

March 26, 2023 by Steve Brandon



Words from the Cross (part 1)

Luke 23:34,43,46

1. **"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (verse 34).**
2. **"Today, you will be with me in Paradise" (verse 43).**
3. **"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (verse 43).**

Periodically, I begin my messages with a quiz. I would like to do that this morning. My question has seven answers. I think that most of you will know some of the answers. Together, I think that we all will be able to come up with all seven answers. Here's my question: "When Jesus was upon the cross, he made seven statements. What were they?"

(A note to the reader: try thinking of them yourself. If you can come up with all seven of them yourself in a relatively short time frame, I would be impressed. You can check your answers in the footnote.)^[1]

We are going to be looking at these seven statements over the next few weeks, as we lead up to Easter. We are going to look at the final words of Jesus upon the cross. The title of my message this morning is, "Words from the Cross (part 1)." This morning, I want to look at the statements that Jesus makes that are recorded in Luke. So, you can open in your Bibles to Luke, chapter 23. We are going to be looking at the last words of Jesus from this chapter. As you are turning there, let me tell you some last words from some famous people.

Some die, thinking about their great accomplishments. Augustus, the first emperor of Rome said this, "If found Rome of clay; I leave it to you of marble." Leonardo da Vinci, the great Renaissance man said, "I have offended God and mankind because my work did not reach the quality it should have."

Some die in despair: Jane Austen, the novelist said, "I want nothing but death." Ludwig van Beethoven, the great composer and pianist said, "Friends, applaud. The comedy is over." Vincent van Gogh, the post-impressionist painter, said, "The sadness will last forever."

Some die with humor: W.C. Fields, the comedian, was reading the Bible on his deathbed. Someone asked him why. He said, "I'm looking for loopholes." Groucho Marx, the comedian, said, "This is no way to live."

Some die with Christian hope: David Brainerd, the great young missionary, said, "I am going into eternity; and it is sweet to me to think of eternity; the endlessness of it makes it sweet. But oh! What shall I say of the future of the wicked! The thought is too dreadful!" Richard Baxter, the great pastor, said, "I have pain; but I have peace, I have peace!" Susanna Wesley, famed mother of the Wesley brothers, said, "Children, when I am gone, sing a song of praise to God." ^[2]

Jesus died with hope for us on his lips! Let's look at the first of Jesus' last words. They come in verse 34.

1. **"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (verse 34).**

The context of these words make them quite remarkable! Consider what Jesus went through to get to this point.

1. **He was betrayed by Judas, one of his disciples.**

Judas had left the pack at one point and Luke 22:4 went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers how he might betray [Jesus]. They gave him some money. And the deal was done. Then, after Jesus had been praying in the garden, Judas was leading a crowd of people to come and arrest Jesus (Luke 22:47). Judas drew near to greet Jesus with a kiss (Luke 22:47), which was the sign that Judas had given the authorities, "The one I will kiss is the man. Seize him and lead him away under guard" (Mark 14:44). Jesus fully knew what Judas was doing. Jesus even asked, him, "Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?" (Luke 22:48). This marks high treason! Jesus had spent three years with Judas! And yet, Judas was willing to turn on him, for thirty pieces of silver (Matthew 26:15).

Jesus felt the full pain of the betrayal. David spoke of the pain of such betrayal in Psalm 55.

Psalm 55:12, 13, 20, 21

It is not an enemy who taunts me- then I could bear it;
It is not an adversary who deals insolently with me - then I could hide from him.
But it is you, a man, my equal, My companion, my familiar friend.

My companion stretched out his hand against his friends; he violated his covenant.
His speech was smooth as butter, yet war was in his heart.
His words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords.

Jesus experienced the unique pain of betrayal. Well, not only was Jesus betrayed, ...

2. He was also abandoned by his closest friends.

When Jesus was arrested, most of the disciples abandoned him. Jesus knew that this would be the case. Before he was betrayed, he quoted from Zechariah 13:7, "Strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered" (Matthew 26:31).

Do you remember what Peter said before Jesus was arrested? "Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death" (Luke 22:33). Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me" (Luke 22:34). And sure enough, that took place. I can do no better than read the story for you.

Luke 22:54-62

Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house, and Peter was following at a distance. And when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down among them. Then a servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the light and looking closely at him, said, "This man also was with him." But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." And a little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not." And after an interval of about an hour still another insisted, saying, "Certainly this man also was with him, for he too is a Galilean." But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about." And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

In many ways, it would have been better if Peter hadn't said anything like, "Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death" (verse 33). The pain of abandonment would have been less. But that's not all. Not only did Jesus face betrayal and abandonment, but ...

