

MEDITATIONS ON THE SEVEN WORDS OF CHRIST
GOOD FRIDAY SERVICE - ST. PAUL LUTHERAN CHURCH OF BISMARCK

March 29, 2024

The First Word

Luke 23:32-34 Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³ And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments.

We talk about forgiveness, but the setting is usually a comfortable chair or church pew in a perfectly air-conditioned building. Jesus' thoughts turned to forgiveness in the worst imaginable circumstances, when there was no evidence of repentance from anyone and when those he forgave were in the midst of torturing him. Jesus' thoughts were always centered not on himself but on others. He could see what we often refuse to see. He was able to see beyond pain and death to the judgment that will certainly follow after this life. Even as he was being crucified, he looked at his tormentors in love and prayed to his Father that they might not be punished with hell for what they were doing.

Where human beings are often very casual about hell, Jesus never was. Hell is not a punch line. It is a very real place to which all unbelievers will be sentenced on Judgment Day. Mindful of this, Jesus offered his personal forgiveness to those who demonstrated no remorse of any kind, even as they carried out barbarous, unjust acts against him.

Yet his prayer was not for the soldiers and the Jews alone. He prayed thus also for you and me. You and I are the Roman soldiers. Our sins pounded the nails. Our sins caused his abandonment. Our sins caused his death. Nor was Jesus' prayer restricted to these words on the cross. His entire life and death were prayers for us, sinners. By offering his perfect life in that death on the cross, Jesus was sending to his Father the greatest, most selfless prayer ever spoken: *"Father, forgive them. Direct their punishment onto me."*

The Second Word

Luke 23:39-43 One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹ And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

During his life on earth, Jesus once gave that beautiful Gospel promise that we have now come to know so well: John 3:16 ***"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*** Jesus could not have demonstrated that love more clearly than he did on the cross on the terrible night of his crucifixion. There Jesus showed that he not only loved ***"the whole world,"*** he also loved *the individual sinner*. Two men were crucified with Jesus. Both had similar backgrounds. They themselves admitted that they were receiving the punishment they deserved for their crimes. And yet we know that at the very end of his life, one of the criminals took a very different path. He went to join his Lord in Paradise.

The message for us is clear. The blackest sins of the most terrible past have been washed clean by the blood of the Lamb of God. There is no life so bad that Jesus cannot save it, no sin so terrible that Jesus did not pay for it. It is never too late, not while we are still living, for the Holy Spirit to turn us to the Lord Jesus and thereby save us. It is unbelief alone that can condemn us. Jesus proved this fact when he spoke the words to the dying thief next to him, the same message he speaks also to us on this the day of his crucifixion: ***"Today, paradise belongs to you!"***

The Third Word

John 19:25-27 Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" ²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

Once again we see the selfless love of Jesus demonstrated from the cross – his compassion in the midst of utter agony. He showed his love to the soldiers. He showed his love to the criminal hanging next to him. He now shows his loving concern for the mother that carried and raised him. Knowing as he did the special pain that his mother was experiencing and knowing that John would not be martyred but would outlive her, Jesus gave him to Mary as the son she deserved, and he gave Mary to John as his mother. From that day on, John cared for Mary willingly, out of love for his Savior. The common bond they shared was their love for the Savior, and that same love for Jesus still works in that very special way to this day. That love binds us together here this evening. It ties us in love to the other members of the CLC throughout the world. It joins us in love with the entire Christian Church on earth. The Bible tells us that all believers are "***children of God through faith in Jesus Christ.***" So now we also resolve on this night to seek to demonstrate that same loving concern not only for our "family members," but for all those for whom our Savior suffered so terribly.

The Fourth Word

Mark 15:33-34 And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. 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?"

