

Father, Forgive Them

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[0 : 00] Let us now turn to the passage that we read. Luke's Gospel chapter 23.

And we may read again at verse 34. And Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

In the passage that we have read together, Luke gives us his take on the immediate events leading up to the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ and also what transpired at Calvary.

Three men have been judged and condemned. One we know has been stripped and brutally flogged.

They have been forced to carry the heavy wooden crossbeams through the streets of Jerusalem and out to the gates of the city. Luke reports that one of them is so weak that a certain Simon of Sirene by name is forced to help carry the cross.

[1 : 22] The cross of Jesus is placed on this man who was making his way to Jerusalem, possibly a Jew. That is why he was coming to Jerusalem.

He has spoken of us belonging to Sirene. I think the moderate equivalent would be Tripoli in Libya. He was coming from North Africa to Jerusalem. He was a married man with at least two sons because Mark's Gospel tells us that he was the father of Alexander and Rufus.

Obviously, both of these were well known by the early church. It is interesting to note what Luke reports. The soldiers laid on this man the cross to carry it behind Jesus.

Many have seen in this word picture an illustration of discipleship. Disciples of Jesus are identified in the world as people of the cross.

[2 : 40] Disciples are seen as those who follow the Lord Jesus, a cross bearing people and followers of Jesus Christ.

And perhaps it is an up-delustration. I'm not entirely sure. It's easy to speculate. I don't know whether this man, whether this episode was a turning point in his life or had the seeds of the Gospel been sown in his life before now.

But it is possible that this was a turning point. And may account for the fact that his sons were known to the early church.

It may be that his conversion was instrumental in theirs. But as I say, I'm in the realm of speculation and it's always unwise to speculate too much with regard to the Bible.

It's just a thought. However, what I do see in the word picture that is painted for us by Luke of Simon carrying the cross is that it is a symbol of old condemnation.

[4 : 10] We are the ones who deserve to die for our sins, not Jesus Christ.

And in the cross bearing of Simon, we ought to see the heavy burden of our own guilt and sin. Jesus on the cross has set before us as the sinner substitute.

And let's remember that Luke's Gospel has been leading right up to this point where we see the cross on Jesus on it.

Remember, Luke's Gospel was written that you may have certainty concerning the things that have been taught. That is how he begins his Gospel.

You might call Luke's Gospel the Gospel of knowing for sure. And Luke has been pointing towards this moment from the time that he began to pen the opening thoughts of his Gospel.

[5 : 15] The moment of the death of Christ as the apex, if you like, of his Gospel.

And Luke alone records for us the conversation that took place on the way to Calvary between weeping women and Jesus.

Jesus tells these women that their sympathy is misdirected. Remember earlier we are told in chapter 19, how when he drew near to Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it.

And so he tells them in this brief conversation on the way to crucifixion that they are weeping for the wrong reason.

And this is blinding them to the real cause of how they should weep for. Our daughters of Jerusalem do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.

[6 : 26] He is speaking of the shedding of tears of repentance that will lead them and us to trust in Christ alone for salvation.

He gives a reason for his exaltation. Before he says the days are coming, when they will say blessed are the bottom of the wounds that never bear on the breast that never nurse.

In other words, Jesus is saying to them, weep for yourselves because a day of judgment is coming. And unless we find safety in Jesus, we are in mortal danger of experiencing the wrath of God in that day of judgment.

And in that day, in the ensuing conversation, Jesus is predicting that the women with children would be envious of those without children.

And one, of course, was the very converse of the thinking of the day children were considered a blessing as they are to the present day.

[7 : 37] Whereas in those days, bottlenecks was viewed as a curse. But when judgment comes, says Jesus, it would be counted as a blessing.

Better not to have any children and see them suffer famine and the sword as mothers did come to see in the siege and fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

They cried to the mountains to crush them, not to hide them, but to remove them out of life.

And you see where Jesus says, they will say to the mountains, follow us unto the hills, cover us.

There is a link here between these words and what is predicted in the Book of Revelation with regard to the teaching on the last day.

Where John in the Book of Revelation tells the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, following us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb for the great day of their wrath has come and who can stand.

