FATHER, FORGIVE THEM

Luke 23:26-55

Key Verse: 34

“Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

In the last lesson, Jesus was surrendered to the will of his enemies to be crucified, while Barabbas was released. In the prevailing of their will, God’s will proceeded. In today’s passage, under God’s divine will, the Son of God would die on the cross with the full wrath of God being poured out on him because of man’s sin. On the cross of Jesus, we see God’s dreadful judgment and his merciful salvation for sinners through forgiveness. The cross of Jesus divides people of the world into two forever. One kind is hateful, cynical, indifferent, or ignorant, the other, God-fearing, solemn, repentant and believing. Luke sharply contrasts these two group of people in this passage. Let’s survey the cross of Jesus presented by Luke.

Verse 26 says, “As they led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus.” Simon was a common Jewish name, indicating that he was a Jew. Cyrene is an area in North Africa which today would be Libya in the area of Tripoli. Josephus tells us, the Jewish historian, that there was a large Jewish community living in Cyrene. Simon was one of the pilgrims to Jerusalem from Cyrene to keep the Passover. Jesus was going out and Simon was coming in. In God’s sovereignty, he was chosen to carry the cross of Jesus. God can chose anyone, but Simon was there to be picked up in God’s sovereign grace. One of his sons and his wife are mentioned in Romans 16 related to Apostle Paul, and in Acts 11, Christians from Cyrene went to Antioch to preach the gospel and disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. The church of Antioch was established as an exemplary one after the Jerusalem church. We can imagine Simon’s conversion and his influence in the early Christian church. May we know more and more the blessing of carrying the cross!

Verse 27 says, “A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him.” The Roman soldiers led Jesus away. Luke wrote that a large number of people followed him. Included among them must have been the leaders of Jews who hated Jesus as well as the ignorant crowd that vacillated according to their feelings and surroundings. Luke specifically mentioned the mourning and wailing women. They were professional female mourners at the death of someone. These were the official mourners who were doing their duty. They were especially sympathetic toward Jesus, whose compassion and good deeds were spread throughout the country and whose form/appearance was so disfigured and marred beyond human likeness from the many beatings and flogging at the sequent night trials. Their mourning and wailing might have moved men’s hearts, but not that of Jesus. They were just the sympathizers who had some feelings for Jesus. Jesus could see the impending judgment coming upon them. He turned and said to them, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, ‘Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’” Jesus was speaking to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. What mother can bear the pain of their babies ripped out of their arms and killed? Such a thing happened in the history of Israel by Assyrians and would happen by Romans and in her later history.

That would be God’s severe judgment due to the apostacy of God’s chosen people. Jesus said in Luke 21:22-24, “For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” The destruction in Jerusalem started in 66 AD and ended in 70 AD. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were slaughtered – men, women and children. This the Romans did as the instruments of God’s judgment. What happened in those years to the Jews was only a preview of what will happen to the world in the future.

Jesus continues here, “Then ‘they will say to the mountains, “Fall on us!” and to the hills, “Cover us!”’’’ What will happen when the mountains fall on you? No one would survive the falling of the mountains. Yet people would rather expect such things than the terrible sufferings that was to come upon them. These words are a quotation from Hosea 10:8, which says, “The high places of wickedness will be destroyed—it is the sin of Israel. Thorns and thistles will grow up and cover their altars. Then they will say to the mountains, ‘Cover us!’ and to the hills, ‘Fall on us!’” This was the prophet Hosea’s warning to faithless northern Israel about God’s imminent judgment by Assyria. Jesus quoted these words here because of the utter corruption of the nation to the point of crucifying the Son of God in their religious establishment, which was actually against God. These words are written one more time in Revelation 6:15-17, “Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’” In the future, the world will borrow Hosea’s words when the Lord breaks the sixth seal, the second-last seal in the time of the Tribulation, just before the return of Christ. In saying this Jesus was foreseeing God’s final judgment on the whole world.

