

# “Father, Forgive Them”

*Text: Luke 23:34a; Readings: Psalm 22:16-18; Isaiah 53:12; Luke 23:26-49*

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The commemoration of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is only six Sundays away. We will prepare for the celebration of our Lord’s resurrection by looking at portions of the Gospels where Jesus spoke as he was hanging on the cross before he died. These are often called the Seven Last Words or the Seven Words of the Cross, because Jesus spoke seven times.

In the Filipino culture, as in many other cultures, the last words of a beloved one on his or her deathbed is very important. It is called “huling bilin,” which is a sort of a “last wish” that the loved ones are bound to fulfill. One of Jesus' last words is to the apostle John, who was the only one of the Twelve who witnessed his crucifixion. Jesus told him to care for Mary his earthly mother. As we will see later, John fulfilled Jesus's wish.

To be sure, we study the whole life of our Lord and all his words, but it is also God's providence that his last words before he died on the cross have been preserved for our study.

The first word he said was, *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”* In most Good Friday sermons, it is often preached that in this first saying, Christ is modeling forgiveness among the brethren in the church. If Christ asked his Father to forgive those who have offended, harmed and crucified him, how can we his disciples not forgive the same? Are we not people who have been forgiven by God, and so we are to forgive others an infinite number of times? (Matt 18:21-22) To be sure, Jesus even taught us the ultimate kind of forgiveness: that of loving, forgiving and doing good to our enemies (Luke 6:27).

But is this what Christ meant when he prayed this first word while he hung on the cross? Today, we will meditate on Jesus's first of the Seven Last Words he spoke while he hung on the cross. First, What was the purpose of this prayer? Second, Who were the objects of this prayer? And third, Did God hear his prayer?

## **The Purpose of This Prayer**

Why did Jesus pray this prayer of love and compassion? Just six verses before he said this, he told the “daughters of Jerusalem” – representing the whole nation of Jews – *“do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children”* (verse 28). He was warning them that *“the days are coming”* when unbelievers will plead to the mountains and hills to *“fall on us!”* to put them out of their misery. In those “days,” God will pour out his wrath not only on the Jews, but on the ungodly and unrighteous world (Hos 10:8; Rev 6:16).

In relation to the Jews, this event happened when God allowed the Roman legions to unleash his wrath on them in A.D. 70, killing tens of thousands, destroying their cities, homes and fields, and leveling their beloved temple in Jerusalem.

Why did Jesus pray, “Father, forgive them”? He was asking his Father to grant a reprieve to the Jews from the inevitable day of judgment that was soon coming to them for their unbelief. If

he had not prayed this prayer, it might be that God would have poured out his wrath and vengeance on these people and nation who had mocked and cursed and plotted against his Son, and who were now torturing and killing him with one of the most painful and humiliating methods of execution invented by wicked men.

What did God the Father see from heaven on that day? He saw his Beloved, only-begotten Son tortured and slowly killed. One of my favorite paintings about the crucifixion is a work by James Tissot, a late 19th century French painter who later immigrated to England.<sup>1</sup> Instead of the usual painting of Jesus hanging on the cross, Tissot's "View from the Cross," is a depiction of what he imagined Jesus saw (or what any other viewer would see) around him while he hung on the cross. The only portion of Jesus' body that is shown are his feet.

In this crucifixion scene, all kinds of people are gathered around the crucified Christ. At his feet, there is a woman, probably Mary Magdalene, and behind her in the middle, a group of three other women, possibly Mary the mother of Jesus, and Mary the mother of James and John among them.

The man to their left could be the Apostle John, also grieving just like the four women. Two beggarly-looking men are shown, one on the left and one on the right.

In the middle background are some Roman soldiers looking on, standing, kneeling or sitting down. The soldier standing in the left, clad in red uniform, is probably the centurion who exclaimed, "*Certainly, this man was innocent!*" (Luke 23:47) The men on horseback are probably Pharisees or scribes who seem satisfied with the whole scene.

In the background, Tissot has painted what looks like a tomb, possibly to depict the place where Jesus would be buried. In the foreground are two pots which may contain the vinegar that was offered to Jesus when he said, "I thirst."

A motley crowd of onlookers are gathered in the background, shown with different emotional reactions to the crucifixion. In this work, Tissot has laid bare human depravity – his wretchedness, apathy, unbelief, smugness, and even the hopelessness of Jesus' disciples.

This might as well be what God saw happening when his Son was crucified. He saw wicked people for whom his Son died. He saw his Son – holy, righteous, meek, declared innocent of any wrongdoing by Pilate the Roman governor – executed as an accursed criminal, flanked on both sides by criminals. Willingly dying a most cruel death for a wicked world he loved so much – but also hated him so much – that he emptied himself of his heavenly glory and humbled himself by becoming an accursed human being.

