

A LIVING CHRONIC FAITH DEVOTIONAL

LESSONS FROM THE CROSS

for people living with chronic diagnoses



What do the seven last words of Jesus
Christ teach and model for those
living with chronic illness and pain?

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Welcome to *Lessons from the Cross*,
a 7-day devotional for Resurrection season,
written with you in mind.

It is our prayer that you will take
this 7-day journey along with us as we
return to the cross, through Scripture,
to see what the heart of Jesus might reveal
to us about how His death empowered
us to live a life that reflects His love.

Please take a few moments each day of
Holy Week to prayerfully consider what God
might be saying to you through
these devotionals.

As always, your feedback is welcome.

Please email us at
info@livingchronicfaith.com

Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. (Luke 23:34)

Right in the midst of one of your most challenging days, your good friend (who has never been sick a day in his or her life) might say something really inconsiderate and you just want to scream at them. A medical professional makes a baseless assumption about your ability or desire to manage your health care. A well-meaning church member might insinuate that you “just need a little more faith” and you could be healed. Any of these could make someone with an already difficult diagnosis feel even worse, and the culprit walks away from the exchange totally clueless to the emotional chain reaction they have set off. Has this ever happened to you?

It's completely natural to feel hurt in any of these scenarios. Chances are, however, that the person involved meant no harm at all. How do you respond? When people that you care about mishandle an interaction and leave you wounded and bleeding, or when they simply do not know how to offer the support that you need, what do you do? What if meddling co-workers “casually” bring attention to how many times you've arrived late to work this month, not realizing how difficult it was for you to drag yourself out of bed? Or what if they try to sabotage your chances for a promotion by questioning your “dependability”? How do you respond when people make your suffering even worse?

Jesus forgave them and asked the Father to do the same. The Bible says that we should follow His example: “Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye” (Colossians 3:13). I'm not suggesting that it is easy to overlook offenses, but whenever we pray “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us (Matthew 6:12)”, we have signed up to be forgivers. We are not required to correct, educate, embarrass, or scold. If the Holy Spirit leads you to lovingly communicate your feelings, that's one thing, but open rebukes can be misconstrued or fan an unnecessary flame. “A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger (Proverbs 15:1).”

Forgiveness frees the other person from guilt and liberates you from a potentially cumbersome grudge. It also frees God to forgive our mistakes. “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you (Matthew 6:14).” Forgiveness releases you to focus on the much more important tasks ahead of you. It is a choice, and our choices matter to God. If Jesus could forgive His own murderers, may we live every day making the effort to follow His example.

Father, I am so grateful that You have forgiven me for all my failures and shortcomings. Thank You for granting me justification when I deserved justice. Whenever I am hurt or offended by someone, whether intentionally or not, please remind me that you have called me to “let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from [me], with all malice (Ephesians 4:31),” and that Jesus taught us to ask for forgiveness in the measure in which we have forgiven others. Please help me to offer the grace to others that I have received from You. Grant me the wisdom to know when, if, and how to respond and the strength to do so, as You lead, in love and humility.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.
(Luke 23:43)

Jesus was hanging on a cross. His body was giving out and He was paying for the sins of the people who were killing Him. Yet, the man next to Him, who actually deserved the death they were both dying, saw beyond the bleeding and ridiculed King of the Jews, to the King of kings Who was soon to come into His Kingdom and be seated upon His eternal throne. In his last moments, this criminal made what may have been the best decision of his life—He acknowledged Jesus and asked Him to remember him. Did the thief have any idea that he was speaking to the Word of God Who spoke creation into being in the very beginning? Did he have any idea how powerful His thoughts are and that just being remembered by the Christ would be enough to change his eternity?

Severe pain can make it difficult to think clearly about anything other than the pain we are feeling. Pain can be a very powerful distraction because in those moments, all we want is relief. Pain can make even the most altruistic person seem selfish because all they can focus on is their own needs. But Jesus was not in too much pain to recognize that one of the Father's beloved children was ready to take his place in the family of God. Jesus could have understandably dismissed this man because He was a little busy saving humanity, but instead, He chose to be an example for humanity. It's counterintuitive, for sure, that a person who is going through so much would entertain special requests. But this was His mission—the whole reason He came was to reconcile people to God.

In those moments when the Holy Spirit presents us with an opportunity to meet the needs of others, may we ask ourselves, "What is my mission? What am I here to do?" We are the body of Christ, representing Him throughout the earth, and our interactions should reflect His heart. Whatever state we find ourselves in, Hebrews 13:16 (NIV) encourages, "And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." Though it may seem that our resources are depleted, God Himself is our Source and He is faithful to take what we have to give and make of it just exactly what someone else needs to receive.

Jesus teaches us that even in the most trying, most painful, most challenging points of our suffering, even in a moment when we feel we have nothing left, we always have something to give, and we always have someone to reach. We're not done until we have breathed our last. Until then, we have something to offer, and we must take every opportunity to do just that.

Lord, I believe that You created me with purpose and that as long as I am here, You have provided a way for me to serve others. Please help me to look for those opportunities. Help me to see in myself what You see in me. I pray that in those most challenging times, when the temptation to be self-absorbed is greatest, that I would remember my mission—to represent You and to reflect the light of Your love into all the earth. Thank you being the endless Source of strength and grace that I need to do so.
In Jesus' name. Amen.

Woman, behold thy son... Behold, thy mother. (John 19:26-27)

Chronic illness does not just affect the people with the diagnoses; it touches everyone closely connected with them. For example, the extreme fatigue you feel might cause you to miss your daughter's recital or your brother's birthday party. Nothing can take the place of being there yourself, but there are two things you can do to make the effects of your diagnosis a little easier on you and the people you love, as demonstrated by Jesus on the cross.

By the time Jesus walked the via dolorosa to Calvary, many scholars suggest that Joseph, his stepfather, had passed away, leaving Him, as the eldest son, with the cultural obligation to care for His mother, Mary. Because He knew that crossing His finish line meant that He would not be able to be there for her in the flesh, He made certain that she would be cared for. Think of it—Jesus, the very Son of God, would soon be returning to His heavenly throne. Who could be in a better position to take care of her than God? But I believe that Jesus was meeting her human needs for contact, compassion, and companionship. Jesus could, and would, still provide for her, but John could fix things, lift heavy objects, and sometimes, just sit with her and maybe even share a few memories.

- 1) If you have loved ones who count on you to be at basketball games, school plays, and charity dinners, no one can take your place, but you can make sure that someone occupies your seat in the event that you do not feel up to it. They want someone to celebrate their game-winning touchdown, and you are their greatest cheerleader, but if you can't be there, perhaps you can find someone dependable who will cheer just as loudly as you would. Later, you can ask for every detail of the event so that you have an opportunity to celebrate it all over again! And if they forget their lines completely during the very first scene of the very first act of the play, make sure that someone is there to give the pep talk you would give and buy them the ice cream that you would buy, just until you have the opportunity to give them the hugs and kisses that only you can give.
- 2) And, like Jesus, do not wait to prepare your loved ones for the difficult days that may be ahead. Communicate with them. Make sure that they know that you will be there every time you can, and that you absolutely don't want to miss a single opportunity to witness their genius or take them to their appointment, but when your body doesn't cooperate, you love them enough to prepare in advance so that the ball does not get dropped. Even the smallest child can understand sickness or pain. Your loved ones want your support, not your guilt. You can make sure that they know they have it.

Jesus, sometimes the pain or fatigue my body feels makes it really hard for me to do the things that others expect. Please help me in those moments to realize that pushing myself is only going to make things worse. Give me the grace to ask trusted loved ones to support me by showing up when I need to rest. Please guide my conversation when I need to explain my absence at important occasions and allow others to feel the love and commitment I carry in my heart for them, even when I can't show it with my presence. Help me to set aside the pride that makes me feel the need to do everything myself, and to show my gratitude for those who will step in to bridge the gap for me when I call.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me? (Matthew 27:46)

When Jesus died on Calvary, He took all the sins of the whole world, past and present, upon Himself. Because sin cannot stand in God's presence, Jesus, in that moment, became repulsive to God. For once, God's beloved Son, in Whom He was well-pleased, embodied the very enemy of God's design for His creation. How it must have broken the heart of God to see His perfect Son covered in the stain and stench of sins He never even committed! It was the fact that there was a purpose in the pain that enabled Jesus to endure the most traumatic thing imaginable—God turning His back on Him. In that moment, as the Lamb of God embraced the will of God, He knew that God's purpose would be fulfilled through His suffering.

I don't believe for one second that God gives us illnesses. God is the Giver of good gifts. He loves us and has plans to prosper us and not to harm us (Jeremiah 29:11), but He will, at times, allow us to endure difficult challenges. When He does, though, we can be certain that He has already created and set in motion and plan to make it work together for good (Romans 8:28). Very seldom does it feel like it in the moment, and, like Jesus, we may wonder where God is in the midst of our pain. But it is because of Jesus that we can know that God is with us—that the sin that would drive a wedge between us and God hung on the cross with Jesus that day at Calvary. In fact, God-in-flesh took those stripes, humiliation, and pain, and is touched with the feelings of our infirmities (Hebrews 4:15). God understands the pain we're experiencing, and He doesn't leave us alone to fend for ourselves. He even understands how heartbreaking it is to watch a loved one suffer. And because Jesus sent us His Holy Spirit, we have a Comforter that goes with us through each symptom, treatment, and procedure.

