



EASTER DEVOTIONAL

SAYINGS FROM THE CROSS



CORE CHRISTIANITY

INTRODUCTION

FOR MANY OF US, Easter preparation goes a little something like this:

- Run to the grocery store for the ham or the lamb to serve for lunch on Easter Sunday.
- Make sure the kids have those cute little outfits for family pictures.
- Get a lily now or just bring one home from church?
- Set the alarm for the sunrise service?

Before we know it, the Easter holiday is behind us and we're left wondering if there shouldn't be more to our celebration of Christ's resurrection from the dead.

In this short devotional, William Boekestein (pastor of Immanuel Fellowship Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan) helps us prepare for Easter by focusing our attention on the seven sayings of Christ from the cross. Maybe you're familiar with him crying out, "It is finished!" while hanging on the cross, but have you ever realized that Jesus spoke seven times? In his final hours, our savior spoke words of forgiveness, salvation, reconciliation, triumph, and reunion.

Take time the week before Easter to read and reflect each day, by yourself or with your family, on these seven sayings from the cross. As you do, I pray you'll be comforted and encouraged as you meditate on God's love and mercy towards us in Christ.

HAPPY EASTER!

Pastor Adriel

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EVEN YOU CAN BE FORGIVEN



“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. And Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ And they cast lots to divide his garments.”

LUKE 23:33-34

Jesus’ first recorded speech from the cross is a shocking prayer for the forgiveness of his executioners. The soldiers stripped him and pinned his naked body to a pole which they raised up so that people could mock him. They criminalized his goodness. How did the King respond? “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

WHAT WAS JESUS PRAYING FOR?

We shouldn’t assume that Jesus is welcoming into his kingdom all of his persecutors. God grants pardon and forgiveness to those who repent and believe (Mark 2:1-12). Jesus’ killers are unrepentant and unbelieving. So his prayer is puzzling. “One would think that he should have prayed, ‘Father, consume them,’” look at their sin and take revenge.¹ But he does the opposite. What is he asking for, and why?

Jesus asked the Father not to exercise immediate retributive justice against his murderers. Father, forgive *this* sin, the worst sin ever committed. Please don’t let your wrath burn hot against them so that you consume them (Exod. 32:10). Christ considers the atrocity his father is witnessing and begs him not to do the most natural thing, but instead to glorify himself by showing startling forbearance. Imagine as a parent that you happen to see a bully beating your son who is curled up in the fetal position. You race to the scene with clenched fists. As you prepare to avenge the child he whispers, “Please, forgive him.” He

isn’t asking you to adopt the bully any more than Jesus was asking his father to justify the Son’s executioners. Jesus’ request was for God to suspend his worthy wrath against sinners.

When vengeance is expected, lenience is surprising. Jesus’ prayer doesn’t fit our calculations. In fact, it might feel anticlimactic. In the days of Moses, the earth swallowed up traitors (Num. 16). God burned up the prophets of Baal in their contest with Elijah (1 Kings 18). Why wasn’t God *more* aggressive when his Son was brutally murdered under false charges? Why wasn’t Jesus as angry as the men crucified on his right and left hand Mark 15:32)?

Jesus’ request teaches us something unexpected about the God of justice: he is shockingly forgiving. At the moment in which we least expect to see God’s clemency, here it is! Isaiah prophesied that the Christ would make intercession for transgressors (Isa. 53:12). But who expected Jesus to intercede for those who transgressed *against him*? What better way could God show himself ready to forgive than by pardoning his murderers?

RESPONDING TO JESUS’ PRAYER: REPENT OF YOUR SINS

With his prayer Christ invites the worst sinners to seek and find pardon through his blood. If Jesus pitied those who spat in his face and drove nails through his hands and feet, he can pity you. If Jesus’ heart is inclined to show mercy even toward those who mock his salvation, who have no sense of the power of his blood, will he not be more merciful to those who seek his forgiveness? Jesus is far more willing to forgive than we are willing to be forgiven. We’re used to grudging, half-hearted, conditional forgiveness. Jesus’ forgiveness is the radical exception to that rule.

JESUS ISN'T IFFY ABOUT YOUR SALVATION



“One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.’ And he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ And he said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’”

LUKE 23:43

Christ’s cross was a stage from which he prayed and preached, drawing people to himself (John 12:32). But Jesus wasn’t the only one speaking from a cross. One criminal, lacking the fear of God, railed at him with demanding and self-serving last words: “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” (Luke 23:39). The other criminal confessed his sin and his total need for God’s mercy. He asked Jesus—a man clearly committed to clemency (Luke 23:34)—to remember him in kindness (Luke 23:42). Luke lets Jesus speak last: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

Three speeches from three condemned men. You and I also are under a death sentence. Two examples—one good and one bad—teach us to repent of our sins and trust entirely in Jesus so we too might own Jesus’ promise as we transition from this life to the life to come.

JESUS PROJECTS CONFIDENCE

Christ was not a helpless victim. Hear Jesus’ authority: “Assuredly, I say to you.” From the cross he issued infallible decrees as the king of the earth. In Christ’s reply, “Calvary becomes a palace, the cross a throne of the Judge of all worlds.”² Imagine the penitent thief’s guilt and regret; feel his pain and

panic. Jesus spoke with the conviction this dying man needed—no ambivalent encouragement would do. What we expect to happen after we die doesn’t really matter if it differs from what Jesus says. To penitent believers, Jesus decisively declares peace and pardon.

JESUS PROMISES CLOSENESS

The thief’s request sounds like what one might say to a friend who is moving away, or who is rising to success: Remember me. Christ abundantly surpassed what was asked of him. By day’s end this man would be with Jesus. The grammatical emphasis in the Lord’s reply is on his presence with the penitent thief: “*With me* you will be.”

Jesus refocuses our expectations of eternity. The penitent thief wanted a piece of God’s kingdom. He wanted relief from the penalty of his guilt. And those are fair desires. But the promise of the gospel is not simply eternal comfort or deliverance from sin but also everlasting intimacy with God. Jesus’ answer invites us to want him above all else.

JESUS COMMUNICATES CONCRETENESS

Jesus’ promise was about a specific day and place. Today. In Paradise.

Two things happened on that particular “today” that forever bound the Lord of glory to a lowly criminal. First, the man was dying. This was his last day. He was beginning eternity. He needed the promise to take effect now. Second, Christ was dying. By his death Christ began to defeat death and remove the separation between God and his chosen people. That is how salvation works. Those

A NEW FAMILY UNDER THE CROSS



“But standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 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 19:25-27

As Jesus hung on the cross, his strength drained away and his organs failed. While enduring physical torment, he also suffered from an acute sense that God had deserted him. Suspended between earth and heaven, he appeared rejected by both. His feelings of not belonging must have been overpowering. Crucifixion was intended to be dehumanizing.

In his agony, Jesus noticed “his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby” (v. 26). The author wants us to see Jesus connecting with them, noticing their needs, feeling their pain. Jesus became especially mindful of the grief of his mother. Imagine watching the execution of a loved one. Mary had labored for Jesus’ birth and nursed him through infancy. She had worried about him, prayed for him, and supported him through severe opposition. She had come to trust in him. How precious was the relationship between the perfect child of the most blessed mother! Now she watched as her boy writhed and moaned, bled and suffocated. At Jesus’ birth Mary was warned, “A sword will pierce through your own soul also” (Luke 2:35). At his death it happened.

In that terrible moment, Jesus loved his mother. When we are in trouble, our thoughts turn inward. But Jesus is always more mindful of our needs than we are. He came not to be served but to serve. So he gave his mother a new son, like a judge effecting a reverse adoption for an aging woman. And he gave her the best son she could hope for, the disciple Jesus loved, the only disciple to venture to the cross,

proving his love and loyalty. John would love Mary the way he had loved Jesus because of Jesus’ love for him.

What wondrous love is this? And what lessons should we learn from it?

