

“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”
Luke 23:34

The very first words of our Lord, spoken from His cross in the midst of all that pain and agony and suffering are words of forgiveness. Imagine! The very first words recorded out of Jesus’ mouth are words of prayer, asking His heavenly Father ***to forgive the very people putting Him to death!*** That brings up a couple of good questions. One, what would be the first words out of your mouth? For that matter, what are usually the first words out of your mouth when persecution and suffering is on the agenda? Probably not forgiveness. Which leads us to the most important question: **Who exactly was Jesus praying for here?** Do you think He was praying ***only*** for the executioners? Do you think He was praying for those religious officials who cooked up and trumped up charges against Him; charges which ultimately put Him on that cross? My friends: Do not be deceived! **These words of Christ are spoken on behalf of all sinners, and that includes you and me.** ***Sin—our sin—put Christ on that cross.*** You and I are ***every bit as guilty*** in the death of Jesus as those Roman soldiers and Pharisees were. These words of Jesus reach all the way back to the Garden of Eden, when God had promised that forgiveness and salvation would come to all those dead in their sin. On this cross God was now bringing His plan to fulfillment; His plan to save all mankind through the life and death of His one and only begotten Son. Here, on this shameful instrument of a lowly criminal’s capital punishment, Almighty God was doing something about sin for ***all mankind for all time.***

Folks: I know this may sound completely ***counter-intuitive***, but this bloody, brutal suffering of Jesus is good...***it’s very good.*** Most people don’t see it that way, do they? Fallen human reason and logic can’t understand this. It’s impossible. Christ’s crucifixion as “good” is ***only*** understood in faith. Faith comprehends the ***incredible, divine goodness*** in this selfless sacrifice because faith understands that there is ***absolutely nothing*** we can do about sin and its deadly wage. We can be sorry for our sins. We can weep over our sins. We can make all the promises in the world to amend our sinful ways. Theoretically, we could even do the ***unthinkable*** and keep every single one of those promises by not committing sin, ***and yet the penalty of death would still hang over our heads.*** It’s something we often forget: Sin is not just what we say, think, or do. Sin is who we are by nature; by fallen, sinful nature, as it has been passed down since the Garden of Eden by our first sinful father and mother. ***We can’t take away the penalty of sin anymore that we can take away our own humanity.***

Believe it or not, *we can't make things right with God*. That's a major stumbling block for people. We can't make things right with God. If we could, Jesus didn't have to die. We can't make things right with God, which is **precisely why God makes things right with us**. Jesus Christ, by living the perfect life none of us ever can; by laying down His *perfect and sinless life* in exchange for ours, makes us right with God. Those words, "*Father, forgive them...*," are true balm and healing for all those *sick and infected with the deadliness of sin and guilt and who know the their sinful, terminal fate apart from Christ*. These words of our Lord assure us of the miracle—His miracle—of complete forgiveness and eternal redemption. These first words speak of *divine restoration*; a joyful reunion with our God and Father after the deadly separation brought about by sin. Folks: Jesus' whole purpose for coming to earth and taking on our flesh, bone, and blood is *embodied right here in these first words* He speaks from His cross—that purpose being **our forgiveness**.

The first words of Christ...AMEN

“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise.”

Luke 23:43

This second sentence of our Lord was spoken to one who was dying beside Him on his own cross. We don't this guy's name. Scripture never tells us who he was, other than the fact that he was ***a thief who had been sentenced to death***. This being the case, it's safe to say that this guy had repeatedly made some bad choices. You don't typically wind up on a Roman cross for singing too loud in the choir. This guy made some sinful, criminal, bad choices, and those bad choices had a ***hard, cruel ending***. Here he is at the end of his life, and all he has to show for it all is a bloody cross. He's at the end of the road and now he's paying for his crimes with his very life; that is, ***he's paying his debt to society; a debt he rightly and justly incurred***. Do not be mistaken: He is **not** paying his debt ***to God*** on this cross. ***He's rendering unto Caesar the just wage for his crimes***.

However, through that ***strange and miraculous working of the Holy Spirit***, this same criminal was able to realize that the death of the man next to Him **was** paying that ***enormous debt*** to God. In ***faithful recognition*** of the life-giving miracle happening right next to him he cried out, ***“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*** Here, amidst all the jeering, mocking, and hate ***this condemned, anonymous dreg of society expresses faithful, resurrection hope***; hope that Christ would ***remember him and vouch for him*** so as to “spring him” from his ***justly-deserved*** torment and eternal prison and restore him to life and freedom, just like Joseph had asked the Pharaoh's cupbearer do centuries earlier when they were both languishing in prison.