Darkness had enveloped that hill of death, and it is at this point that we see the true suffering of our Savior on Good Friday. Jesus was suffering the agony of hell for us - separation from his Heavenly Father as he paid the full penalty for the combined total of the sins of the world. It was not for his own sins that Jesus suffered, he had committed none. It was for *our* sins. Jesus had become cursed *for us*. God the Father, in his righteous anger, now turned away from his own Son. Truly this is something we will very likely never be able to comprehend with our mortal minds: *God forsaken by God.*

This is the real, terrible suffering of Good Friday. Look not to nails and cross for the pain. The criminals suffered that same punishment. Jesus' real suffering is shown in these very words: "**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**" Hell can rightly be defined as separation from God. Knowing as only he could know what this really means, Jesus endured this unspeakable suffering for one reason only - that you and I might never have to speak those horrible words for ourselves. Because of what he did, we will never have to say, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" Jesus has taken our place. The result, thanks be to God, is that sin, death, and hell no longer have any power over us.

The Fifth Word

John 19:28-29 After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "*I thirst.*" ²⁹ 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.

The end was near. Jesus' terrible suffering was almost complete. Yet Jesus knew that to *almost* finish the work the Father had given him was to not finish it at all but to fail. There could be no prophecy left unfulfilled, not a single law broken, not one commandment violated. Only a *perfect* life could be offered to the Father as payment for our sins. Even so Jesus continues to love us while suffering hell for us. To the bitter end his concern is for us sinners, and his singular goal was to finish the course laid out by his Father. He does not give up. Ever. Does not compromise, does not waver. Perfection was the only satisfactory payment for our sins.

The message for us is that Jesus left *nothing* undone. He finished the course his Father had laid out for him. He will also never give up on us. What a comfort to know that we do not have a God who gets bored or tired or loses interest. We have a Savior who will never abandon us. Ever. From that Savior we can draw spiritual refreshment every day of our lives. Because of his perfect life and innocent death, we need never know spiritual thirst. Our spiritual food and water is the Word of God. Jesus himself invites us to eat, drink, and live.

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.

Finally the long journey was at an end. The great gift, promised already in the Garden of Eden at the Fall, and then promised again and again to the people of God - finally that Gift is given. God himself completed the payment for man's sin. With a final word – Tetelestai – Jesus assures us for all time and eternity that nothing has been left out. Nothing can be added. Nothing could be done any better. Not only was Jesus' life on earth "***finished,***" the salvation for all mankind was finished, completed, sealed for all time and eternity. That payment, once made, can never be rescinded, never cancelled. It can only be rejected by the very ones Jesus died to save.

The result for you and me is that now, when our sins trouble us and we imagine that we must somehow earn God the Father's love before he can or will forgive us, then we can and should look to this cross and hear Jesus call out, "***Tetelestai!***" "***It is finished!***" There is no part left for us to do. No special feelings or good works that will make what Jesus did complete. Our salvation has been bought and paid for with the blood of the Son of God. It is *finished!*

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.

The final moment had now arrived. The Light of the World was extinguished. Jesus, the Son of God, died. Yet though mankind's sin was the reason for Jesus' death, man did not kill Jesus. Matthew tells us in the 27th Chapter of his Gospel that it was Jesus himself who "***yielded up his spirit.***" So also he said in John 10:17-18, "***I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.***" What love the Savior has for sinful mankind! The Good Shepherd has laid down his life for his sheep. What a friend we have in Jesus.

And yet our Savior leaves us with one last word: "***Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.***" What depth and meaning are contained in this simple prayer. With these words, Jesus shows all mankind that death did not conquer him, he conquered death. With these words, Jesus indicated that, in dying, he was again reconciled to God the Father. And with him, you and I. In this prayer, Jesus teaches us that, in giving up his life, he then entrusted it to his Father in Heaven. With his victory over death, Christ also won victory over death for us. We no longer have to fear death, for when our final hour is at hand, we too can now pray with all confidence these same words: "***Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.***"

Throughout this service we have witnessed the darkening shadows of that first Good Friday. We recognize again the darkness that reigns in our lives apart from our Savior Jesus. As you now leave this church building in silence, remember the terrible suffering of our Savior on that first Good Friday. And yet do not leave in despair. Before we leave, the Christ Candle will be removed, symbolizing Christ's burial. But we know now that though Jesus' human life was truly extinguished there on the cross, he did not remain in the tomb. Three days later he rose from the dead, and it is because of that resurrection that we can now say with the Apostle Paul: "***Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep...thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.***" Amen.