

Jesus Christ's Last Sermon

Jesus Christ spent his final hours of human life nailed to a cross. Despised and rejected by the world he came to save, history's only perfect person took upon himself the consequences of our sins. The Bible records that on that spring day, from a hill outside Jerusalem, Jesus spoke several times. No one Gospel writer records all his sayings. Matthew and Mark describe one. Luke and John each give us three. Together, these sayings constitute a powerful message from our Savior's heart during the hours of his greatest personal agony. They reveal Jesus' innermost feelings as he poured out his life for us.

1) "Father, forgive them"

Only Luke tells us that Jesus, shortly after he was crucified, prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Nearby were Roman soldiers gambling for his clothes, common people whipped to frenzy by the religious leaders, and gawkers who came for the hideous spectacle. The Jewish elders mockingly said they would believe in him if he saved himself (Matthew 27:42-43). On his left and right were two criminals condemned to die with him.

Not everyone at the foot of the cross was hostile to Jesus. Women who had followed him during his ministry and some of his disciples now came forward. His mother, Mary, was mourning the Son whom God had miraculously given her.

Innocent of any crime against God or humanity, Jesus had been betrayed, arrested, scourged and condemned. Now, from the cross, Jesus' thoughts reached above his pain and rejection. Instead of being consumed with his own pain and misery, Jesus asked forgiveness for those responsible for the evil done to him – by extension, all who ignorantly go the way of sin and death.

2) "You will be with me in paradise"

Jesus next spoke to encourage one of the criminals crucified with him. Both criminals, likely thieves or murderers, early on joined bystanders in reviling Jesus (Mark 15:32). Luke tells us, "One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: 'Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!'" (Luke 23:39). This man wanted only escape from his pain. The gulf between them remained, because this faithless criminal had no desire to know his Savior and repent of his sins.

But a miraculous change occurred in the other criminal. He came to believe. This man was just as guilty as the first. He admitted he deserved to die (verses 40-41). He, too, had mocked Jesus earlier, but now he rebuked the other criminal.

We are not told of any other conversation between this second criminal and Jesus. Perhaps only Jesus' example and prayer, which he overheard, moved him so deeply. He said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (verse 42). Jesus replied by offering him

hope for the future: "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (verse 43).

Like the first criminal did, most people reject Jesus Christ. Their petitions to God thus go unanswered. However, all who surrender to Jesus receive not only strength to face the present, but also lasting hope for the future. There is a future beyond the grave. Eternal life in God's kingdom awaits those who will embrace Jesus as Lord and Savior.

3) "Woman, behold your son!"

Jesus honored and showed concern for his mother. When it seemed impossible for him to help anyone, he provided for Mary's care through his trusted friend John.

"When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, 'Dear woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' From that time on, this disciple took her into his home" (John 19:26-27).

4) "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"

For the first time, Jesus' thoughts were on himself. He cried out, "'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?'" - which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34).

Many have puzzled over Jesus' seeming doubt. Was Jesus afraid? Had his Father deserted him in his greatest need? Jesus was quoting the first portion of Psalm 22:1, a prophecy of the Messiah's suffering and exaltation.

We sometimes forget that Jesus was fully human. Yes, he was God in the flesh, but he was also subject to all the feelings of mind and body that any of us feel. Jesus spoke these words after three hours of darkness had covered the land (Matthew 27:45). Jesus hung on the cross alone, where he took our place to feel the pain and anguish that sin causes. There, in the darkness and pain, bearing the burden of our sins, Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy:

"Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:4-6).

Seven Sayings of Jesus on the Cross

Jesus shared in our humanity. He set an example for us, suffered for us and was victorious over sin and death in his work on the cross. His victory, both in his death and his resurrection, enables us to be reconciled to God and restored to fellowship with him.

While hanging on the cross, Jesus spoke of:

1. Forgiveness (Luke 23:32-34)
2. Hope (Luke 23:39-43)
3. Care (John 19:25-27)
4. Loneliness (Mark 15:33-34; Matthew 27:45-46)
5. Suffering (John 19:28-29)
6. Triumph (John 19:30)
7. Reunion (Luke 23:44-46)

Soon Christ would savor the sweetness of eternal victory over sin and death. His final three statements came in rapid succession.

5) "I am thirsty"

Death drew near. The time of final sacrifice was close. Jesus had endured – and overcome – the heat, pain, rejection and loneliness. He could have suffered and died in silence. Instead, unexpectedly, he asked for help. "Knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, 'I am thirsty'" (John 19:28).

Jesus asked for a drink and received vinegar, fulfilling David's 1,000-year-old prophecy (Psalm 69:21). "Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink" (Matthew 27:48). The man who had hurried to answer Jesus' request said: "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down" (Mark 15:36).

6) "It is finished"

Jesus had finished his work on earth. His sixth message was one of triumph: "When he had received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished.' With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit" (John 19:30).

Jesus' humility rings in his words. His was not a vain, I-showed-you attitude. He did not even say, "I did it." He claimed no credit. He asked no pity. To the end, Jesus' mind was on the work he came to do. He announced, for all to hear, "It is finished."

7) Jesus' final words

Matthew tells us, "And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit" (Matthew 27:50; see also Mark 15:37). Only Luke preserves Jesus' words: "Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' When he had said this, he breathed his last" (Luke 23:46).

God is love, and Jesus' ministry showed what love is. He gave himself for us. He preached his last sermon most effectively, by both word and example. In his last seven statements, he affirmed God's greatness and glory.

God's work goes on

Jesus' example and words on the cross bore fruit even before his death, when the repentant robber acknowledged him as Lord and appealed for his mercy. On that Passover so long ago, Jesus finished his own mission as a human on earth. But his work goes on now in his church. Christ's followers today preach his gospel of salvation. They show his love for fellow humans. And they look for his return as King of kings and Lord of lords. This is the wonderful message of good news that Jesus Christ preached the day he died for all.