

The Gospel of Luke / “Jesus Gets the Last Word”

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If you knew that you were about to die, what would your last words be? Throughout history we’ve recorded the last words of many famous and infamous people. Some express doubt and remorse. Some encourage the living. Some are just really weird. I want to give just a few.

“Fortune favors the bold”

- Pliny the Elder

“I have offended God and mankind because my work did not reach the quality it should have”.

- Leonardo Da Vinci

“We are beggars, this is true.”

- Martin Luther

“Last words are for fools who haven’t said enough.”

- Karl Marx

“I’m Losing.”

- Frank Sinatra

“Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow.”

- Steve Jobs

So If you knew that you were about to die, what would your last words be? If you had a choice, what would you say with your last breath? Our passage this morning brings us to the cross of Christ and to some of Jesus’ last words. What we find when we consider them is that Jesus is fully committed to his ministry and purpose to the very end. Until he could breathe no more, every breath was spent for our good and God’s glory.

And what I hope is clear is that

Jesus went to the Cross to Warn, Forgive, and Save Sinners

To that end we’ll look at

1. **The Warning of Jesus**
2. **The Forgiveness of Jesus**
3. **The Salvation of Jesus**

So first let’s consider the warning of Jesus. Jesus went to the cross to warn us.

The Warning of Jesus

Turn with me to Luke 23:26-31

26 And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus. 27 And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. 28 But turning to them Jesus said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. 29 For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ 30 Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us,’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ 31 For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

In this first scene, we find ourselves on the way to the cross. Jesus has already been condemned to be killed. He's already been tortured to the point where the prophet Isaiah said in **Isaiah 52:14** that his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness. And now Jesus must walk a humiliating half mile, while he's half dead carrying on his back the cross beam that he will be nailed to and hung from.

Around him is a crowd - a great multitude - watching the spectacle. As Jesus strains and, as church tradition would tell us, as Jesus falls repeatedly on this road, Simon of Cyrene is pulled out of the crowd and is conscripted by the Romans to carry Jesus' cross the rest of the way. Before he even gets to the execution site, Jesus' body is failing.

Our passage points out that within the crowd there is a group of women following closely and they're mourning. In our passage today there is no mention of Jesus' disciples, the 12 who are now the 11. They are not following closely. They are gone. But there are women, close behind and on their way to the cross, and Jesus warns them of judgment that is coming.

In the warning of Jesus we'll see that there is an immediate warning and a future warning.

Look with me at **Luke 23:28-31**

28 But turning to them Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. 29 For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' 30 Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' 31 For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

With one of his last breaths, with great compassion, Jesus is warning of coming judgment. This is not the first time.

In Luke 19 when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem it says

Luke 19:41-44

41 when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, 42 saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. 43 For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side 44 and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation."

This judgment is swift and devastating.

He does this again in **Luke 21:20-24**

20 "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. 21 Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, 22 for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. 23 Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. 24 They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

I think as Christians in the modern world, under the new covenant we've been brought into through Christ, we can sometimes move too quickly past the importance of God's relationship to the Jewish people at this time. Jesus was a Jew. The ministry of Jesus happened primarily around Jews. They are who he came to. He is the Jewish Messiah. It's the prophets of Israel who have heralded his coming and many of the Old Testament leaders served as a type of Jesus - meaning what they did and how they did it foreshadowed Jesus and what he would do. This means that Jesus is the better Adam, the better Isaac, the better Joseph, the better Moses, and the better David, he's the passover lamb, the manna from heaven, the tabernacle, and the better high priest. They were a shadow of him. Where these people and things succeeded, Jesus will all the more, where they failed, Jesus never will, and where they were incomplete, Jesus fills every gap. The entire Old Testament leads us to Christ and find its fulfillment in Christ.

And so with the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome in 70 AD on the horizon, Jesus is grieved. Earlier he wept over Jerusalem. This is his immediate warning. The city and the temple would be destroyed and over a million people would be killed.

