

CONTENTS

Preface	9
A Journey into the Heart of Jesus.....	13
CRY 1: A Cry for Pardon.....	29
CRY 2: A Cry of Assurance	45
CRY 3: A Cry of Compassion.....	59
CRY 4: A Cry of Anguish	71
CRY 5: A Cry of Suffering	87
CRY 6: A Cry of Victory	99
CRY 7: A Cry of Submission.....	115
Epilogue: Taking the Cross into the World	127
Notes	133



CHAPTER 1

A CRY FOR PARDON

*“Father, forgive them, for they
know not what they are doing.”*

—LUKE 23:34

How can I forgive him if I can't *trust* him?" A wife was speaking of her husband, who had an affair with a woman he met on a cruise to the Caribbean. This was not the first time he had strayed, nor the second, but the third. Now he was returning, asking to be forgiven again. Because he was honest in his confession, he expected the forgiveness to be instant, unconditional, and complete. After all, his wife was a Christian, wasn't she?

Forgiveness sounds like a marvelous idea until you are the one who has to do it. How can you forgive someone who keeps breaking a promise? Why should you forgive someone

who doesn't ask for it? And why should you be the one to forgive when you are the one who was wronged? Must you forgive someone who is out to destroy you? Perhaps nowhere do we have our questions about forgiveness answered more clearly than at the cross. The Savior's first cry was one for pardon for His enemies.

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

During His ministry Jesus often forgave those who needed His mercy. "Son, your sins are forgiven," He said to the paralytic (Mark 2:5). His remarks caused a storm of controversy, for His hearers knew that only God could forgive sins. Even sin against others is ultimately sin against God. Jesus explained that He had the right to forgive sins because He had the credentials of deity.

Now, on the cross, He did not exercise this divine prerogative. He asked the Father to do what He had previously done. Sacrificed as the Lamb of God, He refused the role of deity. He was God, to be sure, but chose to suspend His divine rights. He so completely identified with us that He temporarily withdrew Himself from a position of authority. Yet His heart was burdened for those who had instigated and committed history's greatest crime. He prayed that the unforgivable might be forgiven.

In this first cry from the cross, Jesus called God "Father." He shall do so again as He breathes His last: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" (Luke 23:46). But in the middle cry, He will shout, "My *God*, my *God*, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34, emphasis added). That, as we shall learn, was His darkest hour, so dark that even nature resonated as the light of the sun was blotted out. In that moment, the Son experienced the full penalty for our sins and

even the Father withdrew His blessed presence.

He could call God “Father” while being treated unjustly. When the mob arrived at the place called the Skull (Luke 23:33), the cross was laid on the ground and He was lowered on top of it. That is when His prayer began. The Greek text implies that He kept repeating the words “*Father*, forgive them . . .” (Luke 23:34, emphasis added). Though He was arrested illegally and suffered personal insults, He knew that He could count on His Father’s blessing and presence. He also knew that His prayer for His enemies would be answered.

All His disciples abandoned Him (except John, who later returned to the scene of the crime). The injustices of His enemies and the betrayal of His friends did not shatter His confidence in the Father’s presence. He knew that the Father could have spared Him this injustice; indeed, as the second person of the Trinity, He could have chosen to come down from the cross. But such a deliverance was not part of the plan agreed upon in the eons of eternity. Thus, He was content to say “Father,” though His personal rights were arrogantly ignored and insults were hurled at Him. These sufferings did not hide the face of the One whom He sought to please.

The Reverend Warren Wiersbe, former pastor of Moody Church, asked, “Is your faith shaken by the wickedness of sinners or the weakness of saints?”¹ Yes, sometimes our faith is shaken. A woman whose husband had tried to destroy her, poisoning the attitude of their four children against her, said, “I don’t see God at all . . . He is nowhere in this.” We can identify with her, for we all have, at times, felt abandoned by God. We tell ourselves that no father could watch his child suffer unjustly. But Christ’s Father remained firm in

the presence of unrestrained wickedness. He knew that He could depend upon His Father, even when evil seemed to be out of control.

When man had done his worst, Jesus prayed, not for justice, but for mercy; He pleaded that His enemies would be exempt from the just consequences of their evil deeds. And He prayed, not after His wounds had healed, but while they were yet open. Words of forgiveness came from His lips when the nails were being driven into His body, when the pain was the fiercest, when the jolts of anguish were the sharpest; He prayed as the cross was lowered into the hole with a thud. It was then, when His nerves were yet the most tender, when the pain was the most unfathomable, He who was the victim of history's greatest crime prayed for the criminals.²

He could forgive because He was about His Father's business. In Gethsemane, He prayed, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39). The cup was not a satanic attack, though Satan no doubt tried to add his own ingredients into the potion given Him. The cup was the one given to Him by His Father. It was the task of purchasing "people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9). This meant that the Son would be cruelly crucified and become "sin" for humanity. He would drink the cup of suffering to the dregs. This cup would purchase the forgiveness for which He now prayed.

