

INTRODUCTION

This is the second message in the series called “Words That Shook the World: Final Words from the Cross.” It’s interesting to read some of the final words spoken by famous people before they died.

Most of us have heard of the Greek philosopher, Socrates, but you may not know how he died and what he said just before he died. In 399 B.C. he was found guilty for polluting the minds of young people in Athens (his real crime was irritating the politicians) and was sentenced to death by drinking hemlock. After he drank the poison, his final words to his servant were: “Crito, I owe a rooster to Asclepius. Will you remember to pay the debt?”

Andrew Jackson was the 7th U.S. President. When he lay dying in the Hermitage near Nashville in 1845, his last words were: “Oh, do not cry. Be good children, and we shall meet in heaven.” Oscar Wilde was an Irish playwright and novelist with a dry sense of humor. At age of 46 he was dying from meningitis and staying at a cheap, drab hotel in Paris. His final words in 1900 were: “Either the wallpaper goes, or I do.” The wallpaper stayed, and he died.

Last week, I said (tongue-in-cheek) that a redneck’s last words were, “Hey, ya’ll watch this.” In that same vein, someone sent me a list of fictitious “infamous” last words:

1. “I’ll hold it and you light the fuse.”
2. “Cute! I wonder where the mother bear is?”
3. “Bob, you have any grenades left? Throw me one...”
4. “The toast is stuck. Hand me that knife, will you?”
5. “Did you hear thunder? Oh well, hurry up and putt.”
6. “There aren’t *that* many Indians, General Custer.”

I think Christians are the only people who can laugh about death and dying, because, for us, death is no longer scary. My favorite description of the Proverbs 31 women says, “She can laugh at the days to come” (Proverbs 31:25).

The reason death is no longer scary for us is because Jesus Christ conquered death and the grave! In this series, we’re examining the final words Jesus spoke from the cross. Jesus wasn’t the only person crucified that day. There were two other men. Luke calls them criminals, which could mean robbers or bandits. We don’t know their names, but we get to hear the fascinating conversation that took place.

Luke 23:39-43. “One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: ‘Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!’ But the other criminal rebuked him, ‘Don’t you fear God,’ he said, ‘since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ Jesus answered him, ‘I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.’”

For the next few minutes, try to visualize these three crosses. Jesus is hanging on the center

cross. Let's imagine to His right is the cross holding the criminal who yelled insults at Jesus. This man cried out to Jesus, but his plea was filled with doubt. He challenged Jesus with the question, "Aren't you the Christ? If you are, then prove it! Save yourself and then save us!" He represents all the people who demand that God prove Himself to them before they'll believe.

Let's imagine another cross to the left of Jesus. This criminal rebuked the other criminal and offered a simple, yet profound prayer to Jesus. He said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Then as we focus on the center cross, we hear Jesus as He makes a promise to the man to his left, "Today, you will be with me in paradise."

These three crosses at Skull Hill can teach us many lessons. For instance, the cross to the right could be called the cross of rejection, and the cross to the left could be called the cross of repentance. The center cross represents the cross of redemption. The cross to the right is the cross of failure; the cross to the left is the cross of faith; and the cross in the middle is the cross of forgiveness. These three crosses illustrate Romans 6:23. The cross to the right says, "The wages of sin is death." The cross to the left says, "But the gift of God is eternal life." And the cross in the center says, "Through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Whenever you read the Bible, you must always first ask, "What did these words mean when they were written or spoken thousands of years ago?" But if that's all you ever seek, then you might as well be a historian. If you want to hear from God, you must also ask, "What do these words mean to ME right now?" That's why I try to always get as quickly as I can to the personal application of the Word of God. So let's examine three points of personal application from these Final Words from the Cross.

1. GOOD DEEDS WON'T GET YOU INTO PARADISE (and bad deeds can't keep you out!)

In verse 41 the criminal to the left made this observation, "We are being punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve." This is a statement about human justice. If you do the crime, then you've got to do the time. But don't ever confuse human justice with the grace of God.

