

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

CHRISTOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ

UNIT 7: THE ATONING WORK OF CHRIST

Lesson 24

The Seven Last Words from the Cross

The Final Utterances of the Dying Savior

Grace, Salvation, Love, Dereliction, Humanity, Completion, and Trust

Key Texts: Luke 23:34, 43, 46; John 19:26–27, 28, 30; Matthew 27:46

“It Is Finished” — tetelestai — The Most Consequential Sentence Ever Spoken

Dr. Joshua Nichols

Pastor, Theologian, Author

faithfultotheword.com

SERIES VERSE

*“For we do not preach ourselves
but Christ Jesus as Lord,
and ourselves as your bond-servants
on account of Jesus.”*

2 CORINTHIANS 4:5, NASB 1995

INTRODUCTION

This final lesson of Unit 7 on the Atoning Work of Christ completes the arc from systematic theology to narrative theology, from the doctrinal architecture of the necessity, nature, and extent of the atonement (Lessons 20–22) and the theological depth of the cry of dereliction (Lesson 23) to the words that Christ Himself spoke in the act of accomplishing it. The seven last words from the cross are not a supplementary appendix to the systematic theology of the atonement; they are the atonement’s own self-commentary, spoken by the one who is in the act of completing it. Each word reveals a dimension of the work being accomplished; together they form a theological portrait of the cross that is more personally searching, more pastorally rich, and more devotionally transformative than any systematic formulation can fully achieve.

The seven last words are drawn from all four Gospels. No single Gospel records all seven; the traditional enumeration gathers them from Luke 23:34 (Father, forgive them), Luke 23:43 (Today you shall be with Me in Paradise), John 19:26–27 (Woman, behold your son), Matthew 27:46 (My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?), John 19:28 (I am thirsty), John 19:30 (It is finished), and Luke 23:46 (Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit). The traditional ordering is broadly chronological, though the precise sequence cannot be established with certainty from the Gospel accounts alone. What can be established with certainty is the theological unity of the seven: they are not random utterances from a dying man but the deliberate, authoritative, theologically freighted words of the one who is accomplishing the redemption of the world in the act of speaking them.

This lesson works through each of the seven words with two aims held simultaneously: theological precision about what each word reveals about the atoning work, and pastoral warmth about what each word means for those who are the beneficiaries of that work. The seven words, taken together, are a complete theological portrait of the cross: grace (“forgive them”), salvation by grace alone (“today you shall be with Me in Paradise”), love (“behold your son”), substitution (“why have You forsaken Me?”), genuine humanity (“I am thirsty”), completion (“it is finished”), and trust (“into Your hands I commit My spirit”). The one who spoke these seven words is the one whose completed work is the ground of the Christian gospel and the hope of every human soul.

I. WORDS ONE THROUGH THREE: GRACE, SALVATION, AND LOVE

The First Three Words Reveal the Character of the One Who Dies and the Scope of His Saving Work

Word 1: *“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”* , Luke 23:34

The first word from the cross is spoken in the very act of the crucifixion itself, as the soldiers drive the nails and the cross is raised, before the mockery of the passersby and the conversation with the two criminals, while the agony of crucifixion is at its most acute and its most immediate. And the first word is a prayer: not a cry of pain, not a statement of accusation, not a protest against the injustice being inflicted, but an intercession for those who are inflicting the injustice. “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34, NASB 1995). The grace of the cross is present from the very first moment of its being inflicted, before the completed work provides the legal ground for the forgiveness being asked.

The first word is the most complete possible demonstration of the active obedience of Christ in the face of the ultimate provocation: love for enemies (Matthew 5:44) at the moment of maximum cost. The one who commanded ‘pray for those who persecute you’ (Matthew 5:44, NASB 1995) is Himself praying for His persecutors in the act of their persecution. The prayer is addressed to the Father, the familiar, intimate, sustaining address that has characterized the entire prayer life of the Son, and its content is intercession for the ignorant: ‘they do not know what they are doing.’ The ignorance is genuine; neither the soldiers who drive the nails nor the crowds who demand the crucifixion nor the religious leaders who orchestrate it understand the cosmic significance of the event they are participating in. And the prayer asks the Father to receive that ignorance as a mitigating circumstance. The grace of the cross is greater than the guilt of its agents.

The theological significance of the first word extends beyond its immediate historical context. It is the living demonstration of the intercessory work that the Priest exercises, the one who cries ‘Father, forgive them’ from the cross is the same one who, from the right hand of the Father, ‘always lives to make intercession’ (Hebrews 7:25, NASB 1995). The first word is the cross-form of the intercession that continues in the exalted ministry; and its scope, forgiveness for the ignorant, the guilty, the hostile, the unaware, is the scope of the grace that the completed atonement makes possible.

Word 2: “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.” , Luke 23:43

The second word is spoken to the repentant criminal who is crucified alongside Jesus and who, alone among all the bystanders at Golgotha, confesses his own guilt (‘we indeed are suffering justly’, v. 41, NASB 1995), acknowledges Christ’s innocence (‘but this man has done nothing wrong’), and makes the single request: ‘Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!’ (v. 42, NASB 1995). The response is the most direct and the most comprehensive statement of salvation by grace alone in the entire Gospel narrative: “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43, NASB 1995).

The second word is the gospel in its most concentrated, most extreme, and most pastorally powerful form. The man who receives the promise of Paradise has done nothing to merit it: he has no baptism, no church membership, no history of discipleship or service, no moral track record of obedience. He has only the confession of his guilt, the acknowledgment of Christ’s innocence, and the request to be

remembered. And on this basis alone, the basis of faith, however elementary, in the one who is dying beside him, he receives the most comprehensive possible promise: not 'perhaps' or 'if you are faithful' but 'today' and 'with Me' and 'Paradise.' The immediacy ('today'), the personal character ('with Me'), and the quality ('Paradise') of the promise together constitute the most extreme possible statement of salvation by grace alone: the worst imaginable sinner, at the last possible moment, on the basis of the most minimal conceivable faith, receives the fullest possible salvation.

The second word also demonstrates the scope of the priestly work: the same one who is bearing the penalty for the sins of His people is simultaneously extending the promise of salvation to those who turn to Him in faith. The cross is the place of penalty-bearing and the place of promise-giving simultaneously; and the criminal's dying faith is the demonstration that the free, gracious, unconditional salvation that the atonement purchases is available to the very last moment of human life.

Word 3: "Woman, behold, your son! Behold, your mother!" , John 19:26–27

The third word is the most intimate and the most personally human of the seven: the dying Son providing for the care of His mother by entrusting her to the keeping of the beloved disciple. "When Jesus then saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!' Then He said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!' From that hour the disciple took her into his own household" (John 19:26–27, NASB 1995).

The third word reveals several dimensions of theological significance that its apparent simplicity might obscure. First, it demonstrates that even in the extremity of the atoning suffering, the incarnate Son retains the full affective and relational dimensions of genuine humanity: the love of a son for his mother, the care for a vulnerable human being who will be bereft when He dies, the practical attention to the arrangements of ordinary life even as He accomplishes the extraordinary work of redemption. The one who bears the sin of the world is simultaneously the son of a woman who weeps at His cross. His genuine humanity is present in the very act of the most cosmic event in human history.

Second, the third word demonstrates the extension of the covenant community through the atoning work: the mother and the beloved disciple are brought into a new filial relationship by the dying declaration of the Son. The cross creates new family, not merely individual salvation but the covenant community of those who are united to the Son and therefore to one another. The beloved disciple receives the mother of the Lord; the mother of the Lord receives the beloved disciple; and from that hour, a new domestic expression of the covenant community is established by the authority of the dying King.

“Father, forgive them.” | “Today you shall be with Me in Paradise.” | “Woman, behold, your son.” | “My God, why have You forsaken Me?” | “I am thirsty.” | “It is finished.” | “Into Your hands I commit My spirit.”

LUKE 23:34, 43, 46; JOHN 19:26, 28, 30; MATTHEW 27:46, NASB 1995

II. WORDS FOUR AND FIVE: DERELICTION AND HUMANITY

The Two Most Theologically Dense Words, The Depths of the Penalty and the Reality of the Flesh

Word 4: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” , Matthew 27:46

The fourth word is the theological center of the seven, the cry of dereliction examined in full theological depth in Lesson 23. It is the word spoken at the ninth hour, after the three hours of cosmic darkness, at the most profound and mysterious moment of the entire passion. As Lesson 23 established, this cry is simultaneously a citation of Psalm 22:1 (applying the entire psalm to the passion), a prayer addressed to God, and the most explicit verbal expression of the judicial forsakenness that is the penal consequence of the sin being borne by the Substitute.

In the context of the seven words, the fourth word occupies the center position, not merely numerically but theologically. The first three words (grace, salvation, love) reveal the character and the scope of the saving work from the perspective of the Savior’s relationship with those He is saving. The sixth and seventh words (completion, trust) reveal the character of the completed work from the perspective of the Savior’s relationship with the Father. The fourth and fifth words, occupying the center, reveal the deepest interior dimensions of the work being accomplished: the judicial forsakenness that is the penalty (fourth word) and the genuine humanity through which the penalty is borne (fifth word). The seven words form a chiasmic structure of revelation: the Savior’s love for others (words 1–3), the depths of what the saving costs (words 4–5), and the Savior’s trust in the Father (words 6–7).

The fourth word is the most theologically searching of the seven because it is the most personally demanding: it forces the question of what the cross actually cost. Not physical suffering (immense though that was) not the social humiliation (real though that was) not the injustice of the condemnation (genuine though that was) but the judicial withdrawal of the Father’s sustaining, blessing presence from the Son who stands in the position of the sin-bearer. The darkness of the ninth hour is the darkness of the divine judgment against the sin of the world, borne in the Person of the Son. The cry that emerges from that darkness is the most costly utterance in the history of the universe: the Son of God, forsaken by the Father, continuing to pray.

Word 5: “I am thirsty.”, John 19:28

The fifth word, the briefest of the seven, a single Greek word (διψῶ, dipsō, ‘I thirst’) in the original, is the most physically naked, the most humanly unguarded utterance of the dying Christ. “After this, Jesus, knowing that all things had already been accomplished, to fulfill the Scripture, said, ‘I am thirsty’” (John 19:28, NASB 1995). The context is deliberate: John frames the cry of thirst as a fulfillment of Scripture (‘to fulfill the Scripture’ echoes Psalm 69:21: ‘in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink’) and as the deliberate, conscious act of the one who knows that ‘all things had already been accomplished.’