Jesus closes his warning with a proverb that sounds a little odd to us today.
He says

"For if they do these things when the wood is green , what will happen when it is dry?"

With this warning he is comparing the treatment that he is receiving from Rome as an innocent man, the green wood that shouldn't burn, to the treatment that Israel will receive in its sin, the dry wood that should.

But this warning has two sides. There's an immediate warning and a future warning. The fact that Jesus is doing two things at once here shouldn't feel foreign to us. In life there are actions we can take, as well as ways that we can fail to take action, that have immediate consequences that are bad and future consequences that are worse. To avoid these consequences we give immediate warnings that are future warnings as well.

For example, If I allow my oldest son to treat his mother poorly, disrespecting her, leaving messes wherever he goes, expecting her to be his maid, cook and piggybank, then I shouldn't be surprised if he turns into a pretty awful husband one day. I correct and warn about the immediate so that my son is ready for the future.

So while Jesus is warning about the judgment of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70AD he is also warning about the judgment that is to come. The is the judgment of sinners by God. Jesus' words are a reminder of the last judgment where we will all stand before God. In light of this, if we go back to the proverb **"For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"**

One Theologian put it another way and interpreted it this way:
"If God allows this to happen to his beloved Son, how much worse will it be for you?"

In this world we can hide and try to minimize our sin. But there is no hiding on the last day. Earlier I said that Rome's judgment was going to be swift and devastating. How much more will the Lord's be? In V 30 of our passage Jesus says:
30 Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.'

This is a quote from Hosea 10:8. A prophecy that was realized when Israel was invaded by the Assyrian army hundreds of years earlier.

Hosea 10:8

*8 The high places of Aven, the sin of Israel,
shall be destroyed.
Thorn and thistle shall grow up
on their altars,
and they shall say to the mountains, "Cover us,"
and to the hills, "Fall on us."*

When the final judgment comes, there will be no place to hide. You would rather be buried under a mountain. Again, speaking of the final judgment - the Apostle John writes in the book of Revelation, chapter 6 verse 16

Revelation 6:16

16 calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb."

In our passage today, Jesus will plead for forgiveness, and he will offer salvation, but first he warns. He wants us to know that we will not be able to stand against what is coming. So what is the right thing to do with a dire warning? Act quickly! Act now! Stop whatever you are doing and heed the warning! When the tornado siren is screaming you don't sit in your trailer - you get to the shelter. Judgment for sinners is coming, and in this moment Jesus' broken body is holding up the mirror to its horror, but he continues to walk to the cross because Jesus went to the cross to forgive sinners.

This is our second point

The Forgiveness of Jesus

Look with me at **Luke 23:32-38**

32 Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 33 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. 34 And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. 35 And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" 36 The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine 37 and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" 38 There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

We started on way to the cross and now we're gathered around the cross. Jesus is not alone. He's crucified between two criminals and gathered around him are three distinct groups of people. There is a crowd, there are the rulers - this is going to be people like the chief priests, the pharisees, the scribes and the members of the religious court that condemned Jesus, and there are soldiers - the bloody hand of Rome's justice. In this scene we are given some of the most famous words of Jesus in verse 34.

Luke 23:34

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

These words are amazing because of the context, Jesus is pleading for the forgiveness of those who are actively killing him. It is also amazing because of the consistency of Jesus' message. This is what he's always been about. Way back in Luke 7:48-49 we have the story of the woman who washed Jesus feet with her tears and anointed him with extravagant perfume and he says

48 And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 49 Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?"

Jesus went to the cross to forgive sins. This is core to his ministry. To the very end, Jesus was on his mission to restore sinners to God. So who needs to be forgiven? In our passage we're given three distinct groups around the cross: the crowd, the Jewish rulers, and the Roman soldiers.

The Crowd

First let's deal with the crowd. What did they do?

