“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.’”

Luke’s account of the crucifixion is similar to Matthew and Mark, but it has some unique details: Jesus’ words to the mourning women, his prayer for forgiveness for those killing him, and his conversation with a criminal next to him. Today we want to focus on Jesus’ prayer while suffering on the cross. May God bless us to experience his forgiveness and help us grow in his image.

Look at verse 26. At first Jesus was carrying his own cross. But after being physically weakened by the flogging, loss of blood and lack of sleep, he fell under its load. At that moment his procession happened to meet an innocent bystander, Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country—most likely for Passover. Cyrene was a prosperous port city in modern-day Libya, North Africa. It also had a Jewish immigrant population. But Simon may have been a God-fearing Gentile who’d learned from the Jewish immigrants and now was seeking God himself. Because he came from North Africa, many believe he was a black man. The Roman soldiers in their blind racial prejudice treated him like a slave and pressed him into service. Simon had no choice. He suddenly had to turn around and go back outside the city, carrying somebody else’s cross. It was so unfair. But through this experience it’s likely he and his family became Christians (Mk15:21; cf. Ro16:13). Simon must have identified with innocent, suffering Jesus. The Roman soldiers’ forcing him to carry the cross was an evil act of oppression. But God used it for good. It points to so many suffering, oppressed people in the Gentile world who’d also see the light in suffering Jesus (2:32).

Look at verse 27. These women probably weren’t those who followed him from Galilee caring for his needs. More likely, they were women of Jerusalem who couldn’t bear to see any Jewish man publicly humiliated by Gentiles. Maybe a few of them had experienced Jesus' love through his ministry. Luke in his Gospel shows how Jesus understood women because he respected them. He was mindful of women even while on his way to be crucified. But there’s more to this than that. Read verses 28–31. He’s referring to the future destruction of Jerusalem. Bearing children is one of the best blessings in life. But the suffering during the future Roman siege of Jerusalem would be so horrible that its women would wish they’d never borne children. People would ask the mountains and hills to fall on them so as to end their misery sooner. Jesus quoted the prophecy of Hosea 10:8, which described the intense misery of God’s judgment, and applied it to the future judgment of Jerusalem. It also describes the time when Jesus will come again (Rev6:16).

Luke repeatedly mentioned God's judgment on Jerusalem (19:41–44; 21:20–24). He was trying to explain the gospel to Gentiles. Salvation came to the Gentiles from the Jews (Jn4:24), but Luke had to show his Gentile audience why it was no longer necessary to go to Jerusalem to worship God. Jerusalem also symbolizes the whole Jewish nation. When they rejected God’s promised Messiah, even though they were his chosen people, they brought God’s wrath on themselves. Verse 31 shows that God’s wrath on them would be even more tragic than Jesus’ execution. Rejecting Jesus seems to be no big deal, but it’s not. The Bible repeatedly warns that those who reject Jesus one day will experience the full fury of God’s wrath.

Look at verse 32. In addition to Simon, there were two criminals in the procession also carrying crosses. They were to be executed along with Jesus. Look at verse 33. Luke describes Jesus’ crucifixion quietly, with few details. Crucifixion was a form of capital punishment reserved for slaves or the worst criminals. Nails were driven through a man’s hands and feet into a wooden cross. Then he was hung naked and left to die for days, usually by asphyxiation. It wasn’t enough for them to crucify Jesus; they also put him in between two criminals, to make him look as guilty and shameful as possible. Even this fulfilled prophecy. Jesus himself had mentioned it a few hours earlier (22:37; Isa53:12). He bore this guilt and shame not just to fulfill prophecy but also to take away all our shame and guilt. When we believe in him, we may suffer many things in this life, but in the end, the Bible says we’ll never be put to shame (Ro10:11).

