

The Seven Last Words of Jesus
A Devotional for Lent

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Charleston, SC



Introduction

What the Church calls “the seven last words” of Jesus are based on the final seven phrases Jesus said on the cross before his death. We study them because his identity, purpose, and depth of love becomes clear as we come to understand the meaning behind his last words. This devotional is the companion to the sermon series we’re preaching, and it can be used by groups, families and individuals. Prayers, readings, questions, and suggested actions can be used throughout the week to grow in discipleship.

February 18	Ash Wednesday: We are marked with the ashes of repentance.
February 22	The First Word: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”
March 1	The Second Word: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”
March 8	The Third Word: “Woman, behold your son; behold your mother.”
March 15	The Fourth Word: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
March 22	The Fifth Word: “I thirst.”
March 29	The Sixth Word: “It is finished.”
April 3	The Seventh Word: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”
April 5	Easter: The Resurrection of Jesus

You are encouraged! Join us for worship on Sundays for the 7 Last Words Sermon series. Listen online at wpccharleston.org

You are invited! Join a small group for further study. The Life Class meets on Sunday mornings 10:00-10:45. We’ll use this devotional together.

A note to families with very young children: you may want to adapt some of the readings slightly or use a children’s Bible to convey the messages around the crucifixion. The death of the Savior is, by its very nature, traumatic material. For some, reading fewer verses about Jesus’ death and paraphrasing the content toward age-appropriateness may be beneficial. You know your family best! This resource relies on parents to help in the spiritual education of their children.

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A Word about Lent and Ash Wednesday

The word lent is from the Anglo-Saxon lencten which means spring or the springtime. Literally, it means the time of the year when the days lengthen. In the church, Lent is the 40 day period during which Christians rededicate themselves to follow Jesus Christ as His faithful disciples, and prepare to celebrate the Lord's resurrection at Easter. Many Christians vow to give up things (like desserts or TV) during Lent so that when they desire those things, they are reminded of their relationship with the Lord. Other Christians choose to take up something (like daily prayer or acts of kindness) during Lent to strengthen their faith.

Ash Wednesday is the beginning of Lent. It's called Ash Wednesday because as a sign of repentance, believers through the centuries have received the mark of an ashen cross on their forehead. The ashes remind us of God's words to Adam when he sinned- "remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return," and it reminds us of the Old Testament practice of wearing sackcloth and having ashes placed on the head as a sign of spiritual poverty.

February 18: Repent

Ash Wednesday: "...for you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Genesis 3:19

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, remembering our spiritual poverty and need for grace.

Prayer for the Week: (based on Psalm 51)

God, of grace,
generous in love,
filled with mercy,
I am aware of my sins;
erase them and wash away my guilt.
And God, start in me a new way. Amen

Read Luke 15:11-32

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, we come to understand the nature of our rebellion, God's amazing grace, and our inclination to stand in judgement of others with whom we disagree.

Questions for Reflection

- Find your place: with whom do you most identify in the parable?
- Do you think the repentance of the younger son is genuine?
- How do the actions of the father reflect the actions of God toward the ones who have lost their way?
- In what ways do you struggle with repentance?

Practicing Repentance

- Attend one of the Ash Wednesday opportunities at church.
- Psalm 51 is a model prayer of forgiveness. Read it aloud, imagining that you are the younger son, praying those words from the pigpen.
- Rewrite Psalm 51:10-12 in your own words.
- Look up Rembrandt's painting, "Return of the Prodigal Son." Read the accompanying devotional by Juliet Benner. (Search for "Juliet Benner, Prodigal")

February 22: Forgiveness

The First Word: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Luke 23:34

In forgiving the ones nailing him to the cross, Jesus demonstrates an outrageous capacity for forgiveness.

Prayer for the Week

God of grace,
In welcoming me, you have forgiven much.
Help me understand the depth of your love
and the power of your mercy.
Enable me to be forgive others
as you have forgiven me. Amen

Read Matthew 18:21-35

Jesus tells this parable to demonstrate the depth of God’s love for us and how coming to an understanding of his mercy affects the way we show mercy to others.

Questions for Reflection

- Do you find it harder to offer forgiveness or to ask for forgiveness? Why?
- The parable of the unmerciful servant suggests that if you are not willing to offer forgiveness to another, it is because you fail to understand how you have been forgiven. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Does God forgive some people a little bit and other people a great deal? Are there degrees of forgiveness?
- In what ways do you struggle with forgiveness?

Practicing Forgiveness

- We wash our hands to protect against germs, but hand washing can also be a ritual (or spiritual practice) where we remember how God has cleansed us of our sins. Fill a bowl with warm water and take turns washing each other’s hands. While you do, you can read Psalm 51:7. Then, dry each other’s hands with a clean towel.
- If there is someone you need to forgive or accept forgiveness from, think of the grace you have received from God and take a positive step in that direction.
- Listen to the song “Forgiven” by Sanctus Real or “Forgiveness” by Matthew West. While you listen, sit somewhere comfortable, close your eyes, and let the music be a prayer from your heart.

March 1: Paradise

The Second Word: “Today you shall be with me in paradise.” Luke 23:34

Jesus calls us to experience the eternal in the present and to live lives which point heavenward. When we wrap our minds up in the Spirit of God, we might glimpse paradise. And when we open our lives to the work of Jesus, he can enable us to live into the realities of the Kingdom of God here and now.

Prayer for the Week

Lord, give me the grace to work with you and for you,
without seeking myself—
To live in the Kingdom
In its full reality.
Amen

Read Luke 23:39-43 and Revelation 21:1-5

Heaven is not imaginary. It is real—perhaps more real than the realities we experience today. But heaven is also an exercise of the imagination., because when Jesus says, “Today you shall be with me in paradise,” we cannot even begin to wrap our minds around the goodness and love and warmth which we will experience on the other side of eternity.

Questions for Reflection

- What do you picture when you hear words like heaven and paradise?
- After reading the scripture and understanding what Jesus meant when he talked about paradise, how does this influence how you help others experience God's Kingdom on Earth now?
- Tell about a time you have experienced or caught a glimpse of the Kingdom of God here on Earth.
- What do you need to change in your life (your schedule, activities, etc) to make space for more Kingdom experiences?

Practicing Paradise

- Go for a walk in your neighborhood or a local park. It does not need to be a new place but try to see things as if for the very first time. What do you notice? What can you hear and smell? What do you see that you have never seen before? What evidence of God's goodness sparks curiosity for you on this walk?
- Spend some time creating some art. A vision of Paradise. This can be drawing, painting, sculpting, or simply enjoying the artwork of others. What makes you pause and take note of the Spirit at work in your world?

March 8: Family

The Third Word: “Woman, behold, your Son! Behold, your mother.” John 19:26-27

For some, the idea of family stirs joy at the thought of meals around a table, laughter, love, support and love. For others, the idea of family brings reminders of broken relationships, loved ones who have died, or a longing for something that does not seem attainable. Family can stir up the best and worst feelings in us.

Prayer for the Week

Sing to God,
sing in praise of God’s name,
extol the One who rides on the clouds;
rejoice before God—his name is the LORD.
A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, God dwells in holiness.
God sets the lonely in families.
God gives strength to the people;
Blessed be the name of God. Amen

Read John 19:25-27 and Mark 2:1-12

God’s provision of family does not always happen through biology and genetics, but through the gift of the family of God—those called God’s children. In our baptism, we are made part of the household of faith and are reminded that in God’s family, “water is thicker than blood.” Sometimes the Church becomes the greatest place to enact our love for one another through the bond of God’s family. Being bonded together as family in the church is a radical act of hospitality and a reordering of social relationships with broad implications.

Questions for Reflection

- In the process of Jesus’ death on the cross, he recognized the grief in Mary and John, two non-biological loved ones, and in turn created ongoing family bonds between them. How has Jesus met your needs, through the bonds formed with others?
- In Mark 2, who was the true family to the man who was paralyzed?
- How have you found a family in the church? How can you be the family to someone who needs it right now?
- Are there any special individuals who act as a grandparent, siblings or an aunt or uncle who have provided special wisdom and care in your life?

Practicing Family

- You are invited to join your church family for a meal at our Wonderful Wednesday dinner from 6:00-7:00 in Covenant Hall. Be sure to sit with someone new, and/or bring a friend to join you.
- Spend time handwriting and decorating cards, or schedule a visit/phone call with someone who may benefit from your hospitality.

March 15: Suffering

The Fourth Word: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Matthew 27:46

Because Jesus experienced human suffering we can turn to God in the midst of our own sufferings in confidence of God’s care, understanding and love.

Prayer for the Week (based on Psalm 22)

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

Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?

My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest.

In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them.

To you they cried out and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

Stretch out your loving arms, we pray,

To embrace our suffering

And the suffering of the World.

Amen.

