

CRUCIFIXION

&

THE SEVEN SAYINGS OF JESUS ON THE CROSS



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JESUS ON THE CROSS



Bentley C.F. Chan

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Crucifixion & The Seven Sayings of Jesus on the Cross
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Contents

Foreword		1
Chapter 1	Crucifixion	5
Chapter 2	The Seven Sayings of Jesus on the Cross	11
Saying 1	Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing	15
Saying 2	Today you will be with me in Paradise	21
Saying 3	Behold your son! Behold your mother!	27
Saying 4	My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?	31
Saying 5	I am thirsty	39
Saying 6	It is finished	41
Saying 7	Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit	45
Epilogue	A Poem on the Seven Sayings on the Cross	49

Foreword

It is a tradition among churches worldwide, in preparation for Good Friday and Easter, to reflect on the trial, crucifixion, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus, and on his seven sayings on the cross. This small book offers brief meditations on two of these things: the crucifixion of Jesus, and the seven sayings on the cross. At around 60 pages, it occupies a middle ground between a brief synopsis on the one hand, and a full-length book on the other.

The Term “Easter”

First I would like to clear away an obstacle: the word “Easter” itself. When I was a young Christian, I would sometimes wonder why the resurrection event is called Easter. To me it is a strange term that bears no obvious connection to resurrection. Is it somehow derived from the word *easterly*—in the eastward direction? (No, it is not.)

The word “Easter” is not found in any mainstream English Bible apart from the King James Bible, which uses “Easter” only once, in Acts 12:4, in reference to the Passover. But KJV’s use of “Easter” in Acts 12:4 is anomalous because KJV, outside this verse, never translates the Greek *pascha* again as “Easter” but always as “Passover” (28 times).

Years later I learned that “Easter” is derived from *Eostre*, the name of an Old English or Germanic goddess. This etymology bothered me, so I eventually adopted the term “Resurrection Day” which I find more biblical and meaningful. In fact, Resurrection Day is the term for Easter in a few languages such as Chinese (in which the term is 复活节), Vietnamese, Japanese, and Serbian.

I will continue to use Easter in this book because all alternative terms, including Resurrection Day, will not be understood by speakers of English.

As for the term “Good Friday,” it simply means “Holy Friday” because “good” can mean “holy” in Old English. That is why the Holy Bible is sometimes called “the Good Book”. I have no objections to the term “Good Friday,” but bear in mind that some believe that Jesus was crucified on a different day from Friday.¹

¹ Scholars debate four aspects of the time of Jesus’ death: the time of day, the day of the week, the day of the month, and the year. See Brad Arnett and James Flanagan’s “The Day, Hour, and Year of Jesus’ Crucifixion,” an essay included in *Harmony of the Gospels*, compiled by Steven Cox and Kendell Easley. The essay says that of these four aspects, the day of the week is the least disputed. All four Gospels indicate that Jesus was crucified the day before the Sabbath (Friday) and was raised the day after the Sabbath, the first day of the week (Matthew 27:62; 28:1; Mark 15:42; 16:1–2,9; Luke 23:54; 24:1; John 19:14,31,42; 20:1). Some reject the view that Jesus died on Friday, and this is often on the basis of Matthew 12:40: “For as Jonah was in the belly of the huge fish three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights.” Their point is that these are three full days and three full nights, which would take up a longer span of time than that between the death and the resurrection of Jesus in the traditional reckoning. This argument is addressed by the aforementioned essay. Note: Half of this footnote is quoted verbatim from this essay.

Which Bible Chapters to Read for Easter?

Since this book is a sharing on the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus and his seven sayings on the cross, it would be helpful to do a private reading of the relevant chapters in the four gospels.

If you want the whole Easter package—Jesus’ arrest, trial, crucifixion, death, burial, resurrection—read the following chapters: Matthew chapters 26, 27, 28; Mark 14, 15, 16; Luke 22, 23, 24; and John 18, 19, 20, 21. These 13 chapters have a total of 618 verses if we include the longer ending of Mark (it makes a difference of only 11 verses).

If all you want to cover is Jesus’ crucifixion and the seven sayings on the cross, here are the chapters: Matthew 26 and 27; Mark 14 and 15; Luke 22 and 23; John 18 and 19; for a total of 8 chapters and 469 verses.

Each gospel, notably Luke and John, offers details not found in the other gospels. For example, only Luke has, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” and, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” And only John has, “It is finished.”

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Crucifixion

Since we are reflecting on the seven sayings on the cross, let us start with the cross—not the cross in terms of theology but as an instrument of capital punishment.²

Crucifixion is an area of ongoing academic study, with more and more of its medical aspects coming to light and occasionally debated. But for the purposes of this book, we only aim to acquire a basic understanding of crucifixion without dwelling much on its medical details or grisly aspects—yet enough detail for a proper understanding of crucifixion.

I am writing this chapter on crucifixion because few Christians today understand what it is, so they don't recoil with the same horror as did the ancients at hearing the words, "Bear your cross".

Everything I know about crucifixion comes from books, so I will simply present information available from standard references. In my non-expert opinion, the film "The Passion of the Christ" gives a fairly accurate portrayal of crucifixion even if some scholars have questioned its historical and biblical accuracy in some other areas.

² For a discussion on both aspects, see the lengthy article "Death of Jesus" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (ed. Joel B. Green *et al*).

New Bible Dictionary, 3rd edition, 1996, was published almost three decades ago, yet its description of crucifixion in the article “Cross, Crucifixion” remains current with today’s understanding of crucifixion apart from a few medical details that have come to light in recent scholarship. The following is my summary of this article, with a few details borrowed from other references.

The Greek word for “cross” (*stauros*) fundamentally means an upright stake or beam. Oxford Dictionary defines “stake” as a strong post or beam with a pointed end, driven into the ground like a fence post. This word *stauros* takes on a more specific meaning in the New Testament, namely, an instrument of crucifixion.

The crucifixion of live criminals is not mentioned in the Old Testament (not even in Esther 7:10) because stoning was the prescribed method of execution among the Israelites. But the bodies of the executed were sometimes hung on trees as a warning to others (Dt.21:22–23); such victims were regarded as accursed (Gal.3:13). That is probably why in the New Testament, the word “tree” (which also means “wood”) is sometimes associated with crucifixion, and Jesus’ execution is occasionally depicted in terms of “hanging him on a tree” (Acts 5:30; 10:39). Here the Greek word for “tree” is *xulon*, which also occurs in Rev.2:7 (“the tree of life”).

