

THE SEVEN LAST STATEMENTS OF JESUS CHRIST

“Today you shall be with me in Paradise”

Luke 23:43

Written By

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In 2017, one of my cousins finally succumbed to the disease which ate away at his body. His name? Jimmy Bowers.

He was the son of the oldest of my father’s sisters, Beatrice, so he was always considerably older than the rest of the cousins. So, when I was a kid, he was a young man in his twenties. While in South Carolina several years ago, one of my aunts showed me some family albums from the 50s and 60s. Thumbing through one, we came to a large picture of a man I thought was James Dean.

“What’s he doing in here in the family album?” I asked.

“Oh, that’s your cousin Jimmy when he was younger,” replied my Aunt Odessa.

“Wow,” I said, “He looked just like James Dean.”

You may be asking yourself, “Why didn’t you recognize Jimmy?” Simple. Years of hard living, years of drinking and smoking non-stop, years of trouble with the law took a toll on his body. Deep lines etched his weathered face, and rotted teeth brought on by lack of personal hygiene reshaped his face, and countless cigarettes gave him that raspy smoker’s voice. This is why I didn’t recognize him. I had only known him this way, not how he used to look in his prime.

Over the years, many family members attempted to point Jimmy to the cross of Christ, but he would, in classic fashion, just laugh and change the subject. He wasn’t about to change life paths, or so it seemed.

A few days before this James Dean look-alike died, a country pastor paid him a visit. His goal? To share the gospel of Jesus Christ with a wicked man who had rejected Christ his whole life. After all those years of family members trying to reach him to no avail, after countless prayers for God to be merciful to him, Jimmy finally quit running from Christ and fully embraced Him.

Today he walks with Jesus in glory and enjoys the fellowship of all the saints. How do I know this? Because 2,000 years ago, another criminal-type, another God-rejector, another evil

man came face to face with the Savior and heard words he never dreamed he, of all people, would hear.

It was almost high noon as three men hung on three crosses just north of the city wall of Jerusalem. The two men nailed on the outer crosses were called criminals. Bauer, Arndt, & Gingrich's *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament* says this word can be translated "one who commits gross misdeeds and serious crimes," or even "a pirate" (398). Or in other words, you name it and these men did it. Murder? No problem. Mugging? Plenty of experience. Extortion? Just give them a call. ACD's hard driving blues number *Dirty Deeds ... Done Dirt Cheap* could have been their theme song. Yes, they would have fit in nicely with any of the ruthless thugs who run rampant on our streets victimizing the innocent, unsuspecting populace.

If anyone deserved the death penalty, it was these two ruffians. After this dark day, the city would be a safer place without these two ferocious felons committing crime after crime.

The man in the middle was another story altogether. He didn't respond as criminals typically did when they were crucified.

- After the Roman crucifixion detail nailed him unmercifully to the cross, He forgave them of their actions. How could He talk like that? How could He speak so kindly toward those who were killing him? Truly, there was something different about this man (Luke 23:34).
- As people and religious leaders mocked Him, He said nothing in his defense, nor did He attempt to angrily counter their statements with so much as a word. Imagine being beaten beyond recognition, dragging a heavy wooden cross part of the way to the hill called Golgotha, being nailed to that cross, and then having gloating, mocking people standing at the base of your blood-stained cross saying things like, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One" (Luke 23:35). What would you have said had you been Him? Probably plenty. Yet He said nothing and just looked at them with those loving eyes.
- Even the soldiers He spoke words of kindness to jumped on the mocking bandwagon: "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!" (Luke 23:37). How could they do that when He had just said what He said to them? Even with this statement, the middle man still said nothing to counter their taunts.

Yes, the man being crucified between two known, and probably infamous, criminals, responded to His crucifixion in a most unusual, emotionally controlled fashion. This, however, didn't keep the two criminals from joining in the mocking fray. Matthew's account of the crucifixion underscores this sad truth:

"⁴⁴ The robbers who had been crucified with Him were also insulting Him with the same words" (Matthew 27:44).