Crucifying him in between criminals also reveals the evilness in humanity. During his life Jesus had been such a servant. The Bible describes him as the man everyone knew had gone around Judea doing good and healing people who were suffering under the power of the devil (Ac10:38). He’d been so merciful and tender toward all those who were sick and hurting. But in response, people did as much evil to him as they could. Now they were even crucifying him in between two criminals. People can still be unbelievably ungrateful (cf. Isa52:14–53:1).

What did Jesus do at this moment? Look at verse 34. Throughout this Gospel Luke has repeated the word “forgive” 22 times. Now, only Luke tells us that while being crucified Jesus prayed for his executioners’ forgiveness. While copying the Scriptures by hand, some scribes got so upset by these words that they scratched them out of the Bible. But Jesus’ words in this amazing prayer still ring out to us today. While wounded and bleeding he prayed such a holy prayer, while his executioners could only think of gambling for his clothes (34b). They were greedy, heartless, spiritually blind, and evil to the end. In history many so-called great men taught lofty, noble truths, but at a crucial moment in their lives most of them failed to practice their own teachings. Early on, Jesus had said: “But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (6:27). Now, while they were driving the nails into him, Jesus himself practiced his own words. But his prayer for his executioners wasn’t forced; it came from his heart. He said to God the Father, “…for they do not know what they are doing.” He really wanted them to be forgiven; he saw them not with hatred but with love. Who can forgive people who repay good with evil? Jesus did, from his heart.

Luke emphasizes his forgiveness because it’s what his Gentile readers really needed to hear. Before Christianity human societies around the world were dominated by power and revenge. In their conceit the rich ground the faces of the poor. Those who were hurt held grudges, and people were as cruel and abusive as they could be. Citizens of the Roman Empire enjoyed gladiator games and oppressed colonial people. Perhaps the highest ideal they could come up with was the Roman legal justice system. They thought forgiveness was a sign of weakness. Jesus’ prayer to forgive his executioners brought God’s light into this fallen world and changed it forever. Still our world desperately needs forgiveness.

What does it mean to forgive? In Greek it means to release or let go. It’s like letting a criminal go free, or cancelling a debt. Jeremiah 31:34b says, “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” Forgiving also means forgetting. So we have the expression, “Forgive and forget.” When God forgives us, he doesn’t even remember our sins anymore! It’s his amazing grace. So, to truly forgive like he does, we can’t keep digging up and reminding people of their past wrongdoings or holding grudges about those things.

Sometimes, we try to forgive. But so often, even if we really want to, we don’t have the strength to do it. We’re too limited. Even while he suffering and dying, Jesus praying for his executioners’ forgiveness shows that he’s more than a man—he really is the divine Son of God. His prayer wasn’t only for the cruel soldiers or the self-righteous Pharisees; it was for all sinful people, including us. We may wonder if there could’ve been some easier way to be forgiven. But actually, after we sin, we can’t ever come back to the holy God. But God made Jesus the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world (1Jn2:2). Jesus was crucified to give us all God’s forgiveness.

We all need to experience his forgiveness personally. But certain things stop us. Some people don’t even realize how sinful they are; they think they’re fundamentally good. To them, Jesus’ forgiveness isn’t so meaningful. But when we consider how Jesus had to be crucified because of *my* *sins*, we come to see how sinful we really are. Because of *my* *sins* *Jesus* had to be crucified—that’s a powerful realization. The opposite problem is when we think we’re too sinful. Many people suffer for years thinking their lives are washed up due to their sins. But when we see how horribly Jesus was crucified, we realize that it was enough—because of all he went through, all the punishment poured out on him, we really are forgiven (Isa53:5). Even after doing many awful things, any person who hears his words, “Father, forgive them,” can deeply experience his grace.