Outside many courthouses around the world, you can see a statue of Lady Justice. This figure comes from Justitia, the Roman goddess of Justice. She can be seen holding a sword and a set of scales, and she is often blindfolded. This is where we get the phrase "justice is blind." Lady Justice symbolizes the concept that justice should be meted out objectively without regard to the position, rank, or power of the person being brought before the bar of judgment.

Sadly, most people think God is like Lady Justice. They imagine there is a set of scales in heaven. They think every good deed they perform is placed on one side of the scale, and every sin they commit is placed on the other side. Then they believe after they die, God is going to weigh their deeds. If the good deeds outweigh the sins, they get into heaven. But if the sins outweigh the good deeds, then they go to that other place they don't even like to mention except as a term of profanity.

What's wrong with this picture? It denies the grace of God. Let's consider the man on the cross beside Jesus again. He was guilty. The preponderance of evidence was against him. But just before He died, he received a promise of paradise from Jesus. He had never done anything to deserve paradise. Do you remember my definition of grace from last week? Grace is something I *need* but I don't *deserve*. The Bible says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith...not by works so that no one can boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

This criminal was saved from eternal separation from God in the same way you and I are saved—by grace through faith, not by works!

If God treated us like Lady Justice, imagine what this criminal's scales measured. There is no record he ever clothed the naked, or fed the hungry. He probably stole clothes and food! There is no record he ever helped a little lady across the street; he would have more likely mugged her. There is no record he was ever baptized. On the scale of good deeds and bad deeds, can you guess which way his scale leaned?

What's the lesson for us? Salvation is by grace. You may think you've done too many bad things in your life to be allowed into God's paradise. But God's grace is greater than ALL our sin. His grace is enough! Abraham was a liar, but he's in heaven now. Moses was a murderer, and he's in heaven now. Elijah was suicidal, and he's in heaven. David was an adulterer and a murder, and he's in heaven. Paul had Christians arrested and killed, yet he'll be in heaven.

The promise of Jesus to this guilty criminal should convince all of us that we're not saved by good deeds, nor are we hopelessly lost because of bad deeds. Salvation is by grace, through faith.

2. THE ONLY WAY TO MAKE A RESERVATION IN PARADISE IS THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS

Salvation is by grace—that's God's part. My part is to exercise faith, and even that is a gift from God. Did you notice the criminal's prayer of faith? Using just nine simple words, he prayed, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Whenever you're traveling, it's always a good idea to make a hotel reservation before you leave. Hotels can often fill up and if you haven't made a reservation, then you can't be certain of getting a room. Reserving a hotel room doesn't require you to be a rocket scientist. All you have to do is call or go online. In order to let the hotel know you're really serious, they require you to give a credit card number to hold the reservation.

Did you know you can also make a reservation in paradise? It doesn't require you to be a rocket scientist either. Jesus said it so simple even a child can do it. In fact, I made my reservation for paradise when I was nine years old.

This criminal on the cross gives us a pattern for making a reservation in paradise. By the way, we have launched a new website called www.go2heaven.net. If someone asks you how to get to heaven you can give them that web address or you can tell them it's as easy as ABC.

(1) You must Admit you're a sinner

The criminal admitted he was guilty and deserved to die for his crimes. Before you can be saved, you must be willing to admit you are a guilty sinner who deserves death and hell.

(2) You must Believe that Jesus can save you

Matthew tells us at first both criminals were insulting Jesus. But something happened that caused one man to believe in Jesus. I believe when he saw how Jesus was dying and heard what He was saying, he changed his mind about Jesus. He heard Jesus say, "Father forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." He heard Jesus speak words of compassion to His mother. That's what repentance really is: Changing your mind about yourself and changing your mind about God. The criminal came to the place where he said, "This man has done nothing wrong." Have you come to the place where you believe Jesus is the perfect Son of God?