Then Jesus says here in verse 31, “For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry.” The green tree seems to refer to Jesus the king of the Jews, and the dry one, to the spiritually deadened Israel. Romans are now doing these things to Jesus and further horrible things will come to Israel and all those who reject Christ. Still, it was the time of grace while Jesus was on the way to the cross. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 6:2, “I tell you, now is the time of God’s favour, now is the day of salvation.” Jesus wants us to weep for ourselves and for our beloved ones, sensing God’s impending judgment.

In verses 32-33, “Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left.” We are surprised to see the very brief description of the fact of Jesus’ crucifixion: In Matthew’s gospel, it says, “When they crucified him…” (27:35), in Mark, “And they crucified him…” (15:24), in Luke, “…there they crucified him…” (Lk 23:33), and in John, “Here they crucified him…” (Jn 19:18). In the four gospel accounts, there is no description of the cruelty of the Roman soldiers or the pain of the crucified. Why is it so? It is because this simple expression would be enough for the readers of that time to understand. The crucifixion of Jesus was one of so many cases, around 30,000, and one of three on that day. Crucifixion was very common.  It didn’t need an explanation. The people of the world, particularly the Jews, knew that crucifixion was the most cruel and most painful and shameful way of killing a fellow man. The Persians invented it and the Romans perfected it. Yet we can briefly think of the pain of crucifixion. Iron spikes around 15 cm long and 1.25 cm in diameter square were driven through two feet overlaid on top of each other with the knees a little bent and also through both wrists, not the palms of the hands, so that they carried the full weight of the slumping body. The victim could push up on the wounds of the legs and pull down on the sores of the two arms to breathe, as not to suffocate. Insects would burrow into the wounds, the eyes, the ears, and the nose.  Birds of prey would tear at the open sites.  No one survived crucifixion. The pain was excruciating beyond description. “Excruciating” is the most extreme word we know in English to describe pain. Interestingly, it comes from the Latin *excruci* – “out of the cross.”  The cross was the symbol of pain, punishment, shame, reproach, and contempt. The idea that Jesus claimed to be God’s anointed king and Messiah was just laughable.

However, what was truly astonishing was what happened on and around the cross after the crucifixion. According to Luke, Jesus first of all prayed on the cross in his excruciating pain, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” On the cross, no criminal could say even a word, in most cases just screaming. But Jesus offered such a prayer to God. Yet no one seemed to have ears to hear the prayer of Jesus. Those who crucified Jesus divided up his clothes by casting lots. They were just interested in a little material gain and having some thoughtless fun, even under the cross. The people stood watching, just to see what would happen further. They were senseless. The rulers even sneered at him saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.” In their sneering, they did not speak directly to Jesus, but indirectly. They were subtle in their intellect. The solders also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.” One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” These were happenings after the crucifixion. Those present were the thoughtless crucifiers, the senseless crowd, the sneering and cunning rulers, mocking soldiers and a crucified robber who hurled insults at him. Luke seemed to collect and very briefly write all such negative responses. They could not imagine that something good would from the cross. Yet, their responses were really unusual, for it is most certain that they would not respond to any cross in such a way. The gist of their sneering, mocking and hurling insults was “save yourself, if you the Christ.” They did not know the deep truth that he could not save himself so that he might save all people, for he is indeed the Christ of God, the Chosen One, the King of the Jews.

