



***The Last Words
of Christ on the Cross***

7 Brief Devotionals and Prayers

by Graham Jones

***“Father, forgive them,
for they know not what they do”***

LUKE 23:34

Jesus, even when he was dying on the cross, had in his mind forgiveness for sinners. It’s amazing to think that this same God, the one who judges the whole world according to His righteousness, the one who flooded the earth to wash away sin, the one who brought the plagues upon Egypt to destroy idol worship and condemn injustice, the one who drove out His people Israel when they failed to obey Him time and time again – this same God spoke forgiveness to the ones who were killing him.

And how did they respond? The same verse says, “and they cast lots to divide his garments.” The people had no regard for forgiveness from this man or this God. They did not know God or His ways and were only doing what sinful nature led them to do.

It’s possible that Jesus then, hanging there while his own clothes were being gambled over, might have remembered a prophecy from Zechariah 3 about other clothes. There, Zechariah saw a vision of God removing filthy garments and clothing His people “with pure vestments.” He heard the prophecy of a coming servant when God declared, “I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day.” Forgiveness.

The writer of Hebrews goes on to explain that what Jesus did for us on that day at the cross not only brought instantaneous forgiveness, it brought *eternal* forgiveness. At the cross, Christ shed His blood to give a God-ordained reality to the words he spoke. As he gave specific forgiveness to these men, he was giving his life to secure everlasting forgiveness for all who would believe in Him. Now, as 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” The blood that His killers spilled by their own hands was the very blood by which they could be forgiven, not just in a word or in a moment, but forever.

God, thank you for planning to save us through the cross of Jesus. Thank you for seeing my sin and sending your Son so that we could be forgiven by His blood.

Jesus, thank you for saving me when I didn’t deserve it, when I didn’t even know how much I needed it, when I didn’t even know how sinful I really was.

Holy Spirit, please help me trust in the power of the cross and the forgiveness of Christ when I feel the weight of my sin. Help me to turn from sin and live the way that Jesus did, trusting and obeying you. Help me to look at the people around me, especially those that persecute me and hurt me, and forgive them and point them to you.

***“Truly, I say to you
today you will be with me in paradise”***

LUKE 23:43

When the Roman soldiers sought to kill Jesus by nailing him to a cross, they weren't doing something unusual for that day and age. Criminals were killed on crosses for all kinds of reasons: theft, murder, treason, and more. According to Matthew's gospel, on the day that Jesus died, they also crucified two robbers next to him.

Consider for a moment that as the blood of Jesus ran down his body, the very blood that was shed so that people could be forgiven, the only person watching in true faith, it seems, was a common criminal. The Pharisees always hated it when Jesus spent time with people like this, but Jesus told them, “the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). Of course, it seems shameful and embarrassing to us for Jesus to have to die with criminals, but in reality, those are the ones whom Jesus came to save! What the Pharisees and scribes could not see because of their pride and selfishness this thief saw so clearly, that he deserved death and Jesus did not.

This small confession is also an astounding testimony to God's salvation by faith alone. No amount of effort or good works can save in any way, and this man certainly knew that. However, simple faith in Christ alone confessed from a changed heart can. Paul writes in Romans 10 to remind us of this, saying, “for with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” While we often try to package salvation into an experience, a decision, or even some kind of work of our own doing, Jesus promises paradise to a man with a believing heart and a simple confession: “This man [Jesus] has done nothing wrong...Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Finally, we see in this confession a beautiful contrast of the perfection of Jesus and the wretchedness of man. The holy God of all creation came down to this earth to dwell with simple men and women as the man, Jesus. He condescended to us, in the truest sense, by bringing the light of His perfection and truth into our darkness. Even now, through the preaching of his gospel and the movement of his Spirit, he shines his light into those who put their faith in him, and promises paradise.

God, thank you for sovereignly establishing salvation by faith alone, rather than leaving us to feebly attempt our own salvation by works.