(3) You must Confess Jesus as your Lord

This man not only made a profession of faith, he prayed a prayer of faith. He said, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." Let's examine that statement. First, the criminal had to believe Jesus had a future in which He could remember him. Next, he believed Jesus would have a kingdom. Remember, at the moment when the criminal prayed that prayer, Jesus didn't look very much like a king. He had been beaten, battered, and bloodied. By human standards, there was no basis to believe Jesus would even survive the cross, much less lead a kingdom! So, the criminal was confessing for all to hear that he believed Jesus would be the Lord, the King, of a future kingdom. In order to make your reservation in heaven, you must make the same confession. The Bible says, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." (Romans 10:9) Have you done that?

Making your reservation in paradise is as easy as ABC. But you have to let God know you're serious. He requires more than a credit card to hold your reservation. He requires your life. The thief on the cross was placing his entire life and future in the nail-pierced hands of Jesus. Just before he died, he made his reservation in paradise, and within a few hours, he was dead.

That's often called a death-bed conversion. A few weeks ago, Jim Carroll and I visited his neighbor who was dying of cancer. He was confined at home in a hospital bed. Jim and I shared the plan of salvation with him, and with tears of joy he prayed a prayer to receive Jesus as his Lord and Savior. Within days, this man died, but because he made his reservation in paradise, I believe that's where he is right now.

But the term "death-bed conversion" can be misleading. We all wish we could put on our pajamas and die in bed after we've expressed our love to all our family members. But statistics tell us more people die with their shoes on than in bed. In other words, you are taking a terrible risk if you try to wait to give your heart to Jesus. We're all going to die, but most of us won't die in bed. In commenting on the salvation of the thief on the cross, the great puritan theologian Alexander McClaren wrote: "There is one death-bed repentance recorded in the Bible so that none may despair; but only one that none may presume."

3. THE PROMISE OF JESUS CONFIRMS YOUR RESERVATION IN PARADISE

When you make a hotel reservation, and secure it with a credit card, then you're given a confirmation number. That's what Jesus did. Our paradise confirmation number is L.U.K.E. 23:43 where we read, "Jesus answered him, 'I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.'" Let's start with the last word in that verse, and word our way backwards. What or where is paradise? Simply stated, Paradise is heaven. The word paradise means, "beautiful garden" and it is found only three times in the New Testament. Jesus used it here and again in Revelation 2:7 Jesus said, "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." Then in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4, the Apostle Paul used the word paradise when he wrote, "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven...was caught up to paradise." Contrary to the popular misconception, there isn't a "seventh heaven." That idea comes from mythology and Islam. Even though there's a popular television series called "Seventh Heaven," the Bible never mentions seven heavens.

PARADISE = HEAVEN

Instead, the Bible speaks of three heavens. First, the word heaven is used to describe the atmosphere. We read about birds that fly in the heavens and rain that falls from heaven. Next, the second heaven would be what we call outer space. The Bible speaks of the stars in the heavens. But the third heaven is paradise, the dwelling place of God which we usually mean when we use the word "heaven." I'm glad Jesus called it paradise. There are places we call tropical paradise here on earth, but compared to heaven, Hawaii will be like a barren desert.

Jesus promised the thief, "You will be WITH ME in paradise." The best part of heaven isn't what is there: flowering trees, streets of gold, or gates of pearl. The most wonderful thing about heaven is we will be with Jesus. Anywhere with Jesus would be paradise!

He promised the criminal, "TODAY you will be with me in paradise." He wasn't talking about some future event, Jesus was talking about today. After a Christian dies, there is no waiting period. We get to be with Jesus immediately. This verse completely destroys any basis for the heresy of purgatory. Our Roman Catholic friends teach in their official catechism that if a person dies who isn't perfectly purified, they go to an intermediate place for purging, or cleansing. I'm glad we don't believe in purgatory! We believe in paradise! And not delayed paradise, but immediate paradise! 2 Corinthians 5:6 says when a Christian dies, we are absent from the body and present with the Lord. In Philippians 1:23, Paul was wrote about dying and said that to die was to "depart and be WITH CHRIST."

Notice the first part of verse 43. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth." The actual words Jesus used were, "Amen, Amen." The KJV translates them, "verily, verily." Jesus was saying, "I absolutely, promise, guarantee, with no uncertainty that you will be with me in paradise."