Crucifixion was first practiced by the Phoenicians and Carthaginians, and later extensively by the Romans. Under the Romans, only slaves, vile criminals, and provincials (those who come from undeveloped places far away from Roman cities) were crucified, but Roman citizens were rarely crucified (hence the tradition that Paul, a Roman citizen, was beheaded, not crucified).

Crucifixion can be carried out on a single upright post (the *crux simplex*), but there was also the cross, of which there were three types: *crux commissa* (shaped like a capital T), *crux decussata* (shaped like the letter X), and *crux immissa* (the traditional two-beam structure). The last of these, the traditional one, was probably the one used for crucifying the Lord Jesus, because the title “The King of the Jews” was nailed to the cross *over* his head (Mt.27:37; Mk.15:26; Lk.23:38; Jn.19:19), though I think this may also be possible with the *crux simplex*, the single upright stake.

It was the custom for the condemned man, prior to crucifixion, to be scourged with the *flagellum*, a whip with leather thongs, sometimes weighed with metal or glass, which in the case of Jesus greatly weakened him and hastened his death. The victim was often made to carry the cross to the place of his torture and death, always outside the city. Jesus did not carry the whole cross, which would be too heavy for him to bear in his weakened condition, but only the crossbeam (the *patibulum*); but even that was too heavy for him, so Simon of Cyrene, a passerby, was forced into carrying it for him (Mt.27:32; Mk.15:21; Lk.23:26; but see John 19:17).

At the crucifixion site, the condemned man would be stripped naked, and laid on the ground with his shoulders on the crossbeam, and his arms or hands tied or nailed to it. This crossbeam was then lifted and secured to an upright post. His feet, either tied or nailed, would be just clear of the ground (rather than high above the ground as depicted in many paintings). His body would often be supported by a projecting peg (the *sedile*) on which he “sat”.

There at the cross the condemned man was left to die either of asphyxiation (a condition of being deprived of oxygen), hunger,

exhaustion, bodily injury, or some other cause. Death was sometimes hastened by the *crurifragium*, the breaking of the legs with an iron club, to bring about agonizing asphyxiation. This was done to the two thieves who were crucified with Jesus, but not to the Lord himself, for he had already died.

New light has been thrown on the subject by archeological work in Israel. In 1968, a team of archeologists led by Vassilios Tzaferis discovered four Jewish tombs at Ammunition Hill near Jerusalem. They found an ossuary (a container for the bones of dead people) which contained the only extant bones of a crucified man. The ossuary dates from between CE 7 and 66, judging from the Herodian pottery found at the site.

The victim was a young man named Jehohanan (a name that appears in the Old Testament, e.g., Jehohanan, a commander). His arms rather than his hands were nailed to the *patibulum*, the crossbeam, made of olive wood. The body's weight was supported by a plank (the *sedecula*) nailed to an upright beam (the *simplex*). His legs were bent at the knees and spread out such that his calves (the back of his legs below the knee) were parallel to the crossbeam. His legs had been broken. The contorted leg muscles would have caused severe pain with spasmodic contractions and rigid cramps.

The crucifixion of Jehohanan is different from the traditional depiction of Jesus' crucifixion. The gospels give no detailed description of his physical sufferings, for this was not their objective, and because the early Christians were familiar with crucifixion.


Crucifixion is meant to inflict not just physical torture but also shame and humiliation. Hence Hebrews 12:2 says that Jesus "endured the cross, despising the shame".

The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible is a larger and more recent Bible dictionary (5 volumes, 2006–2009). Yet its article “Crucifixion” offers no new information that corrects anything in the earlier article by the single-volume *New Bible Dictionary*. Here are a few more details about crucifixion from this reference:

- Crucifixion was practiced long before the Romans adopted it. Alexander the Great was said to have crucified thousands. Prior to Roman rule, the Jewish authorities were known to have practiced crucifixion: Josephus says that Alexander Jannaeus, who ruled Judea 102–76 BCE, crucified a number of Pharisees who had opposed him.
- In Roman crucifixion, the victim would be left to die on the cross, with death taking up to several days in some cases. Guards were stationed at the cross until his death. In some cases, family and friends were allowed to feed the victim, and there had been attempts at rescue.
- The dead body was usually not buried, but left to rot or be picked apart by birds and animals. But in cities with a sizable Jewish population, no Jewish corpse would be left unburied, in keeping with the Mosaic law (Dt.21:23).
- The main political and social purpose of crucifixion was deterrence, hence crucifixion was often set up for public display.

The Wikipedia article “Crucifixion” provides many technical details not found in the two dictionaries I just cited. I will mention only a few:

- A whole cross weighed over 300 pounds, and the crossbeam about 100 pounds, in order to support the weight of a body.
- The length of time required to reach death ranged from hours to days depending on the method of crucifixion, the victim's health, and the environment.
- Maslen and Mitchell reviewed the literature on this subject, and identified scholarly support for various possible causes of death from crucifixion: asphyxia, cardiac rupture, heart failure, hypovolemic shock (the heart can no longer pump enough blood to the body due to blood loss), acidosis (excess acid in the body fluids), arrhythmia (abnormal heart beat), or pulmonary embolism (a blood clot in a blood vessel). Other possible causes of death include sepsis (due to infection from the crucifixion nails or prior scourging), dehydration, and animal predation.
- So appalling were the horrors of crucifixion that Cicero, the great Roman orator, branded it as "cruel and disgusting punishment," and urged that "the very mention of the cross should be far removed not only from a Roman citizen's body, but from his mind, his eyes, his ears."

A photograph showing a man in a red t-shirt carrying a large, dark wooden cross on his shoulders. He is standing in an urban area with a modern building in the background. Two women are visible in the foreground, one wearing a green headscarf and a pink dress, and another in a striped shirt. The man is looking towards the camera with a serious expression.

Normand, a street preacher whom I met in downtown Montreal in 2020, and who gave me kind permission to take several photos of him and his cross

The Seven Sayings of Jesus on the Cross

It is a tradition among churches worldwide, in preparation for Good Friday, to reflect on the seven sayings of Jesus on the cross, so that we may fathom, if that is ever possible, the depths of his anguished soul, his love for humankind in the midst of his dehumanizing torture, and his triumph by faith in his God and Father.

In the four gospels are nine instances of the Lord's utterances on the cross (the following are quoted from ESV and NIV):

1. Matthew 27:46: "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?"
2. Mark 15:34: "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?"
3. Luke 23:34: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."
4. Luke 23:43: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."
5. Luke 23:46: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!"
6. John 19:26 "Woman, behold, your son!"

7. John 19:27 “Behold, your mother!”
8. John 19:28: “I am thirsty.”
9. John 19:30: “It is finished.”

We refine this list in three ways: First, we combine statements 1 and 2. Second, we combine statements 6 and 7. Third, we reorder the list chronologically. Here is our final list of the seven sayings:

1. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34)
2. “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43)
3. “Woman, behold, your son!” (John 19:26) and “Behold, your mother!” (v.27)
4. “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” (Matthew 27:46) or “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” (Mark 15:34)
5. “I am thirsty.” (John 19:28)
6. “It is finished.” (John 19:30)
7. “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 23:46)

This is the traditional order, and I will simply follow it. But bear in mind that its chronology is not clear-cut. Although we are guided by the verse order within Luke, and that within John, the chronology is unclear when we combine the four gospels. For example, it is unclear which comes first, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani” or “I am thirsty”.

Of these seven sayings, three are found in Luke, three in John, and one in Matthew and Mark combined. Two chapters, Luke 23 and John 19, account for six of the seven sayings.

Of these seven sayings, three are addressed to the God and Father of Jesus (statements #1, 4, 7), one is addressed to a criminal crucified alongside Jesus (#2), one is addressed to Jesus' mother and the disciple Jesus loved (#3), one is addressed either to himself or the onlookers (#5), and one is a declaration of triumph (#6).³

³ Do we say, "The sayings of Jesus *on* the cross" or "The sayings of Jesus *from* the cross"? Both make good sense. There is a Wikipedia article titled "Sayings of Jesus on the Cross," but also a book by Fleming Rutledge titled "The Seven Last Words from the Cross". I will use "on the cross" but I find "from the cross" more dynamic for emphasizing that the sayings emanated *from* the cross.

First Saying

Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing

³² Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, “**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.**” (Luke 23:32–34, ESV)

FATHER, FORGIVE THEM, FOR THEY DO NOT KNOW WHAT THEY ARE DOING. These words, unique to Luke’s gospel, are among the most cherished and memorable words in Scripture, for they display Jesus’ magnanimous heart in the midst of torment and suffering.

It is not obvious from the context whom “they” refers to. Is Jesus asking his Father to forgive the Jewish religious leaders? Or the Roman authorities? Or the crowds who clamored for his crucifixion? Or individuals such as Judas and Pilate?

If we ask this question in the hope of getting a specific answer, the consequences could be toxic, for it would be a replication of the ancient question, Who killed Christ, the Jews or the Romans?

The present book does not have enough space to tell the heart-rending story of how the Jewish people came to be branded as Christ killers or God killers, with all the possible consequences that one could imagine from that vilification.

In any case, I don't think our Lord would single out any one particular group over all other groups to be the recipient of God's forgiveness. The vagueness of "they" could have been intended.

But when it comes to the matter of forgiveness, there are some factors that we might consider.

First, Jesus told Pilate that he has the lesser sin than the one who delivered Jesus to Pilate (John 19:11).

Second, the words "for they do not know what they are doing" indicate that the degree of guilt and culpability depends on the degree of one's awareness of the sinfulness of one's own actions. Judgment therefore takes knowledge into account: "But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating." (Luke 12:48)

Third, repentance is a condition for forgiveness. One chapter later, in Luke 24:47, the resurrected Lord speaks of "repentance for the forgiveness of sins".

Fourth, many in Jerusalem did repent. When Peter confronted the crowd and rebuked them for crucifying the Lord (Acts 2:36), they were cut to the heart (v.37), and said to Peter and his fellow apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Three thousand souls were added that day.

The Story of Edgar S.

In the final year of my engineering studies in Montreal, Canada (1981), one of my best friends was Edgar S. He originally lived in Nova Scotia and later moved to Montreal, probably in search of employment. He got a job at the Montreal head office of the Bank of Montreal where he took care of supplies and inventory (at least that was how I understood what his responsibilities were, from his occasional reference to them).

Edgar got along fine with his colleagues and supervisor. This was to be expected because he was soft-spoken and had a generous heart. He was also deeply reflective, and his soul would often be tormented by the long history of hatred against the people of his race, seen in horrific lynchings, though he would also speak out against injustice done to anyone, black or white. In those days we had no Internet, so books were the best sources of historical information. I vividly recall that one of his books had a photograph of an angry mob, with children among them, and the mob was appeased by the hanging of a black man.

I would visit Edgar at his apartment once a week, usually mid-week, for coffee and chatting, though I would also see him on Sundays at our Montreal church.

One day Edgar told me of something that had happened at his workplace. When his supervisor found out that Edgar had become a Christian, he told him that he was going to test his faith, and then expose it to everyone as phony and hypocritical. Specifically, he will provoke Edgar and make him lose his temper in the presence of his colleagues. Yes, that was exactly what he said to him.

Today this would be seen as barbaric discrimination, both religious and racial, but in a world with no Internet or smart-phones, there were fewer recourses for quick remedial action.

Then the supervisor ordered Edgar to take a scrub, go down on his knees, and scrub the office floor. In this particular situation, there were two offending factors: scrubbing floors was not within Edgar's set of responsibilities (he did mainly low-level paperwork), and floor cleaning was normally done after work hours. The command to scrub the floors was clearly provocative, though I suppose that some might say that the supervisor had the right, within limits, to assign unusual responsibilities in unusual circumstances to his subordinates.

What would you do in such a situation? I honestly don't know what I would have done. And I don't think there is a fixed and prescribed course of action. The only means of arriving at the right decision would be the leading of the Spirit.

