

Father, Forgive Them

"And when they were come to the place which is called Calvary, there they crucified him . . . Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

THIS intercessory prayer for his betrayers and murderers, Jesus uttered on the cross when he was crucified. It is found only in Luke, and there are some who claim the passage is not genuine because it is not found in some manuscripts. But that this prayer of Jesus is genuine, and does belong in the Gospel record, there should be no doubt, for several reasons—

1. *Was it not written of him in Isa. 53:12 that he would do just that: intercede for his transgressors?—"He bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."*

2. *Jesus taught his disciples to "Pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Surely he would be a faithful example of his own teachings.*

3. *And such forgiveness would be in harmony with what he said in Matt. 12:31-32—"All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men; but the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit shall not be forgiven unto men. Whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him."*

4. *Did Jesus do less than the first of his martyrs, Stephen?—who, when he was unjustly stoned to death, prayed for his executioners: "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge."*

5. *Finally and certainly: Jesus' intercessory prayer for his betrayers and murderers would be the forgiving spirit of God's Anointed One, the Saviour, whose very purpose in dying on the cross was to bring men forgiveness and life.*

Surely, then, we cannot doubt that Jesus prayed as Luke records. Why then the omission of this prayer from some manuscripts? We do not know. Many omissions occur in various manuscripts, both by error and by design.

It has been suggested that this omission is the work of anti-Semitism—that it may be due to the difficulty which many "Christians" had in believing that Jesus could have prayed for the Jews. We know anti-Semitism has been a characteristic of apostate "Christendom."

Further, it is a basic fact of the flesh that it is not natural or easy or to be expected that men should pray for their enemies and persecutors, let alone for their murderers. Most professed "Christians" reject both Christ's teachings and example on this point, and would clearly be happy to see this prayer omitted from Scripture.

But thus DID Jesus pray for his murderers, even though he knew the suffering and the agony that they, in their ignorance, were bringing upon him—a suffering on the cross that was to last 6 hours before he was released from it by death. For we are told that Jesus hung on the tree from the third to the ninth hour—from 9 am to 3 pm: and 3 of those 6 hours were hours of darkness—

"And it was the third hour, and they crucified him" (Mark 15:25).

"And when the sixth hour was come, there was darkness over the whole land till the ninth hour" (noon to 3 pm)—v. 33.

Jesus knew the will of his Father that he drink of this cup, and with the full possession of his senses at every moment, and alert and aware of everything that was transpiring, he endured unto the end. In fact, he was the ONLY ONE who did know the significance of all that was happening (though the crucified thief showed great faith and comprehension).

Jesus' flesh was crucified and his life blood poured out—an offering for sin. He would consciously drink of this cup to the dregs. So when he was offered "vinegar to drink, mingled with

gall," this was NOT the cup he would drink (though he would be given vinegar at his very end). He declined to accept the sense-deadening drink which would have de-intensified the cup of the physical sufferings which he endured while he waited in agony to say, "I thirst," that he might further say, "It is finished," so that in the faithful ending of the drama of his life, he could finally say—

"Father, into Thy hand I commend my spirit."

No, he would not drink of THAT cup which would relieve his suffering on the cross. In Nazareth Revisited, bro. Roberts comments on this event in the crucifixion of Christ—

"There was, first of all, a mitigating touch of humanity. They offered their noble victim a mixture to drink, which it is said would have had the effect of dulling sensibility to pain.

"Was this the result of softened feelings, inspired by the spectacle of his broken-heartedness? (for it is written in the Psalms, 'Reproach hath broken my heart'—we may know that such would be his aspect).

"Whatever feeling prompted their kindness, it was in vain. Jesus refused to drink. He would not assuage, by a mechanical stupefaction, the sufferings which the Father had called upon him to go through by the power of faith."

Jesus would bear the mental and physical pain with no relief. He would consciously endure the agonizing 6 hours until it was indeed "finished." But this did not mean that his intense and prolonged suffering would cause him to lose his senses or become unconscious before he expired on the cross. He would suffer the agony AND retain his reason and his senses right up to the end. It must be said that the only begotten Son of God would remain steadfast in a fully conscious faith that works by love; possessed with his full, active mental capacity to his last breath on the cross, when he exclaimed—

"Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit."

