

“The Seven Words of Jesus from the Cross”
Isaiah 52:13-53:12; 2 Corinthians 5:14-21

The First Word: Luke 23:34

And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And they cast lots to divide his garments.

The most sublime words in all of history. No words have been uttered nor will be uttered that lie so far removed from the impulse to rectify personal injustice. The Roman centurion would look up at Jesus and say, “Certainly this man was innocent!” (Lk 23:47). Yet here He hangs—mocked, beaten, scourged, crucified—and He makes no defense. In fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth” (cf. Lk 23:9). Why does Jesus tolerate the sentence? Why does He bear the punishment? Any sensible man would mention his innocence! But in fact, Jesus reveals the depth of His innocence in the words, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” He’s so thoroughly innocent of any evil whatsoever that He forgoes the opportunity to revel in proving His opponents wrong and instead prays for them—He prays for what they need most. Jesus “said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, ‘Who is this, who even forgives sins?’” (Lk 7:48-49); when Jesus “saw their faith, he said, ‘Man, your sins are forgiven you.’ And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, ‘Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?’” (Lk 5:20-21). Even before the crucifixion, Jesus’ word of forgiveness amazed; now at the crucifixion this word meets its source of power, because the only truly innocent Man this world will ever know transfers all guilt to Himself. Now Isaiah’s words ring true, for God’s suffering servant “bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors”—He intercedes for His executioners while nailed to the instrument of death, praying, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” If Jesus never said these words, people would still forgive... but that forgiveness would never restore one to God, because only by the crucifixion of Christ is divine forgiveness possible. Without Jesus’ death, the forgiveness you offer someone would never be the means to reconciliation with God, only to self. The Father honors the request of His Son, because His Son takes the place of all sinners. Now the word of forgiveness holds eternal power, for Jesus “makes intercession for the transgressors,” praying for *all us sinners*, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (cf. Rom 8:34; Lk 24:46-47). We sing stanzas 1 through 3 (LSB 447).

The Second Word: Luke 23:43

And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

The crucified criminals are the world. Everyone will face death because “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). And like the world, the criminals are divided: one mocks Jesus, the other believes in Him. Paradise was thrown away by Adam in contempt for God, and now a criminal does the same. But the other has faith. He makes confession concerning sin and Jesus by saying, “we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong” (Lk 23:41). One criminal taunts Jesus, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” (Lk 23:39). But the other sees that true salvation doesn’t come by Jesus removing Himself from the cross—it comes by Jesus keeping Himself on the cross for

the misdeeds of the criminal. In confession of sin and Jesus the believer dies to enter paradise, not yet raised bodily but abounding in peace and free from fear and living with God where there is no sin. We are dying criminals who in faith say to God, “remember me when you come into your kingdom,” to which He answers, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” We sing stanzas 4 through 6.

The Third Word: John 19:26-27

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son!” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

According to John’s gospel, the last time Jesus addressed His mother was at the wedding in Cana. They’d run out of wine and she suggested He produce some. And “Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come’” (Jn 2:4). But now His hour had come: a mother watching her son suffer, suffocate, and die in disgrace. Jesus makes preparation for her care, entrusting her to His apostle. But the greatest care He could provide was being given in what He was already about—dying in her place. It sounds gruff to call one’s mother “woman,” but in fact Jesus was pointing her and all women beyond natural birth to the birth from above, for to all “who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (Jn 1:12-13). An eternal relationship isn’t made by *bloodlines* but by the blood *of Christ*. Mary was more than a mother at the foot of the cross: she was “a new creation,” a child of God, a member of the heavenly family, made holy in the death of her son. We sing stanzas 7 through 9.

The Fourth Word: Mark 15:34

And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

This is the hour of greatest desperation. This is when, as Isaiah writes, “his soul makes an offering for sin.” Genuine faith isn’t revealed in health and prosperity, but in the moment of death. Jesus doesn’t distance Himself from His Father. He doesn’t complain about God to someone else. Instead, He prays to His Father: addressing His Father, claiming His Father as His own—an undeniable statement of faith: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” These words can’t be interpreted as cleaving the divine. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God. Yet Jesus bears every sin. He hangs in place of every sinner. “The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” God “made him to be sin who knew no sin.” To the Galatians Paul writes, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Gal 3:13)—Jesus confirms the curse as permanent exile from God. Yet Jesus was not forsaken. The fourth-century church father Gregory of Nazianzus writes, Jesus “expresses our condition. We had once been the forsaken and disregarded; then we were accepted and now are saved by the sufferings of the impassible” (*Fourth Theological Oration* 30.5). How is this possible? How does one bear every single sin ever committed in thought, word, or deed, and remain united to God? Because the Man bearing sin *is* God. Martin Luther writes, “Righteousness is eternal, immortal, and invincible” (AE 26:281). On the cross, at the ninth hour, Jesus took on your exile from God “so that in him [you] might become the righteousness of God.” We sing stanzas 10 through 12.

The Fifth Word: John 19:28

After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), “I thirst.”

Jesus is God. He is also man. And so He thirsts. But there is no relief. Any drink given to the one being crucified would actually intensify the pain by hastening suffocation. Jesus doesn't flinch from the suffering that is ours—He seeks it. He makes it His own. And so He says, “I thirst.” His request fulfills the psalm that reads, “for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink” (Ps 69:22)... but it also impels the agony of divine punishment: “stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted... it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief.” So that none could say Jesus didn't take on our suffering, He takes on the *greatest* suffering. So that none could say, “Wait! There are others who have suffered more, therefore their cause is greater,” Jesus subjects Himself to suffering in the highest degree. He is willing, but not merry. He is not a masochist, but a substitute: for you, for me, for the world, taking on what we should suffer for our sin. And so Jesus said, “I thirst.” We sing stanzas 13 through 15.

The Sixth Word: John 19:30

When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

When His suffering is complete—when Jesus had suffered on behalf of everyone in the highest degree—“It is finished.” The saying is apt, because its first-century use could refer to a completed financial transaction (cf. Mt 17:24; Rom 13:6). In other words, “It is finished” means “It has been paid.” Jesus *did* pay the price, for “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45). He paid with His whole life as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29), as the sacrificial offering to God for the sins we commit. On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus said to His disciples, “I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it should be paid!” (Lk 12:50). But now it is paid. Now “It is finished.” Jesus was baptized on the cross so that we might be “buried with him by baptism into [His] death” (Rom 6:4) and receive the free gift of payment rendered to God. His death is the complete atonement for sin precisely because “It is finished.” If there was something left to do—no matter how small—you'd have a price to pay. But in fact, “It has been paid.” There's nothing left for you to do. Now you live on from the cross as one ransomed by His death, freed to love without fear, rejoicing in the eternal truth of the words, “It is finished.” We sing stanzas 16 through 18.

The Seventh Word: Luke 23:46

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” (Lk 23:46b). Jesus was perfectly faithful to the end. His spirit was committed to His Father for deliverance from death. One last time Jesus quotes a psalm: “you are my rock and my fortress; and for your name's sake you lead me and guide me; you take me out of the net they have hidden for me, for you are my refuge. Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God” (Ps 31:3-5). His last words are your last words, a final supplication to the Father through the Son in the Spirit (cf. Eph 2:18). Like the Lord's Prayer, He gives you the words to say, which God promises to hear. Jesus was delivered from death, and by His death you are delivered: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” We sing stanzas 19 through 21.

—Pastor Greg Bauch