Jesus, thank you for the immense kindness you showed to this thief in the midst of your pain. I know that the same kindness you showed to him, you show to all of us who believe.

Holy Spirit, help me not to give myself only to the people I like, but to give myself to all who will listen. Help me to share and show them the gospel so that they would respond in faith.

“Woman, behold your son!”
“Behold, your mother!”

JOHN 19:26-27

This moment, by far, is one of the most unusual scenes that occurs at the cross. Most of these “last words” of Jesus happen at critical moments or carry some prophetic or theological significance, but here, Jesus just speaks with one of his closest disciples and his mom. Even in this strange moment, we can discern a couple striking truths.

One, even the dying Jesus cared about his relationships and family, even if not in the ways we might think. According to Scripture, Jesus had other brothers, but he specifically wanted His disciple and friend John to look after His mother. Isn't that strange? Why would Jesus not just let his brothers take care of his mom? This harkens back to Luke 8:31, when Jesus says, “My mother and *my* brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.” He loves his mother, Mary, with the greatest care, respect, and concern for her wellbeing after his death, so rather than entrusting her to his biological brothers who have yet to believe in him, Jesus turns to John. His love for his disciple is the love we all should have for those who are in God's family, our spiritual brothers and sisters. Paul's famous passage on love in 1 Corinthians 13 is about how the church should love one another (not just about romantic love). This love, which shows God's own love for His church, is patient and kind and selfless and humble and tempered and peaceful and truthful and trusting and enduring. And Jesus himself showed this kind of love to Mary and John when he entrusted them to one another.

Which brings us to the second truth: Jesus knew he was *really* going to die. Up to this point, Jesus had plenty of opportunities to climb down off of that cross, heal His own wounds, and vanquish His enemies there on the hillside. Better yet, he could have grasped His divinity with all power and understanding (using the language of Philippians 2) and at least told his mom and friend, “Don't worry!” or “It's going to be alright!” or “Be right back!” Certainly, he had already told the disciples that he, the Son of God, would rise again on the third day, but while hanging there on the cross in the throes of death, Jesus speaks simply as a dying man to His mother and friend. Essentially, he says, “Take care of her when I'm gone!” In this, we hear the pain and love and reality of the moment, and remember that Jesus gave up everything he had for the mission he was sent for, even unto death; and in this, his love for his mother and his brothers is most evident.

God, thank you for creating the family as a picture of your love and your communion with us.
Jesus, thank you for setting us an example in the way that you loved your disciples and your family in a way that would point them, and us, to your truth and your life.
Holy Spirit, help me follow after Jesus in that kind of love for my church and my family.

***“My God, my God,
why have you forsaken me?”***

MATTHEW 27:46

This statement, the only question that Jesus asked while on the cross, carries a form of pain that most of us have experienced in small ways. We have all likely found ourselves in a position of confusion and anguish over where God has brought us, whether in sickness, or poverty, or depression, or unemployment, or any number of other things. When we cry out to God in this way, what we really mean is something like, “God, why does it *feel like* you’ve forsaken me?” because we can’t see what God sees. But when Jesus cries out like this to God, he knows what he’s saying, and it carries great significance.

As we will see in other last words of Jesus, he knows that God sent him to pay the penalty for our sins on the cross, to take on the full punishment of God’s wrath. Paul explains this in 2 Corinthians 5:21, saying, “For our sake he (God the Father) made him (Jesus Christ) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” and in Romans 6:23, saying, “The wages of sin is death.” In case we forget or overlook the gravity of this, take a moment to consider: your God came down to *die* for you. This death was the completely deserved punishment for your sin, yet Jesus took it upon himself willingly so that he might save you. Don’t miss the chance to thank him once again, to worship him, or for some of you, to see and believe in him for the first time.