We're in V35

Luke 23:35a

35 And the people stood by, watching

So what did they do? Nothing! They did nothing! They watched. They watched an innocent man, a healer, a traveling teacher, a defender of the poor, the widow, and the fatherless die. Some in this crowd might have at one point hoped that Jesus was bringing the kind of change they thought they needed. But those hopes are gone. The hope that this teacher brought is destroyed just like every other one before him - it's nailed to a tree until it bleeds out. No doubt some in this crowd were just a week ago shouting "Hosanna", shouting "save our souls" as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. They were shouting his praise and now they're silent.

Is your relationship to God this fickle? Do you lose faith when his plans don't meet your expectations?

These are important questions because we can find ourselves in the crowd.

They're like us.

The Rulers

Who else is around the cross? It's the rulers, the laws givers, the good and holy people.

Why do they need to be forgiven?

We find out if we read all of V 35

Luke 23:35

35 And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!"

So why do the rulers need to be forgiven? It's that they trust in the wrong Savior. This is evident from their mockery.

Because in their minds if Jesus was the savior, the messiah, this would never happen. They cannot conceive that the Christ, the chosen one of God would end up where Jesus has. In their minds, God would never let that happen. Yet, the thing that they are mocking Jesus with is the very thing that is true. Jesus is the Christ. He is the savior. But he's not the savior of Jerusalem from Roman occupation, he's savior of our souls from sin and its penalty - the wrath of God. He's not here to restore Israel to its former glory, he's here to restore sinners to God.

These rulers wanted Jesus to die on the cross because they thought his claim of being the messiah, the savior, were false. But Jesus wasn't crucified because his claims were false. He went to the cross because they were true. These very rulers administrated and oversaw a sacrificial system that demanded the blood of an innocent lamb to pay the penalty for the sins of an individual and now they stand before what scripture calls the Lamb of God and the blood of this innocent Lamb can forgive the sins of all who believe in its saving power.

These, often, very smart people. very educated people got it wrong.
They trusted in the wrong savior, while the true savior was right in front of them.

So what are some wrong savior's that you are trusting in today?
If just had _____ everything would be alright?

If I just had enough money, a nice house, that relationship, the sex life that I desire, the new job, success in business, the career achievements, the good grades, the perfect family, the approval of people.
If I just had the right politician in office, the right legislation passed...
Then things would be ok. And *I would be ok.*

The truth is that even if we had all of these things that we wanted our greatest problem would not be solved. We know this, but we fall for it again and again - we can look at the rulers and see ourselves. None of these things are going to make everything all right.

But Jesus went to the cross to do just that.
To be our savior from sin as opposed to political radical or a genie who granted wishes.

The Soldiers

Lastly, we come to the Soldiers. Let's pick up in V 36

Luke 23:36

36 The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine 37 and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" 38 There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

Much like the rulers, the soldiers mock Jesus not for what is false, but for what is true.
It's as if they're saying:
*"Look how the King of the Jews compares to the Emperor of Rome.
Look at what causing a problem for us will get you."*

Why do the soldiers need to be forgiven?
Because they're taking orders from the wrong authority.
Jesus is the King of the Jews, but he's also the Lord of all creation whose authority extends farther than any empire. And if he's your authority, you're free from the authority that sin had over your life.

Jesus went to the cross so that he might release you from the sin and disobedience that ruled over your heart and mind so that nothing else would have authority over you. This is one reason why scripture holds up the fear of God as being so important. Because if you fear God, you fear everything else less. If you're right with God, who is the authority over everything, then everyone else's opinion and claim over you shrinks in it's importance and in it's effect on your life.

About himself Jesus says in Matthew 28:18 that all authority in heaven and earth has been given to him. So is Jesus the Lord of your life? Do you honor him with your obedience to his commands? Does your life submit to his rule, or your own?
In your own life, can you find yourself in the soldiers, the rulers and the crowd?

Jesus' prayer for forgiveness is interesting he says"
"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

And that is the truth of it. They know not what they do. In all of these cases if these people knew who Jesus was, they'd do exactly the opposite of what they're doing. The crowd would not stay silent, they would take action. The rulers wouldn't condemn Jesus, they would worship him. The soldiers who put Jesus up on the cross would take him down.

They know not what they do.

And this was all of us. We have all been ignorant and passive, we have all trusted in other saviors, and we have all sat on the throne of our lives barking orders that have left us shipwrecked. Jesus came not only that we would know the truth of our need to be forgiven, but that we would truly know the one who offered it.

All of the accusations against Jesus are true. He is the Christ. He is the King of the Jews and as John the Baptist put it at the start of his ministry, He is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

And he's come to the cross to forgive sin. So who can be forgiven?
In all three of the cases that we looked at, the sin behind it all is unbelief.
So who then can be forgiven? The one who believes.
It's the one who believes that will be forgiven and the one who believes that will be saved.

Let's move on to our third and final point

The Salvation of Jesus

Jesus went to the Cross to Warn, Forgive, and Save Sinners and as we finish our passage we're up close and personal with some sinners.
Starting at V 39.

Luke 23:39-43

39 One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" 40 But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." 42 And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43 And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

In our passage today we have been on the way to the cross, we have been around the cross, and now our scene is on the cross. We've gone from the multitude, to a crowd, to a group of three. Jesus and two criminals. In this section, through the words of two criminals, we're going to see two responses to Jesus. These are the only responses that exist. One believes and the other does not.

The unbelieving thief again mocks Jesus. He's even using the same phrases as the rulers.
He says, *"Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!"*

It's as if he's saying:
"If you were who you said you were, you wouldn't be where you are."

The other criminal rightly discerns the heart of his compatriot when he says *"Do you not fear God?"*

Jesus has spent his last breaths warning and forgiving, but the unbelieving criminal wastes his on a joke, self-assured until the end as if he can rightly see the situation from the top of his condemned perch. But the other criminal has a very different response.

First, by simply asking the question *“Do you not fear God?”* there’s an implication that this criminal does. Next we see that this criminal confesses his sin. He says that the punishment he is receiving is just. He deserves it and he knows it. Then this criminal defends Jesus and upholds his innocence. *“He has done nothing wrong”*. No one else in the crowd or in the multitude has attempted to advocate for Jesus’ innocence. But this criminal has. Finally he confesses Jesus’s lordship and pleads for mercy. *“Remember me, when you come into your kingdom.”*

This believing criminal demonstrates how people are saved.

If you are here today and you have not known that there is a way to be saved from sin and from the wrath of a holy God against sin - that there is a way to be right with God and restored in relationship to him now and in eternity - I’m here to tell you that there is a way and it is through faith in Jesus.

First we must rightly see that Jesus is the Lord of all, perfect and Holy, living a sinless life that was pleasing to God. He willingly went to the cross and laid his life down, taking the punishment that we deserved for our sin and taking it in our place.

Then we must rightly see and confess our sin and understand the deadly consequences it brings. And we need to repent, which simply means that we turn from sin to God. We begin to put off sinful patterns of thinking and behavior and begin to replace them with patterns of thinking and behavior that please God, obeying his commands.

Finally we place our hope in grace of God to be saved. Faith in Christ’s work not only removes the debt of our sin, but now he lavishes on us his righteousness to cling to as if it was our own so that when we come into his kingdom it will not only be as if we never sinned, but it will be as if we had always obeyed.

Alternatively, for those who reject Christ, eternal danger awaits and the horrors of death of the cross are only a shadow and type of the judgment that is to come.

It is a miracle that this criminal believed. Not only that, it is an answer to prayer, Jesus’ own prayer. *“Father forgive them.”*

So how does Jesus respond to the criminal who confesses both his sin and that Jesus is the King of the kingdom and the way in? Jesus uses one more breath and with joy, for the first time, he holds out to a sinner the immediate promise of an eternal restored relationship with God.