[9 : 09] It's a very somber, solemn picture of all unbelieving sections in society trying to distance themselves from the judge of all the earth.

But you know not even the caves or the rocks or the mountains can protect any unbeliever from the wrath of the Lamb.

That's the picture that is set before us with regard to the day of judgment. What if they do say to Jesus, these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?

It's a kind of difficult verse to understand. Bishop Roy sees this as a reference to Jesus himself. If the Roman practice of such cruelties on me, Jesus, the green tree, the source of life, what will happen to the nation of Israel which is like a barren, withered tree, dead in trespasses and do sin? More to the point, what will God do if he did not spare his own son? How will he spare those who reject the offer of salvation? And there is a lot of food for thought there.

[10 : 40] What indeed will be the fate of those who reject the offer of salvation in Christ Jesus?

Well soon the strange procession arrives just outside the gates to the north of Jerusalem, to the ugly shaped hill.

The skull shaped hill which in Aramaic is recorded in the other goth post as Golgotha, the place of a skull.

Exhausted, they drop their burdens as the crowd surround them. And it's very strange and I think it's an indictment on human nature that the crowd they find in this gruesome spectacle both evolution and entertainment.

And strange the kind of people that we are in gathering around such an awful spectacle are not people made the same time be repulsed and yet find entertainment in the misery that is allotted to others as they are condemned to the brutal death of crucifixion.

[12 : 12] The soldiers probably harden, set about their business and they do it with brutal efficiency. They strut the condemned men's arms in place, they drive nails into each forearm, they bend the legs together to one side and a single nail is driven through the heels.

And each man, each man is pinned to his own cross. You know, if it was been reported in our day, well everybody would have the phones wouldn't they?

They would be taking pictures of what was taking place and trying to record what was happening. But would the media focus not be on the nails being driven into the bodies of those being crucified? Would we not be informed of the screams of pain as these large nails are driven into their hands and feet before they were erected vertically and suspended on the cross in humiliating nakedness? And yet that's not the purpose of the Gospel right of us. Their purpose is to focus attention on why Christ is on the cross.

[13 : 45] And yet as they're said before us here, it's almost as if the Gospel writer is saying, it ends the careers of three men.

Each one under failure according to the standards of the day and to the eyes of many who gathered there. Two of them Luke tells us were criminals. The other Gospels call them bandits.

They were petty thieves. Possibly there were zealots, members of the revolutionary band. They are hardened and dangerous men whose desperate lives have led perhaps inevitably, perhaps even predictably, to this terrible lingering death.

But between them that haunts someone else. He has walked the streets of Jerusalem. Neither a crook nor a revolution.

Instead his life has been devoted to healing the sick, preaching the forgiveness of sins.

Nevertheless, his messianic claims were considered a direct challenge to the authority of the Jewish elite.

[15 : 15] To those in power and authority in the Jewish church would break no rules for the religious attention of the masses.

And it wasn't too difficult for them to enlist the support of the Roman political apparatus that then governed Judea to do any claim to the larger as a direct challenge to the supremacy of Caesar himself.

And so here he is to us. Verse 33 tells us, crucified between thieves and criminals for being the king of the Jews.

We hear a lot today of those who demonstrate hatred to the Jews. But that hatred is long rooted in history and goes right back.

It is not something new. What's all remarkable about this whole episode is not simply the injustice of his condemnation.

[16 : 28] Twice, once by the criminal, crucified with him, once by one of the soldiers who did the deed. Christ's innocence is recognized.

But it is not his innocence. I believe that is so very striking about this episode. But his extraordinary response to the cruelty meted out to him.

Luke brings us face to face with the crucifixion narrative. And tells us about the first words of Jesus from the cross. It's a prayer.

And it's one of three prayers that were uttered by Jesus from the cross. Three times he prayed as he poured out his soul to the Father.

Each prayer expresses an origin of feeling, purpose and holy desire. In some ways there are like three landmarks or three monuments that dot the landscape of the accounts of the gospel writers of Jesus suffering.

[17 : 43] Each of these three prayers calls attention to three critical moments in Christ's suffering and work on the cross.