At this point, we should really think of Jesus’ prayer on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Who could offer such a prayer on the cross? Surely, no one but Jesus, the Christ of God. The unforgiven state is the fundamental problem of all mankind because of sin. In that unforgiven condition, we cannot forgive one another. Unforgiveness has been undergirded in all human relationships in history. We first of all needed forgiveness from God. So what a fitting prayer on the cross as the Christ of God, the Promised Messiah and King prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” He did not offer this prayer with ease, but giving himself as a sin offering, shedding his life-blood and dying on the cross. This is truly the light of life that shines in all human history. He is indeed the light of the world, the rising sun from heaven who gives his people the knowledge of salvation through forgiveness of sins, shining on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, as Zechariah prophesied in Luke 1:77-80 at the birth of his son John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ Jesus. As we studied, the essence of the new covenant is the forgiveness of sins, written in Jeremiah 31:31-34, “‘The time is coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will make a new covenant…I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” Jesus said at the Last Supper offering the cup, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” in Matthew 26:28 and “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” in Luke 22:20. And Hebrews 9:22 says, “…without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” It is also written in Hebrews 10:4, “…it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin,” and in Hebrews 9:28, “so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many.” Thus again, what an appropriate and enlightening prayer on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” All sinners do not know what the consequences of their sins are. But Jesus knew that without forgiveness, they would be eternally condemned, plunged into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. So Jesus prayed for them, all sort of sinners, to be forgiven. How much God the Father must have been pleased with this pray of the Son Jesus! This prayer, “Father, forgive them…” seems to be more fundamental and deeper than the prayer, “Father, forgive their sins.” We are forgiven and saved because of the sacrifice and this prayer of our Lord Jesus on the cross. This is the reason Jesus said to a paralytic, “Friend, your sins are forgiven…get up, take your mat and go home” (Lk 5:20, 24). I was like a paralytic lying on a mat of fatalism. I thank God for this grace of my Lord Jesus upon me. In this grace, may I all the more live by faith challenging any fatalistic situation. This is also the reason Jesus said to an adulterous woman, “Neither do I condemn you. God now and leave your life of sin” (Jn 8:11). This is the reason Jesus said to the proud and judgmental Pharisees who was even judging Jesus, yet superficially, “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins” (Jn 8:23-24). May we truly believe in him! May our Lord Jesus’ grace of forgiveness be alive in us with deep gratitude, coming up to him at each moment with any sin problem that blocks our relationship with him. Based on this prayer of Jesus we can continually serve and pray for God’s flock of sheep for the forgiveness and salvation of their souls. And through this grace, may we not have any grudge or retaliation toward anyone, growing in the spirit of forgiveness. Paul succinctly tells those who have received this grace of Jesus how they should live: “our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with” (Ro 6 in:6), “count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Ro 6:11) and “…one died for all, therefore all died. And he died for all that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (2 Cor 5:14-15).

