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**Numbers 32:13, ESV.**

*<sup>13</sup> And the LORD's anger was kindled against Israel, and he made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until all the generation that had done evil in the sight of the LORD was gone.*

**I Commit My Spirit: *What is biblical truth?***

There are many elements of the Old Testament that scholars question from a historical perspective. We are told this in the 32<sup>nd</sup> Chapter of Numbers:

*<sup>13</sup> And the LORD's anger was kindled against Israel, and he made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until all the generation that had done evil in the sight of the LORD was gone.*

It is not widely believed by scholars that this statement is accurate. If the Chosen People wandered in the desert, the wilderness, for forty years, they managed to leave nothing behind them, not even a Twinkie wrapper. There is little archeological evidence of the 42 encampments of the Chosen People described in the Bible, considering that most of them do not coincide with any known archeological sites. No contemporary Egyptian or other writings or records describe these wandering people. The Book of Numbers says that 603,550 people set out in the desert – and this includes only males from twenty years and up. This would suggest that around two million people were in the desert. But no one

noticed them? And no definitive archeological sites have ever been found?

Further, once the Chosen People made their way to Canaan, they supposedly slaughtered almost all the residents. But there is a lack of archeological evidence to back this up. And there is strong DNA evidence to suggest that the Canaanites survived in large numbers and their descendants are alive and well today.

In general, there are many Old Testament stories that are of dubious historicity. The scale of the kingdoms of David and Solomon, as described in the Bible, are very suspect. The plagues in Egypt, the story of Jonah and the whale, the Garden of Eden, the Great Flood, and details of the history told in the two Kings and the two Samuel books are questioned. For us as Christians, we realize that the much of what is in the Old Testament was written long after the events they describe happened, were sometimes not intended to be believed literally, and were heavily edited over multiple centuries, and so we are not shocked that much of it might not be fully accurate historically. But what about the New Testament? Christians tend to not question its veracity. How accurate is it?

But before we do that, I'd like to talk about peoples' last words. Not only what they say, but also who hears those words. Before the Covid pandemic, chaplains were only occasionally present when a person passed away. Normally, family are given privacy to be with their loved one at the end. If the person has

anything to say before they stop talking and enter the last stages of life, it is only the family who hears it. Sometimes a chaplain will coincidentally be checking in on a family and might then hear the last words, but usually not. We would be there if a patient has no family, or their family is not able to be there. We don't like anyone to die alone. I was called in at 3 A.M. one night, years ago to be with a man who lived on the street, had no known family, and who was dying of COPD. But then later, during the Covid pandemic, things changed. The rules did not allow for visitors, period, even if someone was passing. The chaplains suddenly sat with dying people, and yes, we heard their last words if there were any, and we often passed them on to the family. But the last words of this man, whom we will call Charlie, and who had COPD, have stuck in my mind most powerfully.

Let's consider the last words of Jesus. Here are abbreviated versions of the reported last words of Jesus, from the ESV, from the four different Gospels.

**Luke 23:44–46.**

*<sup>44</sup> And the sun's light failed. The curtain of the temple was torn in two. <sup>46</sup> Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last.*

**John 19:28–30.**

*<sup>28</sup> Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said, "I thirst." <sup>29</sup> A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and*

*held it to his mouth. <sup>30</sup> When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*

**Matthew 27:46–50.**

*<sup>46</sup> Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” <sup>47</sup> Some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, “This man is calling Elijah.” <sup>48</sup> One of them ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, gave it to him to drink. <sup>50</sup> Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.*

**Mark 15:34–37.**

*<sup>34</sup> At the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” <sup>35</sup> Some of the bystanders hearing it said, “Behold, he is calling Elijah.” <sup>36</sup> Someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine and gave it to him to drink. <sup>37</sup> And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last.*

You probably noticed that the four gospels disagree on what Jesus said last. So, when people talk about the “last words” of Jesus Christ, they often get into a debate about which Gospel has it right. Matthew reports Jesus’ last words on the cross as being: *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* Mark tells us that Jesus’ final words on the cross are the same as what Matthew tells us. Note that we believe that as he wrote Matthew had a copy of Mark’s Gospel on hand. John lists Jesus’ last words on the cross as: *“It is finished!”* Luke tells us that Jesus’ final words were: *“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!”* This is intriguing, as Luke also had Mark’s Gospel on hand as he wrote, we believe, and yet did not use the same last words as Mark quotes. In truth, there’s a possibility that Jesus said

all three of these things, because it isn't explicitly stated that Jesus didn't say anything else after he made whatever remarks the given Gospel writer attributes to Jesus. There are scholars who have concluded that perhaps Luke's version of Jesus's last words is the true last-last, as this Gospel seems to make the strongest statement that these were his absolute last words, that Jesus died right after saying them. Very complex arguments have been made trying to order the last words of Jesus, as given by the four Gospels. Indeed, the goal of many scholars has been to analyze the four Gospels to find a way to argue that the Gospels do NOT conflict on Jesus' true final words, that he could have said all these things. But remember that the Gospels were written from both written sources and oral sources. They are bound to be imprecise, and there is no denying that they conflict with each other in other ways. We do need to remember that Jesus' final words were spoken in Aramaic, then decades later they were written in Greek by authors who were using as sources various unknown written and oral sources. It's hard to understand why Luke and Mark do not agree, if Luke had Mark's Gospel. But if the Gospels are literal history, why do they disagree at all?

To consider this issue, let's look more closely at Jesus' last words as he was dying on the cross. Death by crucifixion took a long time. Because you cannot support your body with your legs for more than some number of hours, your legs

eventually give out and you suffocate. You also lose body fluids; remember that Jesus asked for water at the end and he was tortured by being given vinegar.

