

*THE CRUCIAL HOURS*¹

His Punishment, Our Peace † Seven Last Words

In the name of Jesus, the soul's Best Friend, dearly redeemed by the cross of Christ:

The last words of loved ones are important. We want to remember and treasure those last words. But they can have very little meaning. If the person was shallow or not fully conscious, we might wish for something more heartfelt, more comforting, more timeless. This evening we listen intently to the last words of our dear Savior, treasuring each one—a word of forgiveness, a word of promise, a word of love, a word of ???, a word of fulfillment, a word of completion, and a word of confidence.

† The First Word: A word of forgiveness (Luke 23:33,34)

Had we been beaten and battered like Jesus, we would have found the strength to utter some memorable words. Probably blistering to ears. Who of us would ever offer **a word of forgiveness** like Jesus? Forgiveness doesn't come easily to us, especially if the other person is undeserving. Anger twists our idea of forgiveness into something that must be earned. Otherwise, we seem to have ice in our veins toward the person who hurt us most. Yet here's Jesus with **a word of forgiveness!**

They *"don't know"* what they're doing? The Jewish leaders and Pontius Pilate surely knew they'd condemned an innocent man. Pilate's conscience tore at him, but every attempt to stir up sympathy from the Jews only made matters worse. They wanted Jesus to die but not during the feast because they feared a riot. As it turned out, the riot they caused by disagreeing with Pilate forced him to give in to them. How could such a gross miscarriage of justice be forgiven? Even the Roman soldiers, professional torturers who drove the nails into Jesus' hands and feet, seemed to know this man had done nothing worse than claiming to be a king. They mocked Jesus, knowing well that He did not deserve to be put to death.

The Holy Spirit explains through Paul what no one realized: *"None of the rulers of this world knew [God's wisdom in His plan of salvation]. (If they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.)"* (1 Corinthians 2:8 EHV) Jesus asks God to delay His justice, to give them more time to realize their sin and, by the working of the Holy Spirit, come to repentant faith.

Is this **word of forgiveness** for us who often know, but sometimes not, that we're sinning? Clearly this **word of forgiveness** covers us as well. Because our sins helped nail God's Son to the cross, we need God's **forgiveness** as much as everyone. Jesus prays, then secures God's **forgiveness** for us.

† The Second Word: A word of promise (Luke 23:39-43)

Had I been Jesus, I would have tried to conserve my energy as much as possible. Yet in this second word, Jesus speaks ten words in the Greek original. But He could have just said, "Okay." Why an extra energetic **Amen** – "Truly I tell you"? Jesus wanted this to be **a word of promise** – sure and certain. No, ~~"Probably,"~~ no ~~"Depending on how you do."~~ Absolute certainty is needed in **a word of promise**.

For centuries consciences have been burned with the threat of doing time in a purging place called "purgatory" by those who use guilt to bend people to their will. Non-Christian religions try similar forms of soul-slavery. You and I could fear such terrors at our last breath too. What awaits beyond?

¹ Adapted from NPH 2022 Lent: *The Crucial Hours*, based on the book by William Lauterbach. (NPH: 1-800-662-6022)

Here's Jesus' own word: "**Today.**" Not in 10,000 more years of trying, but right way, "**Today you will be with me in paradise.**" Not "~~sometime.~~" Not "~~eventually.~~" Not "~~after you've finished paying for whatever I don't pay for here on the cross.~~" **Today. Right away.** And this is a very definite. "**You.**" This thief didn't want to know what would happen to others. He needed to be sure of what was going to happen to *him*, a criminal who confessed he was getting what his deeds deserved.

Isn't that what you want to know in the depth of your sinfulness waking you up at night? Harsh honesty screams, "Guilty!" God says our sins deserve eternal wrath, gnashing of teeth, hopeless tears in a superhuman torture chamber designed for the devil and His angels. There's terror for every soul that can be as honest as this dying thief on the cross beside Jesus. How could Jesus **promise** "**Today you will be with me in paradise**"? As thrilling as it is to hear, we need to keep going to find out why.

† **The Third Word: A word of love** (John 19:25-27)

What was on Jesus' mind? Pain in his back from the shredding Roman scourge? Nails through his hands and feet? Crown of thorns tearing His scalp? Angry hurt from betrayal, denial, abandonment by His disciples? Hanging on a cross barely able to breathe with His body tearing down on the nails? Shame?

As His life is ebbing away under the cruelest torture, He sees His mother. He does not cry out to her, but addresses her as He had at the wedding of Cana when she forgot He was no longer her little boy in Nazareth, but God's Son, her Savior. He says tenderly, "**Woman, here is your son!**" And to John, the disciple He dearly loved, the only one there at the cross, "**Here is your mother!**"

This is more than just family. Jesus is our substitute under God's command to love your neighbor as yourself. He keeps God's command to love his mother, obeying God's Fourth Commandment in our place. God was providing in the perfect holiness of His own Son, the perfect obedience His law demands, but we can never give in a thousand lifetimes. Jesus is "**the Lord our righteousness**" (Jeremiah 23:6; 33:16) who provides us with the holiness and perfection God demands, then credits Christ to our account.

