

## CRIES FROM THE CROSS – A CRY FOR PARDON

Matthew 18:21-35, Luke 23:34

March 13, 2022

During this season of Lent, I am doing a series called “*Cries from the Cross*” – a journey into the heart of Jesus by looking at the seven last words of Christ from the cross before He died. However, before we start looking at Jesus’ final words to us as he suffered on the cross, we need to first look at the cross as the altar that we need to come and kneel before on our journey to Easter. At the foot of the cross is where we can experience God’s presence, grace and mercy and have Him speak into our lives.

Today, the symbol of the cross has lost its significance as a cruel and barbaric method of torture and death as it was back in Roman times – no one survived the cross. Today, believers and un-believers alike, all wear crosses as jewelry without every considering the significance of the cross and why Jesus had to be crucified on a cross, suffering in the most inhumane and cruel way ever invented by mankind to achieve the maximum amount of pain before death, rather than dying by any other means. The cross is widely misunderstood today, even by the church. Beautiful crosses decorate our church buildings and sanctuaries as a symbol of our faith; however, very few speak about the offence of the cross. Those that wear crosses around their necks as jewelry would be horrified and outraged if they really understood its true meaning.

The Jewish people that lived in Jesus’ time understood what the cross meant. As they travelled about the countryside, they would have seen the horrific scene of those that were suffering and dying, naked and totally humiliated. They would have smelled the stench of urine and feces covering the upright beams stained with blood. They would have smelled the stench of the rotting corpses left hanging on the crosses for days in the hot sun as an effective deterrent used by the Romans: “*this could be you if you don’t fall in line with Roman rule.*” Today, society has turned the cross into something decorative like a piece of furniture without power to save anyone. Many churches have even turned away from offensive topics like sin, judgment, hell, sacrifice, dying to self, because they aren’t popular topics! Many churches today have also sanitized and tamed the Gospel message!

While it’s true that we need to see the cross as cruel, barbaric, and offensive – we also need to see the cross as the means of salvation, something we need to embrace as Christ embraced His cross, being willing to carry out our Heavenly Father’s

will, regardless how difficult it may be, as Christ carried out His Father's will. YES, we need to trust Christ's sacrificial death on the cross for our salvation, but we also need to see the cross as something we are also called to carry on a daily basis, as we live in a society that is continuously turning against Christ and His teaching. Jesus warned us that this will take place in the end times, in which we are currently living, "***Watch out that you are not deceived...Nation will rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom...They will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name***" (Luke 21:8-12).

That's why the cross is central to the season of Lent, as the cross reminds us of the devastating effects of sin on this world as well as our own mortality. The cruelty of the cross reminds us that this world is not our home, we will be rejected as Christ was rejected. Reminding us as believers that we are not immune from experiencing hardships, trouble, heartache, and persecution similar to what Jesus experienced, and His early followers experienced, dying as a martyr for their faith. Reminding us that we live in a dark sinful world in which we are called to stand up for our faith. However, we may refuse to carry our cross, or we may pray that our cross would be much lighter, saying it's too much to bear, it's too big of a sacrifice to make, and fall into compromising our faith by being silent when we should speak out and embrace society because it's easier; so we all need to learn a lesson from Jesus on how to carry the full weight of the cross voluntarily, even if it means suffering greatly for what we believe in.

Jesus taught us in His Sermon on the Mount (the Beatitudes) that blessed are those that carry the full weight of the cross without grumbling and complaining.

***"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven"*** (Matthew 5:11-12). So, this season of Lent is a good time to grasp a good hold on what the cross meant to Christ; thereby, understanding what the cross should mean to us as Christ followers. And we can't understand what God did for us without standing at the foot of the old rugged cross, not a thing of beauty that ordains our walls or hangs around our necks, but that crude object of torture and death that is highly offensive and reminds us that we must die to self to live for Christ.

