

The Seven Last Words of Christ - Reflections for Holy Week
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The First Word:

“Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing.” —Luke 23:34

Reflection

It makes sense that the first word of Jesus from the cross is a word of forgiveness. That’s the point of the cross, after all. Jesus is dying so that we might be forgiven for our sins, so that we might be reconciled to God for eternity.

But the forgiveness of God through Christ doesn’t come only to those who don’t know what they are doing when they sin. In the mercy of God, we receive his forgiveness even when we do what we know to be wrong. God chooses to wipe away our sins, not because we have some convenient excuse, and not because we have tried hard to make up for them, but because he is a God of amazing grace, with mercies that are new every morning.

As we read the words, “Father, forgive them,” may we understand that we too are forgiven through Christ. As John writes in his first letter, “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness” (1 John 1:9). Because Christ died on the cross for us, we are cleansed from all wickedness, from every last sin. We are united with God the Father as his beloved children. We are free to approach his throne of grace with our needs and concerns. God “has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west” (Ps 103:13). What great news!

Questions for Reflection

Do you really believe God has forgiven your sins? Do you take time on a regular basis to confess your sins so that you might enjoy the freedom of forgiveness? Do you need to experience God’s forgiveness in a fresh way today?

Prayer

Gracious Lord Jesus, it’s easy for me to speak of your forgiveness, even to ask for it and to thank you for it. But do I really believe I’m forgiven? Do I experience the freedom that comes from the assurance that you have cleansed me from my sins? Or do I live as if I’m “semi-forgiven”? Even though I’ve put my faith in you and confessed my sins, do I live as sin still has power over me? Do I try to prove myself to you, as if I might be able to earn more forgiveness?

Dear Lord, though I believe at one level that you have forgiven me, this amazing truth needs to penetrate my heart in new ways. Help me to know with fresh conviction that I am fully and finally forgiven, not because of anything I have done, but because of what you have done for me.

May I live today as a forgiven person, opening my heart to you, choosing not to sin because the power of sin has been broken by your salvation.

All praise be to you, Lord Jesus, for your matchless forgiveness! Amen.

The Second Word:

“I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.” —Luke 23:43

Reflection

As Jesus hung on the cross, he was mocked by the leaders and the soldiers. One of the criminals being crucified with him added his own measure of scorn. But the other crucified criminal sensed that Jesus was being treated unjustly. After speaking up for Jesus, he cried out, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (v. 42).

Jesus responded to this criminal, “I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise” (v. 43). The word *paradise*, from the Greek word *paradeisos*, which meant “garden,” was used in the Greek Old Testament as a word for the Garden of Eden. In Judaism of the time of Jesus it was associated with heaven, and also with the future when God would restore all things to the perfection of the Garden. Paradise was sometimes thought to be the place where righteous people went after death. This seems to be the way Jesus uses *paradise* in this passage.

Thus we have encountered one of the most astounding and encouraging verses in all of Scripture. Jesus promised that the criminal would be with him in paradise. Yet the text of Luke gives us no reason to believe this man had been a follower of Jesus, or even a believer in him in any well-developed sense. He might have felt sorry for his sins, but he did not obviously repent. Rather, the criminal’s cry to be remembered seems more like a desperate, last-gasp effort.

Though we should make every effort to have right theology, and though we should live our lives each day as disciples of Jesus, in the end, our relationship with him comes down to simple trust. “Jesus, remember me,” we cry. And Jesus, embodying the mercy of God, says to us, “You will be with me in paradise.” We are welcome there not because we have right theology, and not because we are living rightly, but because God is merciful and we have put our trust in Jesus.

Questions for Reflection

Have you staked your life on Jesus? Have you put your ultimate trust in him? Do you know that, when your time comes, you will be with him in paradise?

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, how I wonder at your grace and mercy! When we cry out to you, you hear us. When we ask you to remember us when you come into your kingdom, you offer the promise of paradise. Your mercy, dear Lord, exceeds anything we might imagine. It embraces us, encourages us, heals us.

O Lord, though my situation is so different from the criminal who cried out to you, I am nevertheless quite like him. Today I live, trusting you and you alone. My life, but now and in the world to come, is in your hands. And so I pray:

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom! Jesus, remember me today as I seek to live within your kingdom! Amen.

The Third Word:

“Dear woman, here is your son.” —John 19:26

Reflection

As Jesus was dying, his mother was among those who had remained with him. Most of the male disciples had fled, with the exception of one whom the Fourth Gospel calls “the disciple he loved.” We can’t be exactly sure of the identity of this beloved disciple, though many interpreters believe he is John, who is also the one behind the writing of this Gospel.

No matter who the beloved disciple was, it’s clear that Jesus was forging a relationship between this disciple and his mother, one in which the disciple would take care of Mary financially and in other ways. Jesus wanted to make sure she would be in good hands after his death.