The theological significance of the fifth word is concentrated in what it reveals about the genuine humanity of the Savior at the moment of the atonement’s completion. He is genuinely thirsty, the physiological reality of crucifixion includes extreme dehydration, and the body of Christ experiences that dehydration with the same physical reality that any human body would. The one who sustains the universe by the word of His power (Hebrews 1:3) experiences genuine human thirst; the one who offers the water of life (John 4:14; 7:37–38) cries out for literal water. The fifth word is the deepest possible expression of the kenotic self-limitation of the incarnation: the Creator who could speak water into existence from nothing submits to the thirst of genuine creaturely need.

The fifth word also demonstrates the care with which John structures the passion narrative as the fulfillment of Scripture. The explicit fulfillment formula (‘to fulfill the Scripture’) applied to the fifth word is the same formula used throughout the passion narrative for the fulfillment of the Psalms and the prophets. The thirst of the dying Christ is not an incidental biological fact; it is a divinely ordained fulfillment of the prophetic pattern of the Righteous Sufferer whose words are heard by God. The fifth word connects the passion narrative to the lament tradition of the Psalter (Psalm 69:21; Psalm 22:15: ‘my tongue cleaves to my jaws’) and establishes the atoning death as the fulfillment of Israel’s deepest scriptural testimony about the Suffering Servant.

III. WORDS SIX AND SEVEN: COMPLETION AND TRUST

The Work Is Finished, The Son Is Delivered, The Most Consequential and the Most Beautiful Final Utterances

Word 6: “It is finished!”, John 19:30

The sixth word is the most theologically consequential sentence in the history of the universe: “When Jesus therefore had received the sour wine, He said, ‘It is finished!’ And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit” (John 19:30, NASB 1995). The single Greek word τετέλεσται (tetelestai), the perfect passive of τελέω (teleō, ‘to complete,’ ‘to accomplish,’ ‘to bring to its ordained end’), is the

most precisely freighted theological declaration in all of Scripture. The perfect tense is the key: not 'it was finished' (past event only) but 'it has been finished and remains finished' (completed act with abiding permanent result). The work of redemption is not a process still being completed; it is an accomplished fact with permanent effect.

The commercial background of *tetelestai* is well established in papyri and commercial documents of the first-century Mediterranean world: the word was written across paid bills and receipts as the declaration that a debt had been discharged, 'paid in full.' When Jesus cries *tetelestai* from the cross, He is declaring that the debt of sin owed by those for whom He died has been paid in full, permanently, and irrevocably. There is no remaining balance; there is no outstanding claim; there is no further payment required or possible. The divine ledger of sin is marked with the most comprehensive possible declaration of discharge: *tetelestai*.

The sixth word is the theological consummation of the entire series. The grace of the first word (Father, forgive them) is now grounded in the completed work of the sixth: the forgiveness asked for in intercession is purchased in the completed atonement. The salvation promised to the criminal in the second word is now secured in the completed work: the Paradise promised has been paid for. The provision made for Mary in the third word is now the provision of one who has finished the greater provision. The forsakenness of the fourth word has served its redemptive purpose in the completed work: the judicial penalty has been borne in full. The thirst of the fifth word is the last physical expression of the genuine humanity through which the completed work was accomplished. And the trust of the seventh word is the response of the one who has just declared the completion. The sixth word is the hinge on which all history turns; *tetelestai* is the declaration that separates the old age from the new.

Word 7: "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit." , Luke 23:46

The seventh and final word returns to the address of the first: 'Father.' The cry of dereliction, the fourth word, had addressed God as 'My God, My God' in the darkness of the judicial forsakenness. Now, with the work completed (sixth word) and the darkness passed, the seventh word restores the intimate filial address: 'Father.' The judicial withdrawal of the Father's covenantal-relational presence that was the forsakenness of the ninth hour has served its redemptive purpose; the completed atonement has exhausted the penalty; and the Son can now address the Father again in the warmth and the intimacy of the eternal Trinitarian fellowship.

The seventh word is a citation of Psalm 31:5: "Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have ransomed me, O Lord, God of truth" (NASB 1995). The citation is deliberate: Jesus applies to Himself the prayer of the psalmist who trusts his life to God in extremity and who grounds that trust in the divine ransoming. The ransoming is now complete, *tetelestai*, and the one who has accomplished the ransom commends His spirit to the Father who ordained it. The self-committal ('into Your hands') is the ultimate expression of the Dyothelite active obedience examined in Lesson 13: the human will of the

Son, which has chosen the Father's will at every point of the incarnate life and most dramatically in Gethsemane, makes its final free and deliberate choice in the moment of death: I entrust myself to You.

The seventh word is spoken 'with a loud voice' (Luke 23:46, φωνῆ μεγάλῃ, *phōnē megalē*), a physical feat that testifies to the genuineness of the voluntary character of the death: the one who lays down His life 'on My own initiative' (John 10:18) does not die from the exhaustion of crucifixion but commits His spirit deliberately, loudly, and with the characteristic authority of the one who speaks with underived divine power. This is the Savior's death as He has lived: voluntarily, obediently, prayerfully, in the Father's hands. And from the Father's hands He will not be kept; the hands that receive the committed spirit are the hands that will give it back, transformed, on the third day.