During the season of Lent, we are going to stand at the foot of the cross and hear Jesus' "*Cries from the Cross.*" And to stand at the foot of the cross is not only going to be a journey into the heart of Jesus, but hopefully, it will also be a journey of self-examination, self-awareness, in which we will learn to see ourselves, see deep within our heart with all of our needs, our sins, and self-deception, and learn to lay our burdens at the feet of Jesus. Jesus' journey to the cross began in this way, He was beaten and bruised to within an inch of His life and then **Matthew 27:31, "After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him."**

In this series on Jesus' "*Cries from the Cross*" – we will be looking at the seven last words of Christ before He died, because the last words of anyone that is dying are important. However, no last words are as important and significant as those of Jesus on the cross. Then, people also often miss the entire message of the cross because it's not just that Jesus died for us on a cruel Roman cross, but how Jesus died for us, that's equally important. On the cross we will experience Jesus' heart and His sacrificial love for all mankind. On this journey into the heart of Jesus, we will also find healing for our deepest hurts as well. As we read from **Isaiah 53:4-5, "Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering...he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed."** While it's true that Jesus experienced hell that we might experience Heaven, we also need to understand that when Jesus died on the cross, He redeemed us completely, because of the cross we are completely healed in every way – body, soul, and spirit – so if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old sinful nature is gone! The new has come, and nothing in this world can separate us from Christ, our eternity is secure!

While the fact the new has come is undeniable and we are now adopted into God's family – in this life some will receive healing, and some will not; some will have all their needs met and some will not; some will be spared from pain and heartache, and some will not; some will suffer for their faith and some will not. So, we are never to be discouraged or to lose faith because we or our loved ones never experienced complete healing on this side of Heaven and things turn badly. What we hold onto is what we are all promised as God's children is the forgiveness of our sins and the gift of eternal life, with the gift of the Holy Spirit given as a down payment of that future glory. So, we live each day by faith, not by sight, as we await Heaven. Remembering that the cross purchased eternal life for us, as

well as the promise of complete healing: physical, emotional, and spiritual; however, we need to wait for it in faith, as we are reminded in Hebrews 11 of those that have gone before us, ***“These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised since God has planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect”*** (Hebrews 11:39-40). The promise of resurrection is the promise of perfection!

After His trial and scourging – Jesus was led away by the Roman soldiers to be crucified. When they had arrived at Golgotha, Jesus was thrown to the ground upon a wooden cross, stripped naked, with arms extended and wrists nailed to the cross piece, and feet nailed to the upright piece against a block of wood in a bent fashion so that Jesus could lift His body just enough to take a breathe. Then the cross was lifted upright with ropes by the soldiers, falling into place with a sudden jarring nerve piercing thud into a hole fashioned in the rock. The same process was repeated for the other two criminals who were crucified to the left and right of Jesus. Now that their work had been completed, the soldiers could sit back and relax, as the waiting began, waiting for death to claim its three victims. These hardened veteran soldiers had been through this process numerous times: the horror, the cursing, and the cries of excruciating pain from the victims no longer affected them; it was just another day on the job. These enemies of the state meant absolutely nothing to these Roman soldiers, they felt no compassion or pity for them; as far as they were concerned these criminals of Rome were getting exactly what they deserved. So, as they watched and waited, casting lots for the victim’s belongings, drinking wine, taunting the criminals, and placing bets on how long it will take for death to claim them – Jesus began His cries from the cross.

Surrounded by jeering taunts, weakened by the loss of blood, and suffering with excruciating pain with each agonizing breath – Jesus’ began to utter sounds. What was Jesus trying to say? Was He groaning in pain? Was He calling on God His Heavenly Father to save Him? Was He uttering words of self-pity, or was He cursing those hard-hearted, uncompassionate soldiers who were crucifying Him, joining with the other two criminals beside Him? NO! Remarkably, Jesus’ very first cry from the cross was a cry of pardon for those that nailed Him to the cross. In the first cry from the cross, Jesus called God, “Father,” even though the bitter cup He was about to drink was given to Him by His Father. Even though the Father could have spared Him from injustice; indeed, as the second person of the Trinity, Jesus could have chosen to come down from the cross, but that was not part of the plan agreed upon since the beginning of time. Knowing His Father’s

will, Jesus accepted and embraced the cross and trusted His Father in the presence of unrestrained wickedness, as evil was out of control.

When mankind was at its absolute worst, Jesus prayed, not for justice, but for mercy – Jesus pleaded with His Father that His enemies would be exempt from the consequences of their evil deeds. Words of mercy and forgiveness came from Jesus' lips when His nerves were raw and the pain unbearable. At the moment when He was the victim of history's greatest crime Jesus could forgive because He was about His Father's business. **Luke 23:34** records Jesus' very first words from the cross: "***Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.***" Amazingly, our Saviour's very first cry from the cross was pardon for His enemies, for those hardened veteran soldiers who were experts at pain and torture, who enjoyed seeing their victims suffer as entertainment.

We all like to be the recipients of forgiveness – forgiveness sounds like a marvelous idea, that is, until you are the one who has to forgive. How can you forgive someone that has hurt you deeply and keeps on hurting you? How can you forgive someone you don't respect or trust? Then, why should you forgive someone who doesn't deserve it? And if I am the victim, the one being wronged, like in Jesus' situation, why should I be the one to forgive? It's totally illogical to forgive those who have wronged you, especially your enemies. It just doesn't make sense! And like Jesus, can we say, "*Father*" when we are being crucified? Can we pray for the forgiveness of those that are trying to destroy us? Do we have enough faith to leave justice in the hands of our Heavenly Father as Jesus did?

Author and Professor of Literature at Cambridge University, C. S. Lewis, wrote this about forgiveness, "*This is hard. It is perhaps not so hard to forgive a single great injury. But to forgive the incessant provocations of daily life – to keep forgiving the bossy mother-in-law, the bullying husband, the nagging wife, the selfish daughter, the deceitful son – how can we do it? Only, by remembering where we stand, by meaning our words when we say in our prayers each night, 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us!' We are offered forgiveness on no other terms. To refuse it is to refuse God's mercy for ourselves*" (Fern-Seed and Elephants, Essays on Christianity by C.S. Lewis). Jesus taught His disciples in The Lord's Prayer that God forgives us in the very same way we forgive others, and on the cross, Jesus modeled that prayer in the most dramatic way possible. How can anyone possibly pray for their enemies

when they are naked, jeered, humiliated, and in excruciating pain? Well, Jesus can!

God's calling on our lives is for holiness – however, there are many obstacles on our journey towards holiness. On the cross, Jesus has already removed the largest obstacle, sin, and now it's up to us to remove the many other obstacles that we have accumulated in our lives, and here at the foot of the cross, the first obstacle Jesus wants us to deal with is un-forgiveness. Pardon for those that are difficult to forgive! You may have many concerns and questions about forgiveness; however, at the cross, Jesus answers all of our questions on how to forgive others. Jesus the Son of God demonstrated His divine power and authority numerous times as He walked the earth – in the feeding of the 5000, healing every sickness, giving sight to the blind, casting out demons, turning water into wine, stilling the storm, walking on water, and raising the dead. Now on the cross, as history's greatest crime was being played out, Jesus chose not to exercise His divine privilege. Instead, as Jesus was dying for the sins of the world, as the sacrificial Lamb of God, He was burdened for those that were committing history's greatest crime. How could Jesus do that? What was Jesus' secret that we need to learn this morning? Let's start by looking back at Jesus' earthly ministry.

Throughout His earthly ministry – Jesus had a forgiving heart and taught His followers to have a forgiving heart. This was most evident in His answer to Peter's question in **Matthew 18:21-35**. Bold and brash, speak-before-you think Peter came to Jesus with a question, "*Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?*" Then, Peter can't wait for Jesus to answer, as he gives his self-righteous, holier-than-thou answer, "*Up to seven times?*" Believing he gave a very good answer, going far behind what was required, Peter is waiting for Jesus to pat him on the back for being such a wonderful forgiving person. Instead, Jesus puts self-righteous Peter in his place, "*I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.*" In other words, there is no limit or end to our forgiveness, even when you are nailed to a cross. Christ followers always forgive – period! That's their Christ-like nature! And, to make sure His disciples got the point, Jesus gives them the parable of the unmerciful servant who was forgiven this enormous debt yet couldn't show mercy and forgive the person who owed him an insignificant amount in comparison. Jesus calls that unforgiving servant wicked and casts him out of His presence!

Jesus' disciples learned this lesson well – because they also died well as martyrs of the faith, following Jesus' example of forgiving those that were taking their lives, with their dying breathe. The best example is found in the stoning of Stephen, ***“While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he said this, he fell asleep”*** (Acts 7:59-60). Even today, this is taking place wherever Christians are being beheaded by Muslim terrorists. Eyewitness have claimed that the last words of many of these believes have been the words of Jesus, ***“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,”*** which is most likely unbelievable to those Muslims carrying out the beheadings, like it was to the Roman soldiers that day at Golgotha. Why would anyone forgive those that mistreat them, abuse them, torture them in such an inhumane and barbaric manner? It doesn't make sense – that is – unless you know the Saviour's heart. It only makes sense when you come to the foot of the cross and hear Jesus' cries of pardon for your sins and your shortcomings! How Jesus offered us forgiveness when we didn't deserve it!

Forgiveness is powerful because it liberates the soul – taking away all fear, bitterness, resentment, hate, and wanting revenge; replacing it with joy, peace and freedom, knowing that God brings justice not us. I learned this valuable lesson many years ago – when we went through a second very difficult church split. I knew that I had to seek forgiveness at any cost to continue to serve Christ effectively. Even though I felt justified in what we had done by leaving, I still knew that we had caused serious division within the body of Christ and deeply hurt others and damaged our witness within the community. God hates division and disunity, and once again Jesus was being nailed to the cross by our actions. So, to stop the bleeding within my heart and start the healing process their needed to be forgiveness and reconciliation. So, I went and offered forgiveness to the pastor and others for my part in the church split, and the result was a peace that passed all understanding within my soul. YES, it was difficult; however, the lesson that I learned that day, has helped me many times since then. The message of the cross is to let go of our grudges, bitterness, and un-forgiveness and give them over to God, so we can move on to healing and living victorious lives. Forgiveness challenges us, even though it may never change the situation!

On the cross – Jesus knew full well the great sin that was being committed against Him. Jesus knew that He had been betrayed by one of His own disciples. Jesus knew that He was arrested and tried illegally. Jesus knew that He was suffering

needlessly, and being treated unjustly through ignorance, because they didn't know what they were doing. Jesus knew that when He willingly took the cup of suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane, His deliverance was not part of God's plan. Jesus knew full-well that God needed to turn His back on Him and look the other way when He took the sins of the world upon Himself. We tell ourselves that no loving father would watch his child suffer unjustly; however, for our sake, Christ's Father remained firm and unmoveable in the presence of such unrestrained wickedness and cruelty, because of His love for this world and His love for you and me. And Jesus knew at that moment, as difficult as it was, that He could depend on His heavenly Father's justice and mercy even when evil was completely out-of-control, even when evil was at it's worst.

This give us hope whenever our lives get out-of-control – whenever things are falling apart, and when abusive or difficult situations take place, because at times, we are also called to suffer for the Gospel. Jesus endured the cross because He knew the end result of His suffering and death. Jesus knew resurrection Sunday was only a few days away. Jesus knew that one day God will judge the living and the dead for their sins. At the moment, nailed to a cross, things were out of Jesus' hands and death was inevitable, so Jesus decided to do the only thing which He could still do, and that was to pray for the souls of those around Him, asking for God's mercy so that they could be saved. Jesus could do that because He had within Him the heart of God, a heart that wants to see everyone saved!

So, what's in your heart? Can you pray for forgiveness when it feels like you are being crucified by others? Can you pray for forgiveness when others around you are trying to destroy you? Do you have the faith to leave justice in God's hands? Jesus had the power to take revenge on His enemies, but He chose instead to forgive. Paul writes in **Romans 12:19-21** on how we should deal with our enemies, "*Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary, 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*" On the cross we have an example to follow, we see the restraint of a Man who had the power to destroy but chose instead to forgive, and that's real POWER. Un-forgiveness, bitterness, holding on to anger and resentment, wanting to get even is easy, anyone can do that; however, forgiveness is reserved for those filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. The same power of forgiveness that Jesus exhibited is within us; however,

to claim that power we need to come to the foot of the cross and crucify ourselves to release it!

I am thankful for Jesus' words and prayer on the cross that day, because I know that His prayer was for me as well as for those who surrounded the cross on that Good Friday two thousand years ago. Our hope is that Jesus was praying that His death would be effective for all those who would come after Him, including you and me. So, I need to come and stand daily at the foot of the cross as a sinner, seeking His forgiveness, knowing that God is still answering Jesus' prayer, even today. Because at times, like those disciples that followed Jesus – I don't know what I'm doing and I need God's grace, mercy and forgiveness!

God heard His Son's cries from the cross, and Jesus' death fulfilled God's purpose – therefore, I believe some of the Roman soldiers standing at the foot of the cross that day were forgiven. Then what about the centurion who was in charge of the crucifixion, who was deeply affected by the darkness, the earthquake, and the tearing of the veil in the Temple, who boldly claimed: "***Truly this was the Son of God***" (Matthew 27:54). Shouldn't we expect to see that centurion in heaven? Then what about the Jews standing before Pilate shouting, "***Crucify Him, Crucify Him,***" wouldn't some of them also be forgiven, and what about the members of the Sanhedrin council that condemned Jesus to death, wouldn't some of them have been forgiven, even though they knew full well what they were doing.

YES, often we act in ignorance, but when our sin is pointed out, when the Holy Spirit convicts us – our response is to repent, to repent of our ignorance. Listen to Peter's message on the day of Pentecost given to many of those that were there that day Jesus was crucified, "***You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this...Now fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders...Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out***" (Acts 3:15-19). Here's the amazing result of repentance: "***Many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand***" (Acts 4:4). All of this is an answer to Jesus' prayer of pardon from the cross, and we are continuing to experience answers to Jesus' prayer on a daily basis as people continue to come into the kingdom of God, according to another prayer that Jesus prayed the night before His crucifixion, "***And I ask not only for these disciples, but also for all those who will one day believe in me through their message. I pray for them all to be joined together as one even as you and I, Father, are joined together as one. I pray for them to***

***become one with us so that the world would recognize that you sent me***” (John 17:20-21). Today Jesus is at the right hand of the Father making intercession for us! Pointing us to the cross with His nail scarred hands!

Thank God for the cross – without Jesus’ prayer of forgiveness on the cross, no one could be saved. The Good News is that anyone that comes to the cross in brokenness and repentance can be saved. However, we may ask the question, “*Are some sins against God unpardonable?*” The answer is NO! If the worst of sins at the cross were forgiven, then all sins can be forgiven! We are the ones that have a difficult time forgiving. We are the ones that keep a list of those things that we believe to be unforgiveable. “*I will never forgive you*” is not in God’s vocabulary! So, whenever the hurt is too much for me to forgive; I forgive anyway, because God has forgiven me. And, when others will not forgive me, I forgive anyway, because God has forgiven me. We forgive because God didn’t hold the murder of His precious Son against those who should have known better. We forgive because we have all received underserved mercy and grace that none of us deserves!

If you are ever tempted to think that God takes sin lightly, look to Calvary! The cross is the bridge of redeeming love; on it, we walk across the chasm of hell to God, who graciously provided forgiveness for those who believe. Where sin is not taken seriously, forgiveness is received too lightly. If we don’t understand this, we don’t understand the Gospel. The first cry from the cross echoes the one word without which we can’t be saved: “*FORGIVENESS.*” “***Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.***” Father forgive me for I often don’s know what I am doing!