It's strange how verbal violence in a mob setting is so contagious. This entire sordid spectacle occurred sometime between 9 a.m. and shortly before 12:00 p.m. on that Friday of Passover.

From Luke 23, verse 39, something very interesting occurred. Read it and then we will make some necessary observations:

"³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!"

Zero in on that verbal phrase “was hurling abuse.” In Greek it is an imperfect active tense denoting that this crucified criminal kept up the insults at Jesus long after the other criminal quit. Sad, isn’t it? He just couldn’t die like a man. The evil bile in his spiritual system kept coming out all the way up to the end.

Somewhere along the line, as he shot off yet one more insult at Jesus, something amazing occurred. The other criminal verbally stepped up to actually defend the man in the middle:

“⁴⁰ But the other answered, and rebuking him said, ‘Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹ And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong’” (Luke 23).

What happened to this man? Facing his own mortality caused him to be open and honest about his past lifestyle. No more defending or rationalizing it. Nothing like impending death to move you to see your utter wickedness. Really, most of his life had been one of vicious crimes against humanity, but deep in the recesses of his being he always believed there was a God he’d be accountable to one day. That day in God’s courtroom was now just hours away, and he feared standing in his unholy state before the absolutely holy God.

So, coming to terms with the fact of his godless, wayward lifestyle led him to humbly conclude his death penalty was justified. He knew the payment of every crime he had ever committed was now coming due. Translated: He knew he was a sinner, pure and simple.

The man in the middle wasn’t like them. As he says, “but this man has done nothing wrong.” The Greek word *atopon* speaks of moral wrongness (Darrell Bock, *The Bible Knowledge Key Word Study*: 255). How could he make this statement? We don’t know for sure, but we can offer suggestions.

Jesus had been in Jerusalem a number of times. When he was a boy, probably around twelve years old, he amazed the religious leaders by his control of theological information (Luke 2:41-50). And you don’t think the city talked about this? On another occasion He cleansed the temple of evildoers (John 2:13-22). Nobody had ever done this, and it must have been on the lips of every Jerusalemite. One day He healed a lame man at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-9), and you don’t think word of this spread like wildfire? When He debated the religious leaders in the Temple and called Himself the great I Am (John 8:58), countless people heard Him. Was it true? Was He the Messiah? Had the repentant criminal heard Him, or at least heard of Him? Quite possibly, especially in light of what he says as he rebukes his fellow death penalty partner.

For his entire life he lived as if there was no God. For his entire life he lived to enjoy his cravings and his desires. For his entire life he lived contrary to the spiritual truth he obviously knew. Yet at the lowest, scariest time of his life, as the death angel headed his direction, he *finally* came to terms with the person and work of Jesus.

Maybe his story is your story. You, too, have been exposed to Christ all throughout your life. You’ve heard the stories about His miracles. You’ve heard how he turned water into wine, walked on the stormy Sea of Galilee, gave sight to blind people, and even raised the dead with a word. Yet you, too, never give Him any real, serious thought because you are too busy with your life, and hiding behind your vacuous arguments against belief of the man in the middle. But now God has rocked your world. Events had arrested your attention, truly stopped you in your spiritual tracks. What will you do is the question.

Interestingly enough, the criminal who never showed his victims mercy, made the most astonishing, jaw dropping request, given the circumstances:

“⁴² And he was saying, “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!”

He, of all people, asks for mercy in the next life. Please, don’t pass quickly over his words. His request reveals much about the man.

First, he obviously believed in the resurrection of the body. Obviously, he had read about it in the Old Testament. Did the words of Daniel stick out in his mind?

“² Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace *and* everlasting contempt. ³ Those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever” (Daniel 12).

It’s only conjecture, but somehow, either through the teaching of the “Bible” and/or the teaching of the Pharisees, who believed in the resurrection, he understood death wasn’t the end of life, but just the beginning of eternity.