The seven utterances of Jesus on the cross all testify to his full awareness of His Father's will and purpose that he die a sacrificial death by being uplifted on the cross: which is to say, that Jesus would remain conscious and faithful while enduring suffering and pain until death ended it all, for had he been stupefied by the drink of gall, and then fallen into unconsciousness, his sufferings would have been limited. The 7 things he said on the cross are—

1. *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"* (Luke 23:34).
2. *"Verily I say to thee today, Thou shalt be with me in paradise"* (Luke 23:43).
3. *"Woman, behold thy son! .. Behold thy mother!"* (John 19:26-27).
4. *"My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"*(Matt 27:46).
5. *"I thirst"* (John 19:28).
6. *"It is finished"* (John 19:30).
7. *"Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit"* (Luke 23:46)

Of these 7 sayings, 3 are prayers and 4 are statements. This division of 7 into 3 and 4 is characteristic of God's Word. Where 7 of anything appears, the 3 & 4 division is often quite evident. The 3 prayers are the first, middle and last of the 7. The first prayer (and first saying) was—

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

This is quite contrary to the natural feelings and reactions of human nature—sinful flesh—which was crucified on the cross, and which is the natural flesh of all men by birth and by descent from Adam and Eve. Who would utter such a prayer for his murderers, unless it be the Saviour and those who would follow in his steps! We are told concerning those who were condemned to death by crucifixion, that when the sentence was carried out—

"It was usual for the victims of that dreaded doom, frenzied with pain, to shriek, entreat, curse, and spit upon spectators."

Surely this would be the usual reaction of those suffering such a death, especially if they were, or considered themselves, innocent or treated unjustly. The Romans and other heathen worshiped "revenge" as a god, and also worshiped gods of war—so belligerency and revenge were part of their vindictive spirit, according to the natural thoughts and works of the flesh.

In the face of death, even for the guilty, whether by crucifixion or stoning or any other condemnation to death, it was not the usual reaction for the victim to be silent and resigned. Yet in Jesus it was more than mere resignation. It was the positive frame of his mind, and the outpouring of his heartfelt feelings, when he prayed—

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Of course they knew what they were doing—in one sense. That is, certainly all who were there—Jews and Romans and rulers—knew that Jesus of Nazareth was being crucified. But none of them knew Jesus AS THE MESSIAH, the Anointed One of the Only True God, who was to suffer death first, before he would reign in glory on the earth, and—besides—with a long interval of time between his suffering death and the glory of his reign.

The words of Jesus, "for they know not what they do," mean simply, "ignorance." Since the Jews read the Old Testament Scriptures, which prophesied that their Messiah was to be rejected by the nation and to die a sacrificial death, and which foreshowed that he would be lifted up on the stake, and that after 3 days he would rise again to die no more, not seeing corruption—it might be supposed that the Jews as a whole, or at least some of them, were not "ignorant" of what they were doing.

But they WERE in ignorance, as Jesus expressed it in his opening prayer on the cross, and as Peter and Paul also testify. And even his own chosen apostles were "ignorant" of what was going on. So, even though the Jews read the Old Testament Scriptures, and many of them were well-versed in it, being their profession and their life study, nevertheless they were in ignorance—wanting perception. They were unable to see, and thereby learn of the sacrificial work of the Messiah foretold in their Scriptures. Paul, preaching in the synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia, said—

"For they that dwell at Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they KNEW HIM NOT, nor the voices of the prophets which are read every Sabbath day, they have fulfilled them in condemning him" (Acts 13:27).

Paul is saying, "The people living in Jerusalem, the very city where Jesus was crucified, along with their rulers—chief priests, scribes, elders—did not realize that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, nor did they realize the prophets taught that Messiah would suffer a sacrificial death, a message read every Sabbath, and they have fulfilled the very prophecies that say they would reject and condemn Jesus."

And Peter similarly informed the Jews on the day of Pentecost of the ignorance in which they committed their crime against Jesus—

"Ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you; and killed the Prince of Life, whom God hath raised from the dead: whereof we are witnesses . . ."

"And now, brethren, I know that THROUGH IGNORANCE ye did it, as did also your rulers" (Acts 3:14-17).

It was against the flesh, even contrary to the natural mind and heart and the lusts of the flesh and pride and national self-esteem, for ANYONE to perceive and receive in faith the truth of the rejection and suffering and death for sin that was to precede the glory (with the one exception, of course, of the One who was to bear the suffering).

And we also, like the Jews, or like the apostles and other disciples of Christ, would not have been able to perceive the sacrificial work of God's Anointed by reading and studying the Old Testament, of which salvation even the prophets have enquired diligently, which things the angels desire to look into (1 Pet. 1:10-12). Its meaning would have been withheld from us, as it was from all

of Jesus' followers. They were at that time "not able to bear it"; so in the wisdom of a gracious God it was withheld from their understanding, that they should see it not.

And again we find the same "ignorance" spoken of when Paul wrote his first letter to Corinth, saying of Christ's sacrificial death—

"Which none of the princes (Jewish and Roman rulers) of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory" (1 Cor. 2:8).

Because of their ignorance, then, Jesus prayed—

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

—a prayer for all: Jews, Romans, other Gentiles, peoples and their rulers—remission of sins and salvation would be extended in invitation to all. But it was not, however, a pardon for sin which would have entitled the forgiven to eternal life, that Jesus prayed for—a forgiveness they were neither aware that they were in need of, nor that they were getting.

