

*The First Word—Luke 23:34* “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

Crucifying people was no easy job. Condemned criminals wanted to make things as difficult for their Roman executioners as they could. Soldiers routinely faced all kinds of attacks from their charges. The guilty would bite the soldiers carrying out their grim task. Kicking, punching, scratching and screaming these men went to their deaths, even though they knew they deserved their fate. After a while, the soldiers got smarter. To prevent unnecessary struggle, criminals' arms and legs would often be tied to the cross to make the driving of the nails into the hands and feet easier. A drink of myrrh and aloes would be offered to the guilty. This was a drug designed to relax the prisoners and decrease their resistance. For two of the condemned on Good Friday, it was business as usual.

But not for the one being crucified on the middle cross. Jesus was different, very different. The soldiers faced no resistance from him. Jesus would not bite his death squad. No cursing of the soldiers spewed from our Lord's mouth. There would be no spitting in their faces or kicking and scratching as the soldiers tried to tie his hands to the cross. In fact, the soldiers would not need any ropes for Jesus. Quietly, without resistance, as a Lamb led to the slaughter before his shearers is silent, Jesus willingly laid down on his cross and submitted to the terrible agony awaiting him. When the Savior did finally speak, his words must have given the soldiers pause. Of all the criminals they had executed by crucifixion, none had ever said anything like this. Could we show such loving care for the souls of the men who strapped us into an electric chair or prepared to give us a lethal injection? Out of love even for his executioners, Jesus cried out to his Father that his bitter suffering might be even for them, as it was for us.

*The Second Word—Luke 23:43*

“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

On either side of Jesus hung two criminals, men who deserved death under Roman law for their crimes. Both of them joined the crowd in hurling insults at Jesus. One of them called out, “Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” But his cries for salvation were shallow and half-hearted. This criminal only wanted to save his own skin for this life. He had no interest in the eternal life Jesus was dying to bring for the world.

But the thief on the other side understood. He saw past the labored breaths. He looked deeper than the blood and sweat covering Jesus' face. He saw on the tree next to him the Savior of the world bringing forth his salvation. This man's life had been one mistake after another. But now, in the throes of an agonizing death, he was seized with remorse over his life of sin. Learn his lesson, dear friends. It is never too late for anyone to hear about Jesus, as long as breath is still in their lungs. He understood the reason for his death: the wages of his sinful life. This thief told the other criminal as much, “Don't you fear God, since we are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our sins deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” The penitent thief was right. Innocent Jesus hung there dying for what he and all of us

had done wrong. In repentance, the humble thief reached out to Jesus with a prayer fitting for all of us on our dying day, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Our Lord answers him with beautiful assurance. "Today you will be with me in paradise."

*The Third Word—John 19:26*

"Woman, here is your son." "Here is your mother."

Even unto the end, Jesus continues keeping the law perfectly in our place. His mother Mary was among those watching the gruesome spectacle unfold. Now she fully understood the words she had pondered and treasured up in her heart all these years. Simeon had spoken them on the day she and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple for his dedication. "And a sword will pierce your own soul, too." How would you feel watching your firstborn son dying as a criminal even though he was innocent? Mary would now be left without anyone to care for her. In perfect obedience to God's command to honor our parents, Jesus made sure his mother would be cared for in her old age.

As he looked on the one who had born him into the world in Bethlehem's manger all those years ago, Jesus spoke to his mother with the deepest compassion and love. Seeing his beloved disciple John standing next to Mary, he entrusted her to his care. In doing so, he assures us his life was perfect until his last breath, so that we know our sinful lives are covered over by his grace until our last hour comes.

*The Fourth Word—Matthew 27:46* "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Have you ever had a day when you thought you hit rock bottom? So many bad things were pressing down on your heart you thought it could not have gotten any worse. But none of our bad days can even come close to comparing with what Jesus felt as he cried out these words from the cross. Being forsaken by God means being totally cut off from his presence. Imagine it. God refuses to acknowledge your existence. His protecting and providing hand withdraws itself totally from your life. Your heavenly Father will not hear your prayers. He will not help you in time of need. No angels will guard you from harm. God is totally absent in every way from your life.

Jesus knows exactly what that was like. It happened to him on the cross. His heart was wrapped in darkness deeper than that which covered the land for these three hours. Just as unnatural darkness will fall upon the earth at the end of all time, so it fell on Good Friday during the time when God poured out his judgment on our sins over his Son. By being forsaken by God, Jesus became the curse of the law for us to redeem us from our sins. Marvel at the love of Jesus for you. Willingly he undergoes being cut off from the presence of his heavenly Father so that we might enjoy being in the presence of God for all eternity.

*The Fifth Word—John 19:28*

“I am thirsty.”

Jesus knew what was about to happen to him. Death was knocking on the door of his soul. Everything he needed to do to pay for our sins had been done. But he still sought to make sure we would know beyond a shadow of a doubt he was truly the Messiah, the one sent to accomplish our salvation. So he speaks these words. They fulfill the prophecy made two different places about the Messiah in the Psalms. “They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst (Psalm 69:21).” And “My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth (Psalm 22:15).” In the depths of human and divine agony, Jesus was prepared to give himself up for the sins of all of us.

*The Sixth Word—John 19:30*

“It is finished.”

Just as with the previous word of Jesus, what we have as a sentence in English is really only one word in Hebrew. What sounded to the devil like a cry of defeat means something different to our believing ears. We hear the shout of victory for our God which he has passed on to us. We hear Jesus speaking to each one of our hearts weighed down by guilt over our sins which really put him on that tree. “Dear children, your sins are completely forgiven! Your record of spiritual crimes has been cleansed. I have paid the debt to my Father which you owed him for your sins. Your slavery to sin is over forever. You are free from its chains. The darkness of sin is lifted. You now live in the light of my forgiveness. Peace is yours.” There is now no condemnation for all of us who are found in Christ Jesus.

Despite outward appearances, Jesus has done all of this for us voluntarily. He came here to fulfill your salvation and mine. In love almost incomprehensible to us, Jesus lays down his life without putting up any kind of a fight. He does not give in to the cries of the mockers to save himself. Instead he hangs on the cross until it is finished to forgive each one of our sins. It is finished. We are redeemed. We are freed. We are forgiven. It has been completed for us completely by Jesus.

*The Seventh Word—Luke 23:46*

“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

In his last words, Jesus quotes Psalm 31:5, “Into your hands I commit my spirit; redeem me, O Lord, the God of truth.” Jewish people use this as a bedtime prayer, entrusting their souls into the care of God until they awake in the morning. As our Savior dies, he willingly gives his soul to God so that death might not be the end for us. In Jesus’ death, we find life. In Jesus’ dying breath, we find comfort. Through the words of our Lord we have heard tonight our faith is fed. Though we are saddened because of our sinfulness, we know the truth of what has happened here. The devil is not triumphant. Jesus has defeated our sins. Our guilt is swallowed up by our Savior laying down his perfect holy life for us. By the sacrifice of the Lamb of God, our sins are taken away forever. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds, we are healed. Amen.