3. He was also falsely accused.

That's the whole deal with his trials. Jesus stood before a kangaroo court of those who hated him. The religious leaders wanted Jesus dead. and so, they did everything that they could to find some sort of charge against him. They brought Jesus to Pilate and demanded that he crucify Jesus. Even when Pilate said to the crowds, "I find no guilt in this man" (Luke 23:4), it was not enough. A great summary begins in chapter 23 and verse 13,

Luke 23:13-24

Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people. And after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. I will therefore punish and release him." But they all cried out together, "Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas"—a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder. Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus, but they kept shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!" A third time he said to them, "Why? What evil has he done? I have found in him no guilt deserving death. I will therefore punish and release him." But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted.

That's the context of Jesus being crucified! He was (1) Betrayed by Judas; (2) Abandoned by his disciples; and (3) Falsely accused by the authorities. If anyone had a reason to be bitter, it was Jesus. Yet, he said, 1. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (verse 34).

Certainly, this prayer was probably directed toward those Roman soldiers, who nailed his hands and feet to the cross, and who lifted up that cross, so that Jesus would die a slow and painful death. Certainly it was directed to the soldiers, who "cast lots to divide his garments" (Luke 23:34). who were standing by and watching him die.

Yet, I think that the scope of this prayer goes beyond this. Because Jesus said, "They don't understand!" In fact, this is the ground of his prayer. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (verse 34). There were many that day who didn't know what they were doing. Judas didn't fully grasp what he was doing in betraying Jesus. When he found out, he returned the money and hanged himself. Peter didn't fully grasp what he was doing in abandoning Jesus. When the rooster crowed, "he went out and wept bitterly" (Luke 23:42). Those in authority didn't know what they were doing either. Paul would later write in 1 Corinthians 2:8, "None of the rulers of this age understood for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."

So, Jesus prays to his heavenly Father for forgiveness upon all who were ignorant of their sins, including the crowds, which we read about in verses 35-38.

Luke 23:35-38

And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

This all has huge application for us this morning. First of all, it shows the heart of Jesus, reading and willing to forgive. even in the midst of some of the most trying and difficult of circumstances. In pain on the cross, after such wrong done against him, still his heart was to forgive. Isn't it amazing, that at the very moment that Jesus was offering atonement for sin, he was also pleading for application of his atonement. he was praying to his Father, that his current suffering, would turn out for the forgiveness of those who were inflicting the suffering! **Jesus was the sacrificial lamb, at the same time he was the High Priest, pleading at the throne of God on behalf of sinners!** One man said, "That Jesus would pray for them as he hung on the cross is one of the most powerful images in all the Gospels."^[3]

None are beyond the mercy of Jesus! Do you remember the Prodigal Son? He sinned greatly against his father. squandering his wealth with sinful living. Yet, the father was willing to receive him back. Yea, even eager to see him come back home. So with Jesus. His arms are open wide to all who would all upon him! If you doubt, simply look to his words from the cross, . He was ready and willing and desirous to forgive those who were crucifying him, and mocking him, and wronging him, and deserting him, and betraying him. Certainly your sin will fall into one of these categories! So, run into his open arms! He is ready to forgive!

A second of application here is that Jesus was praying for his enemies! I trust that you remember that Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). Jesus not only taught that. He modeled that. So, if you have enemies, follow in the path of Jesus, and pray for them! You have a Savior, who is willing to save all who come to him! Pray for your enemies to come to the Savior!

Well, let's move on. We have seen Jesus' first word from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (verse 34). Let's move on to his second word.

2. "Today, you will be with me in Paradise" (verse 43).

This saying comes in verse 43. But look back at verse 32.

Luke 23:32-33

Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 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.

And then, jump ahead to verse 39.

Luke 23:39-43

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

This is a word of grace from Jesus. Here was a criminal, dying for his crime, unable to do anything. He couldn't give anything to Jesus. He couldn't bow to Jesus. He couldn't do anything for Jesus. He couldn't be baptized. He couldn't go to church. He couldn't go to prayer meeting. He couldn't go to small group. He couldn't read his Bible! His arms were literally stretched out, and unable to move, just like Jesus. He literally, couldn't move. He couldn't walk. He couldn't touch Jesus, to experience his healing power flow through his body!

All he could do was speak. and that's what he did. He cried out to Jesus. "Remember me when you come into your kingdom" (verse 42). And Jesus said, "I will remember you." Jesus heard his prayer request and granted it. ""Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

"Paradise" isn't a word used much in the Bible. But it represents a pleasant place, like a park or a garden! In fact, this is the word that is the Septuagint to translate the "garden" of Eden (Genesis 2:8ff) that perfect place that God created for Adam and Eve, who could live without a care in the world. succulent fruit was available from all of the trees. This word, "paradise" is used in Revelation 2:7, as the place where the tree of life is. We know life here on earth, but it's nothing like the life where the tree of life is!

