

## **Father, Forgive Them**

### **Luke 23: 32-43**

(Sermon preached on Good Friday, April 6, 2007 by Rev. Keith Davis)

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, as we have just read this gripping account of Christ's crucifixion and death; as we ourselves were led, as it were, to the place of the Skull, to Golgotha; as we were called to *survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died*;

As we take into account the immensity of our own sin and shame and enmity against God, we cannot help but stand amazed at the incredible restraint, the amazing forbearance and longsuffering of God who permitted this most dreadful of crimes to be carried out to its very end.

We stand amazed at the Father's forbearance as He looked on, as He watched these wicked men lay hold upon the Son of God in the flesh. These vile sinners dared to lay hold of the Lord's Faithful Servant who came to earth to do His Father's will.

We stand amazed at the Father's restraint as He watched His own beloved Son--the Son whom He loved from all eternity—being stretched out, nailed and hung upon the accursed tree. The Son in whom the Father was well pleased was made to suffer the cruel taunts and mockery, the hatred and brutality, the beating and scourging at the hands of these vial, wicked men.

We stand amazed at the Father's forbearance as He heard His own Son cry out to Him from the darkness, from the isolation, from the depth of His hellish agony. Surely it was there, in those moments that man filled up the full measure of his sin against God.

Surely it was there that man committed the unforgivable sin against God—the ultimate act of rejection and hatred against God, as Peter himself declared in Acts 2, you sinful men killed the Lord of glory, your own Savior, Jesus of Nazareth!

But then we must ask, *why didn't God* execute His righteous judgment right then and there against sinful man, against this sinful world? Why didn't God come precisely at that hour, and in His holy wrath and indignation, wipe away sinful man from the face of the earth?

How is it that our Almighty God could look on from His throne of justice and allow sinful man to finish this most heinous of all sins? How can we explain this? The key to understanding and explaining this mystery is to be found in the intercessory prayer of our Savior Himself—the prayer he made even as He was being nailed to the very cross upon which He would die.

That's when Jesus cried out these familiar words, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. Tonight we will consider this prayer of Christ, as **God's Suffering Servant intercedes on behalf of sinners from the cross of Calvary**. We ask two questions of our text:

- 1) For *What* is Christ Praying?
- 2) For *Whom* is Christ Praying?

## 2) For *What* is Christ Praying?

First of all then, we ask “For what is Christ praying?” Let's look at the text a moment and see the immediate context of this prayer. In verse 32 we're told that two criminals were also led out with Jesus to the place of the Skull, and that these two criminal were crucified with Jesus, with one on His right, and one on his left.

Then immediately after this, we're told that Jesus utters his intercessory prayer, *Father, forgive them for they know not what they do*. It's widely held that these words—the first of what has been called ‘the seven last words/sayings of Christ’ were prayed by Jesus right at the outset of his crucifixion.

Some believe very strongly that Jesus prayed this prayer even as the Roman soldiers were affixing His body to the cross, as they were driving the nails through his hands and his feet—even as the precious blood of our Savior began to flow from His body.

What is so significant about Christ's prayer is the fact that **right then and there**, Jesus was acting as our Heavenly High Priest. No, the fact that Jesus prayed wasn't unusual. We know from John 17 that Jesus made intercession for his disciples before; he made intercession for His church before; we know from Luke 22:31 that Jesus specifically made intercession for Peter after Satan asked to sift Peter like wheat.

But here on Golgotha, the circumstances are quite different. Here, Christ is enduring the climax of His life's suffering and agony; He's in the midst of hellish agony, his body is racked with pain. Yet amidst this overwhelming, suffocating tide of anguish, amidst this torture of **body and soul** what is on our Savior's heart? What thought occupies His mind? What burden lays heavy upon His sweet soul?

***It's forgiveness for sinners!*** Christ is not concerned about his own welfare. Christ might have prayed to his Father for justice, for divine retribution to fall upon these terrible sinners who crucified him. Christ might even have prayed for a speedy end to His horrific suffering.

But as one commentator put it so beautifully: *His love rises above his suffering, he prays for pardon for his enemies.* Simply stated, such love is beyond all human comprehension. Such love exceeds human thought. Such love is truly divine.

But more than that, beloved, this prayer reveals the source from whence redemption and pardon flows—from the Father. Jesus prays *Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.* Jesus prays as the obedient Son who has fully agreed to the terms of forgiveness set by the Father.

John 3:16 tells us that *God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.* Here we discover the price of the Father's love.

Here is where we discover precisely what is meant by the Father *giving* His Son. Forgiveness comes from the Father at the inestimable expense of His beloved Son's blood! And what is the real meaning and nature of this prayer for forgiveness? There are those who like to argue that Jesus was merely praying for a suspension, a temporary postponement of the Father's judgment and wrath, applying this to the Jewish nation particularly. So they say the Father withheld His judgment until 70 A.D. when the Romans finally destroyed Jerusalem and the temple.

But there's no textual support for that interpretation. The fact is, this word forgive means what it always does when used in Scripture. It means to *dismiss*, to *send away*, to *put out of one's mind*, to *speak of it no more*. It is always used in the Bible when speaking about forgiveness of sins.

So there's no other way to explain this or to understand this prayer but to see it as Christ asking the Father to wipe away, to dismiss, to completely forgive the sins of those responsible for Christ's crucifixion. And on what basis does Christ make this petition, this intercession? On the basis of His own precious blood, which He, the High Priest is even now pouring out on the cross.

Jesus could have prayed (in the words of Hebrews 10.12), *Father, as my blood now flows out from my body, accept this as the once for all, atoning sacrifice for the sins of my people*. We have before us a scene that is deeply moving; that defies description; that boggles the mind; that is simply beyond belief.

Christ displays before the world, before all those who stood there watching him suffer and die--not only those who at that time professed their love and devotion to Christ, but even before those who by their actions showed that they hated and despised Christ—before this whole crowd, before the whole world, Jesus displays His heart of love, the heart of God Himself who is determined to love sinners despite all that sinners have said and done against Him.

That is what makes this prayer from the cross so remarkable, so amazing, so divine! **God's Suffering Servant intercedes on behalf of sinners from the cross of Calvary.** We now know for what Christ was praying; now we consider *For whom Christ is praying?*

## **2) For Whom is Christ Praying?**

At this juncture, too, we have to exercise caution as to how we put this question to the text. We are prone to start thinking of any and all the individuals who stand out in the story of Christ's passion. We say *Did Jesus pray this prayer for Pilate, for Herod? Did Jesus intend to include in his prayer the brutal, unmerciful soldiers who struck him, mocked him, spat upon him, divided his clothing among them, and nailed him to the tree?*

*Was Jesus praying here for Judas who betrayed him, for Caiaphas the high priest, for the false witnesses who testified against him, for the Sanhedrin who condemned him? Was Jesus praying for the Jews who demanded his blood?*

But this line of questioning, though very popular, is quite futile and unprofitable to say the least. Our text requires more than mere speculation. It requires that we seek to understand the identity of the word **them**. Who is represented by that word?

The text tells us rather plainly. Jesus says, *Father forgive them, for **they know not what they do***. We can safely assume that Jesus is referring to the event of his crucifixion and death; obviously that is what “they” are doing to him.

But the text suggests that among those who were responsible for Christ’s crucifixion, who may very well have voted to condemn Christ, who at that very moment may have been carrying out his crucifixion, who may very well be standing in the crowds cheering and shouting for his blood, who may very well be rejoicing at the fact that Israel’s trouble makers has finally been silenced once and for all.

Among these people there were those who did not know what they were doing at the moment; at that moment, their hearts and minds were darkened by sin, their eyes were blinded by sin and Satan, and they were at that time unaware of the awfulness of the dreadfulness of their sin!

For example, among the Roman soldiers who were responsible for Christ’s crucifixion there was a Roman centurion. Luke tells us later, in verse 47, that after seeing the cosmic signs that occurred right after Christ died, *He praised God, saying surely He was a righteous man*. We may assume that Christ was interceding for him!

And among the Pharisees who dared to conspire against Christ we know that there was a man named Nicodemus and another named Joseph of Arimathea. They believed in Christ. So surely it is not unreasonable to think that standing there among the Pharisees were others who would

repent of their sins and convert to Christ--like the Apostle Paul. So certainly Christ was interceding for any Pharisee who would repent and put his faith in Christ.

Take for example, the thief on the cross who was crucified with Jesus. Mathew and Mark tell us that both criminal who were crucified with Jesus *heaped insults upon Him*. Yet of these two, one would repent of his sins before his death, and profess his faith in Christ; surely Jesus was praying for the forgiveness of his sins, for he would go to be with Christ in Paradise!

And we also know from what happened in Acts that many who were standing in the crowd that day, demanding Christ's blood, were also included in Christ's prayer. For they are those who would later hear Peter and Paul preach the Gospel, and they would fall to their knees in tears and repentance.

In the book of Acts, Peter is standing preaching to a crowd at Pentecost—undoubtedly many of whom were gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Christ's death. In Acts 3:17 Peter declares: *Now brothers, I know that you **acted in ignorance**, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he foretold through the prophets saying that Christ would suffer. Repent then and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out that times of refreshing may come from the Lord!*

Acts 13: 27 Paul preaches these words, *The people of Jerusalem and their rulers **did not recognize Jesus**, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that we read every Sabbath!*

And in both instances, that preaching was powerfully blessed by God, so that **many thousands** who heard it were struck with grief in their hearts and came to put their faith in the very same Christ whom they had earlier crucified!

In fact, John Calvin, when writing about Christ's prayer of intercession, wrote these beautiful words: *Nor can it be doubted that this prayer was heard by the heavenly Father, and that this was the cause why many of the people afterwards drank by faith the (very) blood which they (themselves) had shed!*

So yes, it's absolutely correct to say that Christ interceded on behalf of His enemies, because that's exactly what the church of Jesus is comprised of. We confess that truth in our catechism, by nature we are prone to hate God.

By nature we are enemies of God, until which time that He, **by His grace**, calls us out of the ranks of the wicked, He regenerates our hearts and minds, causing us to repent, and enabling us to believe on him and follow His ways.

So, it's not as some would say, that Christ is praying a general prayer for the world here. For we know from John 17: 9 that *Christ does not intercede on behalf of the world, but only for those whom the father gives Him.*

So you see, far from this being interpreted as some blanket prayer, far from this being all-encompassing prayer of intercession where forgiveness is poured out upon all people, this is in fact a very specific prayer. For God's forgiveness is not granted to all men everywhere.

No more than Christ's blood is shed for every human being, head for head. That's not the way forgiveness works, and that's not the proper way to interpret this prayer. So this prayer of Christ is not a general prayer for the world here. We know from John 17: 9 that *Christ does not intercede on behalf of the world, but only for those whom the Father gives Him.*

If we understand that word *forgive* in the sense of dismissing sins, then those, and only those who would later come to put their faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ are in view here; only they will have their sins forgiven by the Father; only they will have the benefit of being washed in Christ's blood.

So that is the identity of the word them, in the most direct interpretation and understanding of the text. However, there's something more we have to understand as it relates to this prayer. This prayer also pertains to you and to me.

No, boys and girls, we obviously were not there in person to see Christ die. We were not among those who hurled their insults at Jesus, who hit him with their fists, or scourged him with whips; we were not among the Jewish ruling Council who conspired to put Christ to death.

But the fact remains, we are no less responsible for his crucifixion than they. Although it was not our own hand which pounded those nails and fixed him to that tree, it was our sin which made it necessary! It was our guilt in Adam--our sinful human nature--and our daily sins which continue to pile high as the heavens, that is how we are responsible!

No, our name may not be Judas, or Pilate, or Caiaphas, or Herod; but our name is just as contemptible, just as culpable, just damnable, just as guilty as their names! ***Our name, beloved, is sinner.*** And that name means that we are enemies of God, by nature we stand among those who hate God and despise God. Our sins put Christ to death; our sins nailed Him to that tree!!

So that numbers us among the sinful—the Jews and Gentiles alike who all deserve to die, who all deserve nothing more but to taste God’s infinite wrath and indignation for all eternity in hell. Yet, thanks be to God, the Son interceded on behalf of fallen sinners like you and me when he prayed, *Father, forgive them*, even as His precious blood ebbed out of His body.

And so Christ’s prayer applies to you and to me, the Father’s forgiveness extends to us, because by God’s grace, through His Word and Spirit, He shed the glorious light of salvation upon our hearts and minds, and caused us to humble our hearts before Him, repent of the sin that had so blinded us, and he gave us hearts now that would cling to Him in love!

And what a glorious, and overwhelming reality it is, to know that even in the throes of Christ’s deepest misery and pain and suffering, even while we were yet sinners and enemies of God, He could pray for us; He could forgive us; He could love us!

Now, this same Lord calls us to respond in faith; to love him with heart, soul, mind and strength; and now he bids us to come to his table to remembrance and celebrate. Celebrate the fact that His suffering is over, to celebrate the Father’s forgiveness; to celebrate our life in Him. Amen.