His betrayers and murderers must repent and be baptized to find forgiveness unto life eternal, and then walk the rest of their life in obedience and faithfulness, as we will quote below. (But the betrayer Judas, being the "son of perdition," would not seek forgiveness, but went and hanged himself).

So Jesus is not saying of those who crucified him, "You are forgiven and will be given life eternal by my sacrifice." The Greek word (aphieemi) here translated "forgive" is also rendered "suffer, let go, leave alone, let pass, permit," as in Matt. 3:15 ("suffer it to be so"); Matt. 15:14 ("Let them alone"); Mark 11:6 ("Let them go"), etc. That is—

"Father, suffer them now. let them alone, for they know not what they do."

—for surely God could have struck them all dead there on the spot; or Jesus could call down upon them "12 legions" of avenging angels; or their sin could have been deemed an unforgivable sin.

But Jesus is also praying for his Father's forbearance upon his betrayers and murderers; because God's forbearance to overlook their sin and suffer them now—at the time of His Only Begotten Son's cruel death at their hands—was needed to give those who condemned him both the time and the opportunity to repent and obey whatever God required of them.

On the day of Pentecost (50 days later), Peter explained to the people of Jerusalem (and there must have been many of them who were at the crucifixion) that Jesus, whom they had taken and delivered up to be crucified in the place of a murderer, had been raised from the dead, and is Lord and Christ! He said (Acts 2:36)—

"Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus whom ye have crucified, both LORD AND CHRIST!"

The effect of Peter's revelation to them, and his answer to their critical problem, was (vs 37-38)—

"Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and the rest of the apostles,

"Men and brethren, what shall we do?"

"Then Peter said unto them: Repent, and be baptized every one of you, in the Name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins."

Yes, Jesus truly prayed—

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

—but "they" still would have to obey from the heart the divine command to repent, and to be baptized into the Saving Name of the One they had betrayed, condemned and put to death—and thereafter to walk in newness of life.

They were guilty of putting the Son of God to death, and only their ignorance (necessitated by the need for Jesus to die on the cross for them) permitted the forbearance of God to be exercised that they might be freely given opportunity to not only make amends for their terrible mistake, but to receive life eternal by God's Plan of Salvation for sinful men—the Plan of the Ages being fulfilled in Christ.

But the time would come—because of the Gospel being preached to all the world—when they could no longer be considered "ignorant," for God was revealing what was formerly kept secret. So all who would hear the Gospel of the Kingdom in the Name of Jesus would not be considered "ignorant." And all who heard could not plead ignorance of the suffering and the glory—

"And the times of this ignorance God winked at (overlooked, closed His eyes to), but now commandeth ALL MEN EVERYWHERE—Jews, Romans, other Gentiles—TO REPENT" (Acts 17:30).

Within 40 years the divine "overlooking" and forbearance ended, and terrible judgments began to be poured out upon Israel, which are still continuing through our own days, nearly 2000 years later. Said they, in defiant blasphemy—

"His blood be on us, and on our children!" (Matt. 27:25).

And Jesus said, as they wept at his crucifixion (Luke 23:28-31)—

"Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children: for, behold, the days are coming . . ."

—and what dreadful days he foretold!—and so indeed it has been! The times of "winking at ignorance" and "suffering them" (while the Gospel was graciously preached to them in the Name of him whom they had slain) came to an end with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (AD 68-70), and the scattering of the people ever since.

But it was the will of Jesus that God "forgive" and "suffer" them, because they did not know what they were doing. Certainly Jesus, as Saviour of the world, and being of one mind with His merciful Father, was to be of a long-suffering and forgiving frame of mind. We can be sure of this forgiving spirit in Jesus, as we can of many things written in Scriptures on which we have guidelines, without going into detail. In this case, introducing Jesus' prayer for them, we have the words (Luke 23:34)—

"Then Jesus SAID, Father, forgive them . . ."

The more literal meaning is, "Jesus KEPT SAYING," because the verb is imperfect, indicating continuous action. Other translations bear this out, as Rotherham, "Then Jesus kept saying"; and Robertson, "Then Jesus was saying." How true, then, that Jesus' prayer was not a momentary, passing, self-forced petition of reluctant duty, but rather it was the continual, consistent spiritual mind: the mind of Christ—

"Jesus kept saying. Father, forgive them . . ."

He kept saying this, even as they mocked and abused him, and cruelly put him to an agonizing death—an out-flowing manifestation of the forgiving spirit with which his whole mind and being was saturated, bringing salvation within the reach of all men by his obedient, loving submission to death, and his glorious resurrection to life for evermore!

—N.M.
