

A Eulogy

2 Samuel 23:1-7

¹ Now these are the last words of David: The oracle of David, son of Jesse, the oracle of the man whom God exalted, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the favorite of the Strong One of Israel:

² The spirit of the LORD speaks through me, his word is upon my tongue. ³ The God of Israel has spoken, the Rock of Israel has said to me: One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God,

⁴ is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.

⁵ Is not my house like this with God? For he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure. Will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire?

⁶ But the godless are all like thorns that are thrown away; for they cannot be picked up with the hand;

⁷ to touch them one uses an iron bar or the shaft of a spear. And they are entirely consumed in fire on the spot.

Eulogies are usually the words we speak at a memorial service about the life of one who died. However, in generations past, people wanted to know the last words of that person. Last words have a special weight that other words do not. Last words are given particular significance simply because they are last words. Think of the last words that are spoken at the graveside, or the last words that are said to a child when dropping her off at college, or the last words of the final sermon. People attend to last words.

The Bible is full of partings, and parting words are given a prominent place in the biblical narrative.

For instance, when Moses, after leading his people out of exile and wandering with them in the wilderness for forty years, reached the verge of the promised land, he gathered the people of Israel to say good-bye to them (Deut. 32-33). He attended

carefully to the moment, addressing the whole assembly at length and then speaking a particular word to the head of each tribe. Moses talked directly about his leaving, without a hint of avoidance, without false promises, because he said that the most unavoidable reality of all—the reality of God—would go with them and the promises he related were the changeless promises of God. The journey for Moses and his people was not complete. He told them that they did not yet have a homeland, and yet the eternal God was their dwelling place. For Moses, parting was an occasion to remind the people of the eternal presence and promises of God.

Moses gave a patriarchal blessing to each of the twelve tribes. He names each one and indicates by his wish for them that he is aware of their strengths and weaknesses. He tenderly prays for each and hopes that their way ahead will be healthy, strong, faithful, and blessed. These are good last words, full of love, good wishes, and blessing.

Elijah's last words encourage his young protégé. The old man is near the hour of his translation to richer things, and the young intern is hanging on to him for dear life. The old man asks what the young one most wants. It is a double portion of the old man's spirit. The youth is told that if he will see the old man at the moment of his transition, he may then be well on the road to spiritual power. These too are good last words.

Stephen's last words form a prayer for forgiving grace. At the moment of his death Stephen asks God to forgive the blind rage of his murderers. These last words shine with great courage. Many a martyr, in Luke's time and beyond, has prayed them, and in so doing has humbled critics to think again.

We also think of the special significance accorded Jesus' last words. Nearly the final quarter of John's Gospel consists of Jesus' parting words to his disciples. He was preparing them for his death and for their lives without him. Clearly the disciples were anxious, not wanting him to leave. They did not want to hear all that he had to

say about his parting, but Jesus explained, "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid" (John 14:25-27).

Other Gospel writers offer us a variety of other last sayings for Jesus. To one dying with him he offers paradise today; the gift of a companioning grace that walks with us beyond fear. To the mixed crowd before him he cries, "It is finished," and so heartens all who follow him in the church with the news that the thing is complete and that we work in that assurance. He commends his spirit into the hands of God. Bruises and blessings, achievements and failures, his whole ministry and life, together or unraveling, are offered back to the one who called him. As we look in and listen, we sense the safety of a place for us too to go. And later, among the faithful, Jesus says that they will see him and know his companionship through thick and thin to the close of the age. We find a deeper sense of security while working hard. Jesus knew what the disciples would soon learn: parting is not the time for easy reassurances and false promises. Rather, it is the time to turn again to the assurance of God's continued presence and the promise that even in parting we are gathered up together into the peace of God.

It is interesting to note the way Paul concludes his letters. He knows that the way he travels is treacherous and much about his life is uncertain, so his final words are expansive, but they also are infused with a sense of urgency. The last words of his letters typically are filled with final instructions—things he has probably said before, but which need to be said again, like the final instructions you might repeat to a child who is being dropped off at camp for the summer—but then he concludes each of his letters with a kind of benediction. The last words of his second letter to the Corinthians are typical: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the

communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" (2 Cor. 13:13). Paul can bring himself to say good-bye to this unruly church he has loved into being only by recognizing that he is not leaving them alone, but leaving them in the grace, love, and fellowship of God. **G. Malcolm Sinclair**

In all these instances, writers and editors are taking the broad, high road. Though we cannot see God clearly or know God's will and ways with certainty, and though it is tempting to gather what we have gleaned and to guard our treasures in the vaults of our institutional strength, these fashioners of last words press us to keep moving, to travel lightly, and to trust the one who is out there opening a way in the woods.

