
Father, Forgive Them

DAVE BAST

In some communities, it is still traditional for Christians to gather for worship on Good Friday afternoon. The service, if it follows the old custom, lasts for three hours, from noon until 3:00, marking the three hours of darkness that descended upon Golgotha at that same time as Jesus hung on the cross. It is also customary to meditate during this service on the seven last words of Christ. These are the statements that Jesus spoke from the cross from the very beginning of his ordeal right up to the end of it. Today on *Groundwork*, we begin a series of programs exploring these seven words. The first word from the cross, like several of the others, is actually a prayer, a prayer, in fact, that we each need ourselves. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, as I said in the intro just now, we are starting a new series of programs. It is especially appropriate, I think, for the Lenten season...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sure.

DAVE BAST

The season of Lent, as Christians sort of prepare for Holy Week and Easter; but it really focuses on what is the central fact of the Christian faith, and that is the cross of Christ, or the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and it has long been noted by many people that Christianity is unique among the world religions in a number of aspects, but one of the key aspects that differentiates Christianity is, we are probably the only religion that kind of glorifies in the death of our leader. The cross is an instrument of execution. It is the end of the road. It was bad news back then. It was an electric chair. It was a hangman's noose. There is nothing good about it, all things being equal; but we call the Friday that he died Good Friday; and the New Testament is very clear that all of our salvation somehow paradoxically, against all odds, spins out of the death of Jesus. Our life comes from his death.

DAVE BAST

Right; in fact, it is odd. It is just that we have gotten so used to it, but imagine somebody taking a little silver copy of a gallows and putting it on a chain and wearing it around their neck as a decoration as so many people wear crosses around their necks; but it actually...historically, the cross did not become the main symbol of Christianity until a little bit later in its history when the spectacle of actual crucifixions had died away somewhat; but nevertheless, the truth remains that the Gospel message...what the New Testament calls the Good News...that is what gospel means...centers on this fact that Jesus died on a Friday afternoon under the hands of Roman executioners in the worst, the most horrible way possible; and this is the message that the New Testament says is the heart of our proclamation to the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; they didn't cover up the death or say: Oh, that was just sort of a hiccup in Jesus' career—Easter is the main thing. Easter is exceedingly important, but you don't get Easter without the cross; and so, for instance, in 1 Corinthians—Paul's letter to the Corinthians—in the first chapter he writes:

¹⁸The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. ²²Jews demand signs, Greeks look for wisdom, ²³but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews, foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

So, there is the contrast. Paul himself admits celebrating a cross is just foolish; that is folly; that is silly to the worldly perspective; but in faith, we see it as the portal to life.

DAVE BAST

It is; that is such a fundamental passage, I think, for the whole understanding of Christianity. We preach Christ crucified, Paul says; not just Christ, not just his life, his ideals, his wonderful teaching. A lot of people admire Christ, in that sense; but no, Paul says: It is Christ crucified. It is the death, that terrible thing that happened, which is at the heart of our message for the world. That is the hope that we offer. Somehow, it is bound up in what he calls in this passage also the message of the cross. That is to say, the message that explains what the cross means.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So that is what we preach, Paul said. That is kind of what we are going to do in this seven-part series, preaching the cross of Christ through the words of Christ from that cross. These are gathered from the four Gospels; not all of them are in any one Gospel, and a couple of them are only in one Gospel and not the other three and so forth; but here they are just real quickly:

- 1) Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.
- 2) Woman, behold your son; son, behold your mother.
- 3) Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.

DAVE BAST

And:

- 4) My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
- 5) I thirst. (The shortest of the words.)
- 6) Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit.
- 7) It is finished.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, those are the words, and that is the order in which we are going to be taking them in this particular series. There is a little bit of an order to them, but it is a little bit fluid, so that is the order we are going to do them in. One of the things we can note here, too, Dave, in this first segment as we launch this series, I mentioned just a moment ago that no one Gospel has all seven of these, and a couple of them are only in one: the one we are going to look at in program 2: Woman, your son; son, your mother. That is only in John, but that is one of the characteristics of the Gospels. Critics pounce on this sometimes, but the fact is that the accounts do not completely line up point to point...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In the four Gospels. They did not write completely consistently on some of the events; and although critics say: Well, that shows they are all just made up; actually, what that shows is their authenticity.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly. It is the reverse of they are just made up, because if they were just made up, they would have put their heads together and get the story straight...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; if you are going to have a conspiracy, you better get your story straight, right.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, the fact remains that the Gospels all differ from one another in various ways, including in their reporting of the words from the cross, as you pointed out. Three of these sayings occur in Luke, three of them in John, and one of them, that fourth word, the most terrible in some respects: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me; that is reported by both Matthew and Mark, and they don't report any of the others...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, you could say the same thing about the accounts of Easter and the resurrection. There are little minor differences in the way they tell the story; and partly that can be put down to the witness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Different people remember different things about the same events.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; ask four different people what happened at that car accident at the corner of Main Street and First Street and you will get four slightly different versions because they all had a slightly different angle on it, but that does not cash out the truth at the core of it.

Another thing we should mention just as we get started here is that, although there have been certain movies, particularly that Mel Gibson movie some years ago, that were very graphic about Jesus' whippings and the crucifixion; and some of us have heard sermons where the pastor gets very graphic about what happens to the human body. The Gospels are very restrained. They don't...the fact that Jesus dies is very, very important; how he died, they are very restrained. They do not get gory; they don't linger over blood and spittle and whips. So, they are very restrained because they really want us to focus on the fact that this is a sacrifice.

DAVE BAST

Right; and as we are going to see in just a moment, we will read Luke's account of the crucifixion, and he does not go into detail at all. He simply says: There they crucified him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, that was it.

DAVE BAST

Everybody knew what that involved, but they don't, you know, go into great lengths to kind of show it or verbalize it for us; because, as you say, Scott, I think the point is, it is much deeper than what Jesus suffered physically. He did suffer physically...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Terribly.

DAVE BAST

We can see that—we *will* see that in some of the...in one of the words in particular when he expresses his great thirst; but basically, the things that he said and what he suffered and experienced there have a deeper theological and spiritual meaning, and that begins with the very first word from the cross, as we will hear in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and the first program in a series of seven programs on the seven last words of Jesus from the cross; and Dave, we are going to get right into it here in Luke Chapter 23, to get at the first word that we are going to consider in this series.

DAVE BAST

Right; and this is Luke's account of the crucifixion: ²⁶As the soldiers led him away (that is, from the judgment seat of Pilate and the last of his trials), 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. ³²Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals, one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

SCOTT HOEZEE

³⁵The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others, let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the chosen one." ³⁶The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar, ³⁷and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." ³⁸There was a written notice above him, which read: This is the king of the Jews.

So, among the horrors of crucifixion there is the public humiliation, there is horrible physical suffering. You end up dead, of course, above all; but there is also the mockery, the sneering, the taunting of Jesus; and since Jesus had touted himself as a powerful messiah figure, they play on that, saying: You were going to save other people and you cannot even lift a finger to help yourself. You know, jump down first and then we will see if you can save anybody else...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, really horrible, horrible mockery.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and it actually began before the crucifixion. If you know the story in the Gospels, the soldiers first mocked him even before that when he was tried before the chief priest. They mocked him there. They blindfolded him and slapped him across the face and said: Hey prophet, prophesy who hit you; that kind of thing; and the soldiers with their crown of thorns that they jammed on his head and they put a cloak on his shoulders as if he were the king. Somehow, they got wind of the fact that this involved kingship in some sense that Jesus claimed.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; so they mocked him and made him a mock king. So, it is as bad as it gets, which is all the more reason why the word from the cross we are looking at in this program is all the more powerful, unexpected, utterly remarkable: Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. All of these heinous acts, all of this mockery. He is saying they don't know what they are doing. They don't know I am God's Son. They don't know that I really am the Messiah. They are just lost in their own sinfulness, so forgive them, Father; they don't even know what they are doing. A word of grace at a moment when vengeance...spewing out invectives against these people is what you would expect. Instead, from Jesus we get forgiving grace.

DAVE BAST

Yes, you know, and the very first word of the prayer, so characteristic of Jesus: Abba—Father; the word that he taught his disciples to use when they prayed; the word that he himself had used a few hours earlier in the garden: Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. I mean, Jesus did not look forward to the cross. He did not relish it; he did not enjoy it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No.

