

Hugo Bouter

# The Seven Words of Christ on the Cross

*"Then Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do (...). Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us. But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong."*

*"Then he said to Jesus, Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom. And Jesus said to him, Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise (...)."*

*"And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, He said, Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit."*

Luke 23:34-49; John 19:17-30

---

## The testament of our Lord

As far as we can see from the gospels, Christ cried out something on seven occasions while hanging on the cross. Three of these sayings were uttered 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 suffering cry from Psalm 22 verse 1: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34). In quoting these words of the poet, the Lord expressed the unfathomable sufferings of being

forsaken by His God; these sufferings struck Him because of the judgment for our sins.

In a sense, these seven sayings are the last will, the spiritual testament of the dying Savior. In particular, the first three words are a special testimony to the value and power of Christ's work. In them we hear what the consequences of the Passion of the Cross would be, to which the New Testament epistles also testify. We see here the spiritual riches He has bequeathed to us by virtue of His finished work. There are three blessings bestowed upon us by virtue of His death:

1. The forgiveness of our sins, in accordance with the Lord's prayer to the Father in Luke 23:34.
2. A place in Paradise in heaven, in accordance with the promise of Luke 23:43.
3. A place of caring love in the midst of the family of God, God's household here on earth, according to the instructions of John 19:26-27.

The will of the dying Savior includes the spiritual blessings that His own would receive on the basis of His sufferings and death. He is the Testator and He cares for the past, the present and the future of all those who belong to Him. Thus we see in a slightly different order:

1. As for 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 God's children.
3. As for 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 uttered by Christ 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 cursed tree, but a plea for forgiveness for them. Even in this horrible situation, the Savior's heart was full of love and mercy for the sinners He wanted to seek and save. He prayed to the Father for forgiveness for the evil done to Him, the beloved Son of the Father. Had He not done so, surely judgment would undoubtedly have followed. But it was not yet the day of vengeance. The wrath of heaven did not

strike a guilty world here, but rather the One who wanted to be the Sin-Bearer and was prepared to die for hostile sinners.

It is precisely the fruit of Christ's atoning work that this divine forgiveness is now offered to us. After all, He had come so that His blood, the blood of the new covenant, might be shed for many for the remission of sins (Matt. 26:28). So no retribution, no vengeance, but forgiveness because Christ took our place in God's judgment and was willing to die for our sins. We may well see the apostle Peter's preaching 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.

However, there was one condition: they had to repent and had to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ "for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38). Then they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 3:17 the apostle added that they had rejected the Lord in ignorance – entirely in accordance with the words of Christ: "(...) for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). The good news of the remission of sins is an essential part of the great commission of the disciples. We find it in Matthew 28 and Luke 24, in the book of Acts in the preaching of the apostle Peter, 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). Even in the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, Paul 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 never forget that this blessing is the result of the unfathomable sufferings the Lord endured on Calvary's cross.

## Today you will be with Me in Paradise

The second word on the cross includes the promise of a safe place in Paradise in heaven: "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." The Lord speaks with divine authority. The word Assuredly means, Amen. There is no doubt as to the fulfillment of this promise. Although Christ was crucified in weakness, He now lives by God's power. Whatever He promises, He makes true.

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

1. No interim period of purification and cleansing is needed before the departed saint attains the happiness of heaven. For the Lord says to the criminal that he would be with Him in Paradise that very day. By the way, the sleep of death concerns only the body, which rests in the grave until the resurrection day. This

also implicitly refutes the doctrine of the so-called soul sleep, 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 criminal who believed in Him. This man expected 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 also have a place. Then he hoped he could count on the King's favor. But he already got something better now: a place in God's paradise, where he was allowed to be in the immediate presence of the Savior.
3. In Luke 16 this place is still referred to as "Abraham's bosom," but at that time the Lord had not yet completed His work on the cross. Since He was resurrected and glorified at God's right hand, Abraham – the father of all believers – is no longer the center of attention. To be with *Christ* is now the best part (Phil. 1:23). This is true, by the way, not only in the intermediate state between death and the resurrection. At the resurrection of the departed saints and the transformation of believers still living on earth at the time of 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. Unlike the earthly paradise, it cannot be destroyed by man's failure. It bears the stamp of divine perfection.
5. So here the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the temptation to sin are missing. Christ is here as the real Tree of life and the Holy Spirit is here as the real Source of rivers of living water (John 4:14-24; 7:37-39; Rev. 22:1-2). The thirst and the hunger of the human heart are met in every way.

Those who have fallen asleep through Jesus are already unspeakably happy in His presence (2 Cor. 12:2-4). They hear glorious words here, which no man on earth can take to his lips. Paul was taken up there as "a man in Christ," and it is the place of all those who are united to Him as the last Adam.

## Woman, behold your son

We would now like to focus especially on the third word on 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 saying does not concern Christ's enemies, but His friends and followers. There were only a few faithful followers standing by the cross, and in John's Gospel they are mentioned by name. The beloved disciple gave moral support to Mary in the sufferings that pierced through her own soul, as Simeon had prophesied long ago (Luke 2:34-35). He would now be her support and help, in order that her grief might be alleviated. The Lord gave them both the right place after His passing. Mary was given a son who would care for her, and John was given a loving mother.

This is how it still is among Christ's followers. He shows us the right place, and it is His desire that we support one another. In the family of the children of God, we cannot live independently, but we share our joys and our sorrows. And it is the Lord himself who determines what place we should take in relation to the other members of the household of faith, and what responsibilities we should have.

It is quite remarkable that John later communicates to us so much about the mutual relationships within the family of God. In his first letter, he clearly shows that not all believers have the same place. There are little children in the faith, who have recently come to know the Father and enjoy the fellowship with the Father and the Son. Others have grown spiritually and become strong in their conflicts with the wicked one. However, these "young men" still need certain admonitions. Still others are called "fathers in Christ", because they have been able to lead people to Christ and as real fathers pay attention and care to their spiritual children. To them the apostle no longer devotes any teaching (see 1 John 2). It is enough that they know "Him who is from the beginning" and live in real communion with the Father and the Son. What a privilege it is to be assigned a place in the household of God by the Lord Himself!

## Father, into Your hands

The fifth and sixth words on the cross are found in John 19, the seventh and last word 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 in order to fulfill the Scriptures, namely, "I thirst" (cf. Ps. 22:16 and Ps. 69:22). The sour wine of the soldiers, offered Him just after the crucifixion the Lord had refused because it was an anesthetic. But after completing the work (for Jesus knew that all things were now accomplished, John says), He was able to express His human feelings and desires. And He did so for the special purpose of fulfilling the Scriptures, so that all the Messianic prophecies would have been realized in His life and death. After taking the sour wine, He said, "It is finished! The great work of redemption was completed, and the Scriptures were fulfilled.

Thereupon He bowed His head and 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, for 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 saying on the cross. And when He had said this, He died. So both the first and the last words on the cross begin with this intimate word "Father."

Now He had accomplished all things, and in Him we may find a full salvation. In dying, the martyr Stephen imitated the Lord's example, and his words reflect both the first and last words on 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, standing at God's right hand to receive His servant into His heavenly glory.

---