I want for you to think about your own "paradise." Perhaps your "paradise" is on the beach by the ocean, where you can look out and never see the end of the waters. and the crashing of the waves is soothing to your ears. Perhaps your "paradise" is on the beach by a small Wisconsin lake, where there are deep green trees all around, and all is serene, you just hear the lap, lap, lap of the water. Perhaps your "paradise" is at the top of a mountain, where you are on top of the world, and can see for miles around. Perhaps your "paradise" is at a cabin in the woods, where nobody is around for miles. and the trees rock back and forth slowly in the winds. where the birds are all tweeting happily!

What's the temperature of your "paradise"? 75? 80 degrees? What's in your hand in your "paradise"? A cup of coffee, perhaps? A tropical smoothie? A southern sweet tea? Who is with you in this paradise? Your spouse? Your family? Now, all of these places, as serene and as idyllic as they may be on earth, there's nothing like the paradise of God. It will far exceed all of your earthly dreams!

I think that Jesus used this word, "Paradise" with the criminal on the cross, because of the great torture and pain that he was going through on the cross. Like Jesus, he was nailed to a cross, with painful wounds in his hands and feet. Like Jesus, he was dying a painful death, Slowly suffocating to death, I like to describe it as, "drowning slowly." And Jesus promises him, by the end of the day, all of this pain will be gone! "You will be with me in paradise." "You will be in the garden, with the tree of life with the river of life, where all grows well, where all is beautiful!"

Think of the contrast for this criminal! Hours before, he had been on death row, anticipating his death. Days before that, he was in an unpleasant prison, awaiting his sentence. Weeks before that, he had been tried, and sentenced to death for his crimes. He was on his way to an eternal place of suffering! And there, on the cross next to him, was the Savior of the world! nothing else in the world could save him! nobody else in the world could save him! except for Jesus!

I love how Philip Ryken describes the man and the scene! He says this:

The thief on the cross had to be the luckiest man alive. He was nothing more than a low-life criminal, a loser. He had committed a crime. He was convicted for it, and he was crucified for it. So he had no future; he was going nowhere; or worse, he was going to hell. Yet of all the criminals, on all the crosses, on all the hills in the Roman Empire, he was

crucified next to Jesus Christ.

Just before he died, just before he plunged into the abyss of eternity, at the last possible instant he received the gift of eternal life. If he had died on any other cross, at any other time, in any other place, he would have been forgotten forever. But he did not die on any other cross, at any other time, in any other place. He died at the Place of the Skull, outside Jerusalem, on a cross right next to the cross Jesus died on. Because he died on that cross, he was able to ask for eternal life and hear the beautiful words that Jesus spoke from the cross: "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." He not only heard those words—he went to heaven that very day and has been there ever since.^[4]

And then, Ryken brings the appeal.

If that sounds pretty lucky, you can be just as "lucky." That penitent thief did not get anything from Jesus that you cannot get from him. You can meet Jesus at the cross the same way he did. You do not even have to be crucified for your troubles."

But to be this "lucky," you do need to do what this criminal did.

1. He acknowledged his own sin.

Luke 23:39-41

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong."

This criminal knew his place. He knew that he was receiving the just penalty for his sin! Or, as he say it, "the due reward of our deeds." This is the first step in coming to Jesus. It is acknowledging your sin. It's acknowledging your standing under the just judgement of God! That you too, deserve death! The Bible says, "the wages of sin is death!" That's what this criminal was doing! he was acknowledging his sin! he was affirming that his judgement was just!

2. He saw Jesus as the righteous king.

The criminal said, "And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong" (Luke 23:41). This criminal noticed how Jesus was different than the other two on the cross. They both were suffering the due penalty for their crimes. But he discerned that Jesus had "done nothing wrong."

We don't know how he discerned this. Perhaps there was some discussion on the street below the crosses of the "crimes" of Jesus. Perhaps he saw how these were not genuine "crimes." Perhaps it was the way Jesus was responding to his suffering that convinced him of the injustice. He saw the rulers scoff at him (verse 35). He saw the soldiers mocking him (verse 36). He saw the other criminal railing at him (verse 39). He saw Jesus, not lashing back with his tongue, but silently enduring it.

Perhaps this thief knew what James taught, that "no human being can tame the tongue" (James 3:8). And the one who "does not stumble in what he says is a perfect man" (James 3:2). Perhaps he discerned how Jesus was "entrusting himself to [God] who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23). So, however it was, this criminal knew something about Jesus was different.

He also recognized that Jesus was a king. Did you notice his request of Jesus? He said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (verse 42). He acknowledged that Jesus was, indeed a king, who would enter into his kingdom someday.

Again, we don't know how exactly this criminal came to know this. Perhaps it was the discussion of those below the cross. Perhaps it was the mocking of those below, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" (verse 37). Perhaps it was the sign above Jesus that said, "This is the King of the Jews." That very sign that the Jews hated and wanted Pilate to take down, became the very message that this man needed to be saved. He put it all together, trusting that Jesus had the power to save! because he was the righteous king.