Second, he expressed a firm belief in Jesus as the messianic king of the long-awaited Davidic kingdom. Once more, his statement shows he was a crook with a few Bible lessons under his belt. Somewhere along the line he had studied the prophecies of the coming Messiah because he knew about the coming kingdom.

- Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would come and establish His kingdom in Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:1-4; 9:6).
- Jeremiah prophesied that a righteous Branch would revive the Davidic empire in the end, and this Branch would be THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS (Jeremiah 23:1-8).
- Ezekiel prophesied the divine shepherd would one day shepherd His chosen people (Ezekiel 34:1-10).
- Daniel prophesied that one day a Stone not made by human hands would crush all worldly empires and erect His own eternal kingdom on earth (Daniel 2:24-45).
- Amos prophesied of time after God’s judgment on the earth when the entire earth would be like the Garden of Eden (Amos 9:13-15).

Any Jew with a Torah scroll could have easily read these prophecies about the coming King and Kingdom. I think the criminal who turned to Jesus in faith was no exception. He knew the prophetic truths, however, he had never believed them to be true for himself . . . until now.

Can you appreciate the magnitude of his faith? He looks over at Jesus’, beaten and bloodied body, and as he is slowly dying, he takes into consideration all he was ever taught about the coming Messiah. He processes how this man responded to His crucifixion, he looked at the sign above his head which read: *This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews* (Matt. 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19). and, then, he makes his plea for mercy from the man he is now convinced is the Messiah! Shocking, isn’t it?

Even more jaw dropping is Christ’s reply:

“⁴³ And He said to him, ‘Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.’”

Whenever Jesus said, “Truly, it was as if he said in Greek, “If anything is true, this I am about to tell you is true.” What was true for the repentant convict? At the moment of his death, he would be *instantly* with Jesus in Paradise. Wow. That *very day* he would trade the hellish nature of the crucifixion for the magnificence of heaven, or paradise as Jesus calls it. What a transformation.

But that’s not all. Jesus specifically said “You shall be *with Me* in Paradise.” What an intimate, loving statement. The criminal just humbly asked to be remembered, and Jesus responded by saying that he would not only remember him in the next life, but He, the Lord of Glory, would be with him. Can you imagine what it will be like to be with Him? Is it not hard to process that He wants to be with you when I’m sure Paradise will be teaming with millions of saints? Just as He was never too busy to speak with people while He walked this old, sinful earth, He will be committed to giving you, yes, you, quality time. Oh, to walk and talk with Him.

The confessional criminal., truly, received more than he bargained for. He just asked to be remembered *whenever* the Messiah erected the glorious kingdom. Christ corrected his thinking by letting him know upon his last breath, he’d wake up breathing the fresh, pure air of heaven. There would be no purgatory, nor would he go into some form of soul-sleep for a few thousand years. By placing the Greek word “today” at the head of the clause, Jesus emphatically emphasizes entrance into spiritual bliss is instantaneous for the saint at the moment of death.

And speaking of bliss, Jesus promises this former sinful mocker *paradise*. Holman’s Bible Dictionary defines this intriguing word this way:

“**PARADISE** (*Par’ uh dise*) Old Persian term which means literally “enclosure” or “wooded park,” used in the Old Testament to speak of King Artaxerxes’ forest (Neh. 2:8), and twice of orchards (Eccl. 2:5; Song of Sol. 4:13). All three New Testament occurrences (Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 12:4; Rev. 2:7) refer to the abode of the righteous dead (heaven). The Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) used “paradise” to translate the Hebrew words for the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2-3. Over the years, the terms became synonymous, and eventually paradise came to refer to heaven. Jewish theology then developed an opposite place for wicked persons, *gehenna*, a burning furnace.”



An earthly paradise denotes wonderful parks, laden with trees, flowers, and flowing water. Think of Keukenhof, the world famous Dutch flower garden. Think of Yosemite and you’ve got a small taste of paradise. The green trees. The lush grass. The amazing air. The magnificent rock formations. I think of walking through the jungle near a beach in Maui and I can’t help but say I’ve seen, sensed, and enjoyed paradise in a small, limited fashion.

The Greek word for paradise as used

in the Old Testament predominately speaks of the Garden of Eden. Of the twenty-four usages from Genesis to Malachi, thirteen occur in Genesis chapters 2 through 3, and rightly so. What was Eden like? Moses tells us in Genesis chapter 2:

“⁸ The LORD God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and there He placed the man whom He had formed. ⁹Out of the ground the LORD God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. ¹⁰ Now a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden; and from there it divided and became four rivers. ¹¹ The name of the first is Pishon; it flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is



of the first is Pishon; it flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is



gold. ¹² The gold of that land is good; the bdellium and the onyx stone are there. ¹³ The name of the second river is Gihon; it flows around the whole land of Cush. ¹⁴ The name of the third river is Tigris; it flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. ¹⁵ Then the LORD God took the man and

put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it.”

First, God fashioned it into a magnificent garden. Second, God adorned the garden with gorgeous trees, which were pleasant to look at and some were even fun to eat from. Refreshing water also flowed all through the garden, and man ... along with woman ... had the unique privilege of taking care of God’s garden, His paradise.

As we all know, the first Adam’s sin plunged mankind into sin, costing him the ability to live in this paradise (Rom. 5:12-21). The second Adam, however, Jesus, defeated sin on the cross, thereby giving each and every man, criminals included the opportunity to regain paradise lost in

the next life. This heavenly paradise will be superior to the earthly, but it will share some of the same components. John's last letter gives us some much needed insight on this matter:

“Then he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, ² in the middle of its street. On either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve *kinds of* fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. ³ There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him; ⁴ they will see His face, and His name *will be* on their foreheads. ⁵ And there will no longer be *any* night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and ever” (Revelation 22).

Interesting, isn't it? The Bible opens with man in an *earthly garden* and closes with believers in a *heavenly garden*. And what is most interesting is that from the cross, Jesus, the Second Adam, spoke about what awaits all those who come to Him in faith. Paradise, pure and simple. And for those still wondering if Paradise is, in fact, heaven, all you have to do to prove it is go to Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 12, verses 1 through 4 where the apostle equates the third heaven with Paradise, same word Luke employs, viz., παράδεισον (the first heaven is that of the clouds, the second heaven contains the stars, and the third is the abode of God)

The truth of this historical episode never ceases to capture my spiritual attention. A godless man enters the family of God and inherits paradise at the very last moment of his lurid life. What does this tell us? It tells us it's never too late to turn to Christ in repentant faith. You may have led a life like this convict, but Jesus still waits to forgive and receive you into His kingdom.

But you say, “You just don't know about all the sinful things I've done, Pastor,” Maybe not, but Jesus' love and forgiveness is greater than anything you've done.

Another might say, “I've pursued wickedness my entire life. There is no way Jesus would ever accept me.” Yes, He will, contrary to what you think. Since He accepted this criminal on the hill with Him that day, He will most certainly accept you.

In light of this I have to ask you, “What is holding you back from turning to Him?” Whatever it is it is not worth it. Paradise awaits you.

Somewhere in Christ's heavenly dimension, an ex-con has his arm draped around a man named Jimmy, and together they just can't believe they are where they are. And maybe if they could speak, they'd sing you a song:

The cross upon which Jesus died is a shelter in which we can hide;
and its grace so free is sufficient for me, and deep is its fountain—as wide as the sea.

There's room at the cross for you, there's room at the cross for you;
though millions have come, there's still room for one—Yes, there's room at the cross for you
(Ira F. Stanphill)

Yes, there's room for the cross for you. The moment you kneel before that cross, as the criminal did thousands of years ago, is the moment you become God's child and an inheritor of all we shall enjoy in His magnificent home called Paradise. So, come. Come by faith and ask the Lord of mercy to be merciful to you, and He will shower your sinful life with so much mercy you know you will never be the same again.