

# The Seven Last Words of Jesus - Week One

<sup>13</sup>Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, <sup>14</sup>and said to them, “You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. <sup>15</sup>Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. <sup>16</sup>Therefore, I will punish him and then release him.” <sup>17</sup>(Now it was the governor’s custom at the festival to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd).

<sup>18</sup>But the whole crowd shouted, “Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!” <sup>19</sup>(Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for murder.)

<sup>20</sup>Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. <sup>21</sup>But they kept shouting, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

<sup>22</sup>For the third time he spoke to them: “Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore I will have him punished and then release him.”

<sup>23</sup>But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. <sup>24</sup>So Pilate decided to grant their demand. <sup>25</sup>He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will.

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

This famous plea, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,” was spoken by Jesus Christ while he was being crucified. It is recorded in the New Testament in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 23, verse 34.

## Key Context and Meaning

- **The Setting:** Jesus uttered these words as his first of seven statements from the cross. At that moment, Roman soldiers were nailing him to the cross and gambling for his clothes.

- **Father:** We see Jesus using this word which shows us the relationship He had with God the Father. Their relationship has changed as darkness covers the sky. It will be contrasted as Jesus will use in the later statement: “*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*” (Matthew 27:46), and then restored with His last statement, “*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit*” (Luke 23:46).
- **Who were “them”?** Most interpretations include the Roman soldiers performing the execution, the Jewish leaders who condemned him, and the mocking crowd. But His forgiveness is also for every person that He is dying for – including you and me.
- **“They know not”:** This refers to a profound spiritual blindness. While the persecutors knew they were executing a man, they did not realize they were crucifying the Son of God or understand the full spiritual consequences of their actions.
- **What Was Happening to Jesus?:** Jesus has been through the so-called trial, multiple scourings, Pilate’s verdict, and then crucified on the cross.
- **The Theological Message:** This prayer is considered the ultimate example of radical forgiveness and unconditional love, demonstrating that divine mercy is available even to those who have deeply wronged God.

### Examples of Early Answers

Some believe this prayer was answered soon after:

- The Roman centurion guarding the cross reportedly exclaimed, “*Surely this man was the Son of God!*”.

- One of the **criminals** crucified alongside Jesus expressed faith and was promised paradise.
- Weeks later at **Pentecost**, thousands in Jerusalem—some of whom may have been in the original crowd—were converted.
- Jesus’ words “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*” are found in Luke 23:34. Jesus looked down from the cross upon a scene that must have been distressing to Him. The Roman soldiers were gambling for His clothing (John 19:23–24); the criminals on the crosses to either side of Him were reviling Him (Matthew 27:44); the religious leaders were mocking Him (Matthew 27:41–43); and the crowd was blaspheming Him (Matthew 27:39). Surrounded by this most unworthy lot, Jesus prayed for them. “*Father, forgive them*” is a prayer of unmatched mercy and love.

## Some Thoughts for Us

Even in His agony, Jesus’ concern was for the forgiveness of those who counted themselves among His enemies. He asked the Father to forgive the thieves on the cross who jeered at Him. He asked the Father to forgive the Roman soldiers who had mocked Him, spit on Him, beat Him, yanked out His beard, whipped Him, put a crown of thorns on His head, and nailed Him to the cross. Jesus asked forgiveness for the angry mob that had mocked Him and called for His crucifixion (Mark 15:29–30).

It is important to note that Jesus’ prayer, “Father, forgive them,” does not mean that everyone was forgiven, unilaterally, without repentance and faith. It does mean that Jesus was willing to forgive them—forgiveness was, in fact, the reason He was on the cross. The words “Father, forgive them” show the merciful heart of God.

Jesus prayed, “*Father, forgive them,*” because He was fulfilling Old Testament prophecy: “*He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors*” (Isaiah 53:12). From the cross, Jesus interceded for sinners. Today, risen and glorified, Jesus remains the “one mediator

between God and mankind” (1 Timothy 2:5). Jesus prayed, “*Father, forgive them,*” because He was putting into practice the principle He had taught in the Sermon on the Mount: “*You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*” (Matthew 5:43–44). Jesus, the persecuted, prayed for His persecutors.