That's quite a bit different than how most people view being remembered in or after death, isn't it? ***Our notion of remembrance is often quite selfish***. We want to be remembered by **our fellow man for what we've done**. We want our name to live on here on earth. We want people to know and remember what great, generous, loving people we were. This lowly dying man of faith, however, wanted to be remembered ***by God for Christ's sake, not his own***. He didn't want to be remembered by God because of what he had done or not done. He wanted to be remembered by God because of what Christ had done. He earnestly desired to live on for all eternity in heaven, and he knew the **only** way that was going to happen was because of his heavenly Father remembering ***what Christ did on His cross*** for all mankind, even for a lowly condemned thief like himself. Only Christ could vouch for this man before God. Nothing else would do.

And take careful note: ***Jesus didn't leave this man with any doubt whatsoever***. Christ's response to such a profound, “Christ-alone faith” comes swift and sure from His own cross: ***“Truly I say to you, today you will be with Me***

in paradise.” No limbo. No holding pattern. No “wait and see how things balance up in the books.” **“Today you will be with Me in paradise.”** Guys: You can search the world over and you will never find a better demonstration of God’s *unconditional love for the individual*. Even when suffering the torment of His own cross, Christ had time to show His *divine compassion* for one single person; and that person not exactly “salt of the earth” or a “pillar of society,” but, in fact, a *lowly, condemned criminal*.

My friends: *Perhaps you have doubt in your life*. Perhaps you doubt whether God knows you, knows your plight, or even cares about you and your plight. He does. In fact, **He cares so much for you that He died for you.** Jesus Christ willingly died so that thieves might enter into paradise with Him. He died that you might enter paradise with Him.

The second words of Christ...AMEN

“Woman, behold your son...son, behold your mother.”
John 19:26-27

Searching the crowd gathered around His cross, Jesus lays eyes on His mother, Mary, and also on John, the disciple whom Jesus loved and who was now standing with Mary, providing care and support during this **unbelievably tragic time** in their lives. And in this moment the Son of God is also recognized as the **perfect Son of Man**. In the midst of His own slow and painful death, Jesus is deeply concerned about His mother’s welfare. He loves mom more than Himself. Because of this great compassion and love, He commits her to John’s trusted care with the words, “*Woman, behold your son...son, behold your mother.*” And, as Scripture tells us, from that very hour, John took Mary into his own household to care for her.

Those of you here this evening who have the **privilege** of being known as “mom” certainly understand the **need** to hear these words. What agony Mary must have borne at that moment! It’s often said that it’s a terrible tragedy when a parent outlives their child. It’s a terrible tragedy for a parent to have to watch their child die. Some of you know that pain. Some of you can relate to Mary. But Mary had it worse. Can you imagine what it would be like to watch your own child be put to death in such a **barbaric and publicly shameful manner**? As mothers, I’m quite sure your pain would be **exponentially** worse than mine.

I often wonder what went through Mary’s mind in those last few **bitter hours of torment**. Perhaps her thoughts flooded with the many things she had stored up and pondered in her heart over the years. There was the birth in the Bethlehem stable, and all those miraculous events leading up to and following in the footsteps of that first Christmas Eve. There was that **strange and foreboding** experience at the temple when Jesus was only a few days old, when Simeon took Jesus in his arms, proclaimed praises to God that **he could now depart in peace** and then turned to Mary and warned her that **a sword will pierce through her own soul as well**. This must have been what he was talking about! **That piercing, heart-rending coldness of that proverbial sword could certainly be felt now.**

Truth is: There were many puzzling things to ponder, and yet she probably hadn’t given any thought to what the **future** would hold for her. She looked to the past. She painfully beheld the present. Because of this **immense pain and sorrow**, she probably didn’t care much about what tomorrow would bring. In the midst of all that pain and suffering and despair, she probably didn’t even care if there was a tomorrow. **But Christ cared for her and for all her tomorrows.** With these words He shows His great and loving concern for the “here and now,” for the future, **and even for the eternal**. Her faith would not be lost. John’s faith would

not be lost. Jesus was, in a very real way, *providing for both of them*. Through their mutual sharing of the Gospel words of reassurance and promise that they would undoubtedly speak to each other in the days and years to come when one was up and the other was down, *both mother and son would be provided for eternally—by Christ*.

