

“FATHER, FORGIVE THEM”

Luke 23:26-56

Key Verse: 23:34a

“Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’”

In the last passage Jesus was tried and condemned. Jesus was innocent. There was no basis for a charge against him. The Roman governor Pontius Pilate did his best to set Jesus free. But the shouts of the mob, stirred up by the religious leaders, prevailed. It is easy to think that the evil religious leaders were responsible for this or to blame Pilate’s tendency to compromise. But it was God’s will for Jesus to be tried and condemned in such a way for our sins. Because innocent Jesus was tried and condemned, we sinners who deserve trial and condemnation can be declared “not guilty” by a righteous God. Romans 8:1 says, “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Holy and merciful Jesus took the trial and condemnation that we deserve so that we can be declared “not guilty.” Thank you Jesus!

Today’s passage is Luke’s account of Jesus’ death on the cross. In the gospels, there are seven words of Jesus spoken from the cross. Matthew and Mark both include just one word of Jesus, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Luke does not mention this. But Luke includes three other words of Jesus. Among them, Jesus’ words, “Father, forgive them...” explain clearly the meaning of his death on the cross. It was to forgive our sins and bring us back to paradise. May God help each of us to accept Jesus’ grace of forgiveness in our hearts.

First, “Weep for yourselves...” (26-31).

Jesus had been tried again and again. The emotional strain of such trials would have drained most men completely. Moreover, Jesus’ body was exhausted from sleeplessness and hunger. Jesus had been mocked and beaten. Finally he was condemned to death and flogged; many a man died from flogging. Then Jesus was led away by the soldiers. It was customary for them to make a condemned criminal carry his cross through the streets of the city, taking the longest possible route, to publicly shame him on the way to execution. But Jesus’ bleeding body had reached a limitation. He could not carry the cross. So the soldiers seized Simon of Cyrene and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus (26).

A large number of people followed Jesus, including women who mourned and wailed for him (27). These women knew that Jesus was innocent and good. They knew that his crucifixion was a terrible injustice. They felt helpless against such oppression. They felt sorry that good Jesus was being treated like a criminal. They did not want Jesus to die. So they mourned and wailed. They were women of heart who sympathized with Jesus. But they did not see this event from God’s point of view. To Jesus, they needed to understand what was really happening. Jesus knew very well what he was doing and what God was doing. When their mourning and wailing reached his ears, Jesus wanted to help these women, even at that moment.

Look at verses 28-30. “Jesus turned and said to them, ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, “Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!” Then “they will say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us!’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us!’”’” Although Jesus was being treated like a condemned criminal, he knew he was the Son of God. He was obeying the will of God. After his death, he would rise again. Then he would ascend into heaven to be seated at the right hand of God. Jesus is the Judge of all men. The people of Jerusalem would be punished severely for their crime against the Son of God. At the time of God’s punishment, it would be better not to have children. They would cry out to the mountains and hills to hide them from divine retribution, but to no avail. The only way out was to repent. So Jesus told them to weep for themselves and their children. It meant that they should repent and ask God’s mercy upon them. We also must listen to Jesus’ words. When we look at the cross of Jesus we must repent of our own sins and pray for our children. One lady said, “I feel so sorry for Jesus.” But Jesus doesn’t want our pity. Jesus wants us to repent.

Second, Jesus prays, “Father, forgive them....” (32-34)

Two other men, both criminals, were led out with Jesus to be executed. These men had been tried and condemned for crimes they had committed. Jesus was associated with criminals to make him look like a criminal. It was to

shame Jesus all the more. We human beings want honor and recognition. We want to receive many kinds of awards. But Jesus the holy Son of God was associated with criminals. It was to take up all the shame that we sinners deserve. Many people pretend to have no problem after committing sin. But it is not so. They suffer endlessly in guilt and shame under the power of Satan. But Jesus bore all our shame and guilt on the cross.

When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left (33). Crucifixion was the mode of capital punishment in Roman times. It drew out the pain and suffering of the condemned person to the maximum degree and made him a warning to others. Jesus was stretched out on the cross and nails were driven through his hands and feet. Shocks of pain ran through Jesus' body. Then he was lifted up naked and bleeding. The pressure of his own body weight made breathing difficult. To breathe, he had to lift his body. This motion caused searing pain where the nails were. Jesus was left there to die a slow and painful death.

Why did Jesus have to be crucified in this way? It was to fulfill the will of God. God, in his great mercy, sent his one and only Son Jesus as a ransom sacrifice for the sin of the world. Isaiah 53:10 says, "Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand." God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son Jesus to be the Lamb of God to save us from our sins. Isaiah 53:12b says, "...he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors." Jesus was crucified like a criminal to bear our sins. Peter said, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree..." (1Pe 2:24a).

St. Luke gives us unique insight into Jesus' spiritual condition on the cross. We learn that Jesus' obedience to God was not just outward, but with all his heart and soul and strength. Look at verse 34a. "Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'" Jesus called God "Father." Jesus believed God's love even though it meant he had to die on the cross for sinners. By calling God "Father" from the cross, Jesus set for us an example of faith in God's love. Hebrews 12:2 says, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." Jesus endured the cross with perfect faith in the love of God and called God "Father." On the other hand, when we sinful human beings must suffer a little pain in our lives of mission, we are tempted to doubt God's love. We want to call God "Step-Father." May God help us to call God "Father" as we carry the cross of mission.

Then Jesus said, "Forgive them." Jesus loved God. Jesus also loved sinners for whom he was dying. Jesus prayed for the forgiveness of sins. This was his purpose of coming into the world. This was the purpose for which he was dying on the cross. Forgiveness of sins is what all men need most urgently. Jesus died on the cross to forgive our sins. But God could not forgive sins arbitrarily. To purchase our forgiveness God had to pay a high price. That price was the life of his one and only Son. Jesus offered his own life as a substitutionary sacrifice for sinners. While doing so, he prayed, "Father, forgive them." In the heart of Jesus, there is forgiveness for sinners. Moreover, Jesus understands sinners. He prayed, "...for they do not know what they are doing." This is true. We commit sin in ignorance. Then we suffer terrible consequences. If we really knew what we were doing, we would never commit sin. Jesus really understands us. Jesus does not blame us. Jesus wants to forgive us. His forgiveness brings true healing to our souls.

Jesus had taught the forgiving grace of God so clearly through the parable of the prodigal son. The prodigal son had taken his share of his father's estate and squandered it in wild living in a foreign land. After losing everything, he wanted to return to his father. So he started back home. But would his father accept him? Luke 15:20b says, "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them," so that we could be forgiven of our sins and restored in the love of God.

Third, Jesus did not save himself to bring us back to paradise (35-43).

How did people respond to the crucifixion of Jesus? The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One" (35). The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." One criminal hurled insults at him. "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" They didn't know why Jesus was not saving himself. Jesus did not save himself in order to save men from their sins.

Although it seemed everyone was mocking Jesus at the cross, there was one person who came to know the meaning of his death. It was the other criminal. He rebuked his fellow criminal, saying, "Don't you fear God, since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong" (40,41). While being punished for his sins, this man considered his life soberly, in light of the truth. He realized he was a sinner. He knew he deserved to be crucified for his sins. But when Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them...", heavenly sunlight came into his heart. He saw God in Jesus. He saw God's love and saving grace in Jesus. He saw that death is not the end of everything. After death, there is eternity. He also saw that before the cross of Jesus everyone was the same: all men were sinners. There is no one righteous, not even one. His understanding of salvation by faith alone was probably better than Martin Luther's. He accepted God's love for him personally by faith. He said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." What did Jesus do? Look at verse 43. "Jesus answered him, 'I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.'" Jesus listened to this man's plea. Jesus accepted his simple faith. Jesus promised to take him to paradise. This man was transformed from a condemned criminal to a heavenly prince worthy of paradise. Jesus did not save himself in order to open the way to paradise for us. We sinners can have paradise with Jesus when we come to him with faith.

Fourth, Jesus' death opened the way to God (44-49).

Look at verse 44. "It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour." The sixth hour is noon by our time. The ninth hour is 3:00 p.m. This is usually the brightest part of the day. But this day, the sun stopped shining. So darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. Nature mourned at the death of Jesus. Look at verse 45. "...for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two." The curtain of the temple represented the separation between God and men because of sin. It separated the Most Holy Place from the rest of the temple. Only the high priest could enter behind the curtain. He could only do so once a year with a blood sacrifice for his own sins and for the sins of the people. The Israelites were afraid to enter the curtain because they were sure they would die in the presence of the holy God. But when Jesus died, the heavy curtain that separated God and men was torn in two. There is no longer any barrier between God and men. Through the cross of Jesus we can come to God.

Look at verse 46. Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." It is remarkable that Jesus called out with a loud voice. Jesus did not die with a sad face, but with a shout of victory. Jesus also died with the assurance that he had fulfilled the will of God for world salvation. Jesus died with the assurance that he was going back to God. Jesus shows us that those who take the cross of mission and carry it to the end can die victoriously for the glory of God. St. Stephen imitated Jesus, as did St. Paul.

Look at verse 47. "The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, 'Surely this was a righteous man.'" The centurion was a hardened Roman soldier. He must have seen many men die. Usually they died blaming others and with fear and terror on their faces. But Jesus was different. Jesus died victoriously. Jesus revealed God's glory through his death. The centurion saw God in Jesus. So he praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man." Jesus' death did not overshadow the centurion with the darkness of death. Rather, bright sunlight came into his heart. Historically, many have seen the marvelous light of life looking at Jesus on the cross. When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things (48,49).

Fifth, Jesus was buried (50-56)

Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea and he was waiting for the kingdom of God. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body. Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid (50-53). Humanly speaking, Joseph had a lot to lose by identifying himself as Jesus' follower and taking responsibility for his burial. But Jesus' death had a deep impact on him. It set him free from bondage to the transitory things in this world and helped him to take a stand on Jesus' side for eternal life. He became the instrument of God to provide Jesus a decent burial. This fulfilled the word of God spoken by Isaiah, "He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth" (Isa 53:9). Also, this was a prelude to Jesus' glorious resurrection.

On the cross, Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Jesus died on the cross to forgive our sins. May God help us accept his forgiveness by faith.