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# Christ's words from the Cross

Luke 23; John 19

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## The testament of our Lord

As far as can be gathered from the gospels, there are seven sayings from Christ while hanging on the cross. Three of these words from the cross were spoken before the three hours of darkness and three after.

During the three hours of darkness – almost at the end of it – we hear only the bitter cry from Psalm 22: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34). In quoting these words of the psalmist, the Lord expressed the unfathomable suffering of God's abandonment that afflicted Him because of our sins.

In a sense, these seven statements constitute the last will, the spiritual testament of the dying Savior. The first three words from the cross in particular are a special testimony to the value and power of Christ's work. We hear in them what the consequences of the Passion would be, of which the New Testament letters also testify. We see here the spiritual riches He has bequeathed to us by virtue of His finished work.

There are three special blessings bestowed upon us by virtue of His death:

1. The forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the Lord's prayer to the Father in Luke 23:34.

2. A place in the heavenly paradise, in accordance with the promise of Luke 23:43.
3. A place of caring love in the midst of God's "household" here on earth, according to the instructions of John 19:26-27.

The last will of the Savior speaks about the spiritual goods received by His own on the basis of His sufferings and atoning death. He is the Testator and He provides for the past, present and future of all those who belong to Him. Thus we see in a slightly different order:

1. Regarding the past, we have been washed from our sins by His precious blood. We have the forgiveness of sins.
2. Concerning the present: He grants us a place of security in the midst of the family of God's children.
3. Concerning the future: the paradise of God in heaven is open to us. What more could we desire?

## Father, forgive them

It is touching that the first word Christ uttered on the cross was a prayer for His enemies. It was not a prayer for vengeance on the sinners who had nailed Him to the accursed tree, but a prayer for forgiveness for them. Even in this terrible situation, the Savior's heart was full of love and mercy for the lost sinners He wanted to seek and save. He prayed to the Father about forgiveness for the evil done to Him, the beloved Son of the Father.

Had He not done so, no doubt a devastating judgment would have followed. But it was not yet the day of vengeance. The wrath of heaven did not strike a guilty world here, but the One who was willing to become the Sin-bearer and to go into death for hostile sinners. It is precisely the fruit of Christ's work of atonement that this divine forgiveness is now offered to us. After all, He had come so that His blood – the blood of the new covenant – would be shed for many for the remission of sins (Matt. 26:28).

So no retribution, no revenge, but forgiveness because Christ took our place in the divine judgment and was willing to die for our sins. We can see the preaching of the apostle Peter on the day of Pentecost as the fulfillment of this prayer. Christ prayed for forgiveness for His enemies, and in response Peter was able to offer them that forgiveness. He did so as an envoy and witness on behalf of God. There was one condition, however: People had to repent and be baptized in the name of

Jesus Christ "for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38). In Acts 3:17, the apostle adds that they had killed the Lord in ignorance – and this corresponds entirely with Christ's words, "(...) for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34).

This good news of the forgiveness of sins is an essential part of the gospel message. We find it in the great commission of Matthew 28 and Luke 24, in the preaching of the apostle Peter in the book of Acts, and also in the preaching of the apostle Paul. As soon as Paul begins his missionary work, we read about it (Acts 13:38-39). Also in the letters to the Ephesians and to the Colossians he specifically mentions the forgiveness of sins and counts it among the highest blessings of the Christian (Eph. 1:7; 4:32; Col. 1:14). But we must not forget that this blessing is the result of the unfathomable sufferings the Lord endured on the cross of Calvary.

### Today you will be with Me in Paradise

The second word from the cross includes the promise of a place in the heavenly glory: "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). The Lord speaks with divine authority. The word "assuredly" or "verily" means, "Amen. There is no doubt regarding the fulfillment of this promise. Although Christ was crucified in weakness, He now lives by God's power. What He promises, He also fulfills.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this important verse:

1. No interval of purification and cleansing is needed before a departed believer reaches the happiness of heaven. After all, the Lord says to the evildoer that he would be with Him in paradise that very day. Incidentally, the sleep of death concerns only the body, which rests in the grave until the resurrection day. This also refutes the doctrine of the so-called sleep of the soul, which claims that the saints who have died are in a kind of "sleeping state" until the resurrection day.
2. Those who have fallen asleep in Christ are already in His immediate presence, and they are aware of it. "Today you will be with Me in Paradise," was the Lord's promise to the evildoer who believed on Him. This man was expecting the coming Messianic Kingdom. He believed that the Lord was the King of the Jews and that in God's time He would receive His kingdom, in which the risen saints would also have their place. Then he hoped to count on the King's favor. But already now he received something better: a place in the paradise of God, where he could already recline in the presence of the Lord.

