

Good Friday, April 7, 2023

FIRST WORD

LUKE 23:26–34a. (EHV)

As they led him away, they seized Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country. They placed the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. A large crowd of people was following him, including women who were mourning and wailing for him. Jesus turned to them and said, **“Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. Be sure of this: The days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never gave birth, and the breasts that never nursed.’ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us!’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us!’ [Hosea 10:8]. For if they do these things to the green wood, what will happen to the dry?”** Two other men, who were criminals, were led away with Jesus to be executed. When they came to the place called The Skull, they crucified him there with the criminals, one on his right and the other on his left. Jesus said, **“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”**

I’m not someone who particularly struggles with forgiveness. Don’t get me wrong. There are plenty of buttons that Satan likes to push with me. Forgiveness just isn’t one of them. Then again, no one has really wronged me all that badly. I was bullied a little bit in school at various times, and it caused me to cry a few times, but it was nothing too bad. I forgave those who bullied me a long time ago. Bad drivers have given me some scares on the road, and a couple of them have caused bad accidents for me. But vehicles are just stuff, and in both cases I wasn’t really hurt, and their insurance paid for the damages. I’ve forgiven all the bad drivers I’ve encountered. As a pastor, I’ve had other encounters too, with people who didn’t want to hear what God’s word had to say. But I try to remember that, if I’m truly sharing God’s word with them, they’re not really angry at me. They’re angry at God. Plus, none of them have done me physical harm. In my heart I’ve forgiven them.

So sometimes I like to ask myself: What would it take for me to really struggle to forgive someone? What would it take for forgiveness to be a challenge for me? Would someone need to do me serious bodily injury? What if someone did something horrible to, say, my wife or my sister? That’s what I keep coming back to. There’s a good chance forgiving would be a challenge then.

But I do think that, even then, I’d eventually be able to forgive. In general, I don’t think I’ve struggled too hard with forgiveness because I feel I understand King David’s words in Psalm 51: “I know my own transgressions, and my sin is always before me.” My own heap of sin that God has removed is way too big for me to be making a big deal out of other people’s faults.

But that’s what makes Jesus’s first word so amazing. Not only has he gone through an ordeal far worse than any I’m ever likely to go through, but he also has no sin. Not once did Jesus ever need to pray to his heavenly Father, “Forgive me my trespasses.” When we pass judgment on others, we’re nearly always being hypocritical to one extent or another, because we’ve done the same things or things just as bad. But even though Jesus was tempted in every way, just as we are, he was completely without sin. He is the only one who could look down on others without condition or reservation, and it would be completely justified.

So where does his strength to pray this prayer come from? “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” He is praying this prayer in physical agony, having just gone through the trauma of getting his back torn open by a whip and then having nails pounded into his hands and feet, and while now hanging in the air by those nails!

The only answer is that his strength to pray this prayer must come from his own heart. It must come from a rich supply of mercy and compassion that he simply has within himself, which we do not—at least, not without him. It must come from his heart of perfect obedience to his heavenly Father, and it must be his heavenly Father’s will that he would pray such a prayer, otherwise he would not. It is because of this heart of forgiveness that he is there in the first place. It is because of his heart of forgiveness that he wishes forgiveness not just for those who physically put him on the cross, but for all who put him there by their sins—namely everyone in the history of the world, including you and me. This first word sets the tone for all of Good Friday. All that is running through Jesus’s heart and mind as he goes through this ghastly ordeal is mercy, compassion, forgiveness—for all his enemies, for all humankind.

SECOND WORD

LUKE 23:38–43. (EHV)

There was also an inscription written above him: “This is the King of the Jews.” One of the criminals hanging there was blaspheming him, saying, “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God, since you are under the same condemnation? We are punished justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for what we have done, but this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom.” Jesus said to him, “Amen I tell you: Today you will be with me in paradise.”

The criminals on Jesus’s right and left were also among those who didn’t know what they were doing. Both Matthew and Mark tell us that initially both of the criminals crucified with Jesus joined everyone else in heaping insults on him.

But for one of the criminals, it didn’t last long. Whether it was because of what he saw in Jesus or heard from Jesus or, more likely, both, he eventually stopped heaping insults on Jesus and started rebuking his fellow criminal, reminding him that they were being punished justly, while Jesus was being punished unjustly, as someone completely innocent.

Then he turned to Jesus himself and said, “Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom.” He seems to have been merely asking Jesus to remember him on Judgment Day.

But Jesus tells him he can do much better for him: “Amen I tell you: Today you will be with me in paradise.”

Jesus shows his mercy by making clear to the man that no purgatory, no self-atonement is necessary in order to enjoy the full benefits of the kingdom of God.

Jesus shows his mercy by making clear to the man that his sufferings will end that day. Oftentimes, crucified criminals were left to hang on the cross with their lives gradually ebbing

away for two or three days. Not this man. His life on earth will be over and his life in heaven will begin today.