And still, there is so much else to unpack in this question! When Jesus speaks these words, he absolutely feels and expresses the true anguish felt in God’s wrath, but he’s also quoting a song. In fact, by saying the first line, he’s referencing the whole song for every Jewish listener present. It would be like us saying “Come, thou fount of every blessing!” and both mean the phrase and quote the song in saying it. Here, Jesus is making a direct connection to himself through the words of Psalm 22, a psalm of King David. This psalm shows us a glimpse into the kind of pain and suffering that Jesus felt while on the cross, yet it also reveals an amazing hope and promise. After crying out to God, David says, “Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our fathers trusted; they trusted, *and you delivered them.*” Even in this most deeply emotional and utterly pitiful cry, Jesus trusted his Father! He knew that the same God who had forsaken him in judgment of our sin would deliver him up out of the grave in righteousness. The author of life would defeat death, even his own, and rise, bringing life and hope to all who trust in him.

God, thank you for hearing me when I cry out to you. Sometimes it’s so difficult to trust in you during hard times, but thank you for always being patient and loving and faithful.

Jesus, thank you for dying for my sins perfectly, not cursing God, but trusting in him.

Holy Spirit, help me to die in my living in the way that Jesus did – fully trusting in you.

“I thirst”

JOHN 19:28

While it does not seem strange that Jesus would have been thirsty on the cross, it *does* seem strange that he would take the time to mention it. After all, he was not only thirsty, he was also hungry and bleeding and bruised and pierced and struggling to breathe, among many other things beyond our understanding. Thirst seems like a pretty minor worry by comparison!

Yet Jesus says he is thirsty. John writes that he does this “knowing that all was now finished” and “to fulfill the Scripture.” The Scripture mentioned here is likely Psalm 69:21, which explicitly talks about a thirst met with sour wine, the same drink offered to Jesus. In that context, the sour wine is an insult to the psalmist’s thirst when offered by his enemies. In ancient Rome, when people were crucified, sour wine was usually given to keep them conscious or awake through their last hours, just to extend their pain. The writers of Matthew and Mark bring that idea to the forefront in their telling of the moment, suggesting that a man offered sour wine to try and keep him conscious in order to see if Elijah would come down. Whether the man who offered it was just doing his job or trying to conjure up some miracle out of Jesus before he died, it was a cruel act that prolonged the suffering of an innocent man.

Earlier, Jesus had been offered another kind of wine, a cocktail that would have actually reduced his pain and suffering on the cross before he died, but he did not accept it. Now, a man wants to prolong his suffering just to see what will happen and Jesus accepts the drink. Why would Jesus do that? Jesus knew that the pain of the cross was the righteous judgment of God towards the sins of the world, which he himself bore, and he had been sent to drink the draught of death to the very last drop. He would not accept a drink that would alleviate the pain because the sin that he carried, our sin, deserved full punishment.

But the following verses in John remind us that Jesus did not die on the cross because men overpowered him; rather, he came to lay His own life down. After drinking the draught that was meant to keep Him awake, Jesus bowed His head and gave up His spirit, and died. As Jesus said previously in John 10:18, he had the authority here to lay down His life, so he obeyed his Father and did so willingly; but in three days, he would take his life up again.

God, thank you for allowing us to be thirsty to remind us that every desire we have is quenched in you. Thank you for being all that we need for life and true sustenance.

Jesus, thank you for suffering to such a degree for us that you received the full judgment of God’s wrath. Thank you for laying down your life and taking it up again for me, that I might believe in you and find life.

Holy Spirit, please give me a thirst for Jesus that can be quenched by nothing else.

“It is finished”

JOHN 19:30

Many of us have heard that Jesus said this phrase on the cross, so we might be in danger of taking it for granted. If you think about it, it seems like a pretty odd thing to say, because the resurrection was coming soon, so the work of Jesus in this world was clearly not finished. He would go on later to appear to his disciples and teach them and commission them before ascending to heaven. So what was Jesus even talking about?