The Romans used crucifixion because it was also a form of torture. There is evidence that the Persians might have developed crucifixion. It could have been even earlier than this; perhaps the Babylonians or Assyrians are responsible for this form of capital punishment. What is Jesus attributed to having said as he was very slowly dying this way? 1. *"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!"* 2. *"It is finished."* 3. *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

Let's start out with what many feel is the most bizarre statement of the three, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*. Why would Jesus say this? There are a couple of theories. One is that he was feeling the agony that any person would feel at this moment. He was symbolically dying for us, absorbing our evil, accepting a horrible human death so that we could come to understand the importance of being forgiving, loving, and gentle. By having this extraordinarily kind person, who valued the lowest of humans as equals of the most wealthy and powerful, confront this barbarous death, we have come to understand the importance of living the way he did. A second theory is that Jesus was quite obviously quoting the very first line of Psalm 22: <sup>1</sup>*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the*

*words of my groaning? <sup>2</sup> O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest.* Notice that when Jesus said this, people responded with: *“This man is calling Elijah.”* The words My God, My God that we read in English are in truth *Eli, Eli*, in the original New Testament Scripture, the same as the beginning of Psalm 22 in Hebrew, but in the din of the crowd, some people might have been thinking that he was yelling out to Elijah. Those who heard it correctly, *Eli, Eli*, recognized this as a reference to Psalm 22, which happens to contain parallels with the eventual crucifixion of Jesus. Perhaps he spoke these words because he was making it clear that he was indeed the Messiah promised in the ancient Israelite scriptures. A third theory is that by referring to Psalm 22, a Lament attributed to David, he was doing what Jews of the time did when experiencing anguish. He was praying out a biblical lament, just as David is said to have declared his total dependence on God. Some say that the author of the Gospel of Luke was describing Jesus as saying all three of these things.

Consider John’s version of Jesus’ last words: *“It is finished!”* This one might have been an upbeat statement. Jesus had a mission – to come to earth as a human to teach us how to live. He had succeeded. It was indeed finished.

Here is the third and last “last words” attributed to Jesus: *“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!”* This is another quote from a Psalm, this time, Psalm

31. <sup>3</sup> *For you are my rock and my fortress; and for your name's sake you lead me and guide me;* <sup>4</sup> *you take me out of the net they have hidden for me, for you are my refuge.* <sup>5</sup> *Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.* The first part of this Psalm is a beautiful statement about how we must place our total trust in God, even when our enemies have laid nets as traps for us. So, that's what Jesus did at the end. He had nothing to do in his agony, except to put his trust in the grace, comfort, and love of God, as we should.

So, which of these things might Jesus have been trying to do: 1. Connect with us as a human in order to teach us how to live, 2. reinforce that critical fact that he was the Messiah, 3. imitate David and the Jewish lament tradition, 4. announce that his mission on Earth was gloriously complete, or 5. express his total trust in God, as we should?

Or consider this. Maybe Scripture isn't history. Remember that the Old and New Testaments were meant as neither fiction nor fact, in the modern sense. Scripture consists of spiritual truths. The authors did not consider it to be a twisting of the truth to engineer the words of Jesus to convey what Jesus taught. The authors might have decided on their own to do this. They might not have been trying to literally quote Jesus' final words. Perhaps no one recorded or remembered what he said. By the time the Gospels were written – by people



who were not present when he died – Jesus’ final words might have been lost.

So, the authors used the “final words” as a vehicle for reinforcing basic teachings of Jesus. Each Gospel author just happened to do it somewhat differently.

I have indeed heard a number of people speak their last words. But this one man, Charlie, who had no home and apparently no family, and who died from COPD in the early morning – his words have stuck with me the strongest. It’s because they caught me off guard. A nurse paged me into the hospital because she realized that Charlie was dying alone. I sat by his bed for about four hours. He appeared to not be conscious, just slowly dying. I prayed out loud for him, as his chart said he was a Christian, asking for a peaceful journey to eternity with God. I told him that he was not alone. I don’t remember much of what I said. I assumed that he could not consciously hear me, as his eyes were closed and he was breathing shallowly and noisily. But then he opened his eyes and said, “Thanks for being with me.” He closed his eyes again, and perhaps fifteen minutes later, he stopped breathing.

Do not evaluate the Bible the way you would modern writing. We expect current histories and biographies to be accurate in every detail, and in fact, they are typically tedious. We assume that anything we read in a novel is likely to not be rooted in fact. We draw a clean line between the two. This was not the

standard when Scripture was being written, not the Hebrew Scriptures and not the Greek Scriptures. The Bible was meant to be truthful, but in a different fashion. Storytelling was used to convey spiritual facts. The authors often did not have access to the literal truth and their readers knew this. The ancient Jews and the ancient Christians did not expect literal nonfiction in Scripture. Indeed, the New Testament was written within a few decades of when the facts it describes occurred, but the Old Testament was written in part many hundreds of years after the events it describes occurred. We do assume that the Gospels and the Book of Acts, in particular, to be, in their overall form, essentially true. But modern literalists who enforce our modern literary standards on ancient writings are being very naïve. We need to read the Bible to build our faith, and to learn the truths about how God loves us, lives within us, and guides us through life and will guide us through eternity.

A couple of weeks after Charlie died, they found a brother of his. The man lived in another state. I called him. He identified himself as a strong Christian believer. I told him that the nurses had given Charlie pain and anxiety medications so that he would die peacefully. I told him that Charlie did not die alone. The brother asked me about his last words, and I told him that Charlie thanked me for being with him. The brother began to cry. I told him that

Charlie's last words, thanking me for being with him, reminded me of Jesus' last words in the Gospel of Matthew, spoken after he had died and come back to commission the Apostles. They form the last half verse of Matthew's Gospel: *"remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*