the Jesus’ final words, and his final breath. “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).

Six other times Jesus spoke from the cross, and with each statement he revealed something about his compassion, his mercy, his forgiveness, his humanity, even his agony, but with these final words Jesus revealed his absolute surrender to and trust in God.

Notice how Jesus addressed God. He called him “Father.” Even though Jesus prayed for this suffering to be avoided, and even though he’d cried out from the cross earlier, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me,” Jesus came back to the only characteristic of God he’s ever fully known—the perfect, unconditional love of God as his Father. “Father, I trust you; into your hands, I commit my spirit.”

For some of us, the term “father” carries good feelings and memories of a man who, through his words and actions, showed genuine love and care. If that’s your experience, then praise God for that! That is awesome!

But for some, that’s not been your experience. In fact, the term “father” may carry for you some pretty deep wounds that have actually made trusting others, including God, very difficult. Maybe your father was physically present but emotionally withdrawn. Maybe your father was harsh, or overbearing, or

yelled a lot, or openly struggled with addictions. Perhaps he was even physically or emotionally abusive, or maybe your father was absent from your life altogether.

When I was three, my dad walked out on me, my older sister, and my mom. I only saw him two times after that: at age 12 at my grandfather's funeral and at age 20 for an hour in a coffee shop. My mom remarried when I was five and divorced again when I was 12. That absence of a loving father left wounds that continue to resurface in my life, typically at key moments in my kids' lives when I have the blessing of celebrating their milestones. On one hand, I'm so thankful that I get to be with them and be the dad I never had. But my heart also aches in those moments knowing that my dad didn't want to be around for my big moments. My lack of relationship with an earthly father has made trusting others, including God, much more challenging at times. Your story may have different circumstances than mine, but I've talked to enough people to know that because of a painful and disappointing past, trusting is really, really difficult for many of us.

There's a company that does world-wide surveys on trust. In a recent survey they discovered that 18 of the 28 countries they looked at saw a significant decline in people's trust of businesses, media, government, and global non-profits (which includes churches). The average level of trust in these four institutions combined was below 50%.

I also learned that trust issues have gotten worse with each generation.

- 40% of Baby Boomers (1946-1964) say that people can be trusted.
- 33% of Gen Xers (1965-1980) say that people can be trusted.
- And Millennials, you are the least trusting generation in American history—only 19% of Millennials (1981-1996) say that people can be trusted.

Trust is a huge issue today. Why is that? Well, I think it comes down to one word: FEAR—fear of being hurt or disappointed again, like we have been in the past.

On the wall in my office, I have something called an “emotion wheel” that indicates the six core emotions we have and all the subsequent feelings that follow. Look at what can flow from the core emotion of fear: nervousness, insecurity, terror, dread, or feeling frightened, helpless, panicked, inferior, inadequate, worried, or anxious. Can you identify with one or more of these feelings on a regular basis?

This is so important: when fear of being hurt or disappointed gives way to these feelings, we'll naturally struggle to trust others, and we'll certainly struggle to place our trust in God.

When we don't trust that God is in control, we will inevitably try to take control in four specific areas of our lives.

First, we try to control timing. Rather than trusting in God's timing for our lives, we try to control when things happen. If you think about it, what's “normal” for our lives is often scripted out by our culture. You grow up, you go to college, you fall in love, you get married, you have kids, you retire, and you move someplace warm. That's what our culture has set up as “normal.”

But what happens when things don't go "normally" or as we think they should? Well, rather than trusting in God's timing, we take matters into our own hands, sometimes by compromising biblical standards. We might say, "God, I'm ready now for a relationship, and nothing is happening, so I'm going to date someone your word says not to date and then I'll do things physically with them that your word says not to do, so I can keep the relationship, and won't have to be alone." Or, "God, you know I want to reach a certain level of financial security ASAP, or that I want to be able to buy that house, or that car, or that vacation, so I'm going to withhold some details on my taxes, or I'm going to take something that doesn't belong to me to speed up the timing because I want what I want now."