They take us from the very beginning of his ordeal when the nails were driven into his hands and he was raised up on the cross. He cried out first, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. And then from then on down into the deepest abyss of suffering when he cried, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And then from there on to the final resolution of a self-giving work when he prays at last at the end of it all, Father, into the hands I commit my spirit. And each prayer has a different character.

There are different kinds of prayers. The first is a prayer of intercession. He's praying for others.

The second prayer you might say is a lamentation, a cry of sorrow and loss.

Why have you forsaken me? And the final prayer is expresses submission and surrender to the Father as he commits himself to him in death.

[19 : 03] The first prayer teaches us about the purpose of the cross. What is it Jesus came to accomplish? The second prayer takes us into the magnitude of the pain of the cross.

What it is that he endured. And the third prayer tells us about the final price of the cross. What is it that he ultimately gave to save us? The purpose, the pain and the price of the cross.

But what I'd like to do now is briefly highlight the compassion of Jesus. You could contrast it with the content displayed by man and gender around the cross.

Christ on the cross, a beacon of eternal hope to a biased, prejudiced, unfallen world. A foreign world in which man seeks to be dominant, to be king, aided and abetted by the evil forces of darkness.

Sinful man by nature, unwilling to become subservient to the king of kings. So, prayer for hot. And thirdly, prayer answered.

[20 : 23] Here is a person who has been subjected to the most hideous abuse, who has experienced painful flogging, who has been exposed to the most contemptuous, vitriolic, mockery and ridicule, as the soldiers sported with him and tied with him.

The soldiers twisted together, we are told, a crown of thorns, put it on his head, and made him an apararobe. They came to him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews, struck him with their hands. And now, suffering the ultimate humiliation, a naked victim, raised up under the sun to be the object of mocking and ridicule by every passerby.

Human nakedness, a sign of humiliation and degradation, a sneering crowd, a scornful crowd.

And here is the fulfillment of the words spoken profanically by the psalmist. And you know, do you see your own face in that crowd because you should?

That's how in your unconverted days, and if you're still unconverted, you're dealt with the Christ of God.

[21 : 51] So we can't be self-righteous about ourselves. We can't pretend that we didn't belong to that crowd who ridiculed and sneered and mocked the King of Kings.

So here is the fulfillment of the words spoken profanically by the psalmist, and then he speaks. And you know, it wasn't unusual, apparently, for crucified victims to speak initially.

Usually it was to protest their innocence, or berate those who passed such a sentence on them, or who have gathered to mock.

But you know, Luke tells us here that this person did none of these things. Listen again to what he says.

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. He is praying to the Father in heaven. He engages in intercession for those who in effect are demonstrating their sheer unbelief and naked animosity to the one who is no less than the beloved son in whom the Father is well pleased.

[23 : 15] He is preoccupied not with his pain, not with the level of suffering, but with the crowds who have gathered below, and who had hours before screamed at Pilate the Roman governor for his execution.

Crowds who are now staring and macabre fascination at his leg, it torn and disfigured for him.

Crowds that now deal and mock him in his agony, and he prays for them.

He intercedes for them. That's extraordinary. He is suffering terribly. And here he is praying for the forgiveness of his tormentors.

Father, forgive them. It's a stunning picture of a sacrificial savior.

And you have to marvel at the long suffering of God with sinners in allowing them to go so far in their merciless assault on his beloved son.

[24 : 31] Can you see the love of Christ? For rather than slay with a word, his tongue is involved in praying for mercy for the libenus crowd around him.

You know, on the one hand we might have expected the Lord of glory would have poured out the judgment of God which is in his hands. But no, he pleads with the Father that he might not enter into judgment.

In many ways, it's an example and a source of encouragement to our sons. Remember what is stated in the teaching of the sermon on the mount.

Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. And yet, extraordinary as it might appear, is there not another side to this intercession.

And because you have experience of its power, if today you are in Christ, you would be disappointed if it were not the case.

[25 : 45] Yes, it is fulfillment of prophecy. Do you remember what great seven passages in Isaiah 53 where you find, therefore I will divide him a person with the many and he shall divide the spoil

with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors, yet he bore the sin of many and makes intercession for the transgressors.

He makes intercession for the transgressors. It's not to be thought of as merely just engaging in prayer.