Read Psalm 22 and Luke 18:35-43

The words Jesus is quoting from Psalm 22 would have been well known at the time as a Psalm of Lament. The Old Testament is filled with laments to God from God’s people—raw cries of anxiety and turmoil in the midst of suffering. They are not tidy, polite prayers, but real emotional pleas with God. At the end of Psalm 22, there is a turn toward finding hope in God.

Questions for Reflection

- Did God really abandon Jesus or did it just feel like he did?
- Jesus’ pain was in part about feeling a sense of abandonment and forlornness—separation from God. Would you consider this the worst form of suffering? Why or why not?
- The healing of the blind man from Luke 18, shows us a radical truth that God can use human suffering to reveal his glory. What insights have you learned in times of suffering?
- What is something you can do that would lessen the suffering of others and show love in action? How is this act of love a representation of God’s kingdom?

Practicing Suffering

- Take some time to learn about the variety of ministry partners that Westminster supports, and how you can be involved either by prayer or action. Visit the Westminster Presbyterian website, and follow the volunteer link to learn more about our mission partners.
Website: <https://wpccharleston.org/care/volunteer-opportunities/>
- Spend some time alone in silence and contemplate what it feels like to be alone or lonely. Think of your own experiences and the experiences of others. Write down your thoughts, write a poem or draw a picture based on what you feel. What might Jesus have felt on the cross when he was separated from God?

March 22: Thirst

The Fifth Word: "I thirst." John 19:28

In one of Jesus' final statements on Earth, he said simply, "I thirst," or in other translations, "I am thirsty." This points to the full humanity of Jesus, the suffering that God underwent in human form.

Prayer for the Week

We pray for those people who are in need;
Help us to learn how to share what we have, until they sense your abundant supply.
We pray for those people who are thirsty;
Send us to be messengers to share your living words,
until they find the source of life, never to be thirsty again.
We appeal for those people who are in hunger;
Make us to be your bread, broken for others,
to share and be shared until all are fed. Amen.

Read John 19:28-29 and Luke 10:25-37

The implications of "I thirst" are huge for our theology—believing in the full divinity and full humanity of Jesus. Yet the implications are also significant for our humanity. It should affect every area of life: how we purchase things, how we consume, how we take, how we eat, and how we share. We should also remember that we have much to share with those who lack much. As affluent Christians, our stewardship of resources has an impact not only on our families but on systems all around us. The way we live out our needs in the world matters to our faith. And following a God who gave up God's own needs for our sake matters to the way we live out our needs.

Questions for Reflection

- In John 19:28, Jesus shows the vulnerability of human need. When have you felt your needs were not being met? Did you or did you not turn to someone in your time of need?
- What are some major areas of need in the world today?
- In the scripture from Luke we see the Samaritan caring for and meeting the needs of the beaten man. What were some of the ways he cared for him through action?
- Knowing that Jesus took on the limitations and needs of humanity, how does this shape the way you care for yourself and others?

Practicing Thirst

- Did you know that Westminster has a Blessing Box on our campus? The ministry of Blessing Boxes extends throughout our community. To learn and serve those with food insecurity, and meet an immediate need today, visit chsblssingbox.wixsite.com to see where other blessing boxes are located in the Charleston area.
- One of the best ways to balance the struggle of feeling your own need, is to think about the ways that God has met your needs in the present. Grab a journal or notepad, walk to a quiet comfortable place, and sit and list the things you are grateful for today. See how God illuminates the good in your life through this practice.

March 29: Fulfillment

The Sixth Word: “It is finished.” John 19:30

Jesus came to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins and the brokenness of the world. On the cross, he fulfills that mission.

Prayer for the Week

Dear God,
We trust in the work you are doing in our lives.
We are naturally impatient, in everything
to reach the end without delay.
But you are a God who works with intention, grace, and care.
Help us not to rush
the gradual forming and shaping of our hearts,
and help us to remember
that your hand is leading us at all times.
Amen

Read John 19:30 and Isaiah 52:13-53:6

The Savior of the world came in a way that nobody expected, lived a beautiful life of pointing people toward God, died a horrific death, and as he did, he uttered, “It is finished.” God’s plan has been fulfilled. We have not yet seen the full fruition of God’s plan, but we have seen the glory of God in God’s triumph over sin and death— the prophecies fulfilled.

Questions for Reflection

- Long before the time of Jesus, Isaiah prophesied about a Suffering Servant who would bring healing through sacrifice. In what ways is the cross a fulfillment of those verses from Isaiah?
- Can you explain what it means that Jesus died for your sins?
- From the time of Isaiah, the people of God waited a long time for the fulfillment of that prophecy. What does that tell you about God’s timing and our patience?
- Tell about a time you’ve waited (or are waiting) for God’s plan to be revealed.

Practicing Fulfillment

- Watch a good versus evil movie (Narnia, The Lord of the Rings, Marvel, etc). After watching, talk about the tension you feel when things are not right in the movie and how different you feel once good wins! How does this relate to the story of Easter and the fulfillment of prophecy? Can you spot an “It is finished” moment in the plot?
- Listen to a popular children’s song (like “The Wheels on the Bus,” “Mary Had a Little Lamb” or “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star”), but stop the song halfway through the chorus. See if people can sit with it uncomfortably for a minute without trying to finish the song. Then talk about what it is like not to have a song resolved. Why do we long to reach the end? Why is fulfillment important? Now consider what it might have been like for God’s people to be waiting for hundreds of years for God to fulfill God’s plans and for Jesus to utter the words, “It is finished.”

April 3: Surrender

The Seventh Word: "...into your hands I commit my spirit." Luke 23:46

It is fitting that this week ends in the act of surrender, culminating in the words, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit," when Jesus breathes his last breath.

Prayer for the Week

God, Teach us your ways.
Teach us not to grasp so tightly the things we think are important
but to cling to what you hold dear.
Teach us to release our plans and thoughts and things to you.
Teach us to follow your pathways.
For you know the plans you have for us,
plans to give hope and a future.
Amen

Read Luke 23:46 and Matthew 4:18-22

In the triumphal entry, Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem for a festival, knowing what lies ahead. Jesus surrenders to God's plan throughout his life. Still, it can be seen again and again during Holy Week (the week of Easter) as Jesus takes the final journey into Jerusalem, celebrates Passover with his disciples, and walks his final steps to the cross, where his surrender is complete.

Questions for Reflection

- In the story of Jesus calling his first disciples, we see that each person he called, dropped their nets and left behind their old lives to follow Jesus. What are your "nets"? What is Jesus asking you to set down—such as ego, comfort, or unhealthy attachments—to follow him fully?
- Can you recall a time in your life when you let go of something? What was that like? What was lost, and what was gained in that experience?
- Is following Jesus an act of willful surrender? Why or why not?

Practicing Surrender

- To surrender is an act of worship when you relinquish something you hold very dear (an item, a decision, a dream, a plan, etc.) to God. Listen to the words of the song "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," and consider what it means to surrender yourself to God.
- Attend the Good Friday worship service at church (7pm in the sanctuary). Pay attention to ways God may be leading you to surrender your life to Jesus.

April 5: Resurrection

Easter: “He has risen!” Luke 24:6

In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the curse of sin and death is broken, bringing us to life.

Prayer for the Week

Dear God,

Thank you for your goodness and mercy.

You are a mighty God and death could not hold you.

You took away the sting of death.

Help us to live in the grace of your resurrection.

Your resurrection has brought us hope that one day we will be with you.

Amen.

Read Matthew 28:1-10, Ephesian 2:1-10

Questions for Reflection

- Matthew writes about the day of resurrection, and Paul (in Ephesians) writes about the meaning of the resurrection. Why is the resurrection the centerpoint of the Christian faith?
- How has your life changed because of the resurrection of Jesus? If it hasn't affected the way you live today, why not? What things might you change in how you live to reflect the gift of the resurrection?
- What was the most memorable experience for you during Lent this year? What made it memorable?
- What practice(s) would you like to continue in your life as you move beyond Lent into Easter?

Practicing Resurrection

- Wake up before dawn on Easter morning and go somewhere where you can see the sunrise. Bring hot drinks, warm coats, and blankets along. Go somewhere beautiful where you can sit and watch the sunrise. As it crests over the horizon, read together out loud the passage from John 20:1-8.
- Gather with your faith community for worship. Sing louder than you normally do.
- Invite some neighbors, family, or friends for an after-Easter celebration at the end of the week. Make party favor bags of things to help you celebrate the good news that Jesus is risen! Don't go out and buy plastic chicks, ducks, and bunnies. Think about what you can make around your house that points to the excitement of the resurrection.
- Find and listen to your favorite Easter song(s). If you don't have a favorite, search “Christian songs about the resurrection” and find one that speaks to you.

Closing Prayer (based on Psalm 117)

Praise the LORD!

Extol him, all you peoples!

Great is God's enduring love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.

Praise the LORD!

Christ is risen!

Amen.