He says in Luke 23:43

Luke 23:43

“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

All of previous history led to this moment and nothing has been the same since it happened. Jesus went to the Cross to Warn, Forgive, and Save Sinners and he has done all of it.

And actually I want to change my main point. I think I’m allowed to do that.

Jesus went to the Cross to Warn, Forgive, and Save Sinners *Like Us*.

Like us. Like you and me.

In Luke this man who is saved is just referred to as a criminal. But in Matthew's gospel he's referred to as a thief. In my younger years I was a thief too. Now my parents and kids are hearing this for the first time. So this is going to be great and I am sure that I won't have to discuss it with them any further.

But as a junior high kid living in New York City I used to stop into the little mom and pop deli down the street from me and for a period of time I would regularly stuff my pockets with whatever snacks and drinks I could get my hands on. The inside pocket of my coat even had a hole in it and the things that I would put in that pocket would just disappear into the lining of my coat. Once my pockets were full, I'd spend a quarter on a pack of gum to justify my presence in the store and I'd leave, eating treats all the way home.

Eventually I was caught. It turns out that adults are smarter than kids and they do things like take inventory. I was so ashamed. It hit me so hard. When I was in the middle of my sin. I was so blind to it. I felt no remorse. I felt no conviction. But when I was confronted my eyes were opened and saw what I had become and I was ashamed.

For a couple years after, anytime my parents asked me to get somethings at the deli, I had to run to a different one that was further away and then run all the way back. (Yes, I grew up in place where there were two deli's within walking distance. There's a lot of deli's in New York. It's like Loose Caboose. They're everywhere)

I worked so hard to not be confronted with that shame, to not be discovered, to not be known for what I was. I was a thief. I couldn't take it back.

Have you ever stolen anything? You're a thief too.

Have you ever told a lie? You're a liar

Have you ever looked at someone lustfully. Jesus in Matthew 5 says that you're an adulterer and in the same sermon he compares our anger to murder. Have you ever been sinfully angry at someone?

God knows that we're messed up. He knows what's in our hearts. We can cover ourselves up with mountains and hills of self-righteousness and pretending, but we cannot hide from God. I did my best to not be discovered in my sin, but God knows me. He sees me. He has warned, forgiven and saved me from things far worse than shoplifting as a kid. He took my dead heart that was only concerned about what others might think about me and made it come alive so that I'd see the eternal danger I was in and cast my soul on him for mercy.

He sees you too. Maybe your worst sin is way back in the rearview mirror of your life or maybe it was last night.

But the love of Christ is greater than the worst thing you've ever done.

And he has proved that at the cross.

So be warned, be forgiven and be saved.

Believers, walk in faith and when you do stumble, just get back up again.

Because Christ was faithful to endure to the end he will be faithful to preserve us to the end as well.

In book of Hebrews chapter 12:2 it says that Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was set before him. It was Christ's joy to save sinners like us. To ransom us and restore us to God.

As we close, I want to look once more at Jesus last words here to the criminal.

"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

I opened this morning by asking if you knew that you were about to die, what would your last words be? The truth is, I am more interested, not in the words I will say right before I die, but in the words I will hear after I do. I am hoping to hear words like Matthew 25:23 *"Well done good and faithful servant"*, but a close second would be *"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise"*

When Jesus says **“Truly, I say to you...”**

You can know that whatever follows will come to pass. You can know this because there is no authority that Jesus can appeal to that is higher than himself. All of the accusations are true. He is who he says he is.

When Jesus says **“Today you will be with me...”**

Then you can trust that starting immediately you’ll be in the presence of the one who knows everything about you and yet has perfectly loved you at great cost to himself.

When Jesus says **“In Paradise”**

You will open new eyes that finally see without being corrupted by the lens of sin. Your faith will be made sight and you’ll be free from sin, declared righteous near the presence of God, living forever.

Because Jesus’ last words at the cross have warned, forgiven, and saved sinners like us , death no longer has the last word over us, Jesus does.