IV. THE SEVEN WORDS AS A UNIFIED THEOLOGICAL PORTRAIT

The Complete Picture of the Cross in the Words of the One Who Accomplished It

A. The Seven Dimensions of the Atoning Work

Taken together, the seven last words of Christ constitute a theological portrait of the atonement that is unparalleled in its comprehensiveness and its personal intimacy. Each word reveals a dimension of the work being accomplished; together they address every dimension of the human problem that the atonement was designed to solve and every dimension of the Savior's character that the atonement reveals.

The first word (forgive them) reveals the grace that is the motivation and the goal of the atoning work: the cross is accomplished so that sinners who do not know what they are doing may receive the forgiveness that they do not deserve. The second word (today, Paradise, with Me) reveals the scope of the saving grace: it reaches the worst sinners at the last possible moment on the basis of the most minimal conceivable faith, and it provides the fullest possible salvation. The third word (behold your son) reveals the love that is expressed through the atoning work: not merely the cosmic love of God for the world but the intimate, personal, relational love of the Son for specific people He has taken as His own. The fourth word (why have You forsaken Me?) reveals the cost of the atoning work: the judicial penalty borne at the ninth hour in the darkness of the divine forsakenness. The fifth word (I thirst) reveals the reality of the atoning work: accomplished by genuine human suffering, through genuine human flesh, in genuine human dependence on the Father. The sixth word (it is finished) reveals the completion of the atoning work: the debt paid, the curse borne, the penalty exhausted, the work done. The seventh word (into Your hands) reveals the character of the one who accomplished the atoning work: trusting, obedient, filial, free, the Son who chose the Father's will to the last breath and committed Himself into the Father's hands in the moment of death.

B. The Seven Words and the Units of This Series

It is fitting, as Unit 7 draws to its close, to observe how the seven last words gather up the christological themes that the series has developed across its twenty-four lessons. The first word (grace, intercession) reflects the priestly office (Lesson 18) in its most direct and most personal expression. The second word (salvation by grace alone) reflects the active obedience (Lesson 15) and the definite atonement (Lesson 22): the criminal receives the salvation that was secured for him by the specific, personal, completed work of the one beside him. The third word (care for Mary) reflects the genuine humanity (Lesson 8) and the active obedience (Lesson 15): the incarnate Son, to the last moment, is genuinely human in His relational love and His practical care. The fourth word reflects the penal substitutionary atonement (Lesson 21) and the cry of dereliction (Lesson 23) in the most concentrated possible form. The fifth word reflects the genuine humanity (Lesson 8) and the impeccability (Lesson 12): the sinless one who thirsts like any man. The sixth word reflects the completed priestly sacrifice (Lesson 18) and the active obedience (Lesson 15): tetelestai is the final word of the accomplished work that will never need to be repeated. The seventh word reflects the Dyothelite human will (Lesson 13) and the voluntary character of the atonement (Lesson 20): the Son entrusts Himself to the Father in the free, deliberate, final act of the human will that has chosen the Father's will throughout the entire incarnate life.

V. THE PASTORAL UNITY: WHAT THE SEVEN WORDS TOGETHER OFFER THE BELIEVER

Every Dimension of the Human Need Is Addressed in the Words of the Dying Savior

The pastoral richness of the seven last words is precisely their unity: they are not seven separate pastoral resources to be applied in seven different circumstances but seven windows into the single inexhaustible reality of the completed atonement. The believer who is burdened by guilt goes to the sixth word (tetelestai: the debt is paid) but goes there having heard the first (Father, forgive them: grace is the motivation of the payment) and the second (today, Paradise: the payment secures the fullest possible salvation). The believer who is in the darkness of the felt absence of God goes to the fourth word (My God, why have You forsaken Me?) but goes there knowing that the one who cried in that darkness also cried tetelestai and then committed His spirit into the Father's hands. The believer who is facing death goes to the seventh word (into Your hands I commit My spirit) but goes there having heard the promise of the second word (today you shall be with Me in Paradise) and the assurance of the sixth (the work that secures the Paradise is finished).

The pastoral unity of the seven words is also the unity of the Person who speaks them. The one who forgives the ignorant soldiers (first word) is the same one who receives the dying criminal (second word), who provides for His grieving mother (third word), who bears the judicial forsakenness

(fourth word), who suffers genuine human thirst (fifth word), who declares the completed work (sixth word), and who commits Himself into the Father's hands (seventh word). Every word is spoken by the same Person, and the Person is the theological ground of the pastoral power of every word. The forgiveness of the first word is as reliable as the completed work of the sixth; the promise of the second word is as certain as the voluntary death of the seventh; the sympathy of the fourth word is as genuine as the thirst of the fifth. The seven words together are the self-revelation of the one whose Person and work together constitute the complete answer to the complete human problem.

VI. DOXOLOGICAL CONCLUSION: THE WORK IS FINISHED, THE WORD IS COMPLETE

Unit 7 on the Atoning Work of Christ has moved from the necessity of the cross (Lesson 20) through its nature (Lesson 21), its extent (Lesson 22), its deepest interior dimension in the cry of dereliction (Lesson 23), to the words of the one who accomplished it (this lesson). The arc is complete: the theological architecture has been built, the exegetical foundations have been laid, the historical depth has been plumbed, and the final word, *tetelestai*, has been heard from the lips of the one who spoke it with the authority of the completed work and the permanence of the perfect tense.

The seven last words are the cross's own self-commentary. They are more than theological data to be incorporated into a systematic account; they are the living voice of the Savior speaking from the place of His atoning work to those for whom He is accomplishing it. The one who cries 'Father, forgive them' at the beginning and 'Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit' at the end has enclosed the entire work of redemption in the double address to the Father: the cross is from the Father, through the Son, and to the Father, the Trinitarian shape of the atoning love expressed in the first and last words of the dying Savior.

And the central word, the sixth, the hinge of the seven, is *tetelestai*. It is finished. The debt is paid. The curse is borne. The penalty is exhausted. The work is done. Nothing remains to be added, supplemented, or repeated. The one who cried this word from the cross has sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Hebrews 1:3), the posture of the one whose work is finished. And from that seated, completed, victorious position, He intercedes for those for whom the work was accomplished, presenting the *tetelestai* of the sixth word before the Father as the permanent, sufficient, unanswerable ground of their acceptance. This is the gospel. This is the ground. This is the hope of every human soul. To the one who said *tetelestai* and meant it with the full weight of the eternal Son's authority and the perfect passive's permanent result, to Him be glory and honor and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Key Texts: *Luke 23:34, 43, 46; John 19:26–27, 28, 30; Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34; Psalm 22:1, 24; Psalm 31:5; Psalm 69:21; John 10:18; Hebrews 1:3; Hebrews 7:25*

THEOLOGICAL TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Term	Definition
Seven Last Words	The traditional designation for the seven utterances of Jesus from the cross, gathered from all four Gospels: (1) ‘Father, forgive them’ (Luke 23:34); (2) ‘Today you shall be with Me in Paradise’ (Luke 23:43); (3) ‘Woman, behold your son / Behold your mother’ (John 19:26–27); (4) ‘My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?’ (Matthew 27:46); (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). No single Gospel records all seven; the traditional enumeration gathers them from all four. Together they constitute the cross’s own theological self-commentary, revealing seven dimensions of the atoning work from the lips of the one accomplishing it.
Tetelestai	Greek: ‘it is finished,’ ‘it has been completed.’ The perfect passive of teleoo (‘to complete,’ ‘to accomplish,’ ‘to bring to its ordained end’). The sixth and central word from the cross (John 19:30), considered the most theologically consequential sentence in the history of the universe. The perfect tense declares both the completed action (the atoning work has been accomplished) and its permanent abiding result (it remains accomplished, permanently and irrevocably). In first-century commercial usage, tetelestai was written across paid debts as the declaration that the obligation had been discharged in full. As the cry of the completing High Priest, tetelestai declares that the divine requirement for the sins of those for whom Christ died has been fully, permanently, and finally satisfied.
First Word: Father Forgive Them	Luke 23:34: ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’ Spoken in the very act of crucifixion, before the cross is raised, as the first word from the place of the atoning work. Reveals: (1) grace as the motivation of the cross, the dying Son intercedes for those inflicting His death; (2) the continuity between the active obedience (love for enemies, Matthew 5:44) and the atoning death, the one who commanded prayer for persecutors prays for His own persecutors; (3) the cross-form of the intercessory ministry (Hebrews 7:25) that continues in the exalted Christ; (4) the scope of the grace, reaching even the ignorant, the guilty, and the hostile.
Second Word: Today in Paradise	Luke 23:43: ‘Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.’ Spoken to the repentant criminal who confesses his own guilt, acknowledges Christ’s

Term	Definition
	innocence, and requests to be remembered. Reveals: (1) salvation by grace alone in its most extreme form, the worst sinner at the last moment on the basis of minimal faith receives the fullest salvation; (2) the immediacy ('today'), the personal character ('with Me'), and the quality ('Paradise') of the promised salvation; (3) the scope of the priestly work, the sin-bearer simultaneously extends the promise of salvation to those who turn to Him in faith. The most extreme possible demonstration that salvation is not by works, religious performance, or moral track record but by grace alone through faith alone.
Third Word: Behold Your Son	John 19:26–27: 'Woman, behold, your son! / Behold, your mother!' Spoken to Mary and the beloved disciple standing at the cross. Reveals: (1) the genuine humanity of the incarnate Son in the very act of the atoning work, the love of a son for his mother persists through the extremity of the cosmic event; (2) the covenant community created by the atoning work, the cross creates new family, bringing the mother and the beloved disciple into a new filial relationship by the authority of the dying King; (3) the pastoral care of the Shepherd for the specific, named individuals who are His own, expressed even in the act of bearing the penalty for the sin of the world.
Fifth Word: I Thirst	John 19:28: 'I am thirsty' (dipsō, the single Greek word). The briefest of the seven words, spoken with the explicit fulfillment formula ('to fulfill the Scripture', echoing Psalm 69:21 and Psalm 22:15). Reveals: (1) the genuine humanity of the Savior at the moment of the atonement's completion, the Creator who sustains the universe experiences genuine creaturely thirst; (2) the fulfillment of the Righteous Sufferer's pattern in the Psalter, the thirst is both physiologically real and prophetically anticipated; (3) the kenotic self-limitation of the incarnation at its most extreme, the one who offers the water of life cries out for literal water. The fifth word is the counterpart to the sixth: immediately before tetelestai (the completed cosmic work), dipsō (the genuinely human need).
Seventh Word: Into Your Hands	Luke 23:46: 'Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.' Spoken 'with a loud voice' (phōnē megalē), a citation of Psalm 31:5. Reveals: (1) the restoration of the intimate filial address ('Father') after the 'My God, My God' of the judicial forsakenness, the completed work has exhausted the penalty and restored the warm Trinitarian fellowship; (2) the Dyothelite human will in its final, free, deliberate act, the Son entrusts Himself to the Father as the culmination of the entire pattern of the active obedience; (3) the voluntary character of the death confirmed by the loud voice, He does not die from exhaustion but commits His spirit deliberately. The Father's hands that receive the committed spirit are the hands that will return it on the third day.
Dipsō	Greek: 'I thirst,' first person singular present of dipsaō ('to be thirsty'). The single-word fifth utterance of Christ from the cross (John 19:28), the briefest of the seven last words. Remarkable for its simplicity, its physical nakedness, and

Term	Definition
	<p>its juxtaposition with the theologically momentous ‘knowing that all things had already been accomplished.’ John frames the thirst as the deliberate fulfillment of Scripture (Psalm 69:21) by one who is fully conscious of the theological significance of the moment. The contrast between the accomplished cosmic redemption (panta ede tetelestai, all things already accomplished) and the immediate physical need (dipsō) is the quintessential expression of the full humanity of the Chalcedonian Christ in the very act of accomplishing the atonement.</p>
<p>Chiastic Structure of the Seven Words</p>	<p>A proposed literary-theological structure of the seven last words: Words 1–3 (grace, salvation, love) reveal the Savior’s character in His relationship with those He is saving; Words 4–5 (dereliction, thirst) reveal the depths of the suffering through which the saving is accomplished (judicial penalty + genuine human need); Words 6–7 (completion, trust) reveal the character of the completed work and the Savior’s relationship with the Father. The seventh word ‘Father, into Your hands’ echoes the first word’s ‘Father, forgive them’, enclosing the entire work in the double address to the Father and establishing the Trinitarian shape of the atonement: from the Father, through the Son, to the Father.</p>
<p>Tetelestai as Commercial Term</p>	<p>The commercial background of tetelestai (paid in full) confirmed by papyrological evidence from the first-century Mediterranean world: the word was written across paid debts and receipts as the declaration that an obligation had been fully discharged, nothing remaining to be paid. When applied to Christ’s cry from the cross, the commercial background illuminates the atoning significance: the debt of sin owed by those for whom He died has been paid in full, permanently, and irrevocably. There is no remaining balance; there is no outstanding claim; there is no further payment required or possible. The legal-commercial resonance of tetelestai deepens the penal substitutionary meaning of the sixth word: this is the Substitute’s declaration that the debt is discharged.</p>

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the seven last words are not devotional decoration appended to the systematic theology of the atonement but the atonement’s own primary self-commentary. The words that Christ spoke in the act of accomplishing the redemption of the world are the most authoritative possible account of what the redemption means: not an account provided by a subsequent systematic theologian looking back at the event, but the account provided by the one in the act of accomplishing it. The congregation that has been formed by the seven last words will have an understanding of the

cross that is simultaneously theologically precise (because each word reveals a specific dimension of the atoning work) and personally intimate (because the words are the voice of the Savior speaking from the place of His most costly self-giving).

We must also believe that *tetelestai*, the sixth and central word, is the most personally liberating theological declaration available to the guilty conscience. It is finished. Not 'it is mostly finished' or 'it is finished conditionally upon your continuing faithfulness' or 'it will be finished when you have done your part.' It is finished, with the full weight of the perfect passive: completed action with permanent, abiding result. The believer who has genuinely received *tetelestai* will not live in spiritual performance anxiety about their standing before God; they will live in the freedom of those who know that the debt has been discharged by a payment of infinite value, and that the discharge is permanent.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

Let the seven words together form the pattern of your meditation on the cross throughout Holy Week and throughout the Christian year. Tradition has it that Good Friday services often structure extended meditation around the seven last words, seven movements of contemplation, each word providing a window into a different dimension of the dying Savior's work. But the seven words deserve more than one annual meditation; they deserve to be the regular furniture of the devotional imagination, the words that come to mind when the guilty conscience needs the ground of forgiveness (*tetelestai*), when the suffering believer needs the sympathy of the one who cried in the darkness (My God, My God), when the dying believer needs the promise of the one who received the criminal (today, with Me, Paradise).

Desire a congregation whose worship at the Lord's Table is shaped by all seven words together. The Supper 'proclaims the Lord's death until He comes' (1 Corinthians 11:26, NASB 1995), and the proclamation of His death is most richly accomplished when it includes all seven dimensions that the seven words reveal: the grace that motivated the work (first word), the salvation secured by it (second word), the love expressed through it (third word), the cost at which it was accomplished (fourth word), the genuine humanity through which it was borne (fifth word), the completion that makes the Supper's celebration possible (sixth word), and the trust that characterizes the one whose death the Supper commemorates (seventh word).

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Structure a Good Friday service around the seven last words, with each word receiving twenty to twenty-five minutes of focused theological and devotional attention. The service could be organized as seven movements, each beginning with the reading of the relevant Gospel text, followed by a brief theological exposition of what the word reveals about the atoning work, and closing with a period of silent reflection or congregational lament or praise appropriate to the word. The seventh movement, ending with *tetelestai* and 'Father, into Your

hands,' would close with the congregation's corporate confession of the completed work and the trust of the believer in the hands of the Father who received the committed spirit and will receive ours.

- Preach individual sermons on each of the seven last words as a series in the weeks approaching Holy Week, or as a standalone series at any point in the year. Each word provides a complete sermon in itself, and the series as a whole provides the most comprehensive pastoral engagement with the cross available from a single extended preaching project. The congregation that has sat with all seven words through the course of a sermon series will emerge with a richer, more personally inhabited, more theologically comprehensive understanding of the cross than any single atonement sermon can provide.
- Use the second word (today, with Me, in Paradise) in pastoral care of the dying, and of those who fear death on behalf of themselves or their loved ones. The promise given to the criminal is the most personal, most immediate, most comprehensive promise of salvation available from the lips of Jesus: 'today,' 'with Me,' 'Paradise.' The dying believer who receives this promise receives it from the one whose completed work (sixth word: tetelestai) has secured the Paradise promised. The pastoral care of the dying is most theologically grounded and most personally consoling when it brings the specific promises of the specific words to bear on the specific need of the specific person.
- Use the sixth word (tetelestai: it is finished) as the central text for preaching on justification, assurance, and the freedom from spiritual performance anxiety. The word is not merely the conclusion of the passion narrative; it is the ground of the believer's standing before God, the declaration that the debt has been paid and will never need to be paid again. The believer who regularly returns to tetelestai in prayer and devotion will find in it the most specific possible answer to the recurring question of the guilty conscience: Is it really finished? Yes. Tetelestai. Paid in full, permanently, by the one who spoke it from the cross.
- Build the pastoral care of the grieving, the suffering, and the dying around the full arc of the seven words rather than retreating immediately to the consoling words (second, seventh) without the searching words (fourth, fifth). The suffering believer who is allowed to sit with the fourth word (My God, why have You forsaken Me?) before being brought to the seventh (Father, into Your hands) will find a more christologically honest and more pastorally sustaining engagement with their suffering than the believer who is moved past the darkness too quickly. The arc of the seven words is the arc of the Christian life in miniature: grace, salvation, love, dereliction, thirst, completion, and trust, all held together in the one who spoke them and who now intercedes on the basis of the work they describe.

STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

OPENING QUESTION

1. Which of the seven last words from the cross is most personally meaningful to you, and why? Has that changed at different seasons of your life, was there a time when a different word was more central to your devotional engagement with the cross? And which word have you found most difficult to preach or to receive devotionally, and what has made it difficult?

OBSERVATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DO THE TEXTS SAY?)

2. Read Luke 23:32–43. For the first word (v. 34) and the second word (v. 43), identify: (a) the specific context in which each is spoken (what is happening, who is present, what has just occurred); (b) the specific content of each word; and (c) the immediate response of those present. For the second word, identify the specific elements of the criminal's confession and request in verses 40–42, and explain why these specific elements, and not the content of his moral life, are the basis of the promise he receives in verse 43.

3. Read John 19:25–30. For the third word (vv. 26–27) and the fifth word (v. 28), identify: (a) who is present and what their relationship to Jesus is; (b) the specific content of each word; (c) what John's editorial comments reveal about the theological significance of each word (for the third: the specific action that results; for the fifth: the fulfillment formula and the statement that 'all things had already been accomplished'). How does John's framing of the fifth word ('knowing that all things had already been accomplished') establish the theological relationship between the cry of thirst (*dipsō*) and the completed work (*tetelestai*)?

4. Read John 19:28–30 and Luke 23:44–46. For the sixth word (John 19:30) and the seventh word (Luke 23:46): (a) identify the Greek word *tetelestai* and explain what the perfect passive tense declares about the character of the completed work; (b) identify the Old Testament citation in the seventh word (Psalm 31:5) and explain how the citation changes the meaning of the final breath compared to a simple statement like 'I die'; (c) identify the specific detail in Luke 23:46 that Luke uses to characterize the death (the loud voice) and explain what that detail reveals about the voluntary character of the death.

5. Read all seven passages in sequence: Luke 23:34; Luke 23:43; John 19:26–27; Matthew 27:46; John 19:28; John 19:30; Luke 23:46. Having read all seven in sequence, identify the pattern of address: how does the mode of address change from word to word? How does the shift from 'Father' (first word) to 'My God, My God' (fourth word) back to 'Father' (seventh word) reflect the arc of the passion narrative theologically? What does the double 'Father' frame of words one and seven establish about the Trinitarian shape of the atoning work?

INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT MEAN?)

- 6.** The lesson presents the seven words as having a chiasmic theological structure: Words 1–3 (the Savior’s character in relation to those He saves), Words 4–5 (the depths of the suffering), Words 6–7 (the completed work and the Savior’s relationship with the Father). Do you find this chiasmic structure exegetically and theologically persuasive? What does the chiasmic structure illuminate about the relationship between the words that the simple sequential reading does not? Are there alternative structures that organize the seven words in a different but equally illuminating way?
- 7.** The second word (today, with Me, in Paradise) is the gospel in its most extreme form, salvation given to the worst possible sinner at the last possible moment on the most minimal possible faith. How does the second word relate to the theological debates about salvation that have occupied the tradition, specifically, does it support or challenge the idea that saving faith requires a minimum cognitive or moral content? What does ‘today you shall be with Me in Paradise’ tell you about the character of the faith that receives salvation and the character of the God who grants it?
- 8.** The sixth word (tetelestai) is called ‘the most theologically consequential sentence in the history of the universe.’ Do you agree with this characterization? What makes tetelestai more consequential than the resurrection proclamation (‘He is risen’) or the incarnation announcement (‘the Word became flesh’)? How does the perfect passive tense of tetelestai specifically establish the permanent, abiding character of the completed work in a way that other possible formulations (‘I have completed it’ or ‘the work is done’) would not?
- 9.** The lesson argues that the seventh word (‘Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit’) restores the intimate filial address (‘Father’) that was absent from the fourth word (‘My God, My God’) and that this restoration reflects the theological movement from the judicial forsakenness of the sin-bearing to the restored fellowship of the completed work. Is this argument exegetically persuasive? What specifically does the shift from ‘My God’ to ‘Father’ reveal about the nature of the forsakenness (it was covenantal-relational, not ontological) and about the character of the completed work (the restoration of the relational dimension)?
- 10.** The lesson argues that the seven last words together constitute a ‘complete theological portrait of the atonement’, that together they address every dimension of the human problem that the atonement was designed to solve. Do you agree? For each of the four dimensions of the human problem identified in Lesson 16 (ignorance, guilt, bondage, estrangement), identify which of the seven words most directly addresses it. Are there dimensions of the human problem that the seven words do not address, or dimensions of the atoning work that the seven words do not reveal?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT DEMAND OF US?)

- 11.** The lesson recommends structuring a Good Friday service around the seven last words. Design the outline of such a service: what is the overall structure, how long would each movement be, what would each movement include (reading, exposition, silence, music, prayer), and what would the pastoral aim of the overall service be? If your church does not currently observe Good Friday, what would be the theological and pastoral case for introducing the observance, and how would you present that case to your congregation or leadership?
- 12.** The lesson recommends using the second word (today, with Me, in Paradise) in pastoral care of the dying. Describe the specific pastoral conversation you would have with a believer who is dying and who is expressing fear about what comes after death. Which elements of the second word would you emphasize, and how would you connect the promise of the second word to the completed work of the sixth word (tetelestai) to provide the most specific and the most grounded pastoral assurance?
- 13.** The lesson recommends building pastoral care of the grieving, the suffering, and the dying around the full arc of the seven words rather than retreating immediately to the consoling words without the searching words. Think of a specific pastoral situation in which you were tempted to move past the darkness too quickly, to get to the consolation without sitting with the grief. How might a more deliberate engagement with the fourth word (My God, why have You forsaken Me?) have changed the pastoral care you provided? What would it look like, concretely, to allow the searching words to do their proper work before bringing the consoling words?
- 14.** This lesson completes Unit 7 on the Atoning Work of Christ, and with it the first two-thirds of the Christology series. Looking back over Units 1–7, from the centrality of Christ in all theology (Unit 1) through the pre-existence and eternal Sonship (Unit 2), the incarnation (Unit 3), the hypostatic union (Unit 4), the sinless life and active obedience (Unit 5), the threefold office (Unit 6), and the atoning work (Unit 7), what single insight has most transformed your understanding of the Person and Work of Christ? And as you look ahead to Units 8–11 (the resurrection, the ascension and intercession, the return, and the conclusion), how does the completed work of tetelestai prepare the ground for the resurrection that vindicated it and the exaltation that extended it?

PRAYER FOCUS

Open this lesson's prayer time with a meditative reading of all seven last words in sequence, read slowly, with a period of silence between each word sufficient to allow the full weight of each to rest on the group before the next is read. First word: 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' Silence. Second word: 'Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.' Silence. Third word: 'Woman, behold, your son! / Behold, your mother!' Silence. Fourth word: 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?' Extended silence, the longest pause, appropriate to the deepest word. Fifth word: 'I am thirsty.' Silence. Sixth word: 'It is finished.' Silence, the silence of the

completed work, the silence of the paid debt, the silence of the one who has sat down. Seventh word: 'Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.' Silence, the silence of the committed spirit, resting in the Father's hands, awaiting the third day.

After the reading, spend time in worship structured around three of the seven words that are most directly relevant to the group's current experience and need. If there are those in the group who are carrying guilt, bring the sixth word (tetelestai: the debt is paid, and the payment is permanent). If there are those who are in darkness, experiencing the felt absence of God, praying from a place that feels like dereliction, bring the fourth word and sit with them in it before bringing the seventh word's restoration. If there are those who are facing death, their own or a loved one's, bring the second word (today, with Me, in Paradise) and the seventh (into Your hands I commit my spirit).

Pray for the congregation's engagement with the cross in the coming year, specifically for the preaching and teaching ministry to be shaped by the full arc of the seven words rather than by a selective engagement with only the most comfortable dimensions of the passion. Pray for the Good Friday observance (if your church holds one) to be a genuine, theologically serious, devotionally searching encounter with the dying Savior. And pray for the specific members of your congregation who most need the specific words of the dying Savior to address their specific need.

Close with tetelestai, spoken together as the corporate reception of the completed work, the corporate declaration that the debt is paid and the ground of the believer's standing before God is the finished, permanent, irrevocable atoning work of the one who cried it from the cross:

"When Jesus therefore had received the sour wine, He said, 'It is finished!' And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit."

Tetelestai. *Paid in full. Permanently. Forever.*

JOHN 19:30, NASB 1995

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Dr. Joshua Nichols

josh@faithfultotheword.com | faithfultotheword.com