

Seven Last Words of Jesus: Two

I think the phrase itself, “the seven last words of Jesus,” is somewhat misleading. Better phrasing would be “the seven last words of Jesus on the cross” or “the seven last words of Jesus before his death and resurrection.” He had, and has, many other words to say to us, for he is present right now and eternal in nature, so the seven last words are never really going to happen.

To the point. The second of those last words on the cross in Luke 23:43, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise,” offer words of hope to many people in very diverse circumstances.

They were said to the thief hanging on a cross to Jesus’ side. He was defending Jesus from the other criminal, also being crucified, and then said two things. One, the man has done nothing wrong. And two, “Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

He offers hope to all. Whether we are the worst sinner, the most hardened criminal, the most uncaring of people, if we come to Jesus in humility after a lifetime of sin, Jesus will change, forgive and escort us to the throne of heaven, and we will live forever with him.

In fact, when we search the Bible for words which describe heaven, this is one of the places we find insight. Paradise, the word used also for the Garden of Eden, is clearly a word to describe heaven.

The clear implication is that this very day the criminal was forgiven because he sought Jesus out, and that this very day he was going to heaven with Jesus. Jesus lets us know, in no uncertain terms, that when we die as a Christian we go immediately to heaven.

The word “today” lifts up the immediate gift of heaven for those who know Jesus at the time when they die. It eradicates the tendency many have to fear death and puts in place a sure promise of the believer’s swift and sure arrival in heaven upon our expiration date here on earth.

When Jesus says he goes to heaven to prepare a place for us where there will be no pain or tears, as he told his disciples some time earlier, he builds upon that idea with a certain and short trip because of Jesus’ death on the cross. This marvelous gift is one that keeps us as Christians on our toes to tell others, for this gift is one of the greatest things offered by God.

Here’s another gift offered up by Jesus in the phrase, “today, you will be with me in paradise.” He reconciled the criminal, who had actually committed

crimes by his own admission, to heaven and to others. This work of reconciliation is the ultimate reason Jesus came to earth, to reconcile us to one another and to God.

We can be very far apart from other people. By our own selfishness, pride, or anger, we can separate ourselves from a wonderful and loving God and from people we may have once cared about very much. Jesus came to show us how to forgive our enemies, to forgive seventy times seven, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

This grand goal has admittedly been trampled on by the Church over the centuries. Many violent actions were committed in the name of the church during the Inquisition, when people were tortured by church-sanctioned officials.

During the Spanish Inquisition, “many true and faithful Christians, because of the testimony of enemies, rivals, slaves and other low people—and still less appropriate—without tests of any kind, have been locked up in secular prisons, tortured and condemned like relapsed heretics, deprived of their goods and properties, and given over to the secular arm to be executed, at great danger to their souls, giving a pernicious example and causing scandal to many.” (Part of a Sixtus IV Papal Bull around the year 1492 blocking such actions which were occurring)

During the Holy Land Crusades from the years 1095 to 1291, Christians killed others and were killed in battle with enemy forces in order to rescue the holy city of Jerusalem from “infidels.”

We might say, “Well, I’d never do that!” But we do. We have shut out people in the name of Jesus Christ because they disagreed with us or because we disagreed with them. We leave churches because people don’t do what we think they should do. We un-reconcile, or separate ourselves from others, even family, over disagreements which would not amount to a hill of beans when viewed by an impartial third party.

As we live our lives from now on, let us remember this. Jesus said to the thief on the cross, and to us, “you” will be with me in paradise. It is a promise to be fulfilled on the moment we pass the barrier of the grave. Let us spend the time between being reconciled by God to him and to others, and we too shall inherit the blessing promised to that man on the cross beside Jesus.