CHILDREN MUST CARE FOR THEIR PARENTS

This isn’t the central lesson of the text. But it might be the most obvious. Being born under the law (Gal. 4:4), Jesus had to honor his parents. Presumably Joseph had passed, and now Mary’s firstborn was dying. As the parent/child roles begin reversing it is easy to forget the debt children owe for their parents’ care. Jesus never forgot.

The same John who would care for Jesus’ mother later wrote: “Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked” (1 John 2:6). Do we? Are we committed to helping our parents finish their lives with the same love and devotion that good parents show their children? Jesus fulfilled the fifth commandment his entire life, but most dramatically near his death. He has left us an example to do likewise.

THE CHURCH IS GOD’S FAMILY

Mary had other children who surely could have met her physical needs after Jesus’ death. But Mary needed the kind of spiritual companionship that is only found in God’s family, and her other sons did not yet believe in him (John 7:5). In the church believers treat older men as fathers, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters (1 Tim. 5:1-2), doing God’s will together (Mark 3:35).

JESUS WAS FORSAKEN SO YOU CAN BE ACCEPTED



“Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. 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?’ And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, ‘This man is calling Elijah.’ And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, ‘Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.’”

MATTHEW 27:45-49

When Martin Luther once studied this passage, “He continued for a long time without food, and sat wide awake but as motionless as a corpse.” Finally, he cried out, “God forsaken of God! Who can understand it!”⁴ Jesus’ cry of God-forsakenness—though hard to understand—offers rich comfort for those who look to Christ for acceptance.

CHRIST FORSAKEN IN DARKNESS

During Jesus’ crucifixion, at what should have been the brightest part of the day, “The sun’s light failed” (Luke 23:45). God judges through darkness. The ninth plague against Egypt so darkened the land that the people “did not see one another, nor did anyone rise from his place for three days” (Exod. 10:21-23). It was as if Egypt’s moral shadiness became palpable as a sign of God’s displeasure against them. In the same way, through the darkness at Calvary, God announced his hatred of sin.

But Jesus was in that darkness. He described hell as “the outer darkness” (Matt. 25:30). When John saw an angel open the bottomless pit, smoke belched out and darkened the sun (Rev. 9:2). God wants us to know that “Hell came to Calvary that day, and the Savior descended into it and bore its horrors in our stead.”⁵ God turned his radiant face away

from Jerusalem, where the curse-bearer hung, and darkness reigned (Luke 23:53).

From a place of eerie, disorienting blackness, from the deepest night of the soul, Christ cried out: “My God, you’ve totally abandoned me. Why would you do that?” Under incredible duress, the Son lost sight of the Father’s abiding love, the way airplane pilots have crashed simply because darkness obliterated their sense of vertical orientation. From all appearances, Jesus had become overmatched and outwitted by his opponents, rejected by his God and Father. “The Father had really withdrawn Himself from His inward consciousness,” and in the capacity of sin-bearer, Jesus was truly forsaken.⁶ He cried out in anguish.

Mockers answered him (Matt. 27:47-49). Whether out of misunderstanding or malice, the bystanders suggested that Jesus cried out for rescue, not to his God, but to Elijah. The man who claimed to be God’s beloved Son should seek help from a long-dead prophet? How pathetic. Even Jesus’ cry of dereliction added to his humiliation. Why is this happening?

Christ is not on the cross for his own sake but for those he came to save. He is *for* those forsaken in darkness.

CHRIST BECAME SIN FOR US

Christ is the “propitiation for our sins” (1 John 2:2). At his death, as a vicarious sufferer, Jesus bore God’s hatred of sin, what unbelievers will face on judgment day and for eternity. “Heavy must have been that burden, real and literal must have been our Lord’s substitution for us” that he could call himself forsaken by God.⁷ But his forsakenness brought about a glorious exchange. He became sin so that we

ONLY A THIRSTY SAVIOR CAN SATISFY YOU



“After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), ‘I thirst.’ A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth.”

JOHN 19:28-29

Physical thirst is a craving for fluids triggered by the brain upon sensing low body moisture volume or high blood salinity. Severe thirst can be maddening. Eventually, it's fatal.

But we can be thirsty in other ways. Entertainment, work, accomplishments, wealth, and many other worthy pursuits will never ultimately satisfy us. We're like the woman Jesus met at the well who tried to assuage her thirsty soul with romantic relationships but remained parched (John 4). God gave his Son to be living water for us. So how could Jesus, the bottomless well, thirst? And how does his thirst encourage us to be satisfied in him?

JESUS THIRSTED TO “FULFILL THE SCRIPTURE”

Jesus had just spoken the first words of Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” That same psalm later says, “My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death” (15; cf. Ps. 69:3). In response, Jesus received cheap sour wine—the kind consumed by those in the social margins (John 19:29-30)—again confirming the message of the prophets: “For my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink” (Ps. 69:21).

Jesus announced his thirst to further prove that the Psalms testified about him. The saints in the Old Testament were physically and spiritually thirsty people. They were longing for the coming of the Messiah, the one who would lead them “beside the

still waters” (Ps. 23:2). Jesus wanted them to know that the Good Shepherd had come! Despite the hellish agony Jesus faced, he was thinking about us—he wants us to know that we can fully trust him. He is the savior God promised to send to thirsty people.

JESUS THIRSTED TO SHOW HIS TRUE HUMANITY

Only a true human could pay the penalty for our sin. Jesus is not pretending to be thirsty to teach us spiritual principles about himself. “A man scourged, bleeding, and hanging on a cross under the Near-Eastern sun would be so desperately dehydrated that thirst would be part of the torture.”⁹ “He had already hung nearly six hours on the cross. The blood vessels of His sacred body are almost dried up...His tongue cleaves to His jaws. His lips burn, and a drop of water seems a great refreshment to Him.”¹⁰ Jesus truly sympathizes with all the pains and discomforts that come with living in a sin-afflicted world. And to prove this to us, he experienced the most regular, day-to-day trouble of thirst. If Jesus suffered the most common, mundane human discomforts, you can be sure: None of your troubles are foreign to his experience (Heb. 2:17). Next time you're thirsty, thank God that Jesus was willing to sympathize with our weaknesses (Heb. 4:15).

JESUS THIRSTED TO PROVE HIS ACCURSEDNESS

The Bible uses thirst to describe God's judgment. God swore to make unfaithful Israel a “dry land, and slay her with thirst” (Hos. 2:3; cf. Deut. 28:48). When God judged Jerusalem, people's tongues clung to the roofs of their mouths for thirst (Lam. 4:4; cf. Ps. 137:6; Amos 8:11). Jesus' most powerful parable

WHAT JESUS FINISHED ON THE CROSS



“After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), ‘I thirst.’ A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, ‘It is finished,’ and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.”

JOHN 19:28-30

Edward Abbey was an American writer, environmentalist, and anarchist whose last words allegedly were, “I did what I could.”¹² These are noble words. Jesus says them about the woman who anointed him for death with costly oil—“She has done what she could” (Mark 14:8). Don’t you want to do what you can? Still, the words betray unmet goals and unfinished work.

Imagine if these had been the last words of Jesus. To some, Jesus seemed a failed revolutionary who claimed to be inaugurating an eternal kingdom which no eye could actually see. Some people still teach that Christ did what he could, and we must do what we can; we’re saved through cooperation with Jesus. But Jesus didn’t say, “I did what I could.” He was much bolder. We get the sense that he requested a drink of sour wine (John 19:30) so that he could cry out with greater strength the powerful word: “*Tetelestai!*—It is finished.” Jesus knew “all things were now accomplished” (John 19:28). The word for “accomplished” is also *tetelestai*. This opulent word means to conclude, fulfill, or accomplish. What did Jesus finish?

CHRIST’S DEATH CONCLUDED HIS SUFFERING

When a loved one dies after a long, painful struggle, we often feel relieved: “It’s all over. Her suffering is finished.” The Book of Common Prayer offers this

grave-side blessing: “We give thee hearty thanks, for that it hath pleased thee to deliver this our brother out of the miseries of this sinful world.”¹³ Life is hard. Death for God’s friends is comforting.

Jesus’ last words anticipate relief from matchless pain. In his whole earthly ministry Jesus was battered like the ark in Noah’s flood (1 Pet. 3:18-22). He described his coming death as an awful baptism: “And how distressed I am till it is accomplished!” (Luke 12:50). In the garden he prayed in anguish, “Let this cup pass from me!” (Matt. 26:39). Jesus’ whole life was suffering. But his crucifixion left hardly a shred of dignity. Now Christ’s disgrace is nearly over; his ascent to the throne is near! Christ came both to suffer for us and to reign over us.

CHRIST’S DEATH FULFILLED THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Scriptures, said Jesus, “Bear witness about me” (John 5:39). Before his death, Jesus told the twelve that in Jerusalem, “Everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished” (Luke 18:31). “Scripture must be fulfilled in me...for what is written about me has its fulfillment” (Luke 22:37). After Jesus’ death, Paul could say, “Now when they had fulfilled all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the tree and laid Him in a tomb” (Acts 13:29 NKJV). In Christ’ incarnation, sinless life, and sacrificial death, he fulfilled all the purposes of the prophecies, shadows, types, ceremonies, laws, and figures. With his death Jesus didn’t cancel the Old Testament (Matt. 5:17). Instead, he brought to life what was written in it.

YOU CAN DIE LIKE JESUS



“It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun’s light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. 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 23:44-49

Herbert Richardson was about to be electrocuted by the state of Alabama. “Most people,” he told his attorney, “don’t get to sit and think all day about it being their last day alive.” What if, like Herbert, you knew the exact minute of your death? As the moment drew near, how would you prepare? Most of us won’t have this exact experience. But all of us should “number our days” (Ps. 90:12). The hourglass of our lives has been flipped.

Though innocent, Jesus knew the hour of his execution (John 16:32). Just before he drew his last breath he said something that can help us all live and die well: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 23:46)

JESUS IS FULFILLING SCRIPTURE

David writes Psalm 31 as a man caught in a net (v. 4), with no hope but God. Like Jesus, David could say, “My eye is wasted from grief; my soul and my body also. My life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing” (vv. 8-9). Both men heard “the whispering of many” as enemies schemed and plotted murder (v. 13).

But Psalm 31 is also a song of trust and devotion. “I trust in you, O Lord; I say, ‘You are my God.’ My times are in your hand; rescue me from the hand of my enemies and from my persecutors” (vv. 14-15). “Into your hand I commit my spirit” (v. 5). David and Jesus committed their spirits into God’s hands because they truly had no one else. David prayed

that God would deliver him *from* death. Jesus prayed that God would deliver him *through* the resurrection from the dead (Mark 8:31). On the cross, Jesus was like a besieged city (Ps. 31:21) whose walls were crumbling (John 2:19, 21), but he trusted in God’s steadfast love (Ps. 31:21). All believers read and sing the Psalms in harmony with Jesus.

JESUS IS REVEALING GOD

In Psalm 31 David calls God a refuge (vv. 1, 2, 4) and a fortress (vv. 2-3). God helps all who seek him, and Jesus too could trust God to receive his spirit through death. Jesus used the image of God’s hands to symbolize the refuge he sought from his Father. They are strong enough to create the world (Ps. 8:6; 95:5; 102:25), good enough to accomplish justice for the oppressed (Ps. 10:14; cf. 111:7), and kind enough to take away our heaviest burden (Ps. 81:6). By appearances, Jesus had fallen into wicked hands. But stronger, holier, kinder hands held him up.

Even on the cross, Jesus commanded his destiny. How else could he cry out his last words in a loud voice (Matt. 27:50; Mark 15:37) and then die? Jesus laid down his life for his sheep (John 10:11, 15). “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down” (v. 18). The savior of the world had to be a willing victim killed in the place of traitors. As the champion of his people, Jesus deliberately engaged death. Abraham Kuyper used creative grammar to show that “in his departure he is no longer *passive*. In dying *he dies himself*.”¹⁶ Death didn’t take him.

Jesus is a king (Luke 23:3) in complete control of even the last enemy, death. He entrusts himself into the strong, just, gentle hands of his Father. People like us who are frail as dust need just this message.

ENDNOTES

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