Can we say "Father" when we are being crucified? Can we pray for the forgiveness of those who are trying to destroy us? Do we have enough faith to leave justice in the hands of our heavenly Father? "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written: 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:19). On the

cross we see the restraint of a Man who had the power to destroy but chose instead to forgive.

In these words is the hope of our own deliverance. So let us come near to listen more intently to what is being said. Perhaps we shall hear our own name in the petition.

A PRAYER FOR FORGIVENESS

Surrounded by jeering taunts, weakened by the loss of blood, His lips were moving. What was He trying to say? Was He groaning with pain? Did He mumble words of self-pity? Did He curse those who crucified Him? No, He had a word of forgiveness for His enemies. “Father, forgive them . . .” Though He was personally sinless, He was “numbered with the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:12). Even now, He was bearing their sin and pleading that His sacrifice might be effectively applied to them. Even this was a fulfillment of prophecy. “Yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors” (v. 12).

He prayed aloud so that we might know we are included in this prayer. Already the night before in the garden of Gethsemane, He remembered us.

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (JOHN 17:20-21)

The prayer begun that evening continued on the cross, and even today He is at the right hand of the Father making intercession for us. Be assured, He will never forget us.

*Five bleeding wounds He bears,
Received on Calvary;
They pour effectual prayers,
They strongly plead for me;
“Forgive him, O, forgive,” they cry,
“Nor let that ransomed sinner die!”³*

Let’s move on to the next phrase of the prayer. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Were they ignorant of their wrongdoing? Of course not. Judas knew he had betrayed a friend; Pilate knew he had condemned an innocent man; the Sanhedrin knew that they bribed false witnesses to make the charges stick. All of these people were not ignorant of the facts of their guilt, but they were ignorant of the *enormity* of their crime. For whatever reason, they did not know that they were crucifying the Son of God.

Paul the apostle agreed. He said that we have hidden wisdom, then added, “None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Corinthians 2:8). If they had known what is now clear, they would have recognized Jesus to be Messiah, the Lord of glory. Their crime was much greater than they could ever have realized because of the infinite value of the person whom they had condemned. They knew what they had done, but they did not know *all* they had done.

The Old Testament distinguishes sins of ignorance from sins of presumption, that is, sinning with a clenched fist. “But anyone who sins defiantly . . . blasphemes the LORD and must be cut off from the people of Israel” (Numbers 15:30 NIV). Such a sin is especially evil since it is committed with knowledge; it is willful and rebellious. In the New Testament

Jesus spoke of an unpardonable sin, that is, a sin committed by the nation Israel in their persistent, deliberate rejection of His messiahship. Obviously, the people had varying degrees of responsibility because they had varying degrees of knowledge. For some the rejection of Christ was willful rebellion.

Contrast this with the sin of ignorance: “If anyone commits a breach of faith and sins unintentionally . . . he shall bring to the LORD as his compensation, a ram without blemish out of the flock” (Leviticus 5:15). Such sins needed a sacrifice, but they were not as serious as willful, defiant rebellion. Even in Old Testament times, God evaluated behavior by the attitude of the heart and the knowledge of the mind.

Don’t overlook the fact that even sins of ignorance need forgiveness. Jesus did not say, “They don’t know what they were doing, so let them go free.” God never lowers His standard of justice to the level of our ignorance. Sins committed in ignorance are still sins. The guilt of those who crucified Jesus was real and objective regardless of how much they understood or did not understand.

Have you ever driven through a red light “ignorantly”? A friend of mine argued with a policeman, trying to make the point that he did not see the stop sign. You can guess who won the argument. Ignorance is no excuse in our society, nor is ignorance an excuse in the presence of God. What is more, those who crucified Jesus *should* have known, and they *would* have known if only they had not feared where the truth might take them.

Contrast their knowledge with ours. They did not know that a resurrection would follow the crucifixion; they did not know that a church that would change the world would grow out of Pentecost; they did not know that a New Testament would be written that spells out in detail God’s plan of

the ages. I'm often asked whether people of other religions who have not heard about Christ will be saved. Usually, the question comes from those who know much about Christ and can examine His credentials in detail. They seem more concerned about those who have never heard than about their own response to God. But if responsibility is based on knowledge, those who are born in our culture will experience much greater condemnation than those who have never heard.

Certainly all sin makes us ignorant. We have no idea of the greatness of our sin because we do not understand the greatness of our God. But we have fewer excuses today than ever; we have no reason to turn away from the Savior who left us powerful witnesses to His authenticity.