In Greek, “it is finished” is written as *tetelestai*, a term that essentially means “the debt is paid.” Throughout our lives, we live with all kinds of debt, like car loans, mortgages, credit card debt, and student loans. We borrow money for certain purposes and then must pay it back to the bank over time (with interest!) or face a penalty. In a way, our spiritual lives are much the same. God made us to be a holy people who will worship Him and represent Him on this earth, but ever since Adam and Eve sinned at the beginning of the world, all of us have inherited this debt of sin to God. With each passing year, we add through our sinfulness such an amount of debt that can never be repaid by our own actions.

Again, we will never be able to pay this debt, but Jesus can, *and he did*. In this way, we can see that when Jesus said, “it is finished,” he was talking about a specific mission, about the debt of sin that God the Father sent him to pay. Many hundreds of years before this, Isaiah the prophet wrote that “it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt” (Isaiah 53:10a). This means God planned to pay our debt on the cross before any of us were ever born. “And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Colossians 2:13-14). For those of us who believe in Jesus, we no longer live under the weight of this debt of sin. We have incredible freedom and joy in Christ our Savior, who took that weight upon His own body for us and said, “The debt is paid. *Tetelestai*. It is finished.”

God, thank you for your immense grace and patience with me. I don't deserve a chance to have my sin paid for, especially by you, but I know that no one else could ever pay it.

Jesus, thank you for being obedient to pay this debt for me through your death on the cross. Thank you for living such a life given to this mission that you can say, “it is finished,” to every measure of guilt in my heart for every kind of sin I have ever committed and will commit.

Holy Spirit, please help me to trust in the finished work of the cross and live by its power. Help us, your church, to live out the mission that you have called us to with such passion and fervor until the day when you say again, “it is finished,” and call us home to you.

“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit”

LUKE 23:46

What John records by narrative in John 19:30, Luke records by the very words of Jesus one final truth. With his dying breath, Jesus doesn't take the opportunity to prove himself before his accusers. He doesn't even take the opportunity to preach of God's kingdom again, or make a call to repentance, or condemn hypocrisy and sinfulness, or teach his disciples more about Himself (after all, as John just recorded, "it is finished"). No, at the very last, Jesus simply commits Himself to God.

The next verse after this reveals an amazing response from one of the most unlikely people at the scene. A Roman centurion, one of those presiding over the killing of Jesus, hears what Jesus says and sees him die, and then praises God. "Certainly this man was innocent!" he exclaims, clearly with some knowledge of the reality of what just happened. The centurion heard something in the words of Jesus that seemed radically different from all of the other men he had ever put to death. Rather than defiance or pain or confession of guilt, Jesus spoke final confidence in his Father, the only one he lived for.

As if the holy Son of God needed to clarify that what he was doing was truly God's will! We already know what Jesus prayed in the garden the night before ("not my will, but yours") and throughout his ministry. Jesus fully submitted to the will of God his entire life, but he doesn't miss a final opportunity to once more commit himself to his Father's will. His ultimate submission leads to the ultimate victory: the resurrection to come. "And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him" (Philippians 2:8-9a). This Jesus, who died, is now alive, because in committing his own spirit to God, he placed it in the hands of the only one who could give him the power to walk through death and come back to life.

God, thank you for making a perfect plan to save your people through your perfect Son.

Jesus, thank you for submitting yourself to the will of your Father. You had every right to do whatever you wanted, but you knew that your Father had a plan to save His people through your death. Thank you for being faithful where I could not.

Holy Spirit, help me to submit to the will of the Father. Help me to see in my death and pain and suffering not just the failures of the world and the brokenness of sin and the hopelessness of darkness, but the hope of eternal life through the One who walked through death and emerged victorious. May the One who raised Jesus from the dead also give me strength to walk according to his commands and by his character, that by daily trusting in him I might find true life, for the glory of the name of Jesus and sake of His gospel, forever. Amen.