The presence of Mary at the cross adds both humanity and horror to the scene. We are reminded that Jesus was a real human being, a man who had once been a boy who had once been carried in the womb of his mother. Even as he was dying on the cross as the Saviour of the world, Jesus was also a son, a role he didn’t neglect in his last moments.

When we think of the crucifixion of Jesus from the perspective of his mother, our horror increases dramatically. The death of a child is one of the most painful of all parental experiences. To watch one’s beloved child experience the extreme torture of crucifixion must have been unimaginably terrible. We’re reminded of the prophecy of Simeon shortly after Jesus’ birth, when he said to Mary: “And a sword will pierce your very soul” (Luke 2:35).

This scene helps us not to glorify or spiritualize the crucifixion of Jesus. He was a real man, true flesh and blood, a son of a mother, dying with unbearable agony. His suffering was altogether real, and he took it on for you and for me.

Questions for Reflection

What does Mary’s presence at the cross evoke in you? Why do you think was it necessary for Jesus to suffer physical pain as he died?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, the presence of your mother at the cross engages my heart. You are no longer only the Saviour dying for the sins of the world. You are also a fully human man, a son with a mother.

O Lord, how can I begin to thank you for what you suffered? My words fall short. My thoughts seem superficial and vague. Nevertheless, I offer my sincere gratitude for your suffering. Thank you for bearing my sin on the cross. I give you my praise, my love, my heart... all that I am, because you have given me all that you are.

All praise be to you, Lord Jesus, fully God and fully human, Saviour of the world . . . my Saviour! Amen.

The Fourth Word:

“My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” —Mark 15:34

Reflection

As Jesus was dying on the cross, he echoed the beginning of Psalm 22, which reads:

My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?
Why are you so far away when I groan for help?
Every day I call to you, my God, but you do not answer.
Every night you hear my voice, but I find no relief. (vv. 1-2)

In the words of the psalmist Jesus found a way to express the cry of his heart: Why had God abandoned him? Why did his Father turn his back on Jesus in his moment of greatest agony?

This side of heaven, we will never fully know what Jesus was experiencing in this moment. Was he asking this question because, in the mystery of his incarnational suffering, he didn't know why God had abandoned him? Or was his cry not so much a question as an expression of profound agony? Or was it both?

What we do know is that Jesus entered into the Hell of separation from God. The Father abandoned him because Jesus took upon himself the penalty for our sins. In that excruciating moment, he experienced something far more horrible than physical pain. The beloved Son of God knew what it was like to be rejected by the Father. As we read in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (NIV).

I can write these words. I can say, truly, that the Father abandoned the Son for our sake, for the salvation of the world. But can I really grasp the mystery and the majesty of this truth? Hardly. As Martin Luther once said, “God forsaking God. Who can understand it?” Yet even my miniscule grasp of this reality calls me to confession, to humility, to worship, to adoration.

Questions for Reflection

Have you taken time to consider that Jesus was abandoned by the Father so that you might not be? What does this “word” from the cross mean to you?

Prayer

O Lord Jesus, though I will never fully grasp the wonder and horror of your abandonment by the Father, every time I read this “word,” I am overwhelmed with gratitude. How can I ever thank you for what you suffered for me? What can I do but to offer myself to you in gratitude and praise? Thank you, dear Lord, for what you suffered. Thank you for taking my place. Thank you for being forsaken by the Father so that I might never be.

When I survey the wondrous cross, On which the Prince of glory died, My richest gain I count but loss, And pour contempt on all my pride.	See, from his head, his hands, his feet, Sorrow and love flow mingled down; Did e'er such love and sorrow meet, Or thorns compose so rich a crown.
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Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, Save in the death of Christ my God; All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to his blood.	Were the whole realm of nature mine, That were a present far too small; Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all.
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—“*When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*” by Isaac Watts (1707)

The Fifth Word:

“I am thirsty.” —John 19:28

Reflection

No doubt Jesus experienced extreme thirst while being crucified. He would have lost a substantial quantity of bodily fluid, both blood and sweat, through what he had endured even prior to crucifixion. Thus his statement, “I am thirsty” was, on the most obvious level, a request for something to drink. In response the soldiers gave Jesus “sour wine” (v. 29), a cheap beverage common among lower class people in the time of Jesus.

John notes that Jesus said “I am thirsty,” not only as a statement of physical reality, but also in order to fulfill the Scripture. Though there is no specific reference in the text of the Gospel, it’s likely that John was thinking of Psalm 69, which includes this passage:

Their insults have broken my heart,
and I am in despair.
If only one person would show some pity;
if only one would turn and comfort me.
But instead, they give me poison for food;
they offer me sour wine for my thirst.
(vv. 20-21)

As he suffered, Jesus embodied the pain of the people of Israel, that which had been captured in the Psalms. Jesus was suffering for the sin of Israel, even as he was taking upon himself the sin of the world.

As I reflect on Jesus’ statement, “I am thirsty,” I keep thinking of my own thirst. It’s nothing like that of Jesus. Rather, I am thirsty for him. My soul yearns for the living water that Jesus supplies (John 4:10; 7:38-39). I rejoice in the fact that he suffered physical thirst on the cross – and so much more – so that my thirst for the water of life might be quenched.

