

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Seven Last Words

by

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THE SEVEN LAST WORDS

Father James Martin lists the traditional Seven Last Words, or phrases, that Jesus uttered from the cross, as recorded in the Gospels:

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

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

“Woman, here is your son. . . . Here is your mother.” (John 19:26–27)

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46)

“I am thirsty.” (John 19:28)

“It is finished.” (John 19:30)

“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” (Luke 23:46)

1. Which of the Seven Last Words is most familiar to you? Are there any that you were surprised to encounter? Also, have you ever attended any Seven Last Words services on Good Friday? What was your experience?
2. Fr. Martin writes, “We have a compassionate God, a sympathetic God, an empathetic God, a God who understands our lives because he *experienced* our lives” (p. 12). Do Jesus’s experiences on the cross help you feel that God understands you? Why or why not?

JESUS UNDERSTANDS THE CHALLENGE OF FORGIVENESS

“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

1. This chapter explores Jesus’s ability to understand what drives others to cause him harm, as well as his willingness to forgive. What do you think enables Jesus to forgive those who are executing him?
2. What place does forgiveness hold in your life?
3. Think back to a time when you sought forgiveness from someone. Does that experience influence how you respond to those seeking your forgiveness?

JESUS UNDERSTANDS DOUBTS ABOUT THE AFTERLIFE

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

1. Fr. Martin invites you to look back over your life and remember “common daily moments that make you aware of God’s presence” (p. 38). Reflecting on your own experiences, which moments seemed to reveal the presence of God (holding a newborn baby, looking at a sunset, tearing up over a hymn)?
2. Have you ever doubted the promise of the afterlife? What helps you have faith in heaven?
3. “Could something as small as death destroy that relationship [with God]? By no means!” (p. 38). What do you think of the claim, which originates with Saint Paul, that not even death could alter God’s loving relationship with you?

JESUS UNDERSTANDS A PARENT’S LOVE

“Woman, here is your son. . . . Here is your mother.”

1. Fr. Martin writes, “Some people relate more to Jesus of Nazareth, others to Our Lord Jesus Christ” (p. 47). Knowing that we are speaking about the same person, is it easier for you to relate to the “fully human” Jesus or the “fully divine” Jesus?

2. For many people, Mary is a model of accepting God's mysterious plans. What does Mary represent to you? In what way does her spiritual journey relate to yours?
3. "At the beginning of his life," Fr. Martin writes, "Mary helped the helpless infant Jesus. At the end of his life, the helpless Jesus helped Mary" (p. 55). Can you remember people who helped you when you felt helpless? Do you see them as ways God has of loving you?

JESUS UNDERSTANDS FEELINGS OF ABANDONMENT

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

1. Have you ever felt abandoned by God? What enabled you to move through this struggle? Or, if you still feel forsaken, can you call out to God honestly, as Jesus did?
2. Does it help you to think of Jesus as "fully human and fully divine" in moments of doubt or in feelings of abandonment? Why or why not?
3. Fr. Martin refers to Mother Teresa's honest letters, which expressed her feelings of being abandoned by God, and says that even though she "could not sense God's presence" (p. 68), she still had faith in God's existence. How do you respond to the revelation that both Jesus and Mother Teresa felt abandoned by God? Is it surprising? Frightening? Comforting?
4. What is the difference between feeling that God is absent and believing that God doesn't exist?

JESUS UNDERSTANDS PHYSICAL PAIN

"I am thirsty."

1. Fr. Martin notes that because Jesus had a physical body, he fully understands our own experiences. Do you agree? How does knowing that Jesus understands our physical experiences influence your relationship with him?
2. When you are struggling with physical pain, do you feel closer to God or more distant? Does thinking of Jesus experiencing bodily feelings help you feel closer to God in these moments?

JESUS UNDERSTANDS DISAPPOINTMENT

"It is finished."

1. What was your original interpretation of Jesus's saying "It is finished" (John 19:30) on the cross? Did you see it as the traditional declaration of completion of the Father's will or perhaps as concern over whether the disciples would continue his "work"?
2. Some people read this saying as an indication of worry or even disappointment, others as a grateful moment of accomplishment. What seems more likely to you?

JESUS UNDERSTANDS SELF-OFFERING

“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

1. Fr. Martin writes that “we are asked to turn it *all* over to God” (p. 113). Do you agree? What does that mean in your everyday life? Is there something you’re holding back?
2. In chapter 7, Fr. Martin states, “The more we give of ourselves, the more we know who we are” (p. 114). How does this apply to you?

THE UNDERSTANDING CHRIST

1. How has exploring the Seven Last Words helped you understand Jesus better? Do you feel that you have a better understanding of Jesus’s relationship to the Father? Of Jesus’s relationship to you?
2. What will you take away from this book? How might it change your spiritual journey?