Since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? . . . God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. (HEBREWS 2:2-4)

I know a young man who has defiantly chosen to reject Jesus. He was brought up in a fine Christian home and attended Christian schools. His guilt is greater than that of his best friend in college, who grew up without Christian parents, without a church, and without a moral example. Both are guilty; both have every reason to seek Christ; and both are neglecting their salvation, but with differing levels of responsibility. Such people, wrote Arthur Pink, are "blind to their madness."⁴

THE ANSWER TO HIS PRAYER

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Was His prayer answered? I’m convinced that Jesus received whatever He asked for. Unlike us, the Son always knew the Father’s will, so the Father was always pleased to give His beloved Son His every petition. Forgiveness came to all those for whom Jesus prayed. Of course I don’t mean that everyone connected with the crucifixion was forgiven. Many died in their sins, but those for whom the prayer was uttered were forgiven.

“Now we stand as sinners at the foot of his cross,” wrote Bonhoeffer, “and now a puzzle difficult to understand is solved: Jesus Christ, the innocent one, prays as God’s vengeance on the godless is fulfilled. . . . The one who bore the vengeance, he alone was allowed to ask for the forgiveness of the godless.”⁵ Here the vengeance of God is turned away so that forgiveness might come from the very One who prays that it be so. In effect, Jesus was praying that His own death would be effective for those for whom it was intended.

Some of the soldiers standing at the foot of the cross were forgiven. The centurion who was probably in charge of the crucifixion ordeal was deeply troubled by the darkness, the earthquake, and the tearing of the veil of the temple. Taking his stand against popular opinion, he exclaimed, “Truly this was the Son of God” (Matthew 27:54 KJV). I expect to see him in heaven.

The Jews in Jerusalem who called for His crucifixion—the ones who, standing before Pilate, shouted, “His blood be on us and on our children!” (Matthew 27:25)—many of them were forgiven. Perhaps we want to argue that they were not ignorant of what they were doing. Surely, we think, these cannot be the people Jesus had in mind. It appears as if they

knew *exactly* what they were doing.

Surprisingly, Peter thought they were ignorant of the full extent of their guilt. Listen to him preach: “You killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. . . . Now, brothers, I know that you acted *in ignorance*, as did also your rulers” (Acts 3:15, 17, emphasis added). As a result of his sermon, some two thousand people accepted Jesus as Messiah. We must add this number to the three thousand who responded to the message on the Day of Pentecost to account for the total that swelled to some five thousand (Acts 4:4). We also read that a great number of the temple priests confessed Jesus as Lord (Acts 6:7). All of this in answer to Jesus’ prayer!

Reflect on God’s mercy! He did not hold the murder of His beloved Son against these criminals! Many proclaimed, “His blood be on us and on our children!” (Matthew 27:25), meaning they would bear the guilt of Jesus’ death in future generations. But in God’s sovereign mercy, His blood was instead applied to their hearts! Jim Nance observed that He “turned their words around and applied Christ’s blood for the far more glorious work of their eternal salvation.”⁶

Could God have forgiven these people without their asking to be forgiven? No. The prayer was not for those who did not want to be forgiven, but for those who would seek it. Nor was this a general prayer, giving a blanket pardon to all who were involved in the crucifixion. This was a prayer for those specific individuals whom God would save. We have no evidence that Jesus ever prayed for the world as such, but He did pray for those who were not yet a part of His family but some day would be (John 17:9).

If Jesus had come down from the cross, His prayer could not have been answered. These conversions two thousand

years ago were a kind of “firstfruits” in anticipation of the day when all Israel will be saved. And the Gentile conversions were also the “firstfruits,” anticipating the day when we who are Gentiles would be welcomed into the kingdom.

OUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

In this prayer, we have at least some answers to our questions about forgiveness.

Are some sins “unpardonable”? The answer is no, for if the murder of the Son of God was “forgivable” for those who sought forgiveness, then all sins can be forgiven. On February 9, 2001, an American submarine came up above the surface of the water and hit a Japanese fishing vessel, and nine were drowned. Parents who lost a son in the accident were quoted as saying, “What happened was unforgivable.” We know what they meant, because sometimes human beings feel a loss so deeply that extending forgiveness is beyond their ability. When a babysitter is responsible for the death of the child, the parents often feel there is too much to forgive. But what man cannot forgive, God can. The cross can repair the irreparable.

A man who raped four women wrote to me asking whether he could be forgiven. My first inclination was to say, “Not if I have anything to do with it!” But the answer is yes, he can be forgiven by God, though he may not experience the forgiveness of the victims whose lives he ruined. He, and a host of others like him, must be content with the forgiveness of God when the forgiveness of man fails. There is no unpardonable sin for those who come to Christ for forgiveness. For those who refuse Him, all sins are unpardonable.