Jesus shows his mercy by making clear to the man that what he, the Son of God, is doing is greater than any sin in any amount. It's interesting that Luke is the only one to record these words. Matthew and John were themselves Jesus's apostles. Mark was an evangelist associated with the apostle Peter. And Luke was an evangelist associated with...the apostle Paul. Little wonder that Paul would find such comfort in this second word from the cross, as someone who spent so much of his life rebelling against the gospel and trying to eradicate Christianity and Christians from the earth. Grace is grace. It was there for Paul, just as it was there for this criminal, just as it is there for you and me.

And it is sure and certain grace. After all, Jesus says, "Today you will be *with me* in paradise." In spite of everything he was going through, in spite of everything he would yet go through on this day, Jesus would not lose. He would be successful. He would finish his work. He would win paradise for all people, for all who put their faith in him.

THIRD WORD

JOHN 19:23–27. (EHV)

When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier. They also took his tunic, which was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. So they said to one another, "Let's not tear it. Instead, let's cast lots to see who gets it." This was so that the Scripture might be fulfilled which says:

They divided my garments among them
and cast lots for my clothing. [Psalm 22:18]

So the soldiers did these things. Jesus' mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene were standing near the cross. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "**Woman, here is your son!**" Then he said to the disciple, "**Here is your mother!**" And from that time this disciple took her into his own home.

Matthew and Mark only record one word of Jesus, the next one. Little surprise, considering that they weren't there. As I already mentioned, Luke probably got many of his details from the apostle Paul, who received his details by special revelation from Jesus after the fact. John is the only apostle who was actually there. So it's no surprise that he alone records three of the seven words.

Now if John were here, he would definitely be blushing and he would insist that we not talk him up at all. When Jesus's disciples fled in the Garden of Gethsemane, John was one of them. Yes, he came back to follow the events of Jesus's trial, but only from a distance, and he made sure to keep out of the limelight and to keep his mouth shut, unlike Peter. And yes, he was here at the foot of the cross, but he wasn't fighting with the soldiers to get them to take Jesus down. He was just there, looking on sadly, like the women were.

But he was there—Jesus’s best earthly friend—and he was there with Jesus’s mother—Jesus’s only family member present. How touching that Jesus would use some of his precious energy and breath to entrust these two to each other’s care, to make sure that his best friend and his mother were cared for after he was no longer visibly present on this earth!

There’s only one problem. It wasn’t necessary—not for them anyway. Mary had other sons, Jesus’s half-brothers, at least two of whom were still alive and could have cared for her. And a careful comparison of John with Matthew and Mark seems to reveal that Jesus’s mother’s sister, namely his aunt, was actually John’s mother! John wasn’t only Jesus’s apostle and friend, but also his cousin. So if John’s mother was there, John had someone to take care of him too.

So why did Jesus entrust these two to each other? Wasn’t he actually thinking just as much of us as he was of them? Didn’t he want his mother, who had treasured up so many things and pondered them in her heart, to spend time with the apostle who would, it seems, outlive all the others and be the last one to write a Gospel? Doesn’t the fact that Jesus entrusted John and his mother to each other mean that John’s Gospel is just as much Mary’s Gospel as it is John’s?

Yes, on the cross, Jesus isn’t just thinking of his mother and friend/cousin. He’s thinking of his spiritual family. He’s thinking of the Church. He’s thinking of all whom John and Mary would touch with their words, and with their testimony of his own words, like this one, and the fifth and sixth words we’ll hear later.

FOURTH WORD

MATTHEW 27:45–49. (EHV)

From the sixth hour until the ninth hour, there was darkness over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*” which means “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” When some of those standing there heard this, they said, “This fellow is calling for Elijah.” Immediately one of them ran, took a sponge, and soaked it with sour wine. Then he put it on a stick and gave him a drink. The rest said, “Leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to save him.”

Some of you are aware of this, but perhaps some of you aren’t. Did you know that this darkness at noon that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all mention is also attested by a non-Christian historian who lived in the 100s AD? Phlegon of Tralles wrote that between 32 and 33 AD, “a failure of the sun took place greater than any previously known, and night came on at noon, so that stars actually appeared in the sky.”

But why did that happen?

Did you pay close attention to Jesus when he prayed the first time from the cross?

“*Father, forgive them.*”

Throughout Jesus’s high-priestly prayer that he spoke the previous night, Holy Thursday, it was always “*Father.*”

Earlier in the week, Jesus had prayed, “*Father, glorify your name.*”

Before Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he prayed, “*Father, I thank you that you have heard me.*”

It was always “Father.”

You know what Jesus *never* called God? “My God, my God.” Not once. Until now.

There is something terrible and mystifying taking place here. God is eternal. God is one. God is unchanging. Yet the Son is not addressing his Father as “Father” for the only time in his life here, and his rhetorical question, combined with the fact that he asks it with a loud cry, indicates that the Father has in fact forsaken him. No wonder it turned night half a day early. How can indivisible, unchanging God forsake God?

I don’t know, but I know it happened somehow. And I know we needed it to happen. Because if Jesus was going to pay for our sins, then he also had to take their punishment. And their punishment wasn’t so much eternal fire. It wasn’t so much eternal decomposition. It was eternal separation from God, from all of his love and favor, being left with only his just wrath. That is the essence of hell. Jesus was offering himself as the definitive sacrifice for sin, as the object of God’s wrath, in the true Holy of Holies, and the horrifying scene was such that it nearly sucked all the light right out of the sky.

We can only imagine the anguish and torment with which Jesus said these words.

Yet Jesus didn’t simply say, “*El, El*, why have you forsaken me?” He said, “*Eli*,” “*My God*.” Even in this literal God-forsaken moment, this literal God-forsaken experience, the Son is not bitter or resentful toward his Father. He still knows that what he is going through, he is going through in obedience to his heavenly Father’s will, which is exactly what he wants to fulfill, no matter how agonizing and torturous it is.

Jesus never again addressed God as “My God.” And because of what he went through on the cross for us, we can always address God not just as “My God,” but also as “Father,” like Jesus did. And we need never worry that he will leave or forsake us.

FIFTH WORD

JOHN 19:28–29. (EHV)

After this, knowing that everything had now been finished, and to fulfill the Scripture, Jesus said, “**I thirst.**” A jar full of sour wine was sitting there. So they put a sponge soaked in sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth.

In Psalm 69:21, David prophesies, “They put gall in my food, and gave me vinegar for my thirst.” Extreme thirst was, in fact, one of the effects of being crucified. And we can imagine Jesus being even more thirsty than most because of having just literally gone through hell.

But he will not receive a cold Coke, or even warm water. When you expose regular wine to oxygen long enough, letting it ferment even further, it ceases to become wine and becomes a new product, wine vinegar or sour wine. The alcohol of the wine is converted into acetic acid. It’s not a pleasant thing to drink. It was especially not pleasant served on a sponge—which was likely standard issue for Roman soldiers to clean themselves, including when they used the bathroom. I don’t care how well it might have been rinsed off; no one would want to take a drink from that.

But Jesus will not leave even one prophecy unfulfilled. God's words and promises are always Yes and Amen in Jesus Christ. He takes the bitter drink. He fulfills God's word. Just like he always does.

SIXTH WORD

JOHN 19:30a. (EHV)

When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, **"It is finished!"**

One word in Greek, three in English: "It is finished." They are perhaps the most precious words in all of the Scriptures.

Jesus once said that he had not come to judge the world, but to save it. Finished.

He once said that he had not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them. Finished.

He once said that not the smallest letter or the least stroke of a pen would disappear from the Law until it was all done. Finished.

He once said that he had come to seek and to save what was lost. Finished.

He once said that he came to give his life as a ransom for many. Finished.

He once said that that when he was lifted up from the earth, he would draw all people to himself. Finished.

There is no debt to God left on your account or mine. There is nothing left that we must do to make him favorably disposed toward us. Peace with God and eternal life are there for the believing and taking.

Martin Luther wrote in his popular hymn, "A Mighty Fortress," that one little word can fell the devil. The word he probably had in mind was Christ, but this word from Christ's mouth would do just as well: Finished. Jesus's redeeming work is finished.

SEVENTH WORD

LUKE 23:33–46. (EHV)

When they came to the place called The Skull, they crucified him there with the criminals, one on his right and the other on his left. Jesus said, **"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."** They cast lots to divide his garments among them. The people stood watching. The rulers were ridiculing him, saying, "He saved others. Let him save himself, if this is the Christ of God, the Chosen One!" The soldiers also made fun of him. Coming up to him, they offered him sour wine, saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription written above him: "This is the King of the Jews." One of the criminals hanging there was blaspheming him, saying, "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God, since you are under the same condemnation? We are punished justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for what we have done, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom." Jesus said to him, **"Amen I tell you: Today you will be with me in**

paradise.” It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun was darkened. Then the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” When he had said this, he breathed his last.

Did you hear it? I told you he would never address God as “My God” again. Back to normal. Well, sort of. It is clear the wrath of God over sin is past and fully satisfied. But it isn’t exactly normal that Jesus, the Son of God, is about to sink into death. After all, God isn’t only unchanging. He’s also eternal and immortal. He is life itself. But in the person of God’s Son, God will indeed die.

But Jesus will take with him the work he has finished, the obedience he has fulfilled, and the eternal life he has won. He will not succumb to death; he will intentionally drop into death’s belly like a grenade. Death will be like the great fish that swallowed Jonah, and then soon realized he had eaten the wrong meal, so that he had to vomit him back out again three days later.

In giving death its final blow, Jesus also shows us how to die. Because of the work he has done for us, we need not meet death with terror and uncertainty. We can instead address God as our Father and calmly commit our spirit into his hands, knowing that, just as Jesus promised the repentant criminal, the moment after we breathe our last we will be with Jesus in paradise.