Questions for Reflection

How do you respond to Jesus’ statement “I am thirsty”? What does this statement suggest to you about Jesus? About yourself?

Prayer

O Lord, once again I thank you for what you suffered on the cross. Besides extraordinary pain, you also experienced extreme thirst. All of this was part and parcel of your taking on our humanity so that you might take away our sin.

Dear Lord, in your words “I am thirsty” I hear the cry of my own heart. I too am thirsty, Lord, not for physical drink. I don’t need sour wine. Rather, I need the new wine of your kingdom to flood my soul. I need to be refreshed by your living water. I yearn for your Spirit to fill me once again.

I am thirsty, Lord, for you. Amen.

The Sixth Word:

“It is finished!” —John 19:30

Reflection

I never saw a more difficult film to watch than Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*. For most of that movie I wanted to avert my eyes. It was horrible to watch even a cinematic version of a crucifixion. And it was beyond comprehension to think that this actually happened to somebody, and not just anybody, but my Lord and Saviour. I had studied the crucifixion before, and knew in my head what Jesus experienced. But seeing a visual presentation of his suffering was almost more than I could bear. When *The Passion of the Christ* was over, I felt palpable relief. Thank goodness it was finished.

When Jesus said “It is finished,” surely he was expressing relief that his suffering was over. “It is finished” meant, in part, “This is finally done!” But the Greek verb translated as “It is finished” (*tetelestai*) means more than just this. Eugene Peterson captures the full sense of the verb in *The Message*: “It’s done... complete.” Jesus had accomplished his mission. He had announced and inaugurated the kingdom of God. He had revealed the love and grace of God. And he had embodied that love and grace by dying for the sin of the world, thus opening up the way for all to live under the reign of God.

Because Jesus finished his work of salvation, you and I don’t need to add to it. In fact, we can’t. He accomplished what we never could, taking our sin upon himself and giving us his life in return. Jesus finished that for which he had been sent, and we are the beneficiaries of his unique effort. Because of what he finished, you and I are never “finished.” We have hope for this life and for the next. We know that nothing can separate us from God’s love. One day what God has begun in us will also be finished, by his grace. Until that day, we live in the confidence of Jesus’ cry of victory: “It is finished!”

Questions for Reflection

Do you live as if Jesus finished the work of salvation? To you have confidence that God will finish that which he has begun in you?

Prayer

How can I ever find words to express my gratitude to you, dear Lord Jesus? You did it. You finished that for which you had been sent, faithful in life, faithful in death. You accomplished that which no other person could do, taking the sin of the world upon your sinless shoulders... taking my sin so that I might receive your forgiveness and new life.

All praise be to you, gracious Lord, for finishing the work of salvation. All praise be to you, dear Jesus, for saving me! Alleluia! Amen.

The Seventh Word:

“Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!” —Luke 23:46

Reflection

Two of the last seven “words” of Jesus were quotations from the Psalms. Earlier Jesus had Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” to express his anguish. Later he borrowed from Psalm 31, which comes to us from Luke as “Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands.”

On an obvious level, Jesus was putting his post mortem future in the hands of his Heavenly Father. It was as if he was saying, “Whatever happens to me after I die is your responsibility, Father.”

But when we look carefully at the Psalm Jesus quoted, we see more than what at first meets our eyes. Psalm 31 begins with a cry for divine help:

O LORD, I have come to you for protection;
don't let me be disgraced.
Save me, for you do what is right. (v. 1)

But then it mixes asking for God's deliverance with a confession of God's strength and faithfulness:

I entrust my spirit into your hand.
Rescue me, LORD, for you are a faithful God. (v. 5)

By the end, Psalm 31 offers praise of God's salvation:

Praise the LORD,
for he has shown me the wonders of his unfailing love.
He kept me safe when my city was under attack. (v. 21)

By quoting a portion of Psalm 31, therefore, Jesus not only entrusted his future to his Father, but also implied that he would be delivered and exonerated. No, God would not deliver him from death by crucifixion. But beyond this horrific death lay something marvelous. “I entrust my spirit into your hands” points back to the familiar suffering of David in Psalm 31, and forward to the resurrection.

Questions for Reflection

Have you put your life and, indeed, your life beyond this life, in God's hands? How do you experience God's salvation through Christ in your life today?

Prayer

Gracious Lord, even as you once entrusted your spirit into the hands of the Father, so I give my life to you. I trust you, and you alone to be my Saviour. I submit to your sovereignty over my life, and seek to live for your glory alone. Here I am, Lord, available to you, both now and in the future.

How good it is to know, dear Lord, that the cross was not the end for you. As you entrusted your spirit into the Father's hands, you did so in anticipation of what was to come. So we reflect upon your death, not in despair, but in hope. With Good Friday behind us, Easter Sunday is on the horizon. Amen.