

**The Last Words of Christ –  
Life Words for the Church  
#2 – “With me, in paradise”**

During this season of Lent, we are looking at the last words spoken by Jesus during the time of the crucifixion. While often referred to as the seven last words from the cross, I suggested last week as we began this series that they are more than gasped cries or accidental utterances. They are incredibly potent benedictions from the savior, meant as words of unbounded blessing and grace, and they were spoken with both immediate and eternal intent. That is, those words of mercy, comfort, promise, command, identification, surrender and triumph were intimately and powerfully addressed to those gathered there at Calvary around his cross; but in the holy mystery of God’s saving work and through the ongoing grace of the Holy Spirit, Jesus words then still ring with intimate, personal power and purpose for his followers today. The last words of Christ have always been life words for the Church in its mission, witness and ministry.

**Luke 23: 35-43**

*Truly, I say to you, you will be with me today in paradise.*

There is something lovely and tender about the interchange between the thief who asked Jesus to remember him when he came to his kingdom, and the Saviour’s reply that that very day they would be together in paradise. Sandwiched in the midst of that terrible, tragic spectacle on Golgotha comes this fleeting moment of humanity, dignity, nobility. In the middle of a scene that can only be called the most hellish moment in time, we are given a glimpse of paradise regained.

St. Luke tells us that when Jesus was crucified at Golgotha, two other men, both of them branded as criminals,

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were crucified as well, one on Jesus' left, one on his right. It was not enough that Jesus be humiliated throughout that travesty of justice called a trial, or that he was whipped half to death and paraded through all the city streets, and finally nailed to a cross to die a slow, lingering death. The humiliation continued with the deliberate staging of Jesus' crucifixion in the company of two criminals, so as to rank him with robbers and with the unwanted and expendable. The intended message was clear: there was nothing special about this Galilean, and nothing to admit the travesty of human kind’s rejection of heaven’s most precious gift. Though the sign above his head proclaimed him king of the Jews, it was meant as one final mockery. In the eyes of Rome, and by extension, in the eyes of the world, Jesus was just another unimportant, bothersome troublemaker being executed.

Luke also paints a picture of unrestrained hate and a sort of delirious glee emanating from the crowds who had come to witness the end of this supposed messiah. While the guards cast lots for his clothes, the chief priests and Pharisees ridiculed him, saying how he could save others, but could not save himself. They taunted that if he were truly the Chosen One of God, surely he could easily free himself and come down from the cross. The soldiers joined the heckling, as did one of the criminals crucified with him. Swirling around the cross was this cacophony of hate-filled voices, scorning, tormenting and mocking Jesus; but we need understand, it was not just human voices catcalling and harassing. The cutting laughter and derision included all the voices of hell, the demonic glee of all the principalities and powers of evil rejoicing that the Son of God was being murdered by the very people he had come to save. It was the laughter of hell itself, as it savoured Jesus' humiliating rejection and destruction, as its gates opened wide to receive the choicest soul in all creation, little realizing that it would be the power of hell's gates which would in turn be destroyed, and that the last and best laugh would belong to God.

In the middle of this tragic, horrific scene comes the dialogue between Jesus and the second thief. Whatever else may be said of him, the man knew he was guilty and deserved his punishment, while this Jesus was innocent.

But did he really perceive Jesus to be the messiah and Saviour, when obviously no one else did, when his own disciples were too blind and terrified to recognize it? Or was it only as G. B. Caird once suggested, that he simply wanted to be kind to this innocent enthusiast who had fallen victim to political intrigue and mob violence. Did he simply seize upon the words of the placard over Jesus' head, that he was king of the Jews, as a means of saying something kind to offset the cruel taunts of all the others. If his words were only a naive kindness, Professor Caird wrote, his was still the cup of cold water that did not go without its reward, and whatever he expected, Jesus' promise was out of all proportion to the request.

And is that not the core of the gospel in itself? As Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Long, long before we had any inkling of who Jesus was, who Jesus is and what he has won for us and done for us, his soul-saving mercy was flooding over us. Long before we ever had the first glimmer of our need for forgiveness, redemption and renewal; long before we had any glimmer of how deep our need for mercy and great our hunger for hope, Jesus gave himself to be saviour for us, bread of life for us, ransom for us, friend for us. The mercy and grace Jesus offers us and pours out to us has always been way beyond our deserving and far beyond our dreaming. The Lord lavishes upon us a depth of love so healing, so profound, so complete, so undeserved, so precious, and so, so good. All we ever need is say, Lord, remember me. Had the penitent thief been merely attempting to show compassion towards some poor sap of a Jew against whom such volleys of hate were being directed? Or did he perceive Jesus to be in truth the Lord of heaven? I see no

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reason to doubt that however simple his perception, the criminal recognized in the man hanging next to him a majesty and holiness that no beating could erase, no humiliation could obscure and no official condemnation could nullify. Luke's gospel straightforwardly says that the crucified thief called in hope and in trust to the crucified king to remember him.