Then here, how did this prayer of Jesus shine on sinners? In verses 40-41 it says, “But the other criminal rebuked him. ‘Don’t you fear God,’ he said, ‘since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” This criminal was dying in his sins. According to Matthew 27:44 and Mark32 he also had joined in mocking Jesus and heaping insults in him like the people, the rulers, the soldiers and the other criminal (Mt 27:44; Mk 15:32). But most probably, the prayer of Jesus convicted his soul and was resounding in him and suddenly the fear God came into his heart, “What if I am not forgiven! I am dying here in the excruciating pain of crucifixion. Then how can I bear the eternal judgment of God?” When the fear of God came over him, he could see himself as a terrible sinner, not just violating human law but, more seriously, the law of God. He could see beyond this world after his death on the cross. Truly the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, the beginning of the knowledge of salvation and the beginning of wisdom (Pro 1:7, 10). One clear characteristic of sinner is that there is no fear of God in their eyes (Ro 3:18). In the fear of God, he could have a right view of himself and his fellow criminal and the correct view of Jesus on the cross. Now to him, Jesus was not just dying on the cross helplessly. He was dying willingly, not to save himself but to save others. He could see Jesus as the Saviour and King. So he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He did not ask Jesus to save him from the cross and live a little more in this world. No. He prayed that Jesus might remember him so that he might be included among those who are forgiven and be welcomed into his kingdom. It is truly amazing that this man could see the coming kingdom of Jesus, though Jesus was dying with the crucified. At this Jesus answered him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” Paradise, *paradeisos*, is an old Persian word for garden.  It’s a synonym for heaven. Heaven is the place where God dwells and the spirit of the saved go right after death, while the dead body is buried in the tomb. (2 Cor 12:2, 4). After death, the Spirit of Jesus would go to Hades and proclaim his triumph to the spirits there (1 Pe 3:19) and then go to Paradise with the saved criminal on that day. Then when Jesus comes again, he will reign forever with Jesus in the kingdom of Christ. What a blessing! We thank God for this utmost blessing and hope in the grace of forgiveness in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Then in verses 44 and 45, “It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.” Here, “darkness” refers to God’s judgment, God’s presence in darkness, in pitch darkness. From the sixth hour to the ninth hour, God poured out his wrath. The wrath was not on the Romans, and it was not on the Jewish leaders, and it was not on the people. The wrath was on the Son. God’s hellish wrath was poured out, not on wicked sinners, but on the Son. God unleashed the full extent of His fury on Jesus Christ because of the sins of all mankind, so that God’s grace of forgiveness of sins might be bestowed on all condemned sinners, as Jesus prayed on the cross. How can we imagine the pain of receiving the whole wrath of God that had to be poured out upon all sinners condemned to eternal hell? We can say that Jesus suffered hell for those who believe in him so that they would not suffer eternally in such a place. The pain was so unbearable that the Son Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He could not call God “Father” in the complete separation from God the Father. After this utter darkness of God’s wrath, the curtain of the temple was torn in two. At that time, over two million people gathered in Jerusalem since it was the Passover time and the temple must have been packed with people. The priests were about to kill the Passover lambs between 3 and 5pm. In that atmosphere, the huge and thick curtain of the temple that divided the Holy Place and the Most Holy was torn in two, from top to bottom. Only the high priest could enter the Most Holy place once a year. What a spectacular event in the sight of so many people! What a surprise and confusion to the people at that time! But the fact is that at the completion of God’s outpouring of wrath upon the Son, God’s wrath was soothed and his righteous anger was pacified in propitiation for sinners. Thus the way for sinners to come to God was opened, a new and living way. At this Jesus said, “It is finished.” Then here, in Luke’s gospel Jesus called out in a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Calling God now “Father” again, his sweet communion with God the Father was re-established and he breathed his last. Truly, it is the most beautiful and victorious death of the Lord Jesus in obedience to God’s will.

A centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, “Surely this was a righteous man.” What a confession from the lips of the centurion, the captain of the crucifiers of Jesus! This must be another beautiful fruit of Jesus’ prayer and his death on the cross. To him Jesus was not only innocent, but a righteous man always doing what was right before God. According to Matthew 27:54, “When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, ‘Surely, he was the Son of God.” The fear of God came into the heart of the centurion and he responded correctly.

In verse 48, “when all the people who had gathered to witness the sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away.” They would be those who would repent at the time of the Pentecost when Peter preached, “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Ac 2:36), and members of the Jerusalem church. In verse 49, “And all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.” These women would see the empty tomb and be witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection.

And finally, God prepared for Jesus’ burial supernaturally through a man named Joseph. He was a member of the Council, a Sanhedrin member, a good and upright man, who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea and he was waiting for the kingdom of God. According to John’s gospel he was a disciple of Jesus but secretly in fear of the Jews (Jn 19:36). At the cross of Jesus the light of life must have shone into his heart and he became courageous. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus’ body. Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in whom no one had yet been laid. It was his own tomb prepared for his burial (Mt. 27:59). God prepared such a man for the burial of Jesus. God’s prophecy of Isaiah 53:9 that he would be buried with the rich in his death. Jesus’ burial was certain and sure by such a prominent man. It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin. What timing! Jesus had to bury before the Sabbath so that Jesus would be in the grave three days and three nights (Mt 12:40).

In verses 55-56, “The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.” It was the preparation to be witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection.

We thank and praise Jesus who prayed on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” May this prayer of Jesus be deep in our heart to live in this grace with gratitude and a forgiving spirit, and to share this grace of Jesus with others!