"In their heart's humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps" (Proverbs 16:9). We can make all the plans we want, but friends, God's in control of our days. And his ways are always better than ours.

King David, during a difficult and uncertain time, wrote, "I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living" (Psalm 27:13). "God, I need your help, but I trust your timing to deliver me out of this mess." The very next line reveals the secret to seeing God's goodness: "Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord" (Psalm 27:14).

That is so very easy to say, and so, so difficult to live out! Most of the time we're like: "God I do trust your timing is better than mine, and your ways are better than mine, and so I will try to wait on you, but if you can give me what I asked for in the next five minutes that would be great!"

Sometimes we try to control timing, and other times, when we don't trust God, we try to control outcomes, which means we'll do whatever we can to make things come out the way we want. I think back to the "college admissions scandal" that happened a few years ago. Famous and wealthy parents bribed their kids' way into colleges they didn't earn a place at. That seems like something so far removed beyond us but I know of parents who've called their kid's soccer coach to complain in order to get them more playing time, or who've called teachers to get their kids better grades.

We've all heard stories about money changing hands under the table to get zoning approval or to smooth the way for a deal to go through. Maybe we've gossiped or said things we shouldn't to try and gain some sense of control in an out-of-control situation. If you live by a to-do-list, how much of that is to stay organized, and how much is trying to control what happens next?

Friends, when we don't trust God, sometimes we try to control outcomes and sometimes we try to control other people. As parents, we don't want our kids to make the same mistakes we did, so, with the best of intentions, rather than letting them fail so that they'll learn, we often over-protect them, trying to keep "bad things" from happening now and not realizing the problem we're creating for them later.

Maybe we overcommit to helping others in order to get approval. (That's controlling.) Maybe we sabotage a fellow employee who's getting more recognition. Maybe we find ourselves in marriages that are based, not on unconditional love, but on "transactional love"—"If I do this for them, maybe they will do that for me." I hear of real-life examples all the time of manipulation and control in relationships

through passive aggressive comments, insults, withholding money or intimacy, even physical violence to try to control a spouse or a child.

To the person who might be guilty of that kind of controlling behavior, that is not God-honoring, and it reveals way more about you than it does about the person you are trying to manipulate. To the person on the receiving end, I'm so sorry you've experienced that. God loves you, you are not alone, you are in the right place, and we want to help. Way too often we guilty of trying to control other people.

But I also think we're guilty of trying to control God. We do or say things to try and get God to do what we want.

- If I go to church, then maybe God will bless me.
- If I give some money, then maybe it will outweigh the things I've already done—and still intend to do.
- If I say the right words, and do the right things, then maybe God will let me into heaven someday.

If we find ourselves in this place of doing things for God to get something from God then our “trust” isn't in God, it's in ourselves. Our trust is in religious rituals, rather than in the relationship with God that Jesus hung on the cross to restore.

Today is traditionally known as Palm Sunday. It was on this day Jesus arrived in Jerusalem with a huge crowd yelling, “‘Hosanna!’ ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’” (John 12:13). They thought this man with supernatural power was coming to overthrow the oppressive Roman government. But only days later, when Jesus is standing trial and it's obvious things aren't working out like they thought, this same crowd turned on Jesus and yelling, “CRUCIFY HIM, CRUCIFY HIM!” It is humbling—and even embarrassing—to think how quickly our trust in God is shaken when things don't work out like we want.

Listen to this powerful admission by author Skye Jethani:

My secret is that I want to be relevant and popular. I want my desires fulfilled and pain minimized, I want a manageable relationship with the church rather than messy relationships with real people. I want to be transformed into the image of Christ by showing up at entertaining events rather than through the hard work of discipline. I want to wear my faith on my sleeve and not look at the darkness of my heart. And above all, I want a controllable god. I want a divine commodity to do my will on earth as well as in heaven.

Here are two sobering questions related to this idea of control:

- Am I living to do God's will, or am I expecting God to do my will?
- Do I really trust in God, or do I trust in myself?

I've been guilty of trying to seize control of timing, outcomes, people, and even God, not only over course of my life, but within the last few months!