Throughout the biblical narrative we read of leaders who in parting remind their followers of the promises of God. Our scripture, which consists of David's last words, in the form of a psalm, is in this tradition. At first reading it might seem as if these are words of self-praise, extolling the great king's virtues: "The spirit of the LORD speaks through me, his word is upon my tongue.... One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land" (2 Sam. 23:2, 3b-4). This is not mere boastfulness, however. When one sees one's gifts as issuing from God, as David clearly does, then celebrating them is not an act of pride as much as it is an expression of gratitude and praise. David gives resounding affirmation to the promise that the God who has so blessed him, will also bless his people: "Is not my house like this with God? For he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure. Will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire?" (2 Sam. 23:5). In parting, David reminds his people one more time of the promises of God.

First Samuel begins with Hannah's emotional prayer, and Second Samuel comes toward its close with David's prayerful reflection on his reign. The tendency of human beings to use and abuse power is clearly a theme that is carried through to David's "last words." There is much at stake, and there has been much at stake in how

power has become concentrated in particular human beings for the nation of Israel. The disharmony of this monarchy has been acute at times, and what lies ahead for Solomon after David has a painful and tragic edge to it. There is a tone of wisdom that has formed in David as he has weathered his reign. Just as Hannah embodies a strong consciousness of her dependence on God, now David's song points to the foundational importance of knowing the source of our strength and worth. God's faithfulness, God's effectiveness, and God's character are held up here as the cornerstones of the just use of power. The kingship that was David's rest in justice and the fear of God. Even with the shortcomings of David's rule, even with his missteps, bad decisions, and indiscretions, he remains in covenant with God. This song indicates David has, in the midst of all these lapses, kept his eye on the ball. He has come to the end of his rule remembering that when his kingship has been at its best, it has been because he has remembered he is with God.

This sustained recognition of God's role in his life and in his power is what makes David a favored one of God. Within this awareness rests the vision of a good king. For Christians this vision of a good king is one of the threads that makes its way into our understandings of kingship. How Jesus Christ filled the role of king and how he disrupted the presumptions of power grows out of this history of chosen leadership. One of the most important threads is simply that David maintained his capacity to point beyond himself to the source of his power.

David meditates on his life. God has not determined everything that has happened in his life but has urged David in the best possible direction. When human intention and action can cooperate with that goad toward divine justice and love, then God's Spirit shines more clearly, with the beautiful gleam "from the rain on the grassy land" (v. 4). God promised to work with David, to stay close to him as he made his way in the world. In that proximity of relationship is the potential for all of humanity to be sanctified in its purpose and best potential. David's walk through life is full of flaws,

but God's promise is everlasting. God's faithful stewarding of David expands this man's landscape of possibility and his perception, even in the midst of his flaws. The legitimacy of God's presence in David's flawed life remains. David has been formed by and has lived out of the truth of God's faithfulness.

The wisdom of David in the twilight of his rule is that he knows the source of his power and he knows the character of God's justice. The vision of a just ruler is one that outlasts David's failures. There is hope for this delicate task of human beings possessing political power, because God is faithful still. In a world where abuses of power, violence, and war so often go to the drumbeat of religious overtones and undertones, David's song invites us to find our way out of violence and injustice with a song we should know by heart. **Marcia Mount Shoop**

David leaves a word of wisdom and blessing. And in what other way are we to part, in what other way *can* we? How else can we leave those we care about, unless we entrust them to the care of God? That is, after all, what the word "good-bye" means—"God be with you." What else can be said in parting that does not simply wither and fall at our feet as soon as it is said? We like David, are to leave others with words of the enduring promises of God. **Martin B. Copenhaver**

Today we say goodbye to another church year and next Sunday we mark the beginning of a new church year. Make a place for a manger child, a Nazareth nobody, a washer of feet, a flesh-and-blood life susceptible to lashes, thorns, and nails. He is the truest, noblest, cleanest, and closest to the heart of God. He is God's love letter to us and the very presence of God among us. He is God's good word, a eulogy!

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