3. In Luke 16 this place is still referred to as "Abraham's bosom", but then the Lord had not yet finished His work on the cross. After He has risen and been glorified at God's right hand, Abraham – the father of all believers – is no longer the center of attraction. To be with Christ and with Christ is now the best part (Phil. 1:23). By the way, this is not only true in the intermediate state, the situation between death and the resurrection. At the resurrection of the departed saints and the change of the believers still living here on earth at the rapture, the same promise applies: "(...) and thus we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:17).
4. This place is henceforth called Paradise, as the heavenly counterpart of the Garden of Eden. It is located in the third heaven, i.e., the dwelling place of God Himself. It is therefore the Paradise of God according to Revelation 2:7. It cannot be destroyed by man like the earthly paradise. It bears the stamp of divine perfection.
5. Here, then, is missing the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the temptation to sin. Christ is there as the true Tree of life and the Holy Spirit is there as the source of living water (John 4:14-24; 7:37-39; Rev. 22:1-2). The thirst and the hunger of the heart is supplied in every way. Those who have fallen asleep through Jesus are already unspeakably happy in the presence of God (2 Cor. 12:2-4). They hear glorious words, which a man on earth cannot take to his lips. Paul was taken up there as "a man in Christ," and it is the place of all who are united to Him as the last Adam.

## Woman, behold your son!

We want to occupy ourselves now for a moment with the third word from the cross, which the Lord addressed to His mother and to John, the beloved disciple: "When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, Woman, behold your son! Then He said to the disciple, Behold your mother! And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home" (John 19:26-27).

This third word from the cross does not concern Christ's enemies, but His friends and followers. There were only a few faithful followers who stood by the cross, and in John's gospel they are mentioned by name. The beloved disciple gave moral support to Mary in the suffering that pierced through her own soul, as Simeon had prophesied (Luke 2:34-35). He would now be her support and future companion, so that her sorrow would be alleviated. The Lord gave them both the place they

were to take after His passing. Mary received a son who would care for her, and John received a loving mother.

It is still like that today among the followers of Christ. He shows us the right place, and it is His desire that we mutually support one another. In the family of the children of God, one cannot live on one's own, but we share our joys and sorrows. And it is the Lord who determines what place we should occupy in relation to the other members of the household of faith, and what responsibility we should bear.

It is remarkable that John later tells us so much about the mutual relationships within the family of God's children. In his first letter he clearly shows that not all believers occupy the same place. There are young people, little children in the faith, who have only just come to know the Father and the joys of childhood, as well as the exalted position of sons. Others have grown spiritually and become strong in the conflict with the evil one. However, these "young men" still need certain admonitions.

Still others are called "fathers" because they in turn have led people to Christ and as fathers in Christ pay attention and care to their spiritual children. To them the apostle devotes no more admonitions (see 1 John 2). It is enough that they know Him who is from the beginning and live in constant communion with the Father and the Son. What a privilege it is to be assigned such a place of blessing in God's household by the Lord Himself!

## Father, into Your hands

The fifth and sixth words from the cross are found in John 19, the seventh and last in Luke 23. The end of Christ's life is described very succinctly in John 19:28-30. Here we first find an exclamation of the Lord to fulfill the Scriptures, namely, "I thirst" (cf. Ps. 22:16 and Ps. 69:22). The sour wine just after the crucifixion had been refused by the Lord because it was an anesthetic.

But after finishing the work (for Jesus knew that now all things were accomplished, says John), He could express His human feelings and desires. And then He does so with the special purpose of fulfilling the Scriptures, so that all the Messianic prophecies would have been realized in His life and in His death.

After taking the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" The great work of redemption was accomplished, and the Scriptures were fulfilled. And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit into the hands of His Father (John 19:30). This is the independent and voluntary surrender of His soul into death. He had power to lay down His life. And

in doing so, according to Luke, He was still able to cry out with a loud voice the words, "Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit" (Luke 23:46).

This is the seventh word from the cross. And when He had said this, He died. Therefore, both the first and the last words from the cross begin with the intimate word "Father". The One who speaks here is the One who has accomplished everything, the One in whom we find all our salvation.

The martyr Stephen, when he died, imitated the Lord's example, and his words reflect both the first and last word from the cross: a word of forgiveness and a word of trust (see Acts 7:54-60). He surrendered his spirit into the hands of the glorified Lord, Who stood at God's right hand to receive him into His heavenly presence.

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