It means that he is placing himself between the transgressors, the rebels, if you like, and the punishment they discern.

And it is ongoing. It is part of his ongoing priestly activity. The intercession is open-ended and continuing. And I think it is very obvious that this intervention from the cross makes it clear that his plea is not based on any merit that they possess.

And all the very petition by its nature makes it plain that the act of intercession accepts their demand.

[27 : 02] And maybe, can I ask the question, are you here today? And you consider that your sin is too great and your guilt too deep to allow you to come to Christ with any hope?

But if he intercedes with the Father for them, will he not intercede for you? You see, on the cross he is satisfied, divine justice, that undeserving sinners like me and you might receive forgiveness and eternal life.

Pray of them. In the hour of acute agony and suffering, in the words of the psalmist, when a pack of dogs encloses me, their circle round me is complete.

I am beset by evil men and they have pierced my hands and feet. That's when he prayed this marvelous prayer, Father, forgive them.

Prayer for what? He is praying for forgiveness. Forgiveness that involves their spiritual well-being. That's what he decides.

[28 : 16] So that their relationship with God as judge may be altered. They are under the sentence of condemnation. Remember Stephen, when he was being stoned to death and the Bible tells us that falling to his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against him.

And Stephen's concern is for the eternal well-being of those who perpetrate his execution, not for his old heart.

He is not excusing their action, does he, prays, as though the ignorance might somehow justify their crime. Not at all.

But he is saying that the full enormity of their sin they were committing is something that they did not appreciate or realize.

They know not what they are doing. They could not and would not see it. But they were in fact, crucified.

[29 : 29] The true king of the Jews. Pilates, mocking and scripting, riding over the cross, proclaimed more than he believed.

Because he was God's Messiah. Not just an innocent man, but the Lord of life and self. It was, if you like, culpable ignorance.

Culpable ignorance on their part, but it was an ignorance that nevertheless elicited the compassion of the heart of the very one whom they were crucifying, brutalizing and tormenting.

They ought to have known that ignorance was as inexcusable as the crucifixion. It made plausible. And yet what Jesus sees in the ignorance of these people, lust and blocked and spiritual blindness as they were, is a motive for mercy.

[30 : 41] I think that's really amazing to see in the ignorance a motive for mercy. And so we praise Father, forgive them.

Too often our impression of Jesus Christ is shaped not by the biblical narrative, but by our experience of those who claim to follow Jesus.

And that's all. Perhaps your idea of Jesus is of a judgmental title, or maybe your dismissal must be weak and ineffective.

Perhaps that's been your experience of church people and so here at the cross. That's how you think of Jesus, either judgmental or a weakling.

But when you gaze at the man of Calvary, surely those distortions cannot stamp the scrutiny of the Bible.

[31 : 59] Here is the one into whose flesh the nails were driven, who refused despite the agony of a doll to take his eyes from the singular objective.

His mind is set on securing forgiveness for others, even at the expense of his own life.

He prays for forgiveness, he loves them, they hate him, he loves them, they torment him. And you know, if I dare say there's a kind of indistinctness about the prayer, it doesn't specify exactly who the then are.

Father, forgive them. You may speculate who the then are, but the Bible doesn't spell it out.

[33 : 14] And I think it will spur to a group who used to say, I feel like I'm crawl into that program then.

It seems to me a very graphic way of demonstrating how there is room for sinners like you and me to experience the forgiveness that is prayed for at the cross.

Because there's still room in that pronoun then for other sinners.

It happened that very day, I believe, was the coming to phase of one of those crucified with Jesus. You see, the cross demands that we read read read, we are just out of thinking of Jesus. We cannot dismiss someone like this.

[34 : 21] And what makes this prayer so powerful is that it is prayed by the chosen one, Jesus the son, the Christ of God.

Because the Bible tells us the Father. All was hearsome. When he prayed, he was providing the very basis for forgiveness as he suffered the just in the room of the unjust. And you might be here today wondering if God is willing to forgive you. You might dare to hope that there will be a welcome for you in Jesus Christ.

And you might be saying he'd never receive anyone like me, especially with my past, with my guilt, with my burdens. But as Jesus looked down on the hateful mob surrounding his cross as he looked into their faces and saw the derision, the mockery in their eyes, and heard the contempt in their voices, you remember he pleaded, for their forgiveness.