My friends: In a very real sense, searching that crowd under His cross, *Jesus sees you too, and He is greatly concerned about you*—your past, present, future, and eternity. He still provides you with all that you need for this daily body and life and, more importantly, *for the eternal life with Him that is to come*. He is concerned and cares for you. *If He wasn't, He wouldn't have died for you.*

The third words of Christ...AMEN

“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”
Matthew 27:46

Have you ever been *lonely*? Have you ever felt *truly all alone*? While I’m quite sure that most, if not all of us, have experienced these emotions before, it is important to point out that ***there is a difference between being lonely and being all alone.*** You see, it’s very possible to be lonely while **never** being alone. It’s very possible to be lonely even in the midst of a world that’s literally filled with people. Some of the loneliest people I’ve ever known are people who are surrounded by life and humanity, but still feel ***excluded and left out and all alone.*** They’re **not** alone. They’re surrounded by people. But still...they’re lonely.

While I’m no mental health expert, I can tell you that ***the best remedy for such depressive loneliness is a backward look at Golgotha. Turn, face, and return to Him who was truly and completely alone—Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.*** Folks: Jesus Christ experienced true loneliness and ***true aloneness, even though He was surrounded by people at the foot of His cross.*** You see, He was truly forsaken and forgotten by God, His heavenly Father. At that moment of complete divine loneliness, as Jesus felt the ***full burden*** of our sins upon Himself, God the Father, being ***fully holy and sinless, turned away***, momentarily, from His own Son. In that moment of turning away, Jesus was truly **all alone**, completely forsaken and forgotten. And out of that ***incomprehensible loneliness and abandonment***, Jesus still cries out in faith to His God and Father, “*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? (My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?)*”

No matter how bad life seems, we can **never** say that. No one can. It’s impossible for us to know what it’s like to pay for even ***one single sin***, let alone the sins of ***the entire world.*** We can **never** understand what it means to be ***truly*** forsaken by God. ***It’s never happened to us, and we have God’s promise that it never will.*** Regardless of how low a man stoops in his life of sin, God remains faithful. He will not withdraw His Gospel presence from anyone while they still have air in their lungs.

While it is true that we can never truly understand or even comprehend the ***true hell that Christ went through for us***, this much we do know: **Since Calvary we are never alone!** Jesus Christ was alone—truly alone—so that we might never be truly alone again.

The fourth words of Christ...AMEN

“I thirst.”
John 19:28

While Christ’s fourth words from the cross spoke of *anguish of soul*, this fifth statement bespeaks His *physical anguish*. Jesus raised His head and said, “*I thirst.*” If you remember, this isn’t the first time He said such a thing. He had spoken these words before to a *Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well*. In that meeting, Jesus had proclaimed to her the availability of *living waters that would never fail*.

Folks: Look at this cross. Jesus is **now** bringing these living waters to the entire world. It’s actually quite *ironic* when you think about it. Jesus, *the source of endless, life-giving living water*, is quenching the sinful, deadly thirst of the souls of all mankind on His cross, and yet, at the same time, *He thirsts*.

Take note: This statement of Christ concerning His thirst *doesn’t go unnoticed*, and yet humanity can scarcely be proud of our response. Someone hears this and puts a simple sponge on a reed, dips it into vinegar, and holds it up to the lips of Jesus. *Not exactly refreshing or caring or loving, is it?* “*Gee, thanks. You shouldn’t have.*” As *ugly and forgettable* as this response is to Christ’s suffering, His cry for something to quench His thirst is *significant to us*. It is worth meditating on. **This simple cry reflects His humanity.** It says, without a doubt, that He is fully man and fully “*one of us.*” It gives us the assurance that, as Scripture says, “*we do not have high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who understands us and identifies with us....*”

Jesus hungered, *just like us*. He thirsted, *just like us*. He became tired, *just like us*. He knew sorrow. He wept at the tomb of a departed loved one, just like we do. He felt pain and exhaustion, *just like us*. Jesus Christ knew *every depth of human suffering*, certainly more than you’ll ever know in your life! **He was and is God’s true man—this promise made flesh, who died for us in order to quench our sinful, deadly thirsts and give to us His living water of life.**