DAVE BAST

He asked to be spared it if it was possible; and yet, somehow in the terrible calculus of forgiveness, of God's grace, the cross had to happen in order for that forgiveness to be offered to us; and so, for Jesus to win forgiveness in a sense for the world, including those for whom he prays here, he had to undergo this torture.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and really, even though at a moment of torture and humiliation and mockery you don't expect a word of forgiveness, really, this keeps Jesus very consistent with who he had been all along. I think we have said before on other programs, we have made the analogy that, you know, we as ordinary human beings...we have some sense for the sin that goes on around us and in our life, and in our neighbors and so forth. Well, Jesus was the perfect Son of God. He sensed every sin, every bad attitude, every...you know...piece of jealousy and envy and pride and greed. He knew it his whole life long, and he just kept forgiving as he went along. He kept forgiving; he was never shrill; he didn't scream purple-faced at people. He just again and again forgave. He exuded oceans of grace in his ministry, and it continues now on the cross.

DAVE BAST

Right; you could say, to put it quite simply, Jesus practiced what he preached.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

If you know anything at all about the teaching of Jesus, you know that one of his most difficult commands, which he gave to those who wanted to be his followers, who wanted to be a disciple, was forgive your enemies; forgive those who mistreat you; forgive those who mock you...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Slap you, yes.

DAVE BAST

Turn the other cheek, all that sort of thing. You think of the Lord's Prayer: Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us; and then Jesus actually appended to the Lord's Prayer, just to make sure we got it: If you don't forgive, your Father won't forgive you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it has been said that that little word *as* in the Lord's Prayer—just two little letters in English—two little letters in Greek, too—is the most explosive word: Forgive us our sins *as* we forgive others. If you don't forgive others, you are showing that you don't get it; and as Jesus now as God's own Son is being put to death and humiliated and mocked, you know, we could sort of say: You know, he was able to forgive. Has anybody ever done anything that bad to me?

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the answer...that is kind of a rhetorical question...the answer is: Well, of course not. You are not God's Son, so it is impossible for anybody to do something that bad to you. So, if Jesus could forgive, it sets the agenda for us in our lives, too.

DAVE BAST

You know, I remember a story...I was in India...I was traveling in India and I was about to preach at a church in northeastern India, and just before the service someone came in with the terrible news that in another state nearby an Australian missionary named Graham Staines and his two young children had been burned to death by a mob literally the night before; and they had been out in a village and they were sleeping in their car and these villagers were whipped up by some anti-Christian hysteria. They surrounded the car and set it on fire and...I mean, just horrible! Well, the conclusion of the story came some time later when the widow and mother of these children was interviewed on Indian television and was asked about the people who had done this to her family, and she said: I forgive them. And the interviewer said...blurted out on television: If this is Christianity, India should be Christian. So, it is as we follow Jesus, even in the most horrible kinds of situations and are able to say, as he did, Father, forgive them, that the Gospel is powerfully proclaimed all over again.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because that kind of grace is the only thing that can snap the history-long cycle of vengeance and revenge. Jesus on the cross is saying: That stops with me.

You know, death just leads to more death. Vengeance just leads to more vengeance. Something has got to stop this whole series of calamity that began in the Garden of Eden, and Jesus says: It stops with me; and he says it from the cross, from which our life flows.

DAVE BAST

So, there is one more phrase in this prayer that we want to consider before we end, and that is what we will turn to next.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and we have been talking about this prayer of Jesus, the first word from the cross: Father, forgive *them*...and who is included in that *them*? Well, you could say it is the Roman soldiers pounding the nails in; it is maybe the chief priests and the Pharisees who kind of engineered this; it includes Pilate, the crooked judge who knew Jesus was innocent and yet condemned him anyway; maybe the disciples, who all ran away; maybe even the one who betrayed him; the one who denied him; all those people...the crowd that was mocking him on the cross; the crowd that shouted: Crucify him! All included into them, but maybe it doesn't stop there, either.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No; in fact, many of us during the Lenten season sing that old German hymn, and many of us who grew up in the Church, we know the one stanza: Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon you? It is *my* treason, Lord, that has undone you. 'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied you. I crucified you. And so, we put ourselves into the *them*, forgive *them*, partly because, indeed, Jesus died for all of our sins. It is our sin, my sin, your sin, our collective sin that brought Jesus to that cross. So, this is a forgiving word for us, too; and again, Jesus, as we said near the end of the last segment, Dave, Jesus stopped that history-wide cycle of vengeance

