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PREFACE

IT is impossible to overestimate the importance of the cross of Jesus Christ. For whether we are thinking about Christ's words from the cross, his words about the cross, or the biblical doctrines of the cross, in every case the cross is central to Christianity. Indeed, we are saying more. We are saying that without the cross there is no Christianity. By itself the incarnation does not provide us with genuine Christianity. It merely gives us sentimental stories for Christmas. The example of Christ alone is not Christianity since no one is saved by imitating Jesus. Even the resurrection alone is not the essence of biblical religion.

So I repeat, it is impossible to overestimate the importance of what Jesus accomplished for his people on the cross.

Two truths follow. On the one hand, if the cross of Christ is the very heart and essence of Christianity, we should expect that its meaning is simplicity itself. And it is. For example, "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3). What could be plainer than that? Or we read, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). The Bible often presents the cross that way—simply and with the most direct and pressing demand for faith.

On the other hand, if the cross is the very essence of Christianity, we might also expect it to stretch our minds to the utmost as we try to probe its depths. And we find that too. Indeed, we find that in some measure the full meaning of the cross is always well beyond our grasp. In this double sense, the doctrines of the cross might be described by the words one writer used to describe the theology of the fourth gospel, the gospel of John. He called it "a

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pool in which a child can wade,” as well as “an ocean in which an elephant can swim.”

How does one deal with a matter as central, as simple, and yet as fully rich and inexhaustible as the cross? What my colleague Philip Ryken and I decided to do was to expound the Bible’s teaching about the cross in three series of Lenten messages at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, where we serve together as pastors. He has done the bulk of this Lenten preaching, handling sixteen of the following twenty-one studies. But I have had the privilege of sharing with him by handling the others. I have been blessed by his preaching, as I trust he has by mine. Together we pray that you will be blessed as you reflect with us on the meaning and application of these important Bible texts.

Apart from the cross, the Christian religion becomes only a type of human self-deification that leads to arrogance and presumption, a religion that supposes wrongly that we can somehow save ourselves. With the cross at the center, Christianity offers the sole ground for our standing before God as justified men and women and the only adequate motivation for a life of rest in God and genuine self-sacrifice for others. We are led to give all we have because on the cross Jesus gave all he had for us.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

Isaac Watts wrote those words in 1701, and he was right. I trust you will discover this truth in new ways as you read, think about, and pray over these important Bible passages with us.

James Montgomery Boice
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PART 1

Words from the Cross

THE HEART OF GOD

JAMES MONTGOMERY BOICE

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”
(Luke 23:34)

THESE is something significant about the last words of men and women, because when a person comes face to face with death, what he or she is often rises to the surface. Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821), the French general and emperor, said, “I die before my time, and my body will be given back to the earth. Such is the fate of him who has been called the great Napoleon. What an abyss between my deep misery and the eternal kingdom of Christ.”

Voltaire (1694–1778), the famous French infidel, is reported to have said to his doctor, “I am abandoned by God and man! I will give you half of what I am worth if you will give me six months’ life.”

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), the brilliant skeptic who corrupted the faith of some of England’s great men, exclaimed, “If I had the whole world, I would give it to live one day. I shall be glad to find a hