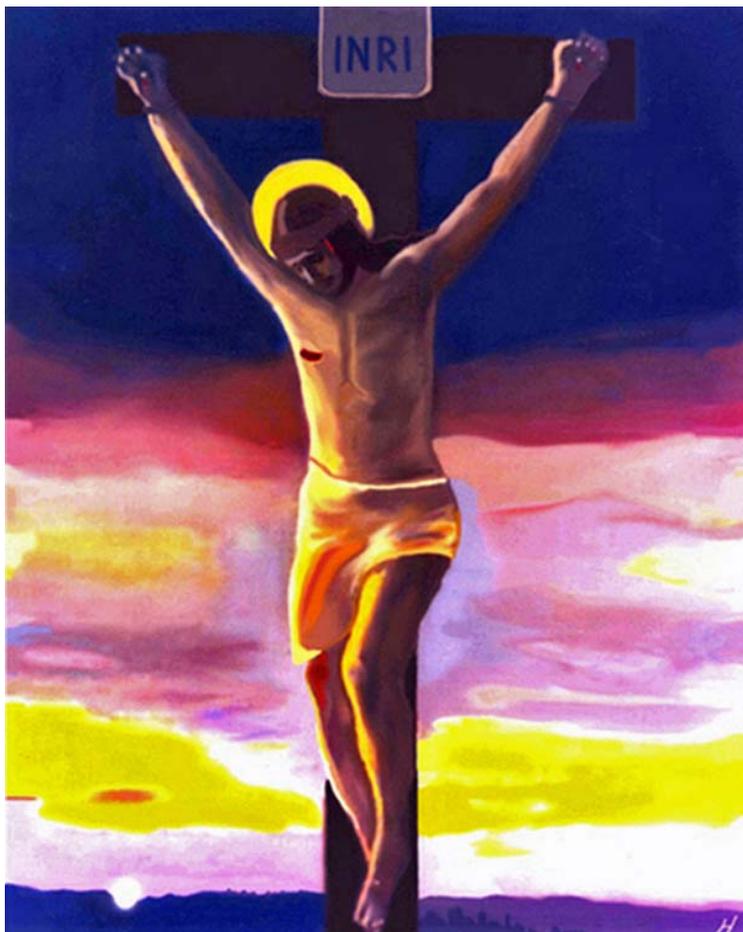


Prayer Vigil 2013



“Could you not keep watch with me for one hour?” Jesus asked His disciples.

Prayer Vigil 2013

We are pleased that you have accepted the invitation to pray during these hours. It is our prayer that this time will be a blessing to you and that your daily prayer life will be enhanced by this experience.

Christ Jesus died on the Cross to redeem mankind, to save us from our sins because of His love for us. As recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in the Holy Bible, Jesus Christ was mocked, scorned, and tortured in the praetorium. He carried his own cross towards Calvary; He was nailed to the Cross and hung between two common criminals, and Jesus suffered a horrible death.

When we examine what our Savior exclaimed on the cross, we can learn about His true character and His integrity before the Father. We can see the love that pours out from His wounds, directed at us! Neither the heat, nor the sweat mixed with the blood, nor the agony and emotional distress distracted Him from having you and me on His mind that day. From these Seven Words of Jesus, we can draw strength and courage for our own walk on this earth as we follow His call to be His disciples. He suffered the extreme penalty of death that we may live!

Here are His **Seven Words**, the last seven expressions of Jesus Christ on the Cross that are recorded in Scripture.

THE FIRST WORD FROM THE CROSS - Forgiveness

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

Throughout His trial Jesus did not complain. He did not strike back with His tongue at the evil that was hurled at Him. He was silent, except when it was necessary to witness to the truth or proclaim the honor of God. Yet, hanging on the cross, He spoke treasured words. The first words were words of intercession. But for whom were they spoken? They were spoken for the soldiers who had taken Him in the Garden of Gethsemane as well as for those who had borne false witness against Him. They were spoken for the High Priest and the crowd that called for His crucifixion. Included were Pilate and Herod, and also those who crucified Him and mocked Him at the cross. They were spoken for all who denied and rejected Him as the Savior, the Messiah.

Even as He prayed, Jesus witnessed to His relationship to God. He called Him, “Father”. He did not say to the people at the cross, “I forgive you.” The offenses against Him were directed at the Father who had sent Him. He implored the Father to forgive them, and thus showed that He had not come into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

Reflection

Jesus’ life, as well as His death, was to complete the mission for which the Father sent Him. He was to suffer and die in our place. He took upon Himself the sins of the world and, in doing so ransomed us from sin, death, and the devil. In every way, His life was one of perfect obedience to the Father. In every way, His life fulfilled all of the prophecies about Him being the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. When He quoted Psalm 22:1 “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?”, He showed that, as prophesied, He became sin for us. He triumphantly announced that the price for sin had been paid in full. Now in conclusion, He shows that His faith in the Father has not been damaged. He always has and still does trust in the promises of God. He knows that even in physical death, His spirit will live on with the Father in eternity. So in parting, Jesus quotes Psalm 31:5 “Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God”. Psalm 31 continues with verses affirming the Father’s “steadfast love”, His “goodness”, His “mercy”, and His “faithfulness”. As He lived, so He died. Jesus died trusting completely in God the Father.

By quoting a portion of Psalm 31, Jesus not only entrusted His future to His Father, but also implied that He would be delivered and exonerated. No, God would not deliver him from death by crucifixion. But beyond this horrific death lay something marvelous. Beyond death and the grave lay resurrection and eternal bliss and glory at the right hand of the Father.

Questions for Reflection

Have you put your life and even your life beyond this life, in God’s hands? How do you experience God’s salvation through Christ in your life today?

Prayer

Gracious Lord, even as you once entrusted your spirit into the hands of the Father, so I give my life to you. I trust you and you alone to be my Savior. I submit to your sovereignty over my life and seek to live for your glory alone. Here I am, Lord, available to you, both now and in the future. How good it is to know, dear Lord, that the cross was not the end for you. As you entrusted your spirit into the Father’s hands, you did so in anticipation of what was to come. So we reflect upon your death, not in despair, but in hope. With Good Friday behind us, Easter Sunday is on the horizon. Amen.

Hymn 425 When I Survey the Wondrous Cross

Hymn 447 Jesus, in Your Dying Woes vv19-21

All praise be to you, Lord Jesus, for your matchless forgiveness. Amen.

THE SECOND WORD FROM THE CROSS – Salvation

“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43).

“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”, (Luke 23:33). Now it is not just the religious leaders or the soldiers that mock Jesus, but even one of the criminals, a downward progression of mockery. Around the cross were representatives of all kinds of people. There were the proud, the self-righteous, the scoffers, and mockers. There were people sympathetic to Jesus. They were all there by choice. But then there were two others who were not there by choice, who were suffering the same punishment as Jesus, though for a different reason. They were convicted criminals who were not there by choice, but whose life choices put them in this circumstance. The one criminal mocked Jesus from the cross. He died with cursing on his lips. What a horrible way to die! But the criminal on the right spoke up for Jesus, explaining that the two criminals were receiving their just due, whereas “this man has done nothing wrong”. He was won by the power of the cross. He had heard the first word of Jesus in which Jesus implored the Father to forgive His crucifiers. “And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”, (Luke 23:42). The criminal who was facing death hanging alongside Jesus spoke from the heart. He confessed his sin and unworthiness.

Isaiah 53:12 says that Jesus would be numbered with the transgressors, and indeed, He died on a hill between two thieves. But these thieves represent two classes of people with one thing in common: They were both helpless sinners. The two of them represent all of us. We have all rebelled against God in various ways. We are all guilty of sin and deserving of death. Yet one of the criminals being crucified asked to be saved.

Jesus’ response is also a comfort to us. This man did not plead his works or any righteousness of his own. How could he? He had wasted away his life in crime and was now receiving the just reward of his deeds. “The wages of sin is death”, (Romans 6:23). If ever there was a strong commentary on the fact that salvation is by grace through faith without the deeds of the Law, this is it. The gift of salvation is not earned; It is given. Jesus said to the penitent thief, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise”. The Lord had said, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself”, (John 12:32). Jesus declared this criminal to be one who was drawn to Him.

Even though His body was nailed to the cross and He was physically dying, the devil could not stop Jesus from reaching out to the unsaved and offering them forgiveness and eternal salvation with Him in paradise (heaven). After the thief received forgiveness and assurance of salvation, he too could die with a peaceful spirit.

Reflection

When Jesus said “It is finished”, He declared that He had accomplished His mission. He had paid the price for rebellion and sin that we could never pay. He had announced and inaugurated the Kingdom of God. He had revealed the love and grace of God. And He had embodied that love and grace by dying for the sin of the world, thus opening up the way for all to live under the reign of God. The rift and disharmony created between God and humanity by Adam and Eve’s sin had been closed and harmony had been restored. On the cross, Jesus restored fallen humanity to fellowship with the Creator God. Christ’s mission was a total success; this is wonderful news!

Because Jesus finished His work of salvation, you and I don’t need to add to it. In fact, we can’t. He accomplished what we never could, taking our sin upon Himself, and giving us His life in return. Jesus finished that for which He had been sent, and we are the beneficiaries of His unique accomplishment. Because of what He finished, you and I are never lost. We have hope for this life and for the next. We know that nothing can separate us from God’s love, (Romans 8:39). One day, what God has begun in us will also be brought to completion by His grace. Until that day, we live in the confidence of Jesus’ cry of victory: “It is finished!”

He accomplished everything He came to do. And why did He come? "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life", (John 3:16). Can we have everlasting life? Absolutely! Christ made it possible.

Questions for Reflection

Do you live as if Jesus finished the work of salvation? Do you have confidence that God will finish that which He has begun in you?

Prayer

How can I ever find words to express my gratitude to you, dear Lord Jesus? You did it. You finished that for which you had been sent, faithful in life, faithful in death. You accomplished that which no other person could do, taking the sin of the world upon your sinless shoulders and taking my sin so that I might receive your forgiveness and new life.

All praise be to you, gracious Lord, for finishing the work of salvation. All praise be to you, dear Jesus, for saving me! Alleluia! Amen.

Hymn 436 Go to Dark Gethsemane

Hymn 447 Jesus, in Your Dying Woes vv16-18

All praise be to you, Lord Jesus, for your matchless forgiveness. Amen.

THE THIRD WORD FROM THE CROSS – Relationship

“When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son!” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.” (John 19:26-27).

As Jesus hung upon the cross, there were many who hung around the cross. Besides His friends of whom there were fewer, there were the mockers and scoffers. Jesus and Mary are together again, at the beginning of His ministry in Cana and now at the end of His public ministry at the foot of the Cross. The sight of Jesus hanging upon the cross, as well as the sound of evil voices mocking her Son surely brought to Mary’s mind the prophecy of Simeon when he blessed them. Simeon had said to Mary, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed”, (Luke 2:34-35). ‘Mary’ means ‘bitter’. Here at the cross she tasted the bitterness of the helplessness of a mother who could neither take the place of her Son nor alleviate His suffering. She tasted bitter sorrow as a sword figuratively pierced through her own soul.

But greater than the love of a mother is the love of her Son Jesus, whom she also knew as her Savior. Neither she nor we have ever been called upon to exercise sacrificial love to the extent Jesus did. Yet in the midst of His suffering there is exhibited what the Scriptures record, “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end”, (John 13:1).

In His last hours, He did not forget His mother but provided a protector for her. The Savior provided her with another ‘son’. He said to his mother, “Woman, behold your son!” Jesus called her ‘woman’ not ‘mother’ because He wanted her to think of Him in relation to her atonement by Him rather than in a narrower familial relationship. Mary could now lean on John as a son. But the concern was to be mutual. John, too, as the disciple “whom Jesus loved” was also in need of support. “Then He said to the disciple (John), ‘Behold, your mother!’ And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.”

In addition to Jesus continuing to keep God’s commandment of ‘honoring His father and mother’ by arranging for His mother’s future care and needs, there is also a spiritual picture here. Biblically, the church is pictured as a woman, the ‘bride of Christ’. Jesus is the Bridegroom and has already arranged for the marriage feast. Now He is arranging for the church’s protection until He comes again to take us to Himself in heaven. Just as Jesus shows care, compassion, and concern for His earthly mother, so He likewise

shows that He loves his church and protects it until He comes again. As Christians, we are all members of His body the church. We are all His family.

Reflection

Roman crucifixion was an extremely painful and slow death. In addition to the pain of being nailed to rough wood after the scourging, there was also the inability to move, the suffocating inability to breathe and the loss of bodily fluids which caused extreme thirst. Because Jesus physically died on a cross, He experienced this extreme thirst while being crucified. He would have lost a substantial quantity of bodily fluid, both blood and sweat, through what He had endured prior to crucifixion. Thus His statement, "I thirst" was, on the most obvious level, a request for something to drink. In response, the soldiers gave Jesus "sour wine", (John 19:29), a cheap beverage common among lower class people in the time of Jesus.

Christ said that, in the great judgment, He will separate the sheep from the goats. He will say to the saved, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink", (Matthew 25:34-35). When Jesus described the condition of the suffering world in Matthew 25, He was also describing His condition on the cross. He was hungry, thirsty, sick, alone, a stranger, and a prisoner. He experienced all these deprivations on the cross for our sake. Jesus experienced the result of sin when He died on the cross. He experienced all the pain of an excruciating death so that we would not be in eternal agony and thirst in hell, (Luke 16:24).

Though we may not be physically thirsty, we do have a spiritual thirst. Like the Samaritan woman, we need the living water that only Jesus can supply, (John 4:10-14). Jesus said, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water'", (John 7:38-39).

Questions for Reflection

How does Jesus' suffering thirst give you assurance? What is it that you thirst for?

Prayer

O Lord, once again I thank you for what you suffered on the cross. Besides extraordinary pain, you also experienced extreme thirst. All of this was part of your taking on our humanity so that you would take away our sin. In your words "I thirst", I hear the cry of my own heart. I too am thirsty, Lord, but not for physical drink. I don't need sour wine. I need the new wine of your kingdom to flood my soul. I need to be refreshed by your living water. I yearn for your Spirit to refresh me again. I am thirsty, Lord, for you. Amen.

Hymn 437 Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed

Hymn 447 Jesus, in Your Dying Woes vv13-15

All praise be to you, Lord Jesus, for your matchless forgiveness. Amen.

THE FOURTH WORD FROM THE CROSS – Abandonment

**"And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?"
that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
(Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34)**

The reality of the Father's love in promising a Savior is overwhelming to the penitent who realize what was lost by the sin of Adam and Eve, and who recognize the on-going nature of sin in our own life. The manner of His conception by the Holy Spirit and His birth of the virgin Mary are no less overwhelming because they are so miraculous. But we believe the miracle, and gladly so, for it declares to us that Jesus is without sin. Jesus had to be both True God and True Man in order to live a life that was perfectly obedient to the Father and lay down His life as a ransom for many. That was His mission. That is why He was born. That is the message of the Bible from cover to cover.

It was at three o'clock in the afternoon, the very hour when the lambs for the evening sacrifice were slain that Jesus said, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Jesus experienced the full weight of our sins and the ultimate separation and abandonment from God that they cause. For us, Jesus was forsaken by God. Christ, our High Priest and Sacrifice, was announcing, 'I am the Lamb. This is the Passover'. As both our High Priest and spotless sacrifice, He is reading and living a Passover psalm. Jesus was forsaken by God for us. He is the true Passover Lamb.

If there is nothing else that strikes the penitent sinner with the enormity of sin, surely it is these words that express the forsakenness of Jesus by His Father. There is no hell on earth when we understand what hell really is. There may be things on earth that mimic hell, but hell, in the real sense, is being forsaken by God. Being forsaken by God is the epitome of punishment. God is not in hell, nor can those in hell call upon God. So great is the Father's love for us that He forsook His own Son! Who can grasp it? Penitent sinners cannot fully grasp it but are thankful for it.

This question of Jesus underscores the reality of His suffering and shame. What He endured was not a charade. It was real! In this question, we can appreciate the severity of what we have been delivered from. The answer to the "Why" of Jesus lies in the Father's determination to provide a means of reconciliation with sinful humanity. The blessed truth is that because Jesus suffered this separation, none who believe in His meritorious atonement will be required to suffer this separation from God. Having been reconciled to God through the merit of the Lord Jesus, we have peace with God. As Christians, we in faith believe that the Father forsook His Son in order that all who believe might have the daily assurance in life and at the moment of death, that the Father will not forsake us. Jesus was abandoned and forsaken so that we might be reconciled and redeemed. He did it all for us.

Reflection

Even in His dying words, Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. He quoted the beginning of Psalm 22, which reads: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest", (Psalm 22:1-2).

Why did God abandon Jesus? Why did the Father turn his back on Jesus in His moment of greatest agony? Was it because His own sins separated Him from His Father? Absolutely not! It was because Jesus became sin for us. In taking on our sins, He experienced the complete separation, isolation, abandonment, and forsakenness of humanity because of Adam and Eve's sin. For the first time in His earthly life, Jesus experienced the end result of sin – abandonment by the Father. The suffering of separation from the Father was a far greater pain and punishment than physically dying on the cross. All those who die in their sins without the blood of Jesus to cover them and make them acceptable to the Father, face eternal abandonment. They face eternity in outer darkness forsaken by God and alienated from all that is good and all that is life. This is what Jesus experienced for our sakes. He took upon Himself the complete penalty for sin – abandonment by God.

In that excruciating moment, He experienced something far more horrible than physical pain. The beloved Son of God now knew what it was to be rejected by the Father. As we read in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God".

Questions for Reflection

Have you taken time to consider that Jesus was abandoned by the Father so that you will not be? What does this 'word' from the cross mean to you?

Prayer

O Lord Jesus, though I will never fully grasp the wonder and horror of your abandonment by the Father, every time I read this 'word', I am overwhelmed with gratitude. How can I ever thank you for what you suffered for me? What can I do but to offer myself to you in gratitude and praise? Thank you, dear Lord, for what you suffered. Thank you for taking my place. Thank you for being forsaken by the Father so that I will never be. Amen.

Hymn 425 When I Survey the Wondrous Cross
Hymn 447 Jesus, in Your Dying Woes vv10-12

All praise be to you, Lord Jesus, for your matchless forgiveness. Amen.

THE FIFTH WORD FROM THE CROSS - Distress

**“After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), ‘I thirst.’”
(John 19:28)**

The fifth word of Jesus is the only human expression of His physical suffering. The wounds inflicted upon Him in the scourging, the crowning with thorns, and the nailing upon the cross are now taking their toll, especially after losing blood on the walk through the city of Jerusalem to Golgotha. Obviously, Jesus is dehydrated from His long trials and the loss of blood.

“I am weary with my crying out; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God. Hide not your face from your servant; for I am in distress; make haste to answer me”, (Psalm 69:3, 17). “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?”, (Psalm 42:2). “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death”, (Psalm 22:14-15).

If we want to know the enormity of our sin, we need only to sit at the foot of the cross, and recognize that the words above from the Psalms are a reflection of what our Savior suffered. When originally offered the drink of myrrh and gall that would have alleviated His suffering and hastened His death, Jesus refused to receive it. He must be in full control of His senses to drink the cup of suffering to its fullest, for only by doing so could He satisfy the demands of the Law which pronounced death upon the sinner. To have done less would have left fallen man still under condemnation of eternal death with all its indescribable horror and suffering. But when Jesus had endured it all, and had fully paid the price, the Son of God desired to see His Father. He was ready to die. It was His time, the time selected by His Father. Unto the end, Jesus remained in control of all things in order that the Scriptures would be fulfilled. “They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink”, (Psalm 69:21).

Now Jesus said, “I thirst.” The thirst that He felt was not uncommon for someone in His circumstance. A parched throat often accompanies death. But His thirst was more than a dry throat. He thirsts for those for whom He died to come to Him and drink of the refreshing water of salvation. “Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities”, (Isaiah 53:11). Each time we hear this word, “I thirst” we should appreciate what He suffered, and at the same time daily bring Him satisfaction through our word and action, as well as our living faith and hope. In that manner we declare that Jesus did not thirst or die in vain.

Reflection

When we think of the crucifixion of Jesus from the perspective of His mother, our horror increases dramatically. The death of a child is one of the most painful of all parental experiences. To watch one’s beloved child experience the extreme torture of crucifixion must have been unimaginably terrible.

This scene helps us not to glorify or spiritualize the crucifixion of Jesus. He was a real man, true flesh and blood, a son of a mother, dying with unbearable agony. His suffering was altogether real, and He took it on for you and for me. In these words, we learn that our welfare is a constant and abiding concern of our Savior. He knows our pain and sorrow, even in His own. He did not die on the cross in our place to forgive us our sin and win heaven for us only to forget us while we are waiting for the eternal dawn. Here He also helps us to appreciate that He helps and strengthens and encourages us through one another. We do not live on an island. At the cross, we learn to appreciate the mutual love and care that exists within a fellowship, as well as the responsibility that members of the body of Christ are to have for one another. If in

His deepest suffering He loved His own so much that He would provide for their mutual welfare, how also ought we to care for and love one another, and thus reflect Jesus' love whereby He has loved us all!

Questions for Reflection

What does Mary and John's presence at the cross evoke in you? Why do you think it was necessary for Jesus to suffer physical pain as He died?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, the presence of your mother at the cross engages my heart. You are no longer just the Savior dying for the sins of the world. You are also a fully human man, a son with a mother. O Lord, how can I begin to thank you for what you suffered? My words fall short. My thoughts seem superficial and vague. Nevertheless, I offer my sincere gratitude for your suffering. Thank you for bearing my sin on the cross. I give you my praise, my love, my heart . . . all that I am, because you have given me all that you are. All praise be to you, Lord Jesus, fully God and fully human, Savior of the world, my Savior! Amen.

Hymn 649 Blest Be the Tie That Binds

Hymn 447 Jesus, in Your Dying Woes vv7-9

All praise be to you, Lord Jesus, for your matchless forgiveness. Amen.

THE SIXTH WORD FROM THE CROSS - Triumph

“When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished”, and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.” (John 19:30)

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”, (Romans 6:23). “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast”, (Ephesians 2:8-9). Thank God! “It is finished.” Jesus had become human to live a perfectly sinless life and die on the cross as the Lamb of God. “He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world”, (1 John 2:2).

The Greek word translated as ‘finished’ (tetelestai) has a wealth of information about this word of Jesus. This word means that everything has been accomplished; the price of rebellion has been paid in full. There is nothing more that needs to be done to redeem humanity from its lost and condemned situation. Christ satisfied God's justice by dying for all to pay for the sins of all people of all time. These sins can never be punished again since that would violate God's justice. Sins can only be punished once, either by a substitute or by the one who sinned.

Everything foretold about and necessary for our salvation is complete! With reference to the attainment of the promised eternal salvation, no works, no penance, no blood, no money, nothing more is necessary unless one does not believe what “finished” means. As comforting as it is to believe that Jesus has paid the full price for our salvation when He died upon the cross, it is also so sad when people remain comfortless and burdened because they believe that they have to complete what Jesus already declared finished.

Our Savior Jesus Christ said to His disciples, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished”, (Luke 18:31). “It is finished” tells us that Jesus is true to His Word. We, the redeemed who believe the Word of Christ and trust in His once-for-all completed atonement, are numbered among those to whom Psalm 22 makes reference. “Posterity shall serve him; it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation; they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it”, (Psalm 22:30-31).

God demanded payment for sin. “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die”, (Genesis 2:16-17). Jesus made that payment for all sinners. Those who try to add to or complete the work of Christ instead of accepting in faith the finished work of Jesus that

justifies the ungodly, they make Christ a liar. They destroy for themselves this message of comfort and assurance: "It is finished!" Your sins have totally and permanently been paid for.

Reflection

What a way to die! "Today you will be with me in paradise." Analyze those words. Today . . . with Jesus . . . in paradise. How blessed is the death of the saints; how great the breadth and depth of the grace of God! Let us not wonder how this evil man could be shown such grace. Let us thank God that grace is so rich to even include him, for then it will include us whose sins against the Lord are every bit as dark, even if not as spectacular.

This has to be one of the most encouraging verses in all of Scripture. Jesus promised that this criminal would be with Him in paradise. Yet the text of Luke gives us no reason to believe this man had previously been a follower of Jesus or even a believer in Him in any well-developed sense. His cry to be remembered was his only statement of repentance and belief. Yet it showed that he believed that Jesus was who He claimed to be and that death would not hold Jesus or prevent Him from coming into an eternal kingdom and he wanted to be included in that kingdom.

Though we should make every effort to have right theology, and though we should live our lives each day as disciples of Jesus, in the end, our relationship with Him comes down to simple trust. "Jesus, remember me," we cry. And Jesus, embodying the mercy of God, says to us, "You will be with me in paradise". We are welcome there not because we have right theology, and not because we are living rightly, but because God is merciful and we have put our trust in Jesus.

Questions for Reflection

Have you staked your life on Jesus? Have you put your ultimate trust in Him? Do you know that, when your time comes, you will be with Him in paradise?

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, how I wonder at your grace and mercy! When we cry out to you, you hear us. When we ask you to remember us when you come into your kingdom, you offer the promise of paradise. Your mercy, dear Lord, exceeds anything we might imagine. It embraces us, encourages us, and heals us. Lord, though my situation is so different from the criminal who cried out to you, I am nevertheless quite like him. Today I live, trusting you and you alone. My life, both now and in the world to come, is in your hands. And so I pray: Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom! Jesus, remember me today as I seek to live within your kingdom! Amen.

Hymn 565 Thy Works, Not Mine, O Christ

Hymn 447 Jesus, in Your Dying Woes vv4-6

All praise be to you, Lord Jesus, for your matchless forgiveness. Amen.

THE SEVENTH WORD FROM THE CROSS – Reunion

**"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 23:46)**

John's Gospel says that Jesus was tried and crucified on the Day of Preparation, the day before the actual Passover, (John 19:14). He died at the ninth hour (three o'clock in the afternoon); about the same time as the Passover lambs were slaughtered in the Temple. Christ became the Paschal or Passover Lamb. "For Christ, our Passover lamb has been sacrificed", (1 Corinthians 5:7). The innocent Lamb was slain for our sins, so that we might be forgiven. "Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews'", (John 19:19). After Jesus announced that "It is finished", He bowed His head and gave up His spirit. The Romans were actually surprised that Jesus died so soon because criminals often languished for days on the cross. Jesus expired after about only six hours. At the ninth hour, He let out that last breath.

In His final words from the cross, Jesus quoted another Old Testament prophecy. "Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God" (Psalm 31:5). After the torment of betrayal by one of His own, the anguish of denial by another of His own, after mockery and abuse, a crown of thorns and suffering, after being forsaken by God, and enduring the throes of death, His spirit was nevertheless peaceful in death! Jesus had paid the price for sin, and now He could give up His spirit in peace.

Do you remember the first recorded words of Jesus? In Luke 2:49, Jesus reminded his earthly parents that He must be about His Father's business. At such a young age, He already knew that His purpose, from the time He went to that first Passover, was to fulfill the will of the Father as the Lamb of God. And now He closes His ministry by acknowledging again that His life was about doing the Father's will.

His last words are words of complete faith. Straining under the crushing weight of the world's guilt and staring into the abysmal portal of the tomb must have appeared hopeless. Yet by faith, Jesus laid hold of the Father and on all of His promises. We learn from His last words that our faith needs to go beyond feeling. Jesus knew His mission, knew the prophecies that He would rise again, and even though He felt He was facing eternal separation, He said, "Father, I trust you." That is why Jesus' spirit could be at peace when He died. This is a perfect example for us.

As a child of God, we can be confident that our spirit will also be at peace when we are called home to be with our Lord. Our Savior has reconciled us to God. As we are reconciled to God through the death of Jesus, we have nothing to fear from God. No matter how violent our death may be, no matter how fierce the struggle may be between life and death, our heart can be at peace in our Lord, Jesus the Christ. When the crowd cried "crucify Him", Jesus responded "Forgive them, Father." When our conscience cries out against us because we have sinned, Jesus' words still echo across the centuries, "Father, forgive them." The message of the Gospel is that where there is forgiveness of sins there is also life and salvation. All who recognize the terrible burden of sin and its eternal consequence are thankful for the price Jesus paid for which reason the Father graciously forgives our sin.

Reflection

It makes sense that the first word Jesus spoke from the cross is a word of forgiveness. That's the whole point of the cross, after all. Jesus died so that we might be forgiven for our sins, so that we might be reconciled to God and live with Him for eternity.

But the forgiveness of God through Christ doesn't come only to those who don't know what they are doing when they sin. In His mercy, God forgives us even when we do what we know to be wrong. God chooses to wipe away our sins, not because we have some convenient excuse, and not because we have tried hard to make up for them, but because He is a God of amazing grace, with mercies that are new every morning.

As we read the words, "Father, forgive them," may we understand that we too are forgiven through Christ. As John writes in his first letter, "But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness", (1 John 1:9). Because Christ died on the cross for us, we are cleansed from all wickedness, from every and all sin. We are united with God the Father as His beloved children. We are free to approach His throne of grace with our needs and concerns. God "has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west", (Psalm 103:13). What great news!

Questions for Reflection

Do you take time to confess your sins so that God will remove the guilt of sinning from you? Does it give your heart great comfort to know that your sins are forgiven?

Prayer

Dear Lord, though I believe that you have forgiven me, this amazing truth needs to penetrate my heart. Help me to know with fresh conviction that I am fully and finally forgiven, not because of anything I have done, but because of what you have done for me. May I live today as a forgiven person, opening my heart to you, choosing to resist temptation to sin because the power of sin has been broken by your salvation. Amen.

Hymn 843 Forgive Our Sins as We Forgive
Hymn 447 Jesus, in Your Dying Woes vv1-3

All praise be to you, Lord Jesus, for your matchless forgiveness. Amen.

AN EIGHTH WORD

**“He is not here, for he has risen, as he said.
Come, see the place where he lay.” (Matthew 28:6)**

We have considered the seven words of Jesus from the cross. From them we have drawn comfort, encouragement, and strength as we pilgrim through the wasteland of this morally barren and spiritually destitute earth. But all would be for naught, and we of all people would be the most deceived were it not for an eighth word, spoken in this case by the heavenly messenger, “He is not here, for he has risen, as he said.”

The Apostle Paul said, “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive”, (1 Corinthians 15:17-22).

After His resurrection, many witnesses and events substantiated the message of the angel to the women. It happened, “as He said.” These three words are significant. Christ fulfilled the Scriptures. Christ took up His life again, (John 10:18). The temple that men sought to destroy was raised up again after three days just as Jesus said it would be, (John 2:19). It is the faithfulness of God that sustains the Christian through this life. Every promise of God is yes and amen; it shall be so. Therefore even before Jesus’ resurrection, Job could say by faith, “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!”, (Job 19:25-27). As the eyes grow dim and the shadows lengthen there echoes through the corridor of the heart, “Because I live, you shall live also”, (John 14:19). The one is true - “He is risen” - therefore the other is also true - “You shall live also!” “As He said!”

Prayer

“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen”, (Ephesians 3:20-21).

Hymn 457 Jesus Christ is Risen Today

Christ is risen, Hallelujah! He is risen indeed!