“By this prayer from the cross,” writes Clarence Cranford,

“Jesus was building a bridge of forgiveness over which his tormentors could come in penitence to the Father.”⁷ God did not hold the murder of His precious Son, the Lord of Glory, against those who had the will to believe. Jesus’ prayer was answered, because the cross is the self-substitution of God; He who needed no forgiveness died for those of us who are condemned without it.

If you are ever tempted to think that God takes sin lightly, look at Calvary. A friend of mine said he was sharing the gospel with a woman on a plane who felt that she was good enough to go to heaven. When he asked her what she would do if, in fact, her works were not good enough, she responded, “I would tell God that He should lighten up.”

Skull Hill, as Calvary was called, reminds us that God can’t “lighten up.” His searing holiness demanded an infinite penalty. And although God forgives us because of Christ, it is neither His job nor His obligation to do so. He forgives us because of undeserved mercy toward us whose just punishment is hell. The cross is the bridge of redeeming love; on it, we walk across the chasm to God, who graciously provided forgiveness for those who believe. If we do not understand this, we do not understand the gospel.

Should we pray for those who do not ask for our forgiveness? Yes, Jesus prayed for His enemies before they became His friends. Of course we do not know the future response of those for whom we pray. We do not know whether they will seek God’s forgiveness, or, for that matter, our forgiveness if they have wronged us. Yet, Jesus taught His disciples to “pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44 NKJV). These are Christ’s instructions when our enemies do to us what His enemies did to Him. We can pray like Jesus, “Forgive them, for they know not what they

do,” but unlike Him, we do not know exactly how our prayer will be answered.

Should we forgive those who do not ask for it? Since God does not forgive those who refuse to ask for His forgiveness, why should we? The answer is that when our forgiveness is not requested, we must still grant it in the sense that we release our bitterness to God and commit our adversaries to Him.

In human relationships, when forgiveness is requested, reconciliation is never a certainty. “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him” (Luke 17:3–4). The goal of forgiveness is always reconciliation, that is, the uniting of two divided hearts. But when forgiveness is not requested, the offended party must still choose to “forgive” in the sense that the injustice is turned over to God. If not, the hurt and anger will destroy the human psyche and grieve the Holy Spirit. The perpetrator has caused enough pain already; the only way to be free from his or her continuing influence is to “forgive” by surrendering the matter to God.

As far as we know, Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber who killed 168 people in 1995, died unforgiven by God and man. There was no reason for the relatives of his victims to grant him the forgiveness he neither wanted nor requested. And yet, among the survivors, those who have been able to “forgive” by trusting God to “even the score” will be rewarded with greater emotional health and stability. Such is the spirit of Jesus.

But where is justice? How can we choose to “forgive” a man who deserves a fate worse than death? How can we surrender the anger that properly seeks compensation and

revenge? Jesus helps us here as well. “When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23). Jesus could forgive without surrendering His desire for justice. He felt no need to even the score at the moment. He committed His plight to the Judge of the universe and could wait for the final verdict.

Two thousand years have passed, and those who mistreated Jesus and rejected His forgiveness—those criminals—have not yet been brought to justice. But a day is coming when they shall stand before the Father of the One they so cruelly wronged. Jesus was content to wait for that day, for His faith in the Father’s justice did not waver. Yes, we too can entrust ourselves to Him who judges justly.

The woman whose husband has left her for another lover; the teenager whose childhood was stolen through parental abuse; the brother who was chiseled out of his inheritance by an unscrupulous relative—these, and others like them, must surrender their hurt to God and be content with the sure knowledge that all such cases have yet to be tried by what is truly *the* Supreme Court.

Should we forgive those who ask for forgiveness even when we doubt their sincerity or cannot trust their motives? The answer is yes, for we cannot see the human heart. Jesus told the disciples that they must be willing to forgive many times—seventy times seven—if they wished to understand God’s forgiveness. However—and this is important—forgiveness must again be distinguished from reconciliation. A wife can forgive her adulterous husband, but that does not mean that she is required to blindly trust his lifestyle. There has to be counseling, the passing of time, and accountability. Regaining trust is a long, often difficult process.

Where sin is not taken seriously, forgiveness is received too lightly. Even sincere repentance must be updated with daily surrender to God and responsible disciplines. Our entire lives must be characterized by repentance. No one act of repentance in and of itself guarantees a future life of obedience.

The first cry from the cross echoes the one word without which we cannot be saved: *forgiveness*. Then as now, it is freely granted to those who humbly receive it. Thankfully, the death of Jesus made the answer to this prayer a reality.