How could God stand this abominable scene? If Jesus did not pray, "Father, forgive them," would God not have sent his legions of angels to destroy all those rebellious people involved in the murder of his Son? The night before, when Jesus was arrested by the Roman soldiers, the chief priests and elders of Israel, he told Peter not to resist them because God could easily send twelve legions (72,000) of his angelic army to defend him if he so chose (Matt 26:51-54).

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<sup>1</sup> To view this painting, go to: [http://twoagespilgrims.com/pasiguerc/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/tissot\\_view\\_cross.jpg](http://twoagespilgrims.com/pasiguerc/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/tissot_view_cross.jpg)

But as Jesus has foretold, what the Old Testament writers prophesied about him must be fulfilled: *“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”* (Isa 53:12). The Triune God's plan in eternity past to save transgressors was unfolding exactly according to his gracious will. This plan would not be accomplished if God exacted vengeance on the wicked Jews right then and there. After his atoning sacrifice, the gospel must be given time to be proclaimed and to save sinners, starting from Jerusalem, to all Judea and Samaria, and to all the world.

Jesus' prayer was only for a temporary extension. The end will surely come, when the Son of Man appears in heaven at a day and hour that no one knows. When all the elect are saved, the preaching of the gospel will cease, and he will gather his elect from the four corners of the earth.

## **The Objects of This Prayer**

Jesus prayed, *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”* Who are the “them” for whom he was praying? No doubt that the crucifixion scene would include Roman soldiers, chief priests, Pharisees, scribes, and just plain onlookers. Many of those who had earlier clamored, *“Crucify him!”* were surely among the crowd. And certainly, his disciple John, the women disciples, and some of those whom Jesus healed, fed and comforted were there too to pay honor to the One who helped them and had compassion on them.

In his prayer to his Father to forgive “them,” Jesus for sure included those wicked people in the crucifixion crowd who wanted him dead. Why did he ask his Father to forgive them? Because they did not know what they were doing. Did they not really know what they were doing? Pilate acquitted him of all guilt, so they knew they were torturing and executing an innocent man.

In the Old Testament, there was forgiveness for the Jews who committed sin unintentionally. A sacrificial animal was offered for this kind of sin committed by an individual or by the whole congregation, by mistake, in ignorance, or in the weakness of his flesh, and for which there was true repentance (Lev 4:1, 13, 22).

But nonetheless, were not the Jews guilty of condemning and murdering an innocent man, a man who was literally and perfectly sinless and guiltless? If they did, they would have committed what Numbers 15:27-31 says is a “high-handed” sin for which there is no forgiveness. What is “high-handed” sin? It is a “deliberate” and “presumptuous” violation. Hebrews 10:26-27 warns about this kind of sin, *“For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.”* These sins are committed in arrogant disregard of divine commands before the face of God (Deut. 17:12; Psa 19:13).

They know the evil they are doing daily because God wrote his law on their hearts, *“their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them”* (Rom 2:14-15). The people who crucified Jesus knew exactly what they were doing. They had no

excuse. Their conscience accused them of murder, slander, hate, idolatry, covetousness, and rebellion against God.

But there was one thing they did not know about what they were doing: they were crucifying the Savior, the Messiah, the Son of God. So there is forgiveness for their ignorance, for *“they know not what they do.”*

In Acts 3, Peter condemned the Jews who crucified Jesus: *“And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled”* (Acts 3:17-18). Although they did not know Jesus as the Christ, and that God already ordained his crucifixion, the Jews were still accountable for their criminal act. But Peter offered them a way out of their guilt, saying, *“Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out”* (Acts 3:19). So they were commanded to repent of their sins to be forgiven, adding that God sent Christ *“to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness”* (Acts 3:26).

While he hung on the cross, Jesus prayed for those around him whom he knew would later repent of their murderous act and believe in him as their Savior and Lord. They would be brought from ignorance to knowledge of the Son of God, which means eternal life, *“And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent”* (John 17:3).

But Jesus was praying not only for those around him as he hung on the cross. He was also praying for all those who would believe in him in all the world, just as he prayed for them in the garden the night before he was crucified: *For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am praying for them* (John 17:8-9).

So at the cross he prays again for those who do not know him, that they might know the truth and believe in him. If they received the truth of the gospel and repent and believe that Jesus died on the cross to save them from their sins and God's wrath, then God would forgive them.

But did his Father hear his prayer?

## **Did His Father Hear This Prayer?**

In the garden the night before he was crucified, Jesus prayed for his disciples who have come to know the truth and believed in him. But he also prayed *“for those who will believe in me through their word... so that the world may believe that you have sent me”* (John 17:19-20). The unbelieving world will know him and believe in him through the gospel that will be preached by his disciples. In his prayer, Jesus declared to his Father, *“I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known”* (John 17:26).