and retribution to say: No, grace has to lead the way home; and we are included in that grace even now today.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and he also adds this qualifying phrase, which I think makes it even more interesting, and maybe prompts us to think a little more deeply: Father, forgive them; they don't know what they are doing. As though to say: Well, they are acting in ignorance; and maybe that somehow helps to excuse what they have done. They didn't realize what they were doing. I mean, the soldiers that pretty obviously they are just following orders, right? It is all in a day's work if you are a soldier and the Centurion says: Well, today you are on the crucifixion detail. Go out and see to it. So, they kind of go about their business. And maybe the crowd didn't realize what they were shouting for. You know how crowds can get whipped up; and certainly, the leaders of the people who turned Jesus over, you know, to Pilate, didn't believe he was the Messiah. If they had believed, they wouldn't have done this, would they?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Of course not; no, right; exactly.

DAVE BAST

So, ignorant; but is ignorance an excuse?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; I mean, very often we are not always so sure about that; although, we always sort of mete out punishment, even with our kids...you know, when they are really, really little and they do something really, really foolish, we say: Well, they didn't know any better; and indeed, they did not know any better. Now, you get to a certain age, you know better; though, we forgive both kinds of sins. We forgive both high-handed sins and also those that are done in ignorance. So, certainly, there was a lot of ignorance here. Ignorance is no excuse; and certainly, it did not apply to everybody. I mean, the disciples kind of knew what they were doing by abandoning Jesus; but Jesus is certainly qualifying it there; but even those who did know what they were doing would have been included in Jesus' circle of forgiveness; but there is a sense, Dave, too, if we think about our own lives today, and sometimes we do something really dumb or we snap at our spouse or we snap at our kids or we just do something really foolish; and kind of when it is over you sort of say to yourself: Why did I do that? How did that happen? How did those words come out of my mouth? It is like I didn't know what I was doing. Again, that is no excuse, but God understands, and indeed, is going to forgive us when we just sort of lose ourselves or lose it, as we say when we get angry: I lost it. I kind of lost myself. That is included in the circle of grace of God's forgiveness, too.

DAVE BAST

Yes; certainly, ignorance is not the same thing as innocence. You may not have known what you were doing, or you may not have intended to hurt that person; you were just kind of, you know, pursuing your own goals; but nevertheless, the hurt happened. The thing was done. That incurs guilt as well. So, ignorance may be explanatory, but it is not exculpatory...can I say that? Is that too big a word? It doesn't excuse, though it may explain.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; yes, that is right; and this comes up again in a little bit. I mean, on Pentecost, you know, and in the early days of the Church in Acts, at one point Peter is preaching in Jerusalem and he says, you know, talking about Jesus' crucifixion: I know you acted in ignorance, as did your rulers; Peter says in the early part of Acts; and Paul, when he talks about himself when he was known as Saul the persecutor of the Church; Paul says; I received mercy because I had ignorantly acted in unbelief. So, this idea of: I didn't know that Jesus was the one; they didn't know that Jesus was the one; there is some ignorance and some blindness there, and God is willing to forgive that.

DAVE BAST

Yes, you know, I wonder if we actually realized what we were doing when we told that lie or offended against our own conscience or hurt that other person...hurt our spouse...if we really knew what sin was maybe we wouldn't be so quick to do it; but nevertheless, our hope really is in the mercy of God, whether we act ignorantly or quite knowingly, what we hope for is that the Father will hear Jesus praying for us, too, when he says: Father, forgive them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The cross was not the last time Jesus said that. We are told that one of the meanings of Christ's ascension into heaven is that he is sitting at the right hand of the Father pleading our cause with God, and I suspect he looks at my life and your life and our lives, and more than once he will say: Father, forgive them; they don't know what they are doing; and the promise of the Gospel is God will do that every single time.

DAVE BAST

That is a beautiful thought. Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation today. I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So, visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

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