

## **FATHER, FORGIVE THEM, FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO**

Luke 23: 34 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

The cross of Jesus Christ is the strangest spectacle the world has ever seen. Here the only begotten and well-beloved Son of God, cried out in the anguish of His heart, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” Here He who possessed all power in heaven and in earth from all eternity, was being put to death at the hands of His own creatures, crucified Paul said, ‘in weakness.’ Here the incarnate God-man, Christ Jesus, by universal consent, the world’s greatest benefactor; was dying on the cross between two malefactors, 2 murderous thieves—the strangest spectacle the world has ever seen. Such a strange spectacle must, of necessity, carry with it a tremendous amount of significance. Before turning to the 7 last words of Jesus, we must ask first, “What is the significance of the cross of Christ?”

We know: (1) **The cross is the realization of God’s eternal plan and purpose.** Acts 4: 24-28 is clear in Peter and John’s message “*O Lord, it is Thou who didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them, who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father, David, Thy servant, didst say, “Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples devise futile things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against His Christ, For truly in this city there were gathered together against Thy holy servant Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur.”* (2) **The cross is the manifestation of God’s love.** I John 4: 9,10 states, “*By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation, (the satisfaction and atonement) for our sins.*” (3) **The cross is the declaration of God’s righteousness.** Romans 3: 23-26 declares, “*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God, He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*”

In the 6 hours of Christ on the cross, Jesus uttered seven words or testimonies that will forever leave us stunned, silent, in awe of who Jesus is. Some of the greatest testimonies of Jesus were prayers. Today, as we look at the first of Jesus seven last words or sayings at Calvary, this first word, was made by Jesus in the initial stages

of his six hours of being crucified and then hanging on the cross to die for us. Each of the four Gospel records give only partial details of Christ's crucifixion and untold suffering on the cross. We must study all 4 Gospel records of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John to put together the entire account of the crucifixion in a biblically sufficiently full picture. Some sayings were repeated, and some were not.

Of the seven sayings on the cross that Jesus uttered, the first three sayings were in reference to persons who were surrounding Him, (1) His enemies, (2) one of His two companions in crucifixion, a murderous, yet repentant thief, and (3) His mother and His beloved disciple and friend, John the beloved, who often leaned on His bosom. These first three sayings seem almost like Jesus uttered last will and testament—His final design and desires as He died. The second three sayings, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me, I thirst, and It is finished,” refer to His sufferings in our place and the work of His atonement being complete and finished. The first two of these second three sayings refer to the suffering of His soul and then of His body. The third of the second three refers to the result gained for us, by His complete sacrifice. The seventh and final saying of Jesus, “Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit” is the Lord's last cry of perfect confidence coming from His expiring heart in His last second of utmost human weakness as He died. Three of these last seven sayings are related by Luke and Luke alone. This first saying we are looking at today is the first of these three sayings recorded only by Luke—Jesus' prayer for His enemies, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Before we share the Lord's Supper, I want us to look at five questions that Jesus' prayer brings to our minds. Perhaps as we answer these five questions, we will begin to understand more why Jesus prayed this mighty prayer.

**WHEN DID JESUS PRAY, “FATHER, FORGIVE THEM?”** (I.) Attempting to answer this question has brought me to tears, and to my knees. (1) First of all, notice the latter part of Luke 23: 34. We read, “And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. And they cast lots to divide His garments.” This casting of lots for the prisoner's clothes was the sport of the Roman executioners. It was all part of a day's work for these soldiers. The habit in crucifixion was that the clothes of the criminal were the new possessions of the four executioner soldiers, as if the victim were already dead. Luke tells us the 4 soldiers cast lots to divide Jesus' garments. John 19: 23, 24 describes the division in detail. We read, “When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into 4 parts, one part for each soldier, also his tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom, so they said to one another, “Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be. This was to fulfill the Scripture which says, “They divided my garments among them and for my clothing

they cast lots. So the soldiers did these things.” The common way they cast lots was to place lots in a helmet and shake the helmet until one flew out with their name or mark on it. This they did in the shadow of the cross as the criminal was slowly dying in agony. So when did Jesus pray this prayer? He prayed as He was being disrobed to be nailed to the cross. He was now robbed of everything, not just His clothes, His followers, His honor, and His life as in this moment, every prisoner was in the stranglehold of death. Taking the last remnant of Jesus’ earthly possessions, His clothing, what they could not take away from Jesus was His love and His heart to die to atone for us so we could be forgiven. Paul was right, in II Corinthians 8: 9, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake, He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich.” We know Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them at this moment of being stripped and nailed, only later to watch the soldiers gamble for His clothes.