Edgar took the scrub, went down on his knees, and scrubbed the floors in the presence of his colleagues. He did this a few hours a day, for several days. He determined to make this a victory for the name of Christ, so he scrubbed the floors *cheerfully*, without a trace of anger. Most importantly, he kept on praying, sometimes out loud, asking that his supervisor may be forgiven of his hostility to Christ, thus imitating the one who prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

A few days later, something happened. Edgar finished lunch at the company cafeteria, and went back to work. Along the way, he saw a wallet sitting on an empty chair, and picked it up. In God's providence, it happened to belong to his supervisor. Edgar went to

his supervisor's desk, and handed him the wallet. The supervisor grabbed the wallet, checked its contents, and did not say a word. Yet from then on, he never again told Edgar to scrub the floors.

Within a few days, the workers noticed that the supervisor had become a changed man, for he was whistling Christian songs (!), and was kind to everyone. I don't know whether he had become a Christian or had been restored to a previously lost Christian faith, but this transformation had an immediate effect on the office. The tensions that used to arise daily among the workers soon disappeared.

I think God led Edgar to endure public humiliation for a greater good, that God's love may come to those who had been indifferent or even hostile to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Second Saying

Today you will be with me in Paradise

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.**” (Luke 23:39–43, ESV)

TRULY, I SAY TO YOU, TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE. The two men who were crucified with Jesus (that is, crucified alongside Jesus) are called “criminals” in Luke and “robbers” in Matthew and Mark, at least in the ESV, but they are unlikely to be petty or common robbers (such robbers were seldom crucified) but criminals of a high order, probably regarded by the Romans as an incipient threat to their rule. Their criminal activities may have been disruptive enough to border on insurrection or sedition, crimes which were often punished with crucifixion.

The trial of Jesus was a highly public event that convulsed Jerusalem. It entangled people from all strata of society—Pontius Pilate, Herod Antipas, Caiaphas, the Jewish populace—so we can almost be sure that only notorious criminals, not common robbers, would be crucified alongside Jesus as a public spectacle.

Initially both criminals mocked Jesus (Mt.27:44). One of them continued mocking Jesus, but the other repented of this, and rebuked the first one: “Do you not fear God 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.”

He turned to Jesus, and said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And Jesus said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

This criminal somehow knew that Jesus had a kingdom, possibly from the sign “The King of the Jews,” but more likely (since robbers were generally illiterate) because he had heard the mockings by the religious leaders: “He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.” (Mt. 27:42)

Jesus said to him, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” Paradise is a loanword from the Persian language, and occurs at three places in the New Testament, namely, the present verse and two other places: 2 Corinthians 12:3 (Paul knows of a man who was caught up into paradise) and Revelation 2:7 (the one who overcomes will eat of the tree of life which is in God’s paradise).

I won’t say anything more about Paradise because the spiritual focus of “today you will be with me in Paradise” is not on the timing, the location, or the nature of Paradise, but on the salvation

of a vile criminal who had such faith as to entrust his eternal well-being into the (nailed! bloodied!) hands of Jesus.

But if we focus on the temporal meaning of “today,” we will only get caught in endless speculations: Does the word “today” mean that when Jesus died, he was transported straight to Paradise, and that on the third day he was resurrected straight from Paradise? And is Paradise a special section of Hades?

The Story of Hiroyuki Suzuki

One of the things I have learned over the years is to take Christian conversion with a grain of salt when it takes place in a prison. The conversion can only be tested when the inmate is released from prison, for only time will tell whether he will use his new freedom to walk a Christian life worthy of his initial pledge to God.

My cautiousness may sound cynical, but I apply it universally to people from all walks of life. A struggling student depends on God for passing his exams, but will he continue in the faith after he graduates? A poor man depends on God for daily bread, but will he continue to walk with God after landing a good job?

I have known or heard of inmates who were active Christians in prison, but lost their faith outside prison, sometimes immediately after release, sometimes in a gradual process of spiritual decline. Some have returned to a life of crime, but some have continued fervently in the faith, I am glad to say.

For this reason I am cautious about the Christian conversions of Ted Bundy and David Berkowitz, though I think Berkowitz’s conversion is genuine.

Ted Bundy was a serial killer who kidnapped, raped, and murdered many women in the mid-1970s. He was executed in 1989 at the age of 42. I won't go into the grisly details of his crimes, and I avoid reading about them or even about him. But two months ago someone told me that just before Bundy was executed, he expressed faith in Christ, and spent his final night in prayer with a minister. My hope is that his conversion was genuine, just as I rejoice that the robber at the cross had genuine faith in Jesus. But many who have studied Bundy's life are skeptical of his conversion.

The other person, David Berkowitz, who named himself "Son of Sam," was a serial killer who terrorized New York City in 1976 and 1977. I won't go into the details of his killing sprees, though I knew about them through the headline news that dominated the press. He received six life sentences, but not the death penalty.

In 1987, in prison, Berkowitz became a Christian after reading Psalm 34:6: "This poor man cried out, and Yahweh heard him and saved him out of all his troubles." He is now an active Christian in prison, writing essays on faith and repentance, and giving spiritual counsel to fellow inmates. In a letter in which he requested the cancellation of a parole hearing, he wrote, "I believe that I deserve to be in prison for the rest of my life. I have, with God's help, long ago come to terms with my situation and I have accepted my punishment."

I think his conversion is genuine, but the true test will come only when he is released from prison, if that should ever happen.

But what about criminals who have been released from prison? The case of Hiroyuki Suzuki, of Japan, comes to mind. He was not

a depraved criminal like Berkowitz and especially Bundy, but he committed enough crimes in his lifetime to merit the label “notorious”.

In Suzuki’s case, there is slight difference from what I said above, in that he became a Christian not while he was in prison but after he had come out. But the basic question remains: whether or not he will keep the faith in his freedom outside prison.

Suzuki’s life of crime can be summarized in a few sentences, which I reconstructed from three web articles.⁴ For 17 years he was a gangster with the Yakuza, Japan’s version of the Mafia. As a member of the Sakaume chapter of the Yakuza in Osaka, he took part in extortion, gambling rings, prostitution rings, and drug trafficking. He had been jailed twice.

His shoulders and upper arms are covered with tattoos of carp and monsters. The tips of his pinkies were cut off after he had shown disrespect towards a crime boss.

His life started to change after he married his third wife, Mariko, who encouraged him to attend a church. But even while attending church, he continued gambling and had a string of mistresses.