In this **word of love**, overriding love for His mother, for His family—this love that surpassed his own personal anguish—we see as his love for us. If anyone thinks that Mary was worthy of such love, remember when she and Jesus' step-siblings thought He'd lost His mind. They came to take Him away. That was when Jesus pointed to His disciples and said, "**Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.**" (Mark 3:21,31-35)

When he says, "**Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven,**" you may think that excludes you, but remember that the will of God the Father is that we believe in his Son as our Savior. Because the Lord has given you faith in Jesus, Paul's words apply to you: "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith." (Galatians 3:26) Jesus' first word from the cross was **a word of forgiveness** that soothes your soul covered here by God's love for you in Christ. It's **a word of love** for you too.

† **The Fourth Word: A word of ???** (Matthew 27:45,46)

Is this a word of anguish with Jesus staggering under the burden all the sins of the whole world? God promised through Isaiah, "**The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all**" (Isaiah 53:6 NIV84), "**charged all our guilt to him.**" (EHV) I don't want to find a word for the terror of being abandoned by God. I can't understand or feel the depth of this. I praise God I'll never have to. Nor will you.

Jesus cried out in our place as our substitute: "**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**" This was so important that God put these words in the pen of King David a thousand years before in Psalm 22:1: "**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**" And He pictured this word of deliverance for us in the middle of the middle of Moses' Pentateuch, the first five Books of Moses – Leviticus 16. On the great Day of Atonement, the priest would lay his hands on the head of the scapegoat while ceremonially placing all the guilt of God's people on the innocent animal. Then a man would lead the goat away into the desert. They could literally see their guilt disappearing into the desert. So centuries
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later John the Baptist pointed at Jesus, and everyone knew what he meant: **“Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”** Carrying the full weight of our guilt under the blazing wrath of God – Jesus suffered our hell in the separation we all deserve for all eternity. Jesus is the only innocent soul who ever lived. He alone could suffer in our place to earn God’s favor. Jesus accomplished God’s plan.

† **The Fifth Word: A word of fulfillment** (John 19:28)

After this, knowing that everything had now been finished, and to fulfill the Scripture, Jesus said, “I thirst.” (John 19:28 EHV) No doubt He suffered raging thirst as crucifixion caused. But the Holy Spirit says through John that Jesus was also looking back on all His life now coming to a close in which He reached the goal of perfect holiness and perfection under God’s law in order to give us the greatest blessing of all. He lived in our place in absolute innocence, then died in our place with absolutely all our guilt piled on Him. Now with all that accomplished, Jesus needs to shout it out for all to hear...down through the ages to us. Thirst was prophesied (Psalm 22:15); that had been **fulfilled**. Full suffering was **fulfilled** in that Jesus did not accept the pain-numbing wine the soldiers kept trying to force on His lips at first. Scholars say it made crucified victims easier to handle. But Jesus needed to suffer the full wrath of God who did not spare His only Son, but gave Him up for us all. Jesus has done it all. And so we hear:

† **The Sixth Word: A word of completion** (John 19:30)

“Finished” – do we actually ever finish anything? More exams, books to read, laundry, groceries, cleaning, car, home maintenance—finished? Life needs constant attention and much re-doing. But **finished**? No one seems to want to let God say that. The world’s religions and even the sinful heart of Christians like us are hard wired to think there must be something more. But Jesus is not just breathing a sigh of relief as if to say, “Finally, that’s over!” The Greek word **τετέλεσται** means *It’s good and done forever*. *What Jesus accomplished in His life and death on the cross is still ours today and into eternity.*

Many people think their status before God still needs work. They feel the need to contribute something. But it’s like putting varnish on a priceless diamond. Like working hard to sand the paint on your brand new car. Anything you and I might try on God’s perfect solution can only dishonor God and His Son Jesus Christ. Just stop. Just believe. **“It is finished.”**

† **The Seventh Word: A word of confidence** (Luke 23:46)

If you do an internet search for famous last words, you’ll find words of wit to illustrate the spirit of the speaker, indomitable even in the face of death. Maybe intended, if only subconsciously, to comfort us with the idea that death isn’t so intimidating after all. But the reality comes in stories of famous philosophers like Voltaire or tyrants like Stalin and the terror they felt as they died. One hospice nurse said she’d never want to be with a non-believer again; it was just too painful.

But Jesus here says so confidently, **“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”** No despair. No defeat. Not words of death, but **confidence** in victory. Just as Jesus had assured the thief on the cross that he would be in paradise immediately after he died, Jesus also expects the same. He knows His body will be placed in a grave, but His soul will soar immediately into the loving embrace of his Father. He’s going home at last. Very soon His soul will reunite with His body—a perfect, glorified body.

Once again Jesus addresses God as his **Father**. He knows He has fully accomplished everything God had asked of him. He stood blameless before God, then willingly suffered God’s wrath as our Substitute. No one else could do what Jesus did. Now He calls to His **Father** once again to go peacefully and confidently, entrusting His soul to God.

At our last hour, we may speak with the same confidence as we sing “Abide with Me” this evening. Thanks to Jesus, God will never forsake us, but will always abide in loving friendship and tender mercy. We stand before God with sins paid for—sins removed. **It is finished.** Amen.