But there’s more to the when question. For this part of the when question, I must share a tiny bit of Greek grammar. We read in our ESV text, “And Jesus said.” The New American Standard Bible captures best the significance of the imperfect tense of the Greek, **elegen**. We read, “But Jesus was saying.” My old Dana and Mantey Greek Grammar in its 15<sup>th</sup> printing from 1955 to 1967, was the grammar I bought and used in 1967 in which I read, “The imperfect tense may be regarded as a sort of auxiliary to the present tense. The imperfect is a sort of moving panorama, a moving picture show. The aorist or past tense tells the simple story. The imperfect draws the picture. It helps you to see the course of the act. It passes before the eye the flowing stream of history. It may be used to describe action as recurring at successive intervals in past time.” The NASB has it right. Jesus was saying this prayer in successive intervals over and over as He was stripped and nailed to the cross. It was more than a one-time prayer. Jesus prayed it over and over as He was being crucified in our place—for each of us sinners deserving of hell forever.

### **WHAT DID JESUS MEAN, PRAYING, “FATHER, FORGIVE THEM?”**

(II.) These actual words Jesus uttered were “Pater, aphas autois.” These words are in the second aorist active imperative tense, with the dative case. There are four kinds of imperatives—**of command**—“Love your enemies—Matthew 5: 44, **of prohibition**—“It is I, be not afraid!”—John 6: 20, **of permission** – “And the demons begged Jesus, saying, If You cast us out, send us away into the pigs,” And Jesus said, “Go,” meaning “I cast you out with that permission,” or **of entreaty**, this is what we have here in Jesus’ prayer. The imperative of entreaty does not convey the finality of command, but has the force of great urgency. What Jesus was saying more than once was, an imperative of urgency to the Father. “Father, I urgently pray that You forgive them. The Greek word for forgive, **aphiemi**, means

to forgive, to remit, lay aside, dismiss or to send away. This prayer uttered while the crucifixion was in progress, while the nails were being driven into Jesus' hands and feet, and afterward as the cross was being lifted to slam down into a deep hole with a thud, and then as rocks were tamped around the hole to hold the cross upright, this urgent prayer was, "Father forgive them." This is an astounding prayer. In this climax of utmost suffering, Jesus' heart for every lost sinner was not drowned or submerged by this ever rising tide of suffering. Jesus was thinking of His enemies and of all those who brought this flood of suffering upon Him. Jesus might have prayed for justice or just retribution, except for one major reason. He was laying down His life because of His love. His love rose above His suffering. In place of justice for His enemies, He urgently entreated the Father for pardon. That is love beyond comprehension—but it reveals the Source from whom our redemption and our pardon flow. "Father," Jesus prayed. Praying as the Father's eternal Son, Jesus was accepting all that His Father was permitting to come upon Him. Jesus' Father was with Him and He heard His Son's prayer, saying, "Father." What Jesus now uttered met a full response in the Father's heart you and I can be sure. Why? It was because God the Father so loved the world, John 3: 16, that He sent His own Son to die for the world, and this dying was going on as Jesus prayed.

### **WHO DID JESUS PRAY FOR, SAYING, "FATHER, FORGIVE THEM."**

(III.) Debates down through history have been waged on whether it was for the soldiers doing the crucifying, or for the hypocritical chief priests and scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees and Herodians whose voices prevailed. A whole message could be preached on the tragedy of over-speaking—just raising our voices to capture the floor and to control. Listen to the news and it is rampant today. Pilate's decision to release Jesus was trumped by overspeaking. Notice Luke 23: 23, "But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that Jesus should be crucified. And their voices prevailed." Was Jesus praying for the executioners, for Pilate and his wife who begged Pilate to have nothing to do with punishing Jesus, was Jesus praying for the scribes and Pharisees He had earlier in Matthew 23 addressed as blind guides, hypocrites, a brood of vipers, and whited sepulchers? Who was He praying for? We must read on in Luke 23: 34. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Jesus was praying for those who did and do not know what they were and are doing in bringing Him to His death.

The best commentary on the Word of God is the Word of God. Let's search the Scriptures for answers. Look at Peter's message at Solomon's Porch after the healing of the lame man. The Scriptures say the multitude, the crowd was utterly astounded. Peter spoke to them all of the crucifixion in Acts 3: 17, "And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers." Peter is

conceding to the people that all the Jews, even the rulers, scribes and Pharisees acted in ignorance in crucifying Jesus. The apostle Paul has more to say in Acts 13: 26-33. “Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation. For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize Him nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning Him. And though they found in Him, no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have Him executed. And when they had carried out all that was written of Him, they took Him down from the tree and laid Him in a tomb. But God raised Him from the dead, and for many days He appeared to those who had come up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now His witnesses to the people. And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus.” Glory! Were Caiaphas and Annas and Herod and Pilate included? They were the rulers who didn’t understand the utterances of the prophets. Paul went on to tell the Corinthians in I Corinthians 2: 7, 8—“But we speak and impart the wisdom of God in a mystery, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” This means Jesus was praying for everyone in His day who was His enemies whose unwillingness to repent, believe and receive Him led them to crucify Him. Is that the end of the meaning? I must hurry on to Question # 4.

### **WHOM DID JESUS MEAN, “FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO.”**

(IV.) Was Jesus saying that ignorance is bliss, that the heavenly Father thus forgives every man without further ado, because of Calvary? No, the very urgent request for the Father to forgive or dismiss the sins leading to the cross shows that crucifying the Lord Jesus Christ was a terrible sin, something grave and too serious to just dismiss. This isn’t like brushing aside a misunderstanding. The sin in crucifying Jesus was open, flagrant, deliberate, and everyone involved with the crucifixion of Jesus knew what they were doing, an outrageous sin. By killing the Prince of Life, they were fulfilling the prophet’s words predicting the cross in Isaiah 53. The Jews in Jesus’ day as all of us today, were born in sin. Ungodly, unregenerate sinners like each of us do terrible sins. The prayer of Jesus involves the thought that sinners like you and me are ignorant to some degree, and the thought of Jesus’ urgent prayer is that all of us will learn what our sins did to Jesus, who died in our place, and learn that our sins crucified the Son of God, the Prince of Life, the Lord of Glory. Jesus’ prayer was not an automatic cancelling of all sinners’ sins. There is no pardon without repentance, for that would run counter to all Scripture. Jesus was praying for a pardon through repentance would come in His day and down through the ages, in every generation. Jesus thus was urgently

praying to the Father for more chances with more time and grace and knowledge of the truth that would bring lost sinners to plead for pardon at the foot of the cross. Beloved, we do not know what we do, when we purposely hurt a human spirit for whom Jesus died, when we sin against our consciences, when we damage other's character with our words, when we grieve our Lord by disobeying Him and dishonoring Him, when we hinder and discredit the cause of Christ, and when we sin against God by withholding ourselves from His will and from serving Him. There are millions of other ways we know not what we do. Yet, Paul tells us from his message in Athens at Mars Hill, in Acts 17: 30, "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent, because He has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom He has appointed, and of this He has given assurance to all by raising Him from the dead." We know Jesus' prayer included Paul because Paul declared in I Timothy 1: 13, "Formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy, because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." So who are these people Jesus prayed for? Charles Spurgeon once said, "Now into that pronoun "them" in "Father, forgive them, I feel that I can crawl. Can you get in there" Oh, by a humble faith, today appropriate the cross of Christ by trusting in the old rugged cross. Get into that infinitely big little word "them." That word them is a chariot of God, a chariot of mercy that has come down to earth. We may through repentance, faith and receiving Jesus, step into that chariot of "Father, forgive them." Beloved, Jesus was praying for all of us, for all of us—that's each of you too—all of us know not what we do. Fifthly and lastly,

### **WHAT TESTIMONY DID JESUS GIVE IN "FATHER, FORGIVE THEM?"**

(V.) The testimony of Jesus, as John the beloved said, in Revelation 19: 10 is the spirit of prophecy. We come to the Lord's Supper today because of the testimony of Jesus' urgent prayer. Somehow He found you and me and because of Calvary, we have been forgiven. Beloved, as I see my Savior dying and repeating His urgent request to the Father, I come to understand what Jesus said immediately following the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6: 14, 15. "For if we forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." Now I hear you protesting, "But you don't know what they did to me." No, I don't! But it was as nothing compared to what our sins did to Jesus. None of us are entitled to self-righteous attitudes we can so often justify. We are bond-servants, prisoners of grace, forgiven sinners, compelled by gratitude to Jesus to forgive. Don't let anyone steal your testimony of forgiveness. As I close this first of 7 words, I call us to Phil. 2: 5. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus." Amen.