And that request affirms this great hope: it is never too late to turn to Jesus. There is no sin so big or so awful, nor any accumulation over a lifetime of stupidity and failure which would disqualify us from being able to call out to him. All of us fall short of the glory of God, Paul said, or to put it a different way, if gaining heaven depended at all upon our gold medal achievement of perfect virtue, holiness, or loveliness, we're in really big trouble. For beggars and thieves, liars and cowards, failures and sinners are we all. Yet here is the good news and promise: there is no sin so great which Jesus cannot forgive; there is no failure so profound that he will not give us the chance to begin afresh. There is no shame so indelible which Jesus can not wipe away, nor wound to our lives so crippling which he cannot heal. There is no soul he cannot or will not restore and refresh with hope, with joy, with grace. If only we have the sense to say, Jesus, remember me.

Remember me, Jesus, the thief pleaded, and remembered are we all of us by our Saviour. And loved. Never shall any of us be forgotten or ignored, deemed unimportant or expendable by heaven's Lord. There is a place in the heart of God for us all, and to our place in paradise with himself, does Jesus long to bring us all.

The word, paradise, is a Persian word that originally referred to a walled garden. When a king of Persia wished to do one of his subjects a particularly high honour, he made him a companion of the garden, he invited him to walk with the king in his own royal garden. And when Jesus promised the penitent thief that he would be in paradise with him, it was not just

eternal life that he promised, but promised him the honoured place as a companion in the garden of the courts of heaven.

When we ask Jesus to remember us, and invite him to be for us saviour, redeemer, and friend, Jesus answers us by inviting us into the paradise of knowing his presence, his mercy, love and power right now, right here. Paradise, at its most basic and most beautiful, means that we become companions with Christ. That is not some pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by kind of wishful thinking. It means Christ promises to receive us into his arms, to fill our lives with his presence through the Holy Spirit and in-fill our lives with the outpoured flood of his grace and goodness. And quite simply, when Christ gives himself to us, there is no joy, no earthly garden of delight, no purpose or experience that can ever surpass the beauty, meaning and wonder of knowing Christ and his love for us.

When Jesus offered the penitent thief his great promise of paradise later that day, I daresay at that very moment the man already had one foot in paradise, even as they together suffered in their dying. Let me suggest that like the thief, one foot in paradise have we all, in the hope that we have of Christ's redeeming power, in the hope that we have of resurrection to eternal life through Jesus Christ; one foot in paradise have we all, knowing Christ is with us always, even to the end of the age, to grace and to bless. Paradise is not a prize or consolation to be gained at the end of life. It is the life of joy to be known when we know Jesus, and know ourselves firmly clasped in his welcoming, accepting, forgiving, life-renewing love, even and perhaps especially in the midst of those times of greatest suffering. For then is the Lord most deeply with us.

And does that holy reality of being a people being brought alive into the wonder of that paradise of knowing Jesus not lead to fresh insight as to our calling as disciples and as the church? Are we not to live like people who are contagious with joy and vibrantly alive in the life-changing power of Jesus? We

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are the redeemed of the Lord. We are the chosen of the Lord. We have been declared absolutely beloved and precious. The abundant mercy and unbounded grace of heaven has been lavished upon us. Our sins, past, present and yet to come have already been forgiven; they've been swept away in the power of Jesus' saving and cleansing mercy. His healing and renewing power is at work in us through the Holy Spirit, and we have been declared to be his saints, his holy people, his chosen nation, his royal priesthood, and most of all, Jesus has said that he calls us his friends.

Such hope this world longs to savour and longs to know is real because it is seen in your face and mine, in our compassion and kindness to every soul, no matter how beggarly or broken they may be. Such hope, such joy and such peace our world longs to know is real as they encounter a church through whom wafts the very aroma of Christ's grace. And of such promise and blessing our world truly longs to hear spoken, exemplified and lived through people like you and me who are living reminders that the love and heaven and the companionship of the King is available to any who would ask Jesus, remember me.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, remember us. Remember us in our need, our brokenness and our sin, and recall to our forgetful hearts this great truth that you have indeed rescued us once for all as you hung upon the cross. In you, our salvation is sure. In you our redemption has been made complete. In you, we have our peace with God. Only help us live as the redeemed and saints of the Lord, and as those who have come to know and are ever more fully realizing the paradise of your embracing love here with us. Only help us live as those citizens of the paradise of your grace, that we may be the encouragers, witnesses and

helpers to all people to call upon your goodness and your love.  
In your precious name, Lord Jesus, do we pray. Amen.