

Seven Sayings (1) Luke 23:34

We all have our favourite songs; one of mine is a real golden oldie. It was penned in the 1800s by an Englishman, William Walsham How. He was often known as 'the poor man's bishop' or 'the children's bishop.' One of his best known hymns was written especially for boys and girls to sing at Sunday School anniversary services; the words are so beautiful. The hymn is called, It is a thing most wonderful.

There are seven verses to it - two of them are so meaningful to me as we embark on this series of seven studies on the cries from the cross. Jesus was not silent on the cross. These are seven sayings of undying love - they are the last words of a dying Saviour!

The hymnwriter put it like this:

I sometimes think about the cross, and shut my eyes, and try to see the cruel nails, and crown of thorns, and Jesus crucified for me. But, even could I see him die, I could but see a little part of that great love which, like a fire, is always burning in his heart.

We climb the hill called Mount Calvary - by faith, we stand at the foot of that old rugged cross - we see the Man of Sorrows, the Lord Jesus, hanging there naked, with no rights, no reputation, and no recourse - we hear him speak seven times - as we listen to every statement he uttered, we take a few steps on our journey into the heart of Jesus. It seems to me there is no preacher like the dying Christ; there is no pulpit like the cross of Christ; there is no congregation like those gathered on

that dark grey hillside; and there is no sermon like the seven sayings he spoke ... you see, these one or two-liner statements are very important to us, because of the person who spoke them, and because of the place where they were said.

When our Lord was doing his greatest work on earth, he was uttering some of his greatest words. I believe these seven last words from the cross are like windows we look through, and when we do, we catch a glimpse of eternity and we see the heartbeat of our heavenly Father.

Here is a God with wounds; a God who entered into our world and suffered on our behalf so that we might be reconciled to the Almighty. As John saw him in Revelation 5, 'the lamb looking as if it had been slain.' The scars remain as a reminder of our sin and a reminder of his matchless grace. So we sing:

O the love that drew salvation's plan, O the grace that brought it down to man, O the mighty gulf that God did span, at Calvary!

The first of the seven sayings is found here in Luke 23 and verse 34, where we read: 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' Basically, it's a cry for pardon - it shines the torchlight on forgiveness.

Sometimes we find it hard to forgive people - it's so easy for us to harbour an unforgiving spirit, to hold a grudge - someone hurts us, someone says bad things about us, someone is out to get us and they knife us in the back - hey, if we're honest, we struggle to forgive them. Don't we? Ah, you see,

in moments like that, forgiveness sounds like a marvellous idea until you are the one who has to do it!

But here, as they brutalised him, and blasphemed him, Jesus prayed, 'Father, forgive them!' It's so important for us to remember, these guys were not his best buddies, they were not his dearest friends - they were his enemies, they were doing horrendously awful things to him ... yet, he says, 'Father, forgive them ...' That's the first time, I'm sure, that these hardened soldiers ever heard any crucified man pray for them!

The lesson is that none are beyond the reach of prayer - none are beyond his mercy, none are so far gone that he can't bring them back, none are beyond the power of love - Jesus prayed that the unforgiveable might be forgiven.

These words are of immense significance for they remind us of the value that Jesus placed upon prayer - his ministry commenced with prayer in Luke 3:21 ... his ministry continued with prayer in Mark 1:35-38 ... his ministry counted upon prayer in Luke 5:15-16 ... and, right here, his ministry concluded with prayer.

There are four main points for us to think about:

1. The wonder of the address

The first word he spoke was one of intimacy when he lifted his eyes heavenward and said, 'Father.' He was calling out to one who meant everything to him, to one whose company he had known in his short life of thirty plus years, to one whose fellowship he had enjoyed in eternity past - and, even with all that has gone on in recent hours, that sweet filial relationship remains intact.

Can you imagine it - that there on Golgotha's brow, with all the vileness, and viciousness, and vulgarity, and vindictiveness that was raging like a torrent around the lovely Son of God, he breathed these precious words, 'Father [Abba] ...' Ah, dear friend, nothing threatened his relationship with his Father, no one shattered the unbreakable bond he had with his God and Father.

Even in his darkest hour, the Father is the one to whom he turned; in the worst of times, even under the evil eyes of Joe public, communion with the one seated on a higher throne was possible! As it was for him, so it is for you and me!

2. The wonder of the appeal

We hear Jesus pleading, 'Father, forgive them ...' Here's something worth noting - we don't see it in the English translation, but the Greek text implies that he kept repeating the words - Jesus said over and over again, 'Father, forgive them ...'

As they manhandled him and nailed his hands and feet to the cross, he prayed ... when they lifted the cross and it plummeted into the socket in the ground, he prayed ... when he's hanging there for all the world to see, he prayed ...

The Lord Jesus prayed, not for justice, but for mercy; he did not pray for judgment to fall or for punishment to be meted out; he prayed, 'Father, forgive them.'

In so doing, he fulfilled God's word - we read in Isaiah 53:12 that 'he made intercession for the transgressors' - there, on Calvary, that prophetic scripture was fulfilled. And it came to pass just as the prophet said it would be! Prayer and prophecy are bedfellows at the cross.

And, unlike some of us, Jesus practised what he preached - he preached forgiveness, he lived it out in the rough and tumble of everyday life. We know that from the gospel narrative and, indeed, from his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount - 'love your enemies and pray for them.' Jesus led by example, he modelled ministry.

Today, you and I, we have 'redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins.'

3. The wonder of the argument

This is quite breathtaking, for Jesus is like an advocate, he's pleading their case to his Father when he argues, 'for they do not know what they are doing.'

They were ignorant of his person for they mocked him as a prophet, they mocked him as a king, and they mocked him as the Son of God. They were ignorant of their own actions - they did not realise that what they were doing was a fulfilment of the ancient prophetic scriptures - Psalm 22:18, Psalm 69:21, and Isaiah 53:12 were all fulfilled. And they were ignorant of their own sin - they knew what they had done, but they didn't know all they had done - the enormity of their crime was unknown to them!

Jesus was saying: 'Father, my people don't fully understand what they're doing, they are ignorant; I am dying for them. They do not know what they are doing, but I know what I am doing, I'm dying on their behalf. Please forgive them ...'

Those sentiments remind me of the hymn:

O, wonder of all wonders, That through thy death for me,
My open sins, my secret sins, Can all forgiven me.

4. The wonder of the answer

The prayer of Jesus was answered, no doubts there at all! Some of the soldiers standing at the foot of the cross were forgiven. The centurion who was deeply troubled with all that he saw and heard on that epic day, exclaimed, 'Truly, this was the Son of God.' I expect to see him in heaven.

There were 3,000 who responded to the gospel on the day of Pentecost, and then another 2,000 said 'yes' to Jesus Christ - that's 5,000 forgiven sinners, according to Acts 4:4. The prayer of Jesus was answered. In Acts 6, a great number of the temple priests confessed Jesus as Lord. All of this in answer to the prayer of Jesus!

The revivalist preacher Charles Wesley penned these lovely words:

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.

So, the first of the seven words from the cross is a cry for pardon, a royal pardon - it was a word of intercession - for Jesus prayed: 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'

The American hymnwriter, Samuel Davies, wrote these wonderful words - they remind us that Jesus is in the business of forgiving sinners:

In wonder lost, with trembling joy, We take the pardon of our God,
Pardon for sins of deepest dye, A pardon sealed with Jesus' blood.
Who is a pardoning God like thee, Or who has grace so rich and free?