3. This criminal asked Jesus for salvation.

Luke 23:42

And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

The promise of the Scripture is that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13). It matters not how you call out to the Lord. You can call out like this criminal did, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." You can call out like the blind beggar did, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Luke 18:39). You can call out like the leper did in coming to Jesus, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." (Luke 5:12). Have you? Have you cried out to the Lord for salvation?

Have you (1) Acknowledged your sin? (2) Recognized Jesus as the righteous king, who is able to save? (3) Cried out to God for salvation?

That's what this word on the cross is all about. It's about salvation. It's about the promise that Jesus gives. "Today, you will be with me in Paradise" (verse 43). This story is here to give us hope. It shows the true nature of salvation, it's not by works. it's by God's grace, as we believe and trust in Jesus. I love what J. C. Ryle said about this passage, "One thief was saved that no sinner might despair, but only one, that no sinner might presume."^[5]

Don't despair, the Lord Jesus is ready to receive even the worst of sinners. But don't presume, because deathbed conversions are no guarantee. Who knows that your heart will be like when you come to die?

Let's look at our last word this morning. We have seen, a word of forgiveness, a word of salvation, and now a word of surrender.

3. "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (verse 43).

Let's read the context of these words, beginning in verse 44.

Luke 23:44-46

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. 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.

Luke seems to indicate that these words were the very last words that Jesus ever spoke. He adds, "And having said this he breathed his last."

That's in contrast to the first two words that we looked at (in verse 34 and verses 43). These may well have taken place early in the crucifixion of Jesus. perhaps even the first two things he said that are recorded for us. But not this one. This is Jesus' final word.

It demonstrates his control over his life. Life wasn't taken away from Jesus, Jesus willingly gave up his life. Unlike sacrificial lambs, who were taken from their flocks, without their consent. Jesus went to the cross with his full consent. He said, "For this reason the Father loves me, because 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" (John 10:17).

Jesus wasn't involved in some revolution gone bad. Jesus wasn't captured in some secret sting operation. Jesus wasn't caught in the crossfire. No, Jesus was in full control of his life. He laid down his life "of his own accord" (John 10:18). That is, he was a willing sacrifice for our sins. Such was the demonstration of his love. "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

I love how saturated Jesus was with the Bible. These words here come from the Old Testament. They come from Psalm 31 and verse 5, when David wrote, "into your hands I commit my spirit." Listen to the verses just before this: "For 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" (Psalm 31:3-4). No doubt, this was the attitude of Jesus. Jesus entrusted his life to God, his rock and his fortress. And his words from the cross were words of entrustment. Or, as I have said, "words of surrender." Jesus surrendered his life into the hands of his Father.

I love what happened surrounding these words. In verse 45 we read that "the curtain of the temple was torn in two" (Luke 23:45). From other passages of the Bible, we know that this represents the dismantling of the Jewish system of sacrifice. No longer do we need a human priest to enter into the Holy Place with blood for us. The way to God has been opened up for us, because Jesus had finished his work on the cross.

After Jesus gave up his spirit, we read the following:

Luke 23:47-49

Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent!" And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts. And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things.

The death of Jesus made an impact on those around him. One of the soldiers, who had helped put Jesus to death acknowledged the wrong that was done on the cross. The crowds knew that something was amiss, as they left that place, beating their breasts in agony. The cross ought to make an impact in our lives as well. that's what I'm hoping we experience as we look at these "Words from the Cross." that his death might impact us.

I close my message with one final verse: Isaiah 53:12. I believe that everything in that verse is found in these words we have looked at today, though they were written hundreds of years before Christ uttered these words.

Isaiah 53:12

Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out his soul to death
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and makes intercession for the transgressors.

Jesus "poured out his soul to death." He willingly gave it up when he was soon to die (Luke 23:46). Jesus "was numbered with the transgressors." He was crucified between two thieves, granting one of them salvation. Jesus "makes intercession for the transgressors." Jesus prayed for the forgiveness of those who crucified him. He still continues in this intercession today (Hebrews 7:25).

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on March 26, 2023 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] Here are the seven sayings of Jesus from the cross:

1. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).
2. "Today, you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).
3. "Woman, behold your son!" "Behold, your mother" (John 19:26-27).
4. "I thirst" (John 19:28).
5. "It is finished" (John 19:30).
6. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34).
7. "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:43).

[2] Here are some of my sources: <https://www.rd.com/list/memorable-last-words/> and <https://www.readersdigest.ca/culture/famous-last-words/>.

[3] Adam Hamilton, *Final Words* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 19.

[4] James Montgomery Boice and Philip Graham Ryken, *The Heart of the Cross* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 19.

[5] Ibid., 20.

[6] J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Luke (Volume 2)* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 471.