In 1990, he fled Osaka with a mountain of debt and an army of gangsters on his back. He stumbled into a church in Tokyo’s Shinjuku district, and spent three days there. For the first time, he was moved by the words of the Bible, and soon entered seminary, leaving behind the underworld for good.

⁴ <https://www.tokyoreporter.com/japan-news/special-reports/former-yakuza-sees-the-light> is one of the articles I consulted. A few years ago, I wrote down notes about his life from an old article whose link I no longer have.

Soon after finishing his studies at seminary, he started Mission Barabbas with seven other former gang members. In church they would sometimes take off their shirts when they preach, to display their tattoos of dragons, demons, and carp.

He now leads a congregation at Siloam Christ Church in Funabashi, east of Tokyo. The church has no fancy building, just a trailer with vinyl floor tiles.

Suzuki says, “Even the Yakuza can be born again. We are still essentially yakuza, but God is our new boss.” Suzuki used to tote a gun but now holds a Bible. His ministry touched the lives of other former Yakuza gangsters, including Tatsuya Shindo whose story is a revelation in itself.

One day Hiroyuki Suzuki will meet the crucified robber in Paradise.

Third Saying

Behold your son! Behold your mother!

²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “**Woman, behold, your son!**” ²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, “**Behold, your mother!**” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. (John 19:26–27, ESV)

HE SAID TO HIS MOTHER, “WOMAN, BEHOLD, YOUR SON!” THEN HE SAID TO THE DISCIPLE, “BEHOLD, YOUR MOTHER!” This saying which consists of two clauses is unique to John’s gospel. The first clause is addressed to “his mother” (v.26) and the second to “the disciple whom he loved” (v.26). His mother is of course Mary, but there is less clarity about the identity of the disciple whom Jesus loved. In Christian tradition, this beloved disciple is the apostle John, son of Zebedee, a tradition that I accept for reasons I won’t go into. But some scholars are not confident that John is the disciple whom Jesus loved, again for reasons I won’t go into.⁵

⁵ It is interesting that Lazarus is the only man in the Gospel of John who is identified by name as the direct recipient of Jesus’ love: “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.” (John 11:5)

At the cross Jesus addressed his mother as *woman*, which is also the term of address he used at the wedding in Cana:

When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.” His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” (John 2:3–5, ESV)

Addressing one’s own mother as “woman” would be considered rude in English, but this must have been taken as respectful in the original circumstances which prevailed in Cana and at the cross, and in their native Aramaic conversation. When Jesus said, “Woman, behold, your son!” he was expressing something beyond respect, namely, love and concern for her welfare.

It just occurred to me that in English one could speak respectfully of one’s own father as “my old man”. Whether it is respectful or not will depend on the circumstances and the manner in which it is said. It would be respectful and even affectionate to say, “My old man will never let me down! Never!” even if the language may sound a bit rough. Hence a term of address such as “woman” or “old man” must be judged by the intent behind the word, and not merely by the word divorced from its context.

Whenever Jesus addressed his mother as *woman*, whether in Cana or from the cross, there was a solemnity and higher purpose in his words that his mother understood.

In Cana, Jesus was drawing a demarcation—a separation—between his blood ties (in which Mary was his mother) and his ministry as the one sent by God (in which she was a follower of the

Lord). Mary apparently caught this, so she said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

There was yet another higher purpose that the Lord had to fulfill in Cana: changing water into wine as the first of many signs of his ministry of salvation. John writes, “What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.” (John 2:11, NIV)

When the Lord Jesus addressed his mother as *woman* from the cross, it was for similar reasons. He was about to depart from the world; at death his blood ties with his mother will be terminated. So in anticipation of this new spiritual reality, Jesus addressed her as *woman*. Another reason may be that it would be confusing to say, “Mother, behold, your son!” in the light of what he was about to say to John in his next breath, “Behold, your mother!”

In making Mary the mother of John, and John the son of Mary, the basis of this new relationship is not blood ties, which is the old sphere of kinship, but a spiritual family, which is the new sphere of kinship. In the old sphere, John was not under obligation to provide for Mary’s support in her old age, but all that was changed in the new sphere. So it is written, “And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.” (John 19:27)⁶

⁶ Nikephoros’s *Ecclesiastical History* (book 2, chapter 3) says that Mary lived with the apostle John in Jerusalem for eleven years and then died. Other sources say that she went with him to Ephesus. But Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos died in 1335, more than a millennium after the birth of the church, so he was neither an early source nor a primary source of church history. Yet his information about Mary’s later years does not seem fantastical or farfetched.

Fourth Saying

My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?

⁴⁵ Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. ⁴⁶ And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “**Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?**” that is, “**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**” ⁴⁷ And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, “This man is calling Elijah.” ⁴⁸ And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. ⁴⁹ But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.” ⁵⁰ And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. (Matthew 27:45–50, ESV)

³³ And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. ³⁴ And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, “**Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?**” which means, “**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**” ³⁵ And some of the bystanders hearing it said, “Behold, he is calling Elijah.” ³⁶ And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.” ³⁷ And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. (Mark 15:33–37, ESV)

JESUS CRIED OUT WITH A LOUD VOICE, SAYING, “ELI, ELI, LEMA SABACHTHANI?” THAT IS, “MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?” This saying is found in both Matthew and Mark but with one difference: Matthew has “Eli, Eli” whereas Mark has “Eloi, Eloi”. They both mean the same—“my God, my God”—with “Eli” coming from the Hebrew language, “Eloi” from the Aramaic.

Hebrew and Aramaic are related Semitic languages but are different enough to be mutually unintelligible without prior exposure to the languages. In Israel at the time of Jesus, Aramaic was the main spoken language of many Jews and of Jesus himself.

Though the New Testament was written in Greek, in it we see instances of Aramaic in Jesus’ most intimate words with his Father, such as “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” spoken from the cross, and “Abba Father” spoken at Gethsemane (Mk.14:36).⁷



Darkness fell on the land of Israel for three hours, from the sixth hour to the ninth hour, that is, from noon to 3 o’clock in the afternoon. At about the ninth hour, when the darkness was about to be lifted, the Lord Jesus faced his darkest moment on the cross, and he cried out, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?”—“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

⁷ Both Matthew and Mark have the Aramaic “Lema sabachthani”. In other words, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” is totally Aramaic in Mark, and *mostly* Aramaic in Matthew apart from “Eli”. But even Matthew’s saying could have been entirely Aramaic in its original sources. In fact some important Greek manuscripts such as the Sinaiticus and the Vaticanus have “Eloi” even for Matthew.

