

Practicing Jesus' Last Words



A Lenten Faith Journey



Introduction

What we call “the seven last words” of Jesus are based on the final seven phrases drawn from the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John that record what Jesus said before his death. This devotional reflects on the seven last words of Jesus through devotional and practical material that groups, families and individuals can embody during each week. Often used in worship services or contemplative disciplines during Lent, the words remind us of Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection.

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the season of Lent. It is the 40 days (excluding Sundays) leading up to Easter—a time when we recognize the many ways we have strayed from God and find ways to practice faith that lean in to God. Some people give up something they enjoy or enjoy doing for the 40 days of Lent, to instead focus that time, energy or money on God. Some people may give up screentime to make time for spiritual discipline or practice. Other people take up a practice during Lent, such as reading the Bible every day, spending time in prayer daily or practicing a devotional. Whatever you decide to do during Lent, may it help reorient your life toward the God we know and worship, as the Creator, Redeemer and Spirit.

Unlike the season of Advent that leads to Christmas, which tends to evoke positive feelings of warmth (like hope, peace, joy, and love), Lent tends to cover a broad spectrum of human emotions. Lent is also a longer season and helps us prepare our hearts and minds for the resurrection of Christ at Easter. But Easter does not happen without first walking through a series of harrowing events: the torment and crucifixion of Jesus. This devotional covers diverse topics, including forgiveness, relationships, suffering, need, fulfillment, surrender, humility, grief, and resurrection. As such, you may find yourself experiencing a broad range of emotions as you move between very challenging but also positive topics. This is part of the season of Lent—a time when we celebrate the amazing things that Jesus has done and recognize the immense sacrifice of God in Jesus’ death on the cross.

This devotional can be used in small groups or at home. Although it is geared toward groups, it can be done with individuals of any age and may be particularly beneficial in intergenerational environments. Most weeks, there are five activities listed which can be done on the five weekdays in addition to doing the rest of the devotional on Sunday, or you can simply choose an activity to do along with the devotion that best suits your household. The Holy Week modules (Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday) have fewer activities according to the number of days.

We have intentionally left one day a week open to practice Sabbath. The Sabbath is a time when work ceases, extra activity ceases, and people can be worshipful before God and rest their bodies and souls. In many ways, the Sabbath is a time to celebrate God. On Friday afternoon each week, many people in the Jewish tradition will make extra preparations (like cleaning the house, making food ahead, etc.) to honor the Sabbath on Saturday. Consider what this might look like for yourself, your household and your community during Lent.

This resource is meant to be adaptive, so please use it in whichever way best fits your context.

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. The goal of this resource is to help point people toward Jesus, deepen their relationships with God, and enliven individuals with the Spirit by engaging in activities which might cultivate a greater sense of awe around Christ and God's amazing love for us. 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.

Thank you for coming along this journey together, practicing the seven last words of Jesus as we approach Easter.

Prayer

Show me during these Lenten days
 how to take the daily things of life
 and by submerging them in the sacred,
 to infuse them with a great love
 for you, O God, and for others.
 Guide me to perform simple acts of love and prayer,
 the real works of reform and renewal ...
 help me not to waste
 these precious Lenten days
 of my soul's spiritual springtime.

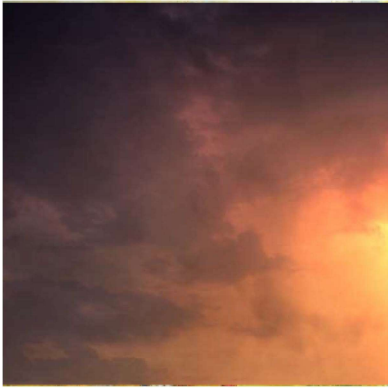
— From *Prayers for a Planetary Pilgrim* by Edward Hays



Lent at Cypress Methodist Church

Lenten Bible Study - Altar'd	Wednesdays	6 pm	M109
Sunday Worship			
Contemporary Worship	9:30 am	MAC	
Traditional Worship	11:00 am	Sanctuary	
Espanol Worship	11:00 am	MAC	
Donkey Day Celebration	11:30 - 2:30	March 23	MAC
Palm Sunday Worship	10:00 am	March 24	MAC
Maundy Thursday Worship	7:00 pm	March 28	MAC
Good Friday Worship	7:00 pm	March 29	MAC
Flowering of the Cross	10:00 am	March 30	MAC
Easter Worship Celebrations			
Contemporary Worship	9:00 am	MAC	
Traditional Worship	11:00 am	MAC	
Espanol Worship	11:00 am	Sanctuary	

First Sunday of Lent



Forgiveness

***"... forgive them;
for they know not what they do."***

Luke 23:34

Opening Prayer (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

Thoughts to Ponder...

When was the last time you needed to ask for forgiveness? What happened? What was that experience like? When were you last asked to forgive someone? What was that like? What did you struggle with about forgiving someone?

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a difficult topic. Some people are challenged by forgiving others; some do not believe they themselves deserve forgiveness. But God, who is rich in mercy, forgives all ... yes, ALL. The Bible teaches that forgiveness can happen not because we make amends or attain goodness ourselves but because Jesus did that for us so that we can be reconciled to God. But in the Christian calendar, Ash Wednesday precedes Easter, a reminder of our brokenness before Jesus' coming, life, death, and resurrection.

On Ash Wednesday, we celebrated the ritual of ashes. Many people attended services where they received the sign of the cross on their forehead with ashes, and they left it there all day. Ashes have been used for thousands of years to represent grief and sorrow, but the sign of the cross is a relatively recent ritual which reminds us of the funeral passage "ashes to ashes and dust to dust." We come from ash and dust and will return to that ... we are mortal, fallible humans capable of both good and evil. But the cross represents Christ Jesus, who took on humanity so that we may be reconciled

with God. But a person is not only a sinner. A person is also someone who has been sinned against and in need of reconciliation, peace and grace. The ashen cross represents both our brokenness and God's grace.

Read the Story: Luke 23:32-34

Questions for Reflection

1. What does it mean to forgive?
2. What feelings surface when you think of forgiving someone who has hurt you?
3. How can we forgive and still see that justice is done?
4. What does it mean to be forgiven by God? How does this make you feel?
5. Are there any particular areas of your life where you need to seek out God's forgiveness?

Practicing Jesus' 7 Last Words

Choose one (or more) of the following activity options to do this week as you consider forgiveness.

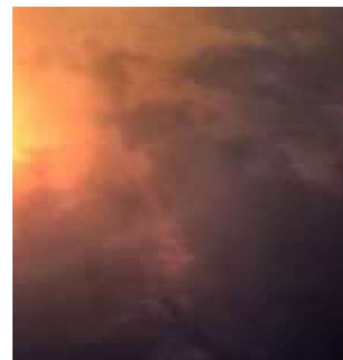
Confession: Confession is a term that means admitting to wrongdoing. Sometimes we need to confess the ways we have done something wrong, and sometimes we need to confess the ways we failed to do something right. Spend some time alone or with your household praying prayers of confession to God.

Hand washing: 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 and made us white as snow. 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 white towel.

Meditative music: Listen to the song "Refiner's Fire" or "Create in Me a Clean Heart." While you listen, sit somewhere comfortable, close your eyes, and let the music be a prayer from your heart.

Closing Prayer (from Psalm 51:10-12)

Holy God, create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me from your presence or
take your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Amen.



Second Sunday of Lent



A new heaven and a new earth

“Today you shall be with me in paradise.”

Luke 23:43

Opening Prayer

Lord, give me the grace to labor with you
without seeking myself—
to live the Kingdom
in its full reality.
Amen

(John Futrell, SJ)


Thoughts to Ponder...

What do you currently believe about heaven? What do you picture when you hear words like “Heaven”? How do you get there? How do you feel about heaven (hopeful, anxious, worried, confused, etc.)? What is the difference in your mind between “Heaven” and the “Kingdom of Heaven”?

Heaven

We often think of heaven as an escape from reality or as the bliss that can be realized only after death—a glittery realm located in the clouds. Yet that is not what scripture teaches us. The promise of eternity with God is an earthly proposition. In the Book of Revelation, the prophecy of John describes a new heaven and a new earth, where people do not ascend into the clouds to be with God. Rather, God comes to the new Earth, the holy city, to be in and amongst the people. This new earth is, in part, a fulfillment of the biblical vision of *shalom*—peace and justice—a state of personal and societal integrity where all things work together harmoniously for the good of the whole.

The writer, C.S. Lewis, known for his imagination, conveys the concept of heaven through story in the last book of the Narnia series, called, *The Last Battle*. As the children approach heaven, they see



this sparkling light, and a scene of mountains, waterfalls, orchards, and the face of Aslan (the God character). Lewis writes, “And as [God] spoke ... the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them.”

Heaven is not imaginary. It is real—perhaps more real than the realities we experience today. But heaven is an exercise of the imagination. 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.

Yet, that does not mean it is otherworldly ... it is a perfect manifestation of the world we live in, so great that we cannot even begin to imagine it. As we get older, we lose our ability to imagine worlds beyond our own. One of my favourite authors says, “Children are made of awe,”⁵ and that is the kind of approach to life we must live into if we are to experience even a glimpse of paradise in the here-and-now. Jesus calls us to experience the eternal now, today, 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.


Read the Story: Luke 23:39-43 and Revelation 21:1-5 (optional)


Questions for Reflection

1. Does reading this change any of your thoughts about heaven? Why or why not?
2. What might it look like to experience awe and wonder this week? What might you need to change in your life (your schedule, activities, etc) to make space for wonder?
3. What do you think Jesus meant when he talked about paradise? How might you live in a way that helps others experience God’s kingdom on Earth now?
4. Discuss moments of shalom or experiences of the Kingdom of God that you have experienced this week or in your life.

Practicing Jesus’ 7 Last Words

Choose one (or more) of the following activity options to do this week as you consider the topic of heaven. Cole Arthur Riley writes, “Awe is not a lens through which to see the world but our sole path to seeing. Any other lens is not a lens but a veil. And I’ve come to believe that our beholding—seeing the veils of this world peeled back again and again, if only for a moment—is no small form of salvation.”⁷ As you practice these activities, embrace AWE.





Worship: Sing a song of praise like the Doxology (“Praise God from whom all blessings flow.”) As you sing, make harmonies, add instruments, or simply listen to the words fall off of your lips. Grab some pots and pans, boxed food, or coffee bean containers to add percussion! Sing it multiple times or in rounds and see how your voices come together and trail apart until it comes to a natural close.

Wonder walk: 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 sparks curiosity for you on this walk?

Taste and see: Scripture says, “taste and see that the Lord is good.” Bake a loaf of bread alone or in a group. As you add the ingredients and take turns kneading the dough, comment on the smell, the sight of bread rising, and the feel of the dough. After it has baked, eat it warm with melted butter and read Psalm 34:8.

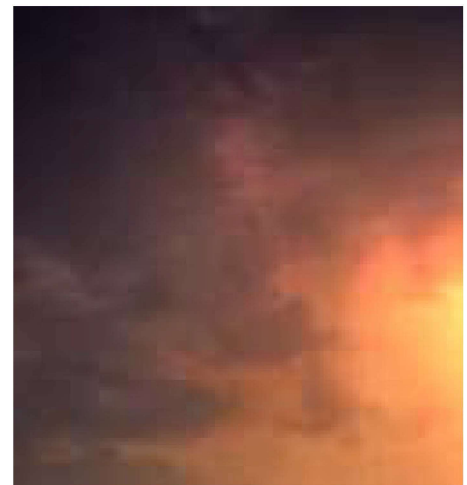
Art: Spend some time engaging in creating some art. This can be drawing, painting, sculpting, or another medium. Some may opt to do this work outdoors. As you create, allow the environment around you to shape your artwork. What inspires your art? How do you see the Spirit at work in the world? What makes you pause in wonderment or takes your breath away?

Reading allegory: Read a chapter in a children’s book out loud together. Imagine yourself in the story, picturing the other characters, examining the world through the wonder only allegory can provide. Consider reading *The Secret Garden*, by Frances Hodgson Burnett, chapter 26, “It’s Mother,” or *The Last Battle*, by C.S. Lewis, chapter 16, “Farewell to Shadowlands.”

Closing Prayer

“Earth’s crammed with heaven.
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.”
(Elizabeth Barrett Browning)

Creator God,
Incarnate One,
Spirit of Life,
stir in us the awareness of you,
in everything and everyone we encounter.
May the veil that divides heaven and Earth
be torn open so that we might experience your grace and joy
in abundance here in this life. Amen.





13403 Cypress N. Houston Road • Cypress TX 77429 • 281.469.0730 • CypressMC.org