The fifth words of Christ...AMEN

“It is finished.”
John 19:30

This is it. The moment of triumph has arrived. This is what all of sinful humanity has been waiting for since that fateful day in the Garden of Eden. ***This is the cry of final, complete, and eternal victory. God has won!*** The world will ***never*** be the same again. Humanity is completely redeemed in the blood of Christ, for all time. From this moment on there will be no neutral ground (not that there ever was to begin with). ***Jesus Christ will either be stumbling block and offense or He will be Lord and Savior.*** No gray area. No middle ground. Men may hate Him. They may curse Him. They may belittle Him, poke fun at Him, or speak against Him. Some will even try to live without Him. However, once they’ve been confronted by Him (***and all will eventually confront Christ face-to-face. At the name of Jesus, every knee will bow***), **He cannot be ignored.**

It is finished. Given the world we live in, you may be tempted to look around and remark, “*What’s finished? Nothing is finished.*” It certainly seems that way, doesn’t it? ***The world still hates and fears and fights and lives in open defiance of God and His Word. What is finished?*** As we look at all the sin in our midst, it seems like the death of Jesus Christ has made ***no appreciable difference*** at all in this world.

And yet, despite what our eyes tell us, Christ’s words here **are absolutely true.** God’s work of our redemption ***is finished.*** He’s done ***everything necessary*** for your salvation. It is finished—in Christ. And while God’s justifying work is completely done ***in that sense, our work, as baptized children of God, is not.*** The Good News that God has fulfilled and accomplished this great salvific work for all mankind in the work and person of Christ Jesus ***must continue to be made known. This is what the sanctified life of a Christian is all about.*** This is our task. This is our calling. ***This is our great mission and commission.*** This work of evangelism—of proclaiming the absolutely free gift of God’s justification in Christ alone—will, ***one day, be completed as well,*** but, make no mistakes, it will **not** be done in our lives until that day when we can answer with St. Paul, “*I have fought the good fight. I have finished my course. I have kept the faith.*” It will not be done in our lives until our Father calls us home with those wonderful words, “*Well done, good and faithful servant. Now enter into the eternal joy of your Master.*”

It is finished.

The sixth words of Christ...AMEN

“Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.”

Luke 23:46

With the work of redemption finished and over, Christ now *entrusts and commits* Himself into His Father’s hands. At this point, the seventh words of Christ almost seem *anticlimactic*, don’t they? The fight is over. Victory is secured. *All that’s left now is to faithfully fall asleep in God’s divine care and go home to heaven.* You know, if this truly were the “end of the story,” then we could, without a doubt, consider these words to be *anticlimactic*. But this isn’t the end of the story. In fact, this is only the **beginning**. Jesus Christ is the Alpha and Omega—the beginning and the end, and He is the beginning of an almost endless procession of faithful saints. He is the *first-fruits* of all who faithfully believe and cling to Him and our Father’s grace. He is the first-fruits of all who have been baptized into His death and resurrection. Just as He was resurrected by the glory of the Father, *so, too, will we be resurrected.* For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His. The story’s not over; not by a long shot.

Because Jesus perfectly and completely entrusted and committed His spirit to His Father, you and I, *through Him*, can **confidently** do the same. We have *NOTHING* to fear in this life. Because of Christ, we, who were (*and are*) wayward, prodigal children, can *confidently return home to our God and Lord*. **Yes, there are sins to be confessed.** *By ourselves, apart from Christ*, we are **not** worthy to be called children of God. However, because Christ shed His life-blood for us, we can boldly and confidently say, *“Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit...my body, my soul, and all my things.”* *May God grant us the faith to actually believe this when we pray this.*

And now, *in the assurance of saving faith*, we can not only look forward to each new day here on earth, but we can also *joyfully* look **forward** to His return when He take us home—in body and soul—to live with Him forever. Make no mistakes, either: **He will return.** It’s sad, but some people—even some faithful Christians—*dread that moment.* They’re scared to death that He might come back and catch them. By faith, we’re different, at least, we ought to be. By faith, we eagerly await that blessed day when we will be *privileged* to hear Him say, *“Come, you who are blessed by My Father. Inherit the kingdom which has been prepared for you. Enter into the heavenly kingdom which has been purchased for you with My body and blood on My cross.”*

In the blessed name of Christ Jesus, your crucified and victorious King...AMEN.