Jesus said this with a “loud voice” such that the bystanders thought he was calling for Elijah. One of them took a sponge, soaked it with sour wine, put it on a reed, and gave it to Jesus to drink. (Matthew and Mark do not say whether he accepted the drink, but John 19:30 indicates that Jesus “received” the sour wine when the sponge was held up to his mouth.) He cried out a second time, again with a loud voice, and “yielded up his spirit”.

How do we understand Jesus’ cry to the Father, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” These words come from Psalm 22:1. Here is the whole Psalm 22, which is a Psalm of David.

Psalm 22

¹ **My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?** Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?

² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest.

³ Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.

⁴ In you our fathers trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them.

⁵ To you they cried and were rescued; in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

⁶ But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people.

⁷ All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads;

⁸ “He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!”

⁹ Yet you are he who took me from the womb; you made me trust you at my mother’s breasts.

¹⁰ On you was I cast from my birth, and from my mother’s womb you have been my God.

¹¹ Be not far from me, for trouble is near, and there is none to help.

¹² Many bulls encompass me; strong bulls of Bashan surround me;

¹³ they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion.

¹⁴ I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast;

¹⁵ my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death.

¹⁶ For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet—

¹⁷ I can count all my bones—they stare and gloat over me;

¹⁸ they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.

¹⁹ But you, O LORD, do not be far off! O you my help, come quickly to my aid!

²⁰ Deliver my soul from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dog!

²¹ Save me from the mouth of the lion! You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen!

²² I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:

²³ You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him, and stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!

²⁴ For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and he has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him.

²⁵ From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will perform before those who fear him.

²⁶ The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD! May your hearts live forever!

²⁷ All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you.

²⁸ For kingship belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.

²⁹ All the prosperous of the earth eat and worship; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, even the one who could not keep himself alive.

³⁰ Posterity shall serve him; it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation;

³¹ they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it.

Psalm 22 is clearly a messianic psalm, for many of its verses were fulfilled in the crucifixion event: verse 1 (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”); verse 6 (“scorned by mankind”); verse 7 (“all who see me mock me”); verse 8 (“He trusts in the Lord, let him deliver him”); verse 16 (“they have pierced my hands and feet”); verse 18 (“they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots”).⁸

If you do a Google search for “fifth gospel psalm,” you will discover that Psalm 22 is often called the Fifth Gospel for its many instances of prophecy fulfilled in the crucifixion of Jesus.

Despite the psalmist’s repeated plea to Yahweh God for deliverance especially from verse 19 onwards, it is not entirely clear from Psalm 22 that God finally rescued him, though there are hints here and there of deliverance, notably in verse 23 (“You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen!”) We might be tempted to look at David’s life in hindsight, and conclude from his life story that Yahweh did deliver him—and therefore Jesus—from all the

⁸ Just now I noticed that verse 20 speaks of “the power of the dog” which is the title of a film nominated for Best Picture in the 2022 Academy Awards, though I haven’t watched the film and don’t know what it’s about.

dangers mentioned in Psalm 22. But there is a limit to how much we can read the details of Psalm 22 into Matthew and Mark, which only quote verse 1 of the psalm, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Was Jesus Abandoned by God His Father?

Over the decades, I have been wondering on and off whether Jesus was abandoned by the Father, and if so, in what sense. I have also gained the impression that many Christians feel that Jesus was never in danger of being forsaken, usually from their trinitarian belief that “God the Father” cannot abandon “God the Son,” to use trinitarian language. But the biblical evidence, while not clear-cut, does not seem to support such a bright conclusion.

The word “forsaken” in Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34 comes from the Greek word *egkatalēipō*, which means to desert, forsake, leave behind. In both these verses, the word is in the aorist indicative, which is explained by a Greek grammar as follows:

The aorist indicative is used to express simple past time. It makes no reference to how long it took for an action to be completed—only that it happened. It views an action as a single, unitary event regardless of its duration and without any implication of lasting consequences: “she died”; “he lived”; “we ate”; “you left”.⁹

⁹ *New Testament Greek: A Beginning and Intermediate Grammar*, James Allen Hewett et al, p.92, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Massachusetts.

It must be stressed that the aorist tense is famously (or infamously) difficult to analyze. It often defies rigid or formulaic analysis, and its meaning must never be divorced from its context. But from the general nature of the aorist indicative as explained above, and from the intensity of Jesus' cry, I feel that there was a real possibility that Jesus could be forsaken by God, or at least that Jesus sensed that the danger was real.

Jesus' cry to the Father, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" was not drama or play-acting, but came from a real fear of abandonment. Hebrews 5:7 says, "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence."

In the end, the Lord Jesus was delivered, for it is written that David as a prophet "foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption." (Acts 2:31) Note the word "resurrection". Christ's deliverance by the Father took place not at the cross but at his resurrection on the third day, for he was heard because of his "reverence".

You may be wondering why Acts 2:31 (in which Peter says that Christ won't be abandoned to Hades) offered no assurance to Jesus that he won't be abandoned. That is because Peter is quoting Psalm 16:10 loosely,¹⁰ and more importantly, Psalm 16:10 refers to David and not to Christ in the first instance: "For you will not abandon

¹⁰ In fact some Bibles such as ESV and NJB do not give Psalm 16:10 as a cross reference for Acts 2:31.

my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.” (Psalm 16:10, ESV)¹¹ Here the word “my” refers to David, for Psalm 16 was composed by David (a Mikhtam of David). Hence Peter in Acts 2:31 was applying Psalm 16:10 *retroactively* to Jesus, and only *after* Jesus’ resurrection. If at the cross Jesus had failed—God forbid—to fulfill the Father’s plan of salvation, Psalm 16:10 would not be applicable to Christ, and would not offer him any automatic or unconditional assurance.