He bore the sins of his enemies. And don't you think if he could look and speak and pray and pour out his life with such love for those who deserve, in fact, only, only his rejection, do you think that he will respond to you any differently in your sin and bring better.

His stance is always the same, Father, forgive. That's how we approach as the sinners that look to them. You may feel deeply the shamefulness of your sin. You may have an acute sense that your place is more among the guilty crowds of men and women rejecting Jesus than anyone else.

[36 : 14] Perhaps you'll catalog all your musteens. Reliving them, your stumbling, your strain.

Feel yourself worthy of rejection and the condemnation of God, not the welcome and the pardon of Jesus Christ. But doesn't this prayer teach that the welcome and pardon of Jesus Christ is precisely what he offers us? We may not think ourselves worthy. We may believe we are disqualified, but it's not the worthy or the qualified for whom Jesus prays here. It's for the guilty he prays, the disqualified, precisely for them that he intercedes because he welcomes sinners to himself.

He wants nothing so much as the pardon of his killers. He longs for the salvation of sinners of hateful, twisted, shameful sinners. And he longs for it still. He bids you calm and welcome.

There's pardon for you in him today. Prayer for God, prayer for forgiveness, prayer when one is suffering acutely and painfully. Finally prayer answered.

The psalmist states you have not withheld the request of his lips. Can we know if this prayer was answered?

[38 : 00] Well, if you are a Christian today, you have evidence that the prayer was answered. The one deciding were you of Christ's forgiveness. You didn't merit it, not on the slightest.

And it ought to be more amazing and wonderful on your side day by day if you are a child of grace to know that you have experienced divine forgiveness. But if we look at the context, can we know if the prayer answered? Well, I'm going to suggest a sinful, condemned, dying man crucified beside Christ who became an advocate of Christ among the jeers on the mockery and the disdain. It's an amazing moment. Because in this man hanging from the cross, that we learn how we're really ought to respond to Jesus Christ. Who can ever forget this man's prayer on the very precipice of eternity, moments before death. Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. There is the prayer of someone who is the recipient of divine forgiveness, whose life is turned around as one who heard Christ interceding from the cross. And you remember the equally memorable reply as Jesus said to him truly, I say to you today, you will be with me in politics. Quality deliverance, what forgiveness? That's one instance. But what about the admission of the officer in charge of the execution squad? A hardened soldier. And Luke tells us, he praised God saying, certainly, this man was innocent. It's the only person you find praising God at the cross. Or many have come to praise

God at the cross subsequently. But here is this man at the very moment of crucifixion. Comes to the conclusion on the basis of the evidence presented to him, this man was innocent. Because even Matthew and Mark were even further in their narrative. Truly, this was the Son of God. That's the conclusion of the officer in charge of the execution. He's standing right opposite the cross. He's watching proceedings carefully. He has to monitor the crowd. He's responsible for what is taking place. And his conclusion is, this was the Son of God. But then, about 50 days after this, in Acts chapter six, we're told the word of God continued to increase. And the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem. And the great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. The very people who were actively engaged in the persecution and crucifixion of Christ. A great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. What about the thousands who are brought into the kingdom on the day of Pentecost? All listen to his powerful prayer again from the cross. Father forgive them,

for they know not what they do. Receive the pardon, a royal pardon. Oh, have you found yourself within the circumference of this glorious divine forgiveness? Have you experienced the peace that accompanies it?

Or are you still a stranger to this marvelous forgiveness that is bequeathed in grace by Christ? Let us pray.

Eternal God, we marvel today again at the nature of the forgiveness that is bequeathed by Thee. [43 : 16] And we remember again before Thee, if You would mark any good He who could stand. Oh, we bless Thy day for plentiful redemption. It is ever found with Thee an adultest pardon.

Not just some sins, or 90% of sin, but all sin. Erased and cleansed from the lives of the forgiven. We bless Thee for the efficacy of the blood, but enable sinners to come to Thee and enjoy that blessed forgiveness. Lord forbid that we be strangers to it and the glory shall be thine.

In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen.