

CHAPTER ONE

“FATHER, FORGIVE THEM”

Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And they cast lots to divide his garments.

Luke 23:32-34

You do not have to know a lot about ancient history to be familiar with the last words of Julius Caesar, spoken when the conspirators began to attack him. When his previously close friend Brutus began to strike him, Caesar replied with, “*Et tu, Brutus?*” Translated, Caesar asked, “You too, Brutus?” You too, my son? Famous last words. When I was a kid, I remember reading a biography of Nathan Hale, who was in the American Revolution and arrested as a spy by the British and hanged. As he was hanged, he said, “I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.” More recently, I’m sure many of you are familiar with the story of Todd Beamer a passenger on United Airlines Flight 93, who helped to spearhead the effort of the passengers and crew to disrupt the plot of terrorists on September 11, 2001. His famous last words were, “Let’s roll.”

History is filled with famous last words. Sometimes these last words are ironic, sometimes tragic, but they are always memorable. When our Lord was on the cross, he made seven brief statements. In the technical sense, they’re not really his last words, because death was not the last word for him—he rose again. When you consider the

physical rigors that he faced on the cross, to muster the strength to say anything at all must mean that whatever he said was critical. I want to meditate with you about the seven sayings of Jesus on the cross.

THE BACKGROUND

Turn with me to the first found in Luke 23:

Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left (32-33).

The setting for this first scene is the place that the New King James Version calls "Calvary," but most other versions translate as "the skull," which is what Calvary means in Latin. It is an appropriate name for a site that reeks with death. Some people believe the hill was given this name because the very shape of the hill might have resembled a skull. Other people think it was given this name because of the remains of those who were put to death. Unsure of the specific reason for this name, it certainly evokes a sense of dread. It is an ominous name.

Verse 33 reports the method of Jesus's execution in what I think we would consider simple and very understated terms. It just simply says, "There they crucified him." The original readers of this gospel would have no need for Luke to elaborate on exactly what that meant. Crucifixion was all too familiar to the people who lived in the first century. They knew about the way that it forced a victim to stretch out in an agonizing position, making them struggle to breathe, writhe in pain, and do so in public on full, shameful display.

Our American Constitution prohibits cruel and unusual punishment, but Roman law featured it. It was a way to send a

message to those who were under the thumb of Imperial Rome—if you dare challenge the rule of Rome, you will pay a terrible price: excruciating pain and public humiliation. It is in the midst of that intense physical anguish that Jesus prayed.

And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (23:34).

THE PRAYER OF JESUS

Jesus began with, "Father." That is how Jesus taught the disciples to pray in Luke 11. That is how the people of Christ have prayed for centuries, addressing God as Father. This is normal to us and does not stand out as unique. But in the centuries before Christ, throughout the pages of the Old Testament, a careful search through prayers reveals that there is not a single instance of anyone addressing God as Father. There is something unique about Christian prayer, a uniqueness made possible because of who Jesus is—the Son of God.

That terminology is found in reference to other people in the Bible. Adam is called the son of God, but Adam was not Christ. David and the kings who came after him are sometimes called the sons of God, but not even the great King David was as great a son as was the Christ. God called the nation of Israel his "firstborn son," but not even the entire nation of Israel, with all of its collective accumulated glory, could ever compare to the one who is the Son of God.

It is because Christ is the Son of the Father in a special way. He is the word who is with God and is God (cf. Joh 1:1). It is he who opened up an avenue to God for all of us. Israel could not do that. David could not do that. Adam could not do that. We should never forget how special it is for us to be able to pray to God as Father.

I love what Paul says in Galatians 4:4-7.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his

Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

We can pray to God as our Father because we are his children. We are his children because the Son of God opened up that relationship for us. What we commemorate in the Lord's Supper is the specific work of Christ that made this avenue of prayer possible. In order for us to have this special relationship with God, the barrier of sin that existed between us and God had to be removed. The way that barrier is removed is through what Jesus prayed for, which is forgiveness.

"Father, forgive them," he says. Jesus practiced what he preached, because in Luke's account of Jesus's great sermon in Luke 6, Jesus teaches this,

"But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (6:27-28).

Now Jesus is on the cross, loving his enemies and doing good for those who hate him. He is blessing those who curse him by praying for those who are abusing him. Jesus practiced what he preached, and he also prayed what he preached. Among the things Jesus taught his disciples to pray in Luke 11 is,

"Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us" (11:4).

As Jesus prays to the Father, he also prays for those who are hurting him to be forgiven. That is not easy, even under the best of personal circumstances. It is not an easy task to pray for those who

have hurt you. Remarkably, Jesus prays this prayer in the very throes of the agony of death. He prays this prayer while he is being abused. When he prayed this prayer, there was a crown of thorns ripping into his scalp. When he prayed this prayer, there were spikes driven into his hands and feet. When he prayed this prayer, the weight of his body was pulling down and pushing up on the nails. He was hemorrhaging when he prayed this. He was being humiliated when he prayed this. Nevertheless, he prayed it.

HIS LAST WORDS

I do not know how many of you are fascinated with famous last words. Enough of us must exist because there are whole websites dedicated to listing famous last words. The Jewish people were also interested in famous last words. Many of these are recorded in a non-biblical book written between the end of the Old Testament and the New Testament called the Book of Second Maccabees. It is during that time in Jewish history when Greek invaders came from the North and essentially tried to stamp out Judaism, making the Sabbath and circumcision illegal. They tried to compel Jewish people to violate their dietary laws. In the book of Second Maccabees, there is an account of a series of executions that take place. As these young Jewish men are being put to death, this book records the things that they say. "Keep on and see how his mighty power will torture you and your descendants."¹ In these famous last words of Jewish history, as these people are in the midst of the death throes, they are calling out for God to torture those who are harming them.

But Jesus does not call out for retaliation or for revenge. He asks for forgiveness. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." The "they" here could be in reference to the Roman soldiers, the detachment of troops who were assigned to be the execution squad of Jesus. "They" could be the Jewish rulers who are said to

1 2 Maccabees 7:17

be present and scoffing at Jesus. These are the same ones who had earlier unjustly tried him and wrongly convicted him. Later, in Acts 3:17, Peter will say that the Jewish people and their rulers acted in ignorance.

You may argue that these soldiers knew exactly what they were doing since they were experts at putting people to death. You might argue that the Jewish rulers knew exactly what they were doing, since they are seen plotting and conspiring for Jesus's death. They arranged for false witnesses to come and give testimony against Jesus. Those statements are true, but they thought they were doing these things to the man Jesus, not knowing his true identity. They did not know what God was doing through Jesus, including Jesus's prayer for their forgiveness. In other words, the issue here when Jesus says they know not what they do is not so much a lack of information as it is a lack of judgment.

Imagine sitting at a four-way stop, waiting your turn, and someone blows right through the intersection. You will be likely to yell out, "What are you doing?" The issue here is not that they lack information; it's that their judgment is terrible. When we swerve from one sin to another, making one bad judgment after another, we can easily ask the same question in spiritual terms. "What are you doing?" All we like sheep have gone astray. Since the forgiveness that Jesus's death offers is ultimately for everyone, I do not think it is stretching the text to understand that when Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them," he means "Father, forgive them all." In other words, he is fulfilling the last verse of Isaiah's most famous song about the suffering servant,

*Therefore I will divide him a portion 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 (53:12).*

Jesus made intercession for sinners. But why does he seem to connect this with forgiveness? "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." Remember, in the Law of Moses, there is a clear distinction made between what we might call presumptuous or high-handed sin, and what we might call sins of ignorance or temporary lapses in judgment. It is certainly true that all sin is sin, but not all sinners are the same sinners. Those who sin with a full understanding of what they are doing in defiance of God are reflecting hard hearts. Such hearts will not seek forgiveness. Those who sin out of ignorance can be taught. They can be touched with the truth and they can turn to the Lord. In fact, in another scene of Jesus on the cross, in this same chapter, we see someone made that very kind of change. A few weeks later, about 3,000 people will make a similar change when they respond to the preaching of the gospel on the day of Pentecost. But for others, there is a game to play. There's a prize to win. Look again at the end of Luke 23:34, "they cast lots to divide his garments."

When Adam and Eve were made, the Bible is very clear that they were naked and not ashamed, either of one another or to be in the presence of God. As soon as they sinned and became aware of their guilt, they also became aware of their shame. God ends up having to provide clothing for them. Sin produces shame. The "Word who is God," in order to remove our shame, must bear the shame of nakedness. As the writer of Hebrews said, "endured the cross, despising the shame" (12:2), so that he could remove the sin. He did this to remove shame and to remove our sin. For us to receive that forgiveness for which he prayed, Jesus gave his life.

Many of us have had loved ones who have been seriously ill and we have prayed for them for their lives to be spared. God often

answers those prayers by sparing those lives. For Jesus's prayer to be answered, "Father, forgive them," it necessitates his death. In essence, when Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them," which he knows is a forgiveness that is accomplished through his death, Jesus is praying for God to accept his death as the atoning sacrifice for sin.

Meanwhile, the rulers were mocking him while he was praying for them, while he was dying for them. The soldiers were stealing from him while he was praying for them and dying for them. If he prayed for greedy soldiers playing dice for his clothes, and if he prayed for crooked Jewish officials mocking his execution, then there is nothing that you and I could ever do that would put us outside of the scope of his prayer for us.

Jesus made God's answer to his prayer possible through the death he offered for all of us. "Father, forgive them," is still his prayer.