Coupled with the willingness of Jesus to forgive His tormentors is the fact that they did not know what they were doing (Luke 23:34). The sinners who put Jesus on the cross were ignorant of the true import of their actions. The soldiers personally held no ill will toward Him. They were simply following orders. This was how they normally treated condemned men, and they believed that He truly deserved it. They didn’t know that they were killing the Son of God (see 1 Corinthians 2:8). The mob didn’t really know whom they were trying to destroy. The Jewish leaders had deceived them into believing that Jesus was a fake and a troublemaker (Acts 3:17). In praying “*Father, forgive them,*” Jesus revealed His infinite mercy; He still loved them and would forgive them if only they would humble themselves and repent (Matthew 18:14; 2 Peter 3:9).

Jesus’ prayer “Father, forgive them” was answered in the lives of many people. The Roman centurion at the foot of the cross, upon seeing how Jesus died, exclaimed, “Surely this man was the Son of God!” (Mark 15:39). One of the two thieves crucified with Jesus exercised faith in Christ, who promised him paradise (Luke 23:39–43). A member of the Sanhedrin publicly aligned himself with Jesus (John 19:39). And, a little over a month later, three thousand people in Jerusalem were saved in one day as the church began (Acts 2:41).

On the cross Jesus provided forgiveness for all those who would ever believe in Him (Matthew 20:28). Jesus paid the penalty for the sins that we commit in our ignorance, and even the ones we’ve committed deliberately. When we are born again, we, too, become an answer to Jesus’ prayer “Father, forgive them.”

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*“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”*

In Luke 23:43, these are the words spoken by Jesus to the repentant thief during the crucifixion. The statement is widely regarded as a profound illustration of **divine grace** and the assurance of salvation through faith alone.

## Key Interpretations

There is significant theological debate regarding the specific meaning and timing of this promise, often centering on the placement of a single comma:

- **Immediate Presence in Paradise:** Most modern translations place the comma before "today" (*“Truly I tell you, today you will be...”*), suggesting the thief entered a state of bliss immediately upon death.
- **The "Today" of the Promise:** Some scholars and denominations (such as Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses) argue the comma belongs after "today" (*“Truly I tell you today, you will be...”*). In this view, Jesus was emphasizing the *time of his speaking* rather than the time of the thief's entry into paradise, which they believe occurs at the future resurrection.
- **The Nature of Paradise:** "Paradise" is often interpreted as **Abraham's Bosom**—a place of rest for the righteous dead in Sheol—rather than the final "Third Heaven" where God's throne resides. This addresses the question of how Jesus could be in paradise that day while not yet having ascended to the Father (John 20:17).

## Significance in Christian Theology

- **Salvation by Faith:** The thief had no opportunity for good works, baptism, or church membership; his salvation was granted solely based on his repentant heart and belief in Jesus.
- **Jesus' Authority:** By granting entry into paradise, Jesus asserted his role as the King and Judge of the afterlife, even while suffering on the cross.

- **Universal Hope:** The narrative serves as a reminder that it is never too late to turn to God for mercy.

## Some Thoughts for Us

Too often we can pass by Jesus' words to the dying thief on the cross as if they are nothing more than a temporary respite to pull us away from the shock of the main thing taking place: Jesus is dying on the cross! Read below from Luke 23:39-43:

*"Then one of the criminals hanging there began to yell insults at Him: 'Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'"*

*"But then the other answered, rebuking him: "Don't you even fear God, since you are undergoing the same punishment? We are punished justly, because we're getting back what we deserve for the things we did, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*

*And He said to him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."*

These words from Jesus show us the goodness of God and His heart for us toward salvation. Through these words, the life of the dying thief was changed instantly as he received grace, hope and eternal salvation. Those same words continue to change lives today!

We don't know much about the thief on the cross, other than that he was being crucified along side Jesus. The other Gospels even show that he joined in with the other criminal, mocking Jesus (Matthew 27:44; Mark 15:32).

Yet somewhere in these moments, the thief changed his mind. "We deserve our punishment . . . but this man has done nothing wrong" (verse 41).

Finally, the thief asks Jesus, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom” (verse 42). The statement made by the thief contain all of the elements of salvation. He perceived his guilt, knew he deserved death because of his sin, and then prayed to Jesus to receive forgiveness!

*“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”*

It’s the same for us today! Through Jesus’ death and resurrection, we can receive the very same grace, hope and eternal salvation that the thief on the cross received that day!