Because of our fear of being hurt again, trust is a constant struggle for us.

But here's Jesus, hanging on the cross, in an act of absolute surrender and trust. Look again at Luke 23:46: "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 crucifixion, death didn't happen because of blood loss from the nails in the hands and feet; death occurred by asphyxiation. The arms and the legs got too tired to hold the body in the right position to breathe. Jesus was literally suffocated to death. But notice that Jesus called out with a loud voice. Do you realize the determination it must have taken for Jesus to do this? After the beating he took, and after hanging there for three hours, to pull himself up against the pain of the nails in his hands and feet, with the fluid filling his lungs, to take one last deep breath and yell something out?

And think about this: the Bible says Jesus was fully God, and yet fully human. The Bible says Jesus was with God at creation, that nothing was created apart from him. As a human Jesus ate and slept and wept and was tempted in every way we are yet was without sin. But Jesus was about to experience something for the first time—death! In that moment, with his last act, what was it that he desperately wanted everyone to hear? "Father, I trust you; into your hands I commit my spirit."

There are two takeaways from this text. First, friends, if Jesus can trust in God as Father, we can, too. It will take similar determination for us to trust. Not pulling ourselves up to yell something with our final breath, but in the face of all our unknowns, the willingness to daily surrender control of every area of our lives, placing our faith in God as our Father.

I remember going to the circus as a kid; my favorite part was the trapeze, these acrobats who would swing and do flips high up in the air, get caught by someone, and then literally get thrown back towards the bar they just let go of, to swing to safety. You can actually go to trapeze school and learn how to do this, and it's said the secret to success, once you let go of the bar is to remain perfectly still. Only in perfectly still submission, can the other person catch you.

Here's another quote by author Skye Jethani:

Faith is the opposite of seeking control. It embraces the truth that control is an illusion—we never had it and we never will. Rather than trying to overcome our fears by seeking more control, we overcome fear by surrendering control. But surrender is only possible if we have total assurance that we are safe. We must be convinced that if we let go, we will be caught. This assurance only comes when we trust that our heavenly Father desires to be with us and will not let us fall.

If Jesus, in the face of the unknown, can let go of his life and trust in God as Father, then friends, we can too.

Here's the second takeaway: trusting in God can restore what was broken. By surrendering control, Jesus helped restore the broken relationship between us and God. What's broken in your life that needs restored? What do you need to place in the hands of God?

Perhaps God is inviting you to pray today: Father, into your hands I commit my marriage; Father, into your hands I commit my sexuality; Father, into your hands I commit my children, my past, my future, my doubts, my illness, my business dealings, my fears, my finances, my time when I'm alone. God, I trust you with my career and I trust your timing with my relationships. God, I surrender control of outcomes and people.

What is God inviting you to trust him with?

We come to a time of communion, and we're going to do this a bit differently today. I'd like for us to take the bread and the juice together. While God might be inviting us each to commit different aspects of our lives to him, there's great power and unity in knowing we are not alone.

Get the bread ready and take a moment, as a prayer, to complete this sentence: "Father, into your hands I commit my _____." After a moment, I will pray and we'll take the bread together.

Get the juice ready and take a moment to pray again, thanking God for the sacrifice of Jesus that brings forgiveness and hope for today and eternity. After you thank God in prayer, I'll pray and we'll take the juice together.

There's another way we can respond, and it comes right from our text. Luke 23:47 reads, "The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God." This tough Roman soldier saw how Jesus died and he praised God. We get to do that, too. Praising God might involve seeking help with next steps.

We're going to sing some songs to God, and I want to encourage every one of us, as we praise him with our voices to also praise him with a physical posture of surrender. Jesus's posture of surrender was arms outstretched. For us it might be hands in front surrendering control. For others it might be hands high in surrender and celebration of freedom and hope. If you feel comfortable, as you sing these songs of gratitude for the cross, praise God with your whole self, thanking him, desiring to be with him, celebrating him, and surrendering to him in worship.

Whatever your posture is, you can trust in him, because he died on the cross for you.