

“Father, Forgive Them”

Luke 23:32-49

In the 14th century, Robert Bruce of Scotland was leading his men in battle to gain independence from England. Near the end of the conflict, the English wanted to capture Bruce to keep him from the Scottish crown. So they put his own bloodhounds on his trail. As the bloodhounds got close, Bruce could hear their baying. His attendant said, "We are done for. They are on your trail, and they will reveal your hiding place." Bruce replied, "It's all right." Then he headed for a stream that flowed through the forest. He plunged in and waded upstream a short distance. When he came out on the other bank, he was in the depths of the forest.

Within minutes, the hounds, following their master's scent, came to the bank. They went no farther. The English soldiers urged them on, but the trail was broken. The stream had carried the scent away. A short time later, the crown of Scotland rested on the head of Robert Bruce.

The memory of our sins, prodded on by Satan, can be like those baying dogs--but a stream flows, red with the blood of God's own Son. By grace through faith we are forgiven, we are safe. No sin-hound can touch us. The trail is broken by the precious blood of Christ. "The purpose of the cross," someone observed, "is to repair the irreparable."¹

As we continue our study in Luke chapter 23 we meditate today on the verses that give us the details of Jesus' crucifixion, verses 32 through 49. It's a scene that's difficult for us to imagine. But Dr. Luke spares us the gory details. He just states the fact of the matter with awful simplicity; "there they crucified Him."

Yes, the purpose of the cross is to repair the irreparable. The cross is a symbol of suffering and death, but it is also a symbol of life. The death of Jesus on the cross provided for all humanity the forgiveness of our sins; only the forgiven can truly live. But those who have not accepted the forgiveness Jesus offers abide in death. As we look at this account I've taken the title for my teaching right from the text; "Father, Forgive Them." Listen carefully as I read Luke chapter 23 and verses 32 through 49.

This text highlights for us several ACTIONS relating to God's provision for our forgiveness, and our response to that provision.

E. Lutzer, [Putting Your Past Behind You, Here's Life](#), 1990, p.42.

The First ACTION is,

Forgiveness Requested

Most of us are familiar with the fact that two criminals were led along with Jesus to the place of execution. The words used to describe them lead us to believe these men were cruel and cunning. And they certainly were not first-time offenders! It seems that Pilate is mocking the Jews by having these two criminals crucified beside Jesus. It was the Jewish leaders who suggested that Jesus belonged to the criminal class! And although Pilate didn't know it, he was being used by God to fulfill Isaiah 53:12. *"...He was numbered with the transgressors, And He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."*

Once the procession reached the place called "Cranium" (Calvary is the Latin), there they crucified Jesus and the criminals. Jesus was on the center cross with a criminal on either side of Him. Notice the brevity of Luke's statement; "there, they crucified Him." No gory details of that horrible practice are given, just the stated fact in its awful simplicity. It is the fact of Jesus' crucifixion, not the details, which Luke wants to fill our minds and hearts.

Here is the Son of God, the Creator of all, suspended between earth and heaven on a Roman cross! How could this happen? It could only happen because God allowed it and because Jesus surrendered to the will of His Father.

Now, let's reflect on Jesus' first words from the cross. *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."* Forgive is a powerful word; but in this case it is too weak. It doesn't completely express what Jesus is saying. The fuller meaning is to dismiss, or send away. The same word is used several times in First Corinthians 7 where Paul instructs the believing spouse, whose partner is an unbeliever, not to dismiss them or send them away.

At the height of His extreme suffering, Jesus is thinking of those who perpetrated this monstrous injustice. He is not praying for justice or retribution on them. Instead He is requesting the Father to send away the guilt of His tormentors. We must understand that He is not absolving these people of their guilt. By no means! To suggest pardon without repentance would violate the Scriptures. Jesus is interceding for them in the hope that they might see the error of their ways and receive a pardon through repentance.

Now it may be, since these words are recorded very near the beginning of the crucifixion, that Jesus was addressing His request to the Father particularly on behalf of the soldiers. But we

can conclude, without doing violence to the Scriptures, that all the others involved in this process were included.

And what is the basis for Jesus' prayer of forgiveness or dismissal? "*They do not know what they are doing.*" They are ignorant of what is really happening here. Paul says in First Corinthians 2:8 that the "princes of this world did not know the wisdom of God, and if they had known it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." So the Roman authorities were ignorant of who Jesus was. Although Pilate seemed to sense He was more than a mere mortal.

Then in Acts 13 and verse 27 we learn that the Jewish people, and their leaders, were ignorant too. Paul writes "*For those who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they did not know Him, or even the voices of the Prophets which are read every Sabbath, have fulfilled them in condemning Him.*" The Jewish people and especially their leaders should've known who Jesus was. In fact, Paul says they didn't know the voices of the prophets even though they read them in the synagogues every Sabbath! They were ignorant of the Scriptures.

In Acts 3, verses 14 to 17 Peter speaks to the crowds of people who gathered in Solomon's Porch after the healing of the lame man at the Gate Beautiful. They too were ignorant of what they'd done. "*But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses... Yet now, brethren, I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers.*"

Each of these three groups of people might have known the truth about who Jesus really was and is. The facts were readily available to them; especially to the Jewish people and their leaders. The leaders were especially culpable because they were the ones who studied the Scriptures. So their ignorance, at least in part, was due to their own negligence. Ignorance does not excuse a crime but it does diminish the guilt.

You and I were not in the crowd that day when Jesus was crucified. We did not wield the nails or the hammer. We did not present false witness in order to condemn an innocent man and we were not part of the mocking crowd. But it was our sins that helped put Jesus on the cross; and we are included in Jesus' request for forgiveness. He was interceding for us in the hope that we too might see the error of our ways and receive a pardon through repentance.

Romans 5:12 reads "*Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned...*" And then verses 18 and 19 of that same chapter; "*Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men,*

resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous."

My friend, Jesus has requested forgiveness for you; He has asked the Father to give it to you as a gift. A gift cannot be earned. There are only two things you can do when you are offered a gift; you either accept it or reject it. And that leads us to the next action relating to forgiveness.

The Next ACTION is,

Forgiveness Rejected

As you can imagine, and as we learned from the earlier record, an event like a crucifixion attracted a crowd. This was the time of the Passover, with many visitors to the city of Jerusalem, making the crowd much larger. So you have a multitude gathered around the cross, looking on. All these are included in Jesus' request for forgiveness.

The Jewish leaders are in this crowd too; in fact, most likely in the front. And they are depicted as leading out in the mockery of Him. The meaning of the text is that they literally "turned up their noses at Him." They sneeringly cried out "*He saved others; let Him save Himself, if He is the Christ of God, the elect.*" The fact that Jesus was dying on a Roman cross was plain evidence to these Jews that God had not elected Jesus, but rejected Him. A suffering Messiah didn't fit their plans, even though the Scriptures clearly taught about Him.

The soldiers joined in the mockery too. How sad that they learned their taunts and jeers from the religious leaders. They had mocked Jesus before, in the Praetorium; but now they added the words of the religious leaders to their insults. In addition, they came forward and offered Jesus sour wine to drink. Picture them coming near the cross, holding out a cup of this poor quality wine toward Him, and saying, "just step down and take it." It was a cruel way to mock Jesus in His suffering.

The two criminals also pick up the abusive language of the Jewish leaders. This was most likely their first contact with Jesus. They didn't know who He was except by what they heard from the crowd. Matthew records that both of these men began to verbally abuse Jesus in the manner of the soldiers and the crowd. Yet Luke records only one of them reviling Him. Is this a contradiction? No. Isn't it possible that at the beginning, both of these men joined in the abuse of

Jesus? But as they watched Jesus' response to the suffering, as they heard His words of forgiveness, the heart of one of them is touched by the injustice of it all?

The first criminal presumed to speak for both men. He said to Jesus "save yourself and us." This man was not repentant; he simply wanted to be spared from the suffering he deserved. The rebuke of the second criminal shows us that a change has already taken place in his heart. His public rebuke of his fellow repudiated his own previous behavior, and it confronted all the onlookers with their hardness of heart.

So the penitent criminal rebukes his unrepentant compatriot. "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are in the same judgment? And indeed, we are suffering justly because we are receiving the reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing to deserve death." What an amazing statement considering he'd only met Jesus in the past hour! Here is this man's confession of his sin. We'll focus more on him in a few moments.

All this mockery seems to have taken place before darkness began to fall on that awful scene. And as we learn from our text, the vast majority of that multitude rejected the forgiveness that Jesus offered to them.

But what about you, my friend; are you too rejecting Jesus' offer of forgiveness? As I said earlier, when you're offered a gift, there are only two ways to respond; you either accept or reject. There is no third option. That you need the gift of Jesus' forgiveness is evident from the verses I read earlier. We have all sinned and are under condemnation. The only way to escape that condemnation is to accept the forgiveness Jesus offers; which leads us to the next action relating to our forgiveness.

The Next ACTION is,

Forgiveness Accepted

The difference in the responses of the two criminals is clearly seen in the text. The first wanted Jesus to save him...on his terms. Like many men in sickness or near death, he wanted to be delivered, but only so he could go on living as he pleased.

In my teens and early 20s I knew a man just like that. He had heart problems, and when he'd end up in the hospital he'd ask the church to pray that God would heal and restore him. He promised God that if he was healed, he would serve Him. But when the crisis was passed he soon

went back to his former way of living. I praise God for His mercy because after a couple of incidents like this that man truly committed his life to Christ.

Both [of these men] were hardened rascals when they were led out with Jesus. But they came to see and to hear mighty things regarding him from that moment onward. They were facing a slow death. The human judgment that had been visited upon them presaged the divine judgment that awaited them so shortly. It took until this time to produce a salutary effect in the one. The denial that [this change] could take place is met by the fact that it did take place. The only difficult matter is to explain why the same effect was not accomplished also in the other [criminal], but the fact is again that it was not accomplished.¹

The words and actions of the second criminal clearly show that a change has taken place in his heart. After rebuking his fellow, look at what he said. *“Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”* He wanted Jesus to include him when He came in connection with His kingdom. He wanted to be noted as a follower of Jesus.

His request implies that He believed that Jesus was who He said He was – the Messiah. And although they were dying side by side on Roman crosses, he had the confidence that Jesus would set up His kingdom. The grammar here denotes only one act, so the repentant criminal seems to have been referring to the coming of Jesus’ kingdom at the end of the age. Both the idea and the wording suggest that this man was a Jew.

And Jesus’ response was immediate; *“Amen, today you will be with me in Paradise.”* When Jesus prayed to the Father for the forgiveness of His tormentors we know the Father answered that prayer. John chapter 11 records the raising of Lazarus. In that context we have verses 41 and 42. *“Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, **I thank you that you heard me. I know that you always hear me. But I said these things because of the people here around me. I want them to believe that you sent me.**”*

Jesus knew the Father had heard and answered His prayer; consequently He could assure the repentant criminal of His forgiveness. Jesus did not forgive the other criminal. That man did not acknowledge who Jesus was; he was not repentant. Forgiveness is offered to all, but only those who are repentant will receive it. So immediately, upon his confession of Jesus as Lord, Jesus pronounced this man forgiven.

¹ Lenski, R. C. H. (1961). [*The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel*](#) (pp. 1140–1141). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

There's something else that's significant about Jesus' statement. He said "Today, you will be with me..." People who were crucified could sustain life for several days on the cross. It was designed to be a slow and extremely painful way to die. But Jesus assured this man that "*today, you will be with me in Paradise.*" He knew that no man was going to take His life from Him; He was going to lay it down voluntarily.

We are not altogether sure what Jesus meant by Paradise, but whatever and wherever it is it is a place of blessedness and security. What we do know is that the soul will exist separate from the body. The lifeless bodies of Jesus and this man would be on the cross or in the grave, while the soul would be at rest. That rest would come immediately after death. One of the few pictures we have of the afterlife is in Luke's Gospel, chapter 16, the account of the rich man and Lazarus. What we really want to glean from this part of the text is this – when forgiveness is accepted there is no delay in it being granted.

Friend, have you accepted the forgiveness Jesus offers like this criminal did? You might say "Well I'm not a criminal; I've never done the kind of things he did." That may be true, but remember, "*ALL have sinned and fall short of God's glory.*" You and I are in just as much need of forgiveness as those criminals on the cross.

But the forgiveness Jesus was offering was, at this point, not yet complete; which leads us to the final action relating to forgiveness.

The Final ACTION is,

Forgiveness Completed

Our forgiveness could not be completed until Jesus died! It was His death that made our forgiveness possible. And the final verses of our text supply the details.

The time of day, according to verse 44 was noon. And from that hour until 3pm there was darkness over all the earth! I take that to mean that the whole side of the earth that was experiencing daylight suddenly went dark. Why? Because the sun was darkened. This was not an eclipse because Passover was celebrated at the time of the full moon. I believe it was the supernatural power of God. Cannot the Creator control what He has made?

Darkness is always a symbol of judgment, and Jesus, the sinless Son of God was bearing the punishment, the judgment for the sins of all humanity. No wonder the sun refused to shine!

In addition to the darkness, the veil of the Temple was torn in two, right down the middle, from top to bottom. Even the sound of its tearing may have attracted attention. With all the activity taking place in the Temple during Passover many priests must have witnessed this striking event. It is perhaps why we read in Acts chapter 6 and verse 7 that “...*the number of disciples increased daily and a great number of priests were obedient to the faith.*” This was a graphic, visual object lesson of what Jesus was accomplishing through His death. The way into the Holiest Place was now open to all who, by faith, accept the blood of Jesus as the only sufficient payment for their sin.

Now let’s return to verse 46. “*And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice (or a mighty shout), He said, ‘Father, ‘into Your hands I commit My spirit.’” Having said this, He breathed His last.*” At that moment our forgiveness was completed; there was nothing more to be done. Yes, the resurrection was still in the future, but that was about victory over physical death and power for daily living. The ascension was still in the future but that was about the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The closing verses of our text record observations by those who were there. First, we have the Roman centurion. After observing all that had taken place during those hours, including the darkness, the earthquake, the taunts and jeers of the Jewish leaders, the dialog between Jesus and the criminals, and Jesus’ mostly silent suffering, the centurion was convinced that “...actually, or certainly this was a righteous man.”

What irony! His words are a declaration set over against all that the mocking Jewish crowd thought or said about Jesus. The centurion and the criminal both seem to agree that Jesus is who He said He was.

And the multitude of people that had gathered to see that sight, and had been mesmerized by the events of those long hours, beat their breasts and returned to the city. They came to see the sight, literally a spectacle, a word used to denote a theatrical performance. But they left beating their breasts, a sign of deep grief and remorse. One writer said “They came to witness a show; they left with feelings of woe.” Some of these were most likely in that later crowd on the day of Pentecost, when Peter preached his powerful sermon. Remembering what they had observed on that fateful day, their consciences convicted them and they cried out “*men and brethren, what shall we do?*”

The last group of people is identified as those who were acquainted with Jesus and were His followers. Notice Luke's special mention again of the women that followed Jesus from Galilee. As the crowds are leaving the scene of the crucifixion, beating their breasts as they went, the followers of Jesus are standing at a distance watching all that is taking place. Sadly, we conclude from the other Gospels that, John was the only one of the Eleven who was present at the cross.

The fact that Jesus' friends stood at a distance doesn't necessarily indicate fear. In fact, John records that he, Mary the mother of Jesus, and several others were very near Jesus at one point during the crucifixion. Certainly, the Roman soldiers would've prevented a large group of Jesus' followers near the cross together for fear they might try to rescue Him or create a disturbance. But we can only imagine the feelings and emotions they were struggling with as they viewed these scenes of cruelty and injustice. They did not yet know or understand the forgiveness was now complete.

Forgiveness is an amazing reality my friend! No matter where we've been or what we've done, not one of us is outside the reach of God's forgiveness in Jesus. Sometimes, that fact is hard for us to accept.

In December 1961, the founder of Heralds of Hope and my mentor, Dr. J. Otis Yoder, was in the Jerusalem courtroom when Adolf Eichmann, the architect of Hitler's Jewish extermination plan, was sentenced to death. He was there because he was a friend of the Reverend William Hull, a Canadian minister in Jerusalem. Because Eichmann considered himself a Protestant, Reverend Hull was the Protestant minister appointed by the Jerusalem court to be Eichmann's spiritual advisor. He was to help prepare the prisoner for his execution.

In the six years we worked together before his death, Dr. Yoder told me about some of his conversations with Reverend Hull. In one of those conversations Reverend Hull and Dr. Yoder were discussing the reality that if Eichmann would have repented of his sin, God would have forgiven him. But Eichmann never admitted his guilt; saying only that he followed orders. And he never expressed remorse for the extermination of millions of Jews, Gypsies, and other people the Third Reich classified as undesirable. He never viewed his behavior as criminal.

In Eichmann's case, forgiveness was offered, forgiveness was rejected, and his final words were "Long live Germany. Long live Argentina. Long live Austria. These are the three countries with which I have been most connected and which I will not forget. I greet my wife,

my family and my friends. I am ready. We'll meet again soon, as is the fate of all men. I die believing in God.”

I remember Dr. Yoder telling me that Reverend Hull said something like this, “If Eichmann had truly repented the world would not have believed it was genuine.” But only God can see the heart. When Jesus uttered His cry from the cross, “Father, forgive them for they don’t know what they’re doing,” Adolf Eichmann’s name, just like yours and mine, was included in that request! So were the names of Osama Bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, and Bashir al Assad.

My friend, God through Jesus has made every provision for you to be forgiven of your sin. If you’ve already accepted that forgiveness, take some time now to thank God again for the transformation that has brought into your life.

If you haven’t yet responded to this offer of divine forgiveness, what are you waiting for? Every moment you refuse Jesus’ offer of forgiveness you are recklessly exposing yourself to the full weight of divine justice. And the writer of Hebrews reminds you that “it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the Living God.”

When Jesus died on the cross the provision for your forgiveness and mine was complete. Now, it is offered freely to all who will receive it. Those are facts, my friend. The only variable in the equation is your response; and there are only two responses. You will either accept His forgiveness and eternal life, or you will reject His forgiveness and receive eternal torment. The choice is yours!