Not only does He comfort us, however, but He brings purpose out of our pain—if we let Him. As we seek His will in the midst of illness and pain, as we surrender our attitudes, losses, and disappointments, we will find our loving Father waiting to use what we're going through for His glory. He will reveal His goodness and His faithfulness in ways we could never imagine. He will align our paths with those who need to hear more about His mercy and kindness. And He will supply our every need and make ways where none exist so that we can testify to the whole world that God has not forgotten them and will never forget them, no matter what situation they are facing.

God had to turn His back on His sin-burdened Son for a moment, because Jesus finished the atoning work of Calvary, we never have to experience that. Jesus promised never to leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). As we face the challenges before us, may we never forget that Jesus came to be God with us (Matthew 1:23), and He is faithful to be just that. Whatever comes our way, we are never forsaken.

Jesus, thank You for coming to earth to be God with me. Thank You for loving me so much that You would endure the traumatic loss of the Father's presence, even for a moment, so that I would never have to. Please help me to never take it for granted, and to remember—even in the difficult times—that I am never alone. Even in the scariest places, even in the valley of the shadow of death, You choose to be with me. Remind me, in those times, that Your presence makes all the difference. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I thirst. (John 19:28)

Jesus was in the most pain He had ever experienced—more pain than most people ever will. Every drop of fluid was slowly draining from His body through literal blood, sweat, and tears. Can you feel the dizziness? The weakness? How His lungs must have burned, and His mouth must have become dry? We understand, now, what happens physiologically during a crucifixion but at the time, science had yet to discover the misery of the cross. It was known to be a slow, cruel death—cursed, Moses said (Deuteronomy 21:22-23; Galatians 3:13). Even at a glance, one could observe the torment, the agony. Having never experienced it, however, no bystander could relate, much less understand what the Christ, and the thieves, dying that day were going through.

Have you ever felt like no one understands what you are experiencing? Like, no matter how many times you try to describe it or how often they ask how you're doing, they can never really grasp what it's like for you? Well, you're right. Unless they have been through something very similar, no one can truly understand your experience. And chances are that your loved ones really want to know how to help or support you. If you're like most people who value their independence highly, you hesitate (or flat-out refuse) to reveal too much because you don't want pity or to be a burden. But the truth is that the people who love you may already be carrying the burden of not having a way to help. This is hard for people who genuinely want the best for you, and it can really damage relationships because they don't want to offend you by continuing to ask questions and offer help, yet, when they stop asking and offering, you may feel less inclined to ask for help because they seem distant or unconcerned. And so on... and so on...

Jesus, while on the cross, expressed a basic human need—simply and unapologetically. Unfortunately, it could not be His loved ones to respond, but the model is clear. You will never receive what you don't ask for. How many times in the Bible are we told to "Ask"? One night, I was fighting a raging infection that brought with it a pretty significant fever. Delirious and dizzy, I was in and out of consciousness, and completely unable to ambulate to the kitchen to get water. In a moment of lucidity, I called my sister, in the middle of the night, and she answered the phone right away. I told her that I was extremely hot and very thirsty, but I couldn't get up to get water. My sister understood that under normal circumstances, I would never ask such a thing, so I must be in crisis. My sister got out of bed and drove the twenty or so minutes to my house just to bring me water (and call an ambulance and follow us to the ER). The people who care about you are not mind readers, but most of them would probably love to find a way to contribute to your well-being. Even if it is an inconvenience to them, I have found that love will choose the extra mile every time.

Lord, I want to try. I want to do the things for myself that I can do. Sometimes, however, I find that assistance would be beneficial. Please help me to think about my willingness to help my loved ones, that I would never consider it a burden to be there for them in their times of need. I would want them to share their needs with me so that we can find a solution together. Today, I accept that they feel the same way towards me and that if I never ask, I may never receive the help I truly need. Please help me to appreciate the support system You have given me. Jesus, if You could be humble enough to ask for what You needed, so can I. Thank You for Your example. In Jesus' name. Amen.

It is finished. (John 19:30)

It.

What is “it”? What was Jesus declaring to be finished? Surely “it” wasn’t His life, because He was laying it down to be picked up again in three days.

“It” wasn’t His relationship with the disciples because He promised to be with them until the end of the age and to send them a Comforter.

The “it” Jesus spoke of was the work He had come to do. “It” represented the atonement for sin and the reconciliation of mankind back to God. “It” meant that the hard part was over, the suffering could finally end—His and ours. This bitter cup that God could not allow to pass from Jesus was finally empty, now that Jesus had poured Himself out for us. “It” was the thing that Jesus had accomplished for us that we could not accomplish for ourselves. “It” was the debt that could finally be marked “paid in full” and “it” was the case file stamped “Mission: Accomplished”.

But that wasn’t all that was finished.

When Jesus died, the veil in the Temple was torn from top to bottom. Separation from God was finished.

When Jesus died, He took the keys of death, hell, and the grave. The sting and finality of death was finished.

When Jesus died, He triumphed over every scheme and device the devil has imagined. The triumph of the enemy in the life of the believer was finished.

When Jesus died, He purchased our salvation and freedom. Our sin-debt was finished.

In fact, not only did Jesus conquer sin, He conquered all of sin’s collateral damage, too. When sin entered the world, so did death, pain, illness, hatred, and everything negative. Our human bodies are still going to die because death is a consequence of the flesh, but Christ’s death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead means that the permanence of death is finished. Actually, Jesus’ resurrection made death a gateway to eternal life. Death is no longer the end—our eternity with Him is secure because of the atoning work Christ began in a young girl from Nazareth. “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23). Glory to the Lamb of God—It is finished!”

Jesus, because of what You did on Calvary, the enemy can no longer hold death over my head. I was already dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1), but You came that I might have life more abundantly (John 10:10). Thank You for a victory over illness that means that even with a diagnosis and symptoms, I can still walk in wholeness right now. Thank You that pain doesn’t get to dictate my future. And thank You that I have an eternity to look forward to, a “forever life” with no pain in which I will never tire of praising Your great name. I choose to begin practicing right now--Hallelujah! In Jesus’ name. Amen

Father, into Thy hands I commend My Spirit. (Luke 23:46)

This statement has been recorded as Jesus' last proclamation before He died. Imagine Jesus up on the cross, in excruciating pain. He is beyond exhausted because He has been awake since Gethsemane, being whipped and tortured, spat upon and ridiculed. On absolutely no sleep, He is forced to drag a heavy, cumbersome cross up Golgotha's hill. It takes every ounce of strength He has just to draw in the shallowest of breaths. He is trying to see through the tears of agony

and the blood running into His eyes from the ironic thorny crown that was placed on His head. His body is caught between fighting to survive (because that's what bodies are designed to do) and just wanting it all to be over. But He held on—for us. He waited until He accomplished what needed to happen to pay our ransom, win us back to the Father, and purchase our healing and salvation. Now, finally, the Word made flesh, God with us, Jesus the Christ could rest. There was only one thing left to do.

We have heard it preached many times that Jesus said, "No man takes my life, but I lay it down" (John 10:18), but it wasn't that the soldiers couldn't kill Jesus. The fact is, Jesus couldn't die. The reason He couldn't die is because the Spirit that enlivened His flesh being was the very Spirit of Almighty God, and God's Spirit is Life itself. When God breathed into Adam, he came to life. It was the Spirit of God that enlivened Jesus, too. That's why He had to actually give His Spirit to the Father—because as long as He had it, He would have Life.

The amazing thing is that because God gave that Spirit back to Jesus early on the first Easter Sunday morning, that Spirit is accessible to us, to lead us into all truth, to comfort and convict us—to give us eternal life. And now that we have the Holy Spirit in us, we cannot die, either. Sure, because of sin, our bodies will die, but the flesh is only the "container" for our souls; it is our souls that will reign forever with Him.

The other idea that I want you to meditate on is that in the moments of His worst suffering, Jesus gave His life to God—not in the sense of responding to an altar call, but He literally placed His whole life into God's hands, choosing to die so that God's purpose might be fulfilled. God is calling for us, maybe in moments of great pain or suffering, to entrust Him with our whole lives, choosing to die to our flesh, so that God's purpose can be fulfilled in our lives as well. Will you, like Jesus, place your life in God's hands?

Even the word "excruciating" comes from the Latin word meaning "to torment" which was derived from "crux", meaning "cross". Language had no word accurate enough to describe the pain of the cross, so it became its own description--kind of like "Google" became a verb.

Father, thank You for the gift of free will. Please forgive me for the times when I have leaned to my own understanding without acknowledging You (Proverbs 3:5-6). I pray that from now on I will use that free will to choose Your way. Whatever areas of my life that I have been withholding from You, Lord, I surrender them now. May Your will be done in every moment of my life, every word I speak, everything I do. Be glorified in my life and may Your purpose be fulfilled in me. I place my entire life into Your hands in this moment. Have Your way. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

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You are in our hearts and prayers. Enjoy this
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Christ is risen indeed!

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