Finally, here are two relevant statements by the apostle Paul, given here without comment for your reflection:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.” (Gal. 3:13, ESV)

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:21, ESV)

¹¹ In the Septuagint (LXX), this verse, which is numbered Psalm 15:10 rather than Psalm 16:10, says, “because you will not abandon my soul to Hades or give your devout to see corruption” (ANETS). Since the Greek “Hades” is equivalent to the Hebrew “Sheol,” the Greek Psalm 15:10 does not deviate from the Hebrew Psalm 16:10, and offers no new wording that might account for Peter’s wording in Acts 2:31. (ANETS stands for “A New English Translation of the Septuagint,” a modern and scholarly translation of the Septuagint into English.)

Fifth Saying

I am thirsty

²⁸ Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “**I am thirsty.**”

²⁹ A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus’ lips. ³⁰ When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:28–30, NIV)

I AM THIRSTY. These are very human words driven by an extreme need for water while Jesus was on the cross. Our Lord was capable of being thirsty (of course), as seen in the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John chapter 4, in which he was “wearied” from a journey, so he asked her for a drink of water.

John may have recorded the Lord’s ordinary-sounding words “I am thirsty” to show us that Jesus was so brutally shackled to the cross that he was powerless to meet even his own elemental need for water. But John also wanted to say that all these things were taking place so that “Scripture might be fulfilled.” An Old Testament verse that offers tangential correspondence is: “They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.” (Psalm 69:21, ESV) But the Old Testament nowhere has

the utterance “I thirst” or “I am thirsty” that has prophetic import, though Sisera said “I am thirsty” just before he was killed with a tent peg driven into his temple (Judges 4:19).

As we saw in chapter 1, dehydration is one of the possible causes of death by crucifixion.

The term “sour wine” in John 19:29 is just one word *oxos* in the Greek. The BDAG Greek-English lexicon says that *oxos* “relieved thirst more effectively than water and, being cheaper than regular wine, it was a favourite beverage of the lower ranks of society and of those in moderate circumstances.”

As Jesus was being led to the crucifixion site, he was offered a different kind of drink: wine mixed with “gall” (Matthew 27:34) or wine mixed with “myrrh” (Mark 15:23). But when he tasted it, he knew what it was, and refused to take it. This drink is different from the sour wine I just mentioned; it is a potion, sometimes toxic, with anesthetic and painkilling properties that would dull one’s physical and spiritual alertness. Our Lord refused to take the drink in order to remain spiritually alert on the cross, rejecting the one opportunity to lessen his pain and torment on the cross, so that he may set his eyes on the salvation of the world.

Sixth Saying

It is finished

²⁸ Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I am thirsty.”

²⁹ A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus’ lips. ³⁰ When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “**It is finished.**” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:28–30, NIV)

WHEN HE HAD RECEIVED THE DRINK, JESUS SAID, “IT IS FINISHED.” WITH THAT, HE BOWED HIS HEAD AND GAVE UP HIS SPIRIT. I don’t recall that I have ever seen a person die, that is, at the moment of giving up one’s breath, or as John puts it, at the moment of giving up one’s spirit. I would only see a dead body after the fact, sometimes a few minutes later (in the case of my mother), or a few hours later (in the case of my father), or several days later (usually at funerals). I am not talking about sudden or violent deaths, such as when a bank robber is shot dead.

But the apostle John gives us a snapshot of the moment of Jesus’ death: Jesus said “It is finished,” bowed his head, and gave up his spirit. Luke has something similar: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” Then he “breathed his last”.

These two sayings, one from John, the other from Luke, were probably uttered one after the other, which in the traditional order of the seven sayings would put “It is finished” just before “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!”

But something else is striking about the death of our Lord Jesus: *his absolute clarity of mind that he maintained right to the end*. He achieved this not merely by refusing the intoxicating wine mixed with myrrh, but by his resolve to do his Father’s will: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work” (John 4:34).

From my experience, clarity of mind just before physical death is somewhat rare. My mother was in a coma before she died, and my father didn’t wake up from his afternoon nap.

But Jesus died after saying—with a clear mind—“It is finished”. He bowed his head and “gave up his spirit”—a phrase that is found nowhere else in the Bible, though it might remind us of Ecclesiastes 12:7: “the dust returns to the earth as it once was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.”

What does “it is finished” mean? Does it mean that one’s travails are over? That the end has arrived? That a lifelong anticipation of finality has reached its terminus?

In the Greek text, the word “finished” is *teleō*, which also occurs two verses earlier, in verse 28: “Jesus, knowing that everything had now been *finished* ...”

The BDAG Greek-English lexicon gives several definitions of *teleō*, and groups them under three headings, with John 19:30 listed under the first heading: “to complete an activity or process, *bring to an end, finish, complete*”. This definition is couched in

language that is active, not passive. When Jesus said, “It is finished,” he did not simply mean that the end had come, but that he had completed the work of doing his Father’s will.

Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). And by his death the ruler of the world is defeated:

“Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die. (John 12:31–33, ESV).

His work will continue on after his death. By his resurrection there is a new community of God’s people, the body of Christ, the temple of God empowered by the Spirit. The Lord told the religious leaders that the temple which is his body will be destroyed and then raised in three days (John 2:19-22).



I will never forget the handwritten words, “Unfinished? Will this be the story of your life?” These words were written on my assignment paper by Mrs. Hruska, my grade seven teacher, in response to an excuse I had inserted into my assignment to explain to her why I didn’t finish it.

Unfinished lives come and go in this world, cut short by the vagaries of life but also by recklessness. When I was a young boy, I was shocked by the news that my father’s friend had committed suicide over a gambling debt.

A few years later, at night time, I heard a loud bang outside my home in Montreal. The next day I learned from the news that a young man, 18 years old, was driving his brand new Corvette at high speed on the wide stretch of Park Avenue. As he approached Mont Royal Avenue, he lost control of the car, crashed into a brick wall, and died instantly. He was flung so hard from the car that his socks came off his feet. He had owned the car for only a few hours when he died.

It is not only non-Christians but also Christians who end up living unfinished lives. We see this in the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14–30): A slave was given one talent, which is a large sum of money equal to twenty years' wages for a laborer (ESV note), but he was too lazy to invest it. When his master returned from a journey and saw that the slave had been negligent, he cast him into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

I have many stories to tell you about failed Christian lives, but I prefer to conclude this chapter on a positive note. Here is a true story in one sentence: In her twenties or thirties, she dedicated her life to serve God and help people in their spiritual need, and she continued doing this for years right up to her death from illness. I omitted the details of her life because I only wanted to extract the kernel of a life well lived before God. I know of a few women who fit that story exactly, so I did not mention any names. They will hear the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

Seventh Saying

Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit

⁴⁴ It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, ⁴⁵ while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶ Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, “**Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!**” And having said this he breathed his last. (Luke 23:44–46, ESV)

THEN JESUS, CALLING OUT WITH A LOUD VOICE, SAID, “FATHER, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT!” AND HAVING SAID THIS HE BREATHED HIS LAST. In the traditional chronology of the seven sayings, this is considered the final saying, probably because it is followed immediately by his last breath with nothing happening in between, not even the bowing of the head.¹²

¹² A minor point: Luke says, in agreement with Matthew and Mark, that darkness came upon the land for three hours, namely, from the sixth hour to the ninth hour. But whereas Matthew and Mark clearly situates Jesus' death at the terminus of the darkness, the ninth hour, Luke's wording is less precise, such that some may think that Luke situates Jesus' death at the *start* of the darkness, the sixth hour. This is actually a minor issue of wording and clarity that arises only if we read Luke's

Just before Jesus died, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, an event that is also recorded in Matthew and Mark. It is unclear whether Luke is referring to the outer curtain at the temple courtyard or the inner curtain that separated the temple's Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. The scholars are not in agreement on this because Luke does not state which. I am inclined to think, but only intuitively, that Luke was referring to the inner curtain located at the holiest sanctum of the temple, for its rending would be a most powerful statement that the barrier between God and humankind had been removed through the work of our mediator Jesus Christ (cf. 1Tim.2:5).

Jesus' final words, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" come from Psalm 31:5. Here are the first five verses of Psalm 31, a psalm of David and a prayer for God's deliverance:

¹ In you, O LORD, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me!

² Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily! Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me!

³ For you are my rock and my fortress; and for your name's sake you lead me and guide me;

⁴ you take me out of the net they have hidden for me, for you are my refuge.

⁵ **Into your hand I commit my spirit;** you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God. (ESV)

passage as one block of events that takes place at the same time, the sixth hour. It is not necessary to read the passage that way. In any case, *de* in v.45 and *kai* in v.46 allow for Jesus' death to be placed at a later time after v.44.

Jesus commits himself into the “hands” of God, for God’s hands represent great power. Psalm 89:13 says, “You have a mighty arm; strong is your hand, high your right hand.” What Jesus commits into God’s hands is his own “spirit,” essentially his very person.



I conclude my book here. The main spiritual lesson I learned in writing it is that we must entrust ourselves into God’s hands, especially in a world wracked by a pandemic, economic upheaval, climate change, geopolitical tension, and the war in Ukraine.

1 Peter 4:19 says, “Let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.”

But entrusting ourselves into God’s hands is not something that we do at the final minute of our lives, on our deathbeds. Our Lord Jesus entrusted himself to God not just at the cross, but all through his life. There is no way for us to entrust ourselves to God at our death if we have not been doing this all our lives.

The Lord Jesus set an example for us to follow. And because he obeyed his Father unto death at the cross,

Therefore God has highly exalted him and
bestowed on him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Epilogue

A Poem on the Seven Sayings on the Cross

The following poem on the seven sayings on the cross is found at <http://frjoeshomilies.net/04-06-12.html>, and composed by Msgr. Joseph Pellegrino who at <http://frjoeshomilies.net> wrote, “These homilies are my gifts to you,” and “You do not need to ask for permission to view or use this site,” but use of the material requires inserting the statement, “This material is used with the permission of its author, Rev. Msgr. Joseph A. Pellegrino, Diocese of St. Petersburg, Florida.”

Many thanks to Monsignor Joseph Pellegrino for his splendid and striking poem. And no, his attempts at poetry are not “feeble”.

Good Friday: Some Feeble Attempts at Poetry on The Seven Last Words

Msgr. Joseph A. Pellegrino



The First Word:

“Father, Forgive them for they do not know what they do!”

All were included: the indifferent, those who slapped his face,
The Chief Priests, hidden by the cruel Centurion’s chariot.
In the distance, an incredible ultimate grace
Was besought for the self-hung Judas Iscariot.

The Second Word:

“This day you shall be with me in paradise!”

A common thief, that’s all he was
Good for nothing, useless crook
Suffering excruciating pain, yet deserving his fate.
Dismiss

The King of the Jews, that’s what he is,
The creator of the heavens, his Father,
Suffering excruciating pain, the Innocent One
Jesus

Never too late to confess the Lord
The thief hears the Innocent mocked
In one last chance for charity, he calls:
Have you no fear of God?
A living faith
Life eternal.

The Third Word:

“Woman, Behold your son! Behold your mother.”

All night long in the hospital,
She holds her child’s hand,
The doctors say it looks grim,
We’ll do whatever we can.

He feels her warmth, her presence
Her love makes the pain go away
Her sorrow is not important now
All that matters is making it to the day.

O Mary, the presence that you give,
To Jesus on the Cross,
Give now to John and all of us
Our suffering is no loss.

The One on the throne calls out to you
Proclaims you to be our mother
Help us embrace our crosses with him
Replace your son with another.

The Fourth Word:

“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

All can be endured when there is warmth within,
The sacrifice is little when the presence is great
But when abandonment is total, the soul calls out in pain
Jesus concludes the Work of the Father.

The Fifth Word: “I thirst”

A woman of Samaria
of repute quite deserved
heard a Jew once ask of her
for water from a well preserved.

He really didn't want to drink
He wanted her to see
the life that she was living
was destroying reality.

She believed his words
and changed her ways
and opened a new life
that Jew had all the water he needed
from a lady who had been in strife.

So also to us
The Lord calls out
from the crucified throne
He wants water from our wells,
It's our hearts he wants for his own.

The Sixth Word:

“Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit!”

It was his hands that created the world,
and separated the waters from the land.

It was his hands that fashioned humans,
and gave them the capacity to love.

It was his hands that delivered the people,
and sent the evil into the sea

It was his hands that carved the law
and gave the path to his own,

It was into his hands that Jesus completed his work,
the work of the Father.

The Seventh Word: “It is finished”

Finished? Completed?

Yes

Beaten? Conquered?

No

Accomplished! Triumphant!

Jesus!



