

# Words From the Cross

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Forgive Them-Luke 23:34

## Intro

All four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) have the death and resurrection of Jesus as their central focus. It's at the cross that Jesus died for the sins of the world. We have much more detail about the events immediately preceding and following the cross than we do about any other time in Jesus' life.

As we approach Easter this year, we are going to look specifically at the words that Jesus spoke while he was on the cross. These reveal not only Jesus' focus and attitude at his death, but they also remind us about what he came to accomplish on the earth.

This week in Digging Deeper we will look at the first word of Jesus on the cross from Luke 23:34. We will also look at some of the facts about crucifixion to better understand what Jesus experienced on the cross.

## Crucifixion

As a means of execution, crucifixion was particularly heinous. This had as much to do with the public humiliation accompanying crucifixion as with the act itself. Bound or nailed to a stake, tree, or cross, the victim faced death with all organs intact and with relatively little blood loss. As a consequence, death came slowly, sometimes over several days, as the body succumbed to shock or asphyxiation. No standard form of crucifixion was universally practiced, though a summary outline of Roman practice is possible.

Crucifixion included a flogging beforehand, with victims often required to carry their own crossbeams to the site of execution, where they were nailed or bound to the cross with arms extended, raised up, and perhaps seated on a small wooden peg. Even among the Romans this procedure was subject to variation. In his account of the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans, for example, Josephus observes how hundreds of Jews were "scourged and subjected to torture of every description...and then crucified opposite the city walls." Free to fulfill their whims in the



**Digging  
Deeper**

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*Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."  
Luke 23:34*

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hope of persuading those Jews remaining in the city to surrender their positions, “the soldiers out of rage and hatred amused themselves by nailing their prisoners in different positions...”

Josephus' account reminds us that crucifixion was reserved by the Romans especially for those who resisted the authority of Roman occupation. Typically naked and fastened to a tree, stake, or cross, located at major crossroads, the victim was subjected both to a particularly abhorrent form of capital punishment and to optimum, savage ridicule. The corpse of the crucified was typically left on the tree to rot or as food for scavenging birds. In this way the general populace were granted a somber reminder of the fate of those daring to assert themselves against Rome (Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, Eerdmans, 810).

### **Jesus' Crucifixion**

Luke calls the place of Jesus' crucifixion the “Skull.” This is a translation for the Greek word for skull. Matthew, Mark, and John refer to this place as “Golgotha.” This is the word for skull in Aramaic, the language used in Israel in Jesus' day. In Latin, the word for skull is *Calvariae* or as we know it “Calvary.” Churches and Bible teachers use these terms interchangeably to refer to the place where Jesus was crucified. The place was probably given the name “Skull” because it looked like a skull. Many archaeologists and historians believe that this site is where the Church of the Holy Sepulchre currently resides in Jerusalem. In Jesus' time, this site was outside the walled city of Jerusalem (Robert Stein, *Luke*, Broadman Holman, 588).

Jesus' crucifixion was a hideously grotesque scene. Hundreds of years in advance, the prophet Isaiah saw it this way: “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted (Isa. 53:3-4).”

In addition to the horrifying spectacle of the crucified Jesus, Isaiah also saw his silent response: “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth (Isaiah 53:7).”

Rather than reviling his mockers or declaring his innocence, Jesus chose to die with his masculine dignity intact. He spoke seven last words from the cross. These words provide great insight into the final thoughts of Jesus and his purpose for dying.

Jesus first word was “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). This first word is a word of forgiveness for the very people who are murdering him. He knew that in a moment he would die to atone for their sins, including the sins they were presently committing against him. In this we see the utter selflessness of Jesus and his unbroken devotion to saving even the worst of sinners through the cross (Mark Driscoll & Gerry Breshears, *Death By Love: Letters From the Cross*, Crossway, 26).

### **Father, Forgive Them**

Despite the fact that in the Old Testament we read many prayers for vengeance (2 Chron. 24:22; Psa. 137:7-9; Jer. 15:15; 17:18; 18:23; 20:12), Jesus prays that God will forgive his persecutors. Those who were executed were expected to ask that their death would atone for their sins. But Jesus instead confesses the sins of those who falsely convicted him and were responsible for putting him on the cross. Under Old Testament law they were liable for a punishment from God. In

Acts, Luke writes about a follower of Jesus, Stephen, who made a very similar statement asking for the forgiveness of his murderers, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60) (Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 254).

Jesus' plea for mercy on behalf of his tormentors comes shortly after he was raised up on the cross while the soldiers were still gambling for his clothing. While others were mocking him—just as the taunting and jeering reached a fever pitch—Christ responded in precisely the opposite way most men would have. Instead of threatening, lashing back, or cursing his enemies, he prayed to God on their behalf.

As with so many of the details surrounding Jesus' death, this priestly intercession on behalf of his own killers was done in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy: “He poured out his soul unto death, and he was numbered with the transgressors, and he bore the sin of many, *and made intercession for the transgressors*” (Isaiah 53:12). The whole meaning of the cross is summed up in this one act of intercession. “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:17). Certainly any mortal man would have desired only to curse or revile his killers under these circumstances. We might even think that God incarnate would wish to call down some thunderous blast of judgment against men acting so wickedly. But Christ was on a mission of mercy. He was dying to purchase forgiveness of sins. And even at the very height of his agony, compassion was what filled his heart (John MacArthur, *The Murder of Jesus*, Thomas Nelson, 210).

### **Who Is Responsible for Jesus' Death?**

When we read the Gospels we are faced with the question, “Who is responsible for Jesus' death?” Through much of church history, people blamed the Jewish leadership and the Jewish people in general for the death of Jesus. This is extremely unfashionable today. Indeed, if it is used as a justification for slandering and persecuting the Jews (as it has been in the past), or for anti-semitism, it is absolutely indefensible. The way to avoid anti-semitic prejudice, however, is not to pretend that the Jews were innocent, but having admitted their guilt, to add that others shared in it. This was how the apostles saw it. Herod and Pilate, Gentiles and Jews, they said, had together “conspired” against Jesus (Acts 4:27).

More important still, we ourselves are also guilty. If we were in their place, we would have done what they did. Indeed, we *have* done it. For whenever we turn away from Christ, we “are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace” (Heb. 6:6). We too sacrifice Jesus to our greed like Judas, to our envy like the priests, to our ambition like Pilate. “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” the old song asks. And we must answer, “Yes, we were there.” Not as spectators only but as participants, guilty participants, plotting, scheming, betraying, bargaining, and handing him over to be crucified. We may try to wash our hands of responsibility like Pilate. But our attempt will be as futile as his. For there is blood on our hands. Before we can begin to see the cross as something done *for* us (leading us to faith and worship), we have to see it as something done *by* us (leading us to repentance). Indeed, “only the man who is prepared to own his share in the guilt of the cross,” wrote Peter Green, “may claim his share in its grace” (John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, IVP, 59-60).

### **Final Thoughts**

Crucifixion was the most violent, cruel, and heinous method of execution in the ancient world. And yet, Jesus endured this violent act for us. He endured the pain and suffering of the cross for our good. Even on the cross, Jesus was filled with compassion and mercy. He did not seek revenge on those who killed him. Rather, he sought their forgiveness. He asked that God would have mercy on them. How great and amazing is the love of God!