His forgiveness is great, but he also expects us to practice it. Once Jesus said, “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven” (6:37). He taught us to pray, “Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us” (11:4a). He was saying that if we don’t forgive *others’* sins, God won’t forgive us *our* sins. He made God’s forgiveness of us dependent on our forgiveness of others. Wow! Why is forgiving so important? It’s because God has forgiven us so much. We who’ve received such forgiveness from God should also forgive. Forgiveness is as essential to spiritual life as food is to physical life. In our daily lives we all face relationships with all kinds of people. To have deeper, long-lasting, meaningful relationships, we all need to learn to forgive. The Bible says that if we don’t grow in forgiving love, we become ineffective and unproductive spiritually; it’s a sign that we’ve become nearsighted and blind and have forgotten that we’ve been cleansed from our past sins (2Pe1:7–9). How can we forgive? We can’t—especially when we just think about people. But when we hear Jesus’ words from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” we’re rebuked for our pride and self-righteousness, and we can forgive anybody.

In verses 35–56 Luke describes how the rulers, soldiers, criminals, nature and a centurion reacted to witnessing Jesus crucified. Their responses were varied. It tells us that not everybody responds well to his crucifixion. The rulers sneered at him. They made fun of his ministry of saving others. The soldiers offered him wine vinegar to spite him and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” Even one of the selfish criminals joined in and said, “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” They all mocked his kingship. Most kings were really good at saving themselves at the expense of others. But Jesus, our true King, saved others at the expense of himself. We learn even from their mocking words that if we want to help save others today, first of all we’ve got to personally imitate Jesus who didn’t save himself. This isn’t a theory; it’s very practical.

At this scene of Jesus’ crucifixion there was an unusual person. He was one of the criminals next to Jesus. This is one of the most beautiful parts of Luke’s account. Read verses 40,41. As he witnessed what was happening this condemned man heard Jesus’ prayer to forgive his enemies. Surprisingly, his spiritual eyes began to open. When he heard his fellow criminal insulting Jesus, he rebuked him and stood on Jesus’ side. Read verse 42. What he was asking is amazing! How could this condemned man ask such a thing? Somehow, witnessing what was happening he had gained even a little bit of faith in Jesus. With his newfound spiritual sight he could see that Jesus really is the Spiritual King, and that he really will have a glorious kingdom. By faith he also asked Jesus to remember him, meaning to somehow let him into his kingdom. Honestly, asking dying Jesus for this after a life of many crimes and sins seems a bit too shameless. But it wasn’t like that. This man dying on a cross for his own crimes is a great example of a sinner reaching out only to the mercy of Jesus by faith. How did Jesus respond to him? Read verse 43. This is even more amazing! How could Jesus say that such a man would be with him in paradise “today,” just as he was, without doing penance or any other ritual? It’s simple: it’s because of his amazing grace of forgiveness, and because this man had faith. Jesus always welcomes repentant sinners who have simple faith. This dialogue between this criminal and Jesus is a classic illustration of the gospel. There’s nothing good we ever could do to deserve to enter God’s kingdom—no ritual, no good work. All we need is faith in Jesus and his mercy.

In verses 44,45 the sun stopped shining on account of the injustice of Jesus’ execution. The temple curtain also was torn in two. It meant that at the death of Jesus, the temple worship had become obsolete; now Jesus is our temple. It also shows us that now, because of Jesus’ death, we have direct access to the Holy God. Read verse 46. Jesus died victoriously, trusting in God. He died committing his life into God's hands. Many people responded so poorly, even though they saw and heard all these things. But look at verse 47. Even a hardened Roman centurion was moved, praised God and said, “Surely this was a righteous man.” Regardless of who we may seem to be, we need a pure heart like this man had, to truly appreciate Jesus crucified. In verses 50–53 we see how Joseph of Arimathea responded to Jesus' execution. While Jesus was alive, Joseph had been too fearful to side with him. But after witnessing his death he gained courage to stand on Jesus’ side, even though it meant losing his Council position. Many eyewitnesses could also testify to the truth of Jesus’ death.

Let’s read verse 34a again. May God help us all newly experience and practice his forgiveness.