Because his will and the will of the Father are one (John 17:21), his Father granted whatever Jesus asked. So Jesus' prayers in the garden and in the cross were immediately answered by his Father. One of the criminals acknowledged his sins and Jesus' innocence, saying, *“For we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”* Then he confessed his faith in Jesus as his Savior and King, *“Jesus, remember me when you come into*

*your kingdom.*” Jesus, fulfilling his promise that those who come to him in faith will never be cast out (John 6:37), answered the criminal with a sure promise, *“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise”* (Luke 23:41-43).

What a great comfort for a man about to die: an assurance from the King of Heaven himself that he will be with him that same hour in Paradise! This sinner was the first person to benefit from Jesus’ prayer to his Father to forgive sinners once they come to the knowledge that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. He repented and believed, and thereby was saved from God’s wrathful judgment.

A few verses later, Luke observes the reaction of a Roman centurion after he saw all of these things: Jesus praying for his enemies, assuring words to the repentant criminal, the unnatural darkness and the great earthquake, and his trust in God. In praise of God, the centurion exclaimed a declaration, *“Certainly, this man was innocent!”* or in Matthew and Mark, *“Truly, this was the Son of God!”* (Matt 27:54; Mark 15:39). We do not know if this was a confession of faith in the Son of God, but could it be that the centurion was the second man to benefit from Jesus’ prayer? Like the criminal, he was brought from ignorance of who Jesus was to knowledge that he was the Son of God.

Luke goes on to say in verse 48 that all the crowds who saw what had place *“returned home beating their breasts.”* In the New Testament, the act of beating one’s breasts is a sign of remorse and even godly repentance, as when the tax collector who went to the Temple realized his utter sinfulness. In his great contrition and sorrow over his sins, he *“would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’”* (Luke 18:13).

Notice that Luke sets in parallel the accounts of the centurion and the onlookers:

*47 Now when the centurion  
saw what had taken place,  
he praised God, saying,*

*“Certainly this man was innocent!”*

*48 And all the crowds...  
when they saw what had taken place,  
returned home beating their breasts.*

Luke set in parallel the centurion’s reaction of praising God and the crowds’ grief. Could it be that some in the crowd who heard and saw Jesus’ love for and compassion on them were also brought from ignorance into knowledge that he is truly Christ the Savior?

Jesus prayed to his Father to forgive the criminal on the cross, and maybe even the centurion and some among the crowd. But his prayer extended beyond the time and place of the cross, because the gospel of repentance and faith was preached into all the world by his apostles and is still being preached today by Christ’s appointed ministers in his church. And this gospel will be preached until the whole number of the elect are gathered into his kingdom, and then the end will come.

Fifty days after Jesus arose from the grave, his apostles preached the gospel in Jerusalem, and 3,000 were cut to the heart, repented of their sins, believed in Christ, and were baptized for the forgiveness of sins. They were included in Jesus’ prayer to the Father on the cross.

A few years after Jesus was crucified, a deacon of the church named Stephen was martyred by the enemies of Christ. As he was pelted by stones, he prayed a prayer to Christ just like his Savior's prayer on the cross, *"Lord, do not hold this sin against them"* (Acts 7:60). One of the leaders of those who martyred Stephen is a Pharisee named Saul who also was a recipient of God's forgiveness on account of Christ's prayer on the cross. Paul, the new Saul, wrote about the his own ignorance before Christ revealed himself to him, *"Formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief"* (1 Tim 1:13; see also Eph 4:18).

Paul, Peter and the other apostles proceeded to spread the gospel throughout the world, bringing the knowledge of Christ to multitudes, including pagan idolaters, sorcerers, immoral people, criminals, and even to Cornelius, a centurion, and his household.

## Conclusion

And so for 2,000 years after Christ prayed to his Father on the cross, *"Father, forgive them,"* we still see God answering his prayer. God still tarries from ending this age of the gospel of repentance and forgiveness because many throughout the whole earth are still being brought from ignorance to knowledge of Christ, redeemed from sin and saved from God's wrath. For them, this age is an age of mercy and forgiveness.

But just as Paul says, people who remain ignorant of Christ are still accountable for their sins. Why? *"They are without excuse"* because God has revealed himself and witnessed to them in two ways: first, in the divine beauty and design of his creation; and second, in the law *"written on their hearts,"* that is, their conscience (Rom 1:18-20; 2:14-15).

And for those who hear the true gospel but remain defiant against God in their unbelief and rebellion, the judgment is even more severe. They have committed a deliberate and intentional sin, for which there is no forgiveness.

The prayer of Jesus on the cross is also a part of the Great Commission to preach and teach the gospel to all the nations in order that all those who repent and believe will be forgiven of their sins. Time is of the essence. The church has to feel the urgency of the situation because the time of forgiveness will someday come to an end when the salvation of all the elect is completed.

Christ's prayer on the cross is also for all of you today. To you who have repented and believed in him: Rejoice! Because God the Father has forgiven you of your sins. To you who remain unrepentant and in unbelief, know that Jesus' prayer on the cross — *"Father, forgive them"* — is also for you if you repent and believe in him.