Have you ever wondered what makes Christianity different from the other religions of the world? There are many differences of course, but here's a major contrast. Of all the world's religions, Christianity is the *only* faith that guarantees salvation to its followers.

Hindus believe salvation is finally attained through transmigration of the soul, or reincarnation. But what if you keep being reincarnated in the wrong direction? Or what if planet earth gets destroyed by a meteorite during the middle of your transmigration? Too bad, there you'd be: A soul without a body floating in the universe. It's really a karma lottery—no guarantee there.

The Buddhist believes if you do everything right, think right, talk right, act right, then you can attain karma. But you are actually judged more by your motives than your actions. So what if you die before you purify your motives? There are no make-up courses in hell.

Muslims are in the same little boat of insecurity. Nobody is ever certain they are good enough to please the great and mighty Allah. You can only try harder. Mohammed himself wrote, "Save yourselves from hellfire, as I cannot save you from Allah's punishment...Nor do I know what will be done with me or you..." (Sura 46:9).

Then I see Jesus hanging on a cross. He looks at a man who has lived an awful life and is dying an awful death. This man is nailed to a cross. He can't move. He can only speak. And in response to a simple, sincere nine word prayer Jesus says, "I promise! I guarantee! I assure you! Amen! Amen! Today you will be with me in paradise." We're the ONLY ones who can sing, "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!"

CONCLUSION

Let's go back to the crosses, fast forward three or four hours. The sky has grown dark. Jesus has uttered His final word from the cross. He says, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" He dies. He breathes His last breath. And as John writes, "He bowed his head and gave up his spirit." (John 19:30) It was late afternoon by now, and because it was the day before a special Passover Sabbath, the soldiers decided to hasten the death of those being executed. Crucifixion was never intended to be a quick, painless execution. It was designed to last for days. When a man was crucified, the only way he could breathe was to push himself upward, and lower his body. This action would lower and raise his diaphragm, allowing air to be drawn into the lungs. The soldiers probably took the same hammer used to pound the nails into Jesus' hands and broke the legs of the two criminals. Since they could no longer press upward, they would soon suffocate.

I'm amazed that these two thieves died the same distance from Jesus. Yet one died trusting Jesus while the other died rejecting Jesus. That should serve as a warning to all of us that you can be close to Jesus and still die without trusting Him. How can two people be seated on the same pew and hear the same gospel, and one comes running to Jesus while the other person walks away unchanged? It's a mystery to me how anyone can see the cross and not give their heart to Christ. The same sun that melts ice will harden clay.

After the soldiers broke the legs of the criminals they approached Jesus to break His legs. However, they discovered He was already dead. So to certify He was dead, a soldier took a long lance and punctured the left side of Jesus sending the point of the spear into Jesus' heart. The Bible says blood and water flowed from that wound. It wasn't just a wound, it was a fountain.

The prophet Zechariah had promised that one day a fountain of salvation would be opened in Jerusalem.

The last thing on earth the dying thief saw was that fountain of salvation. There's a great old hymn that says, "There is a fount filled with blood; Drawn from Immanuel's veins; And sinners plunged beneath that flood; Lose all their guilty stains. The dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day; And there may I, though vile as he, wash all my sins away." (Words by William Cowper)

You and I are as vile as any criminal when it comes to our own righteousness. We have all sinned against a Holy God. But we can have the promise of paradise when we simply place our faith in Jesus. Have you come to the cross? Have you seen Jesus dying for you? If you have, then you can say, "Jesus, I am a sinner. I deserve to be punished. But I believe in you. I confess you as my Lord. Jesus, please remember me when you come into your kingdom." Then listen once again as He speaks these words of promise, "The day you die, you can be certain, you will be with me in paradise."

OUTLINE

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"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith...not by works so that no one can boast."
Ephesians 2:8-9

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Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

To go2heaven you must:

- (1) Admit you're a sinner
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Jesus answered him, 'I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.

PARADISE = HEAVEN

"To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." —*Jesus, Revelation 2:7*

"I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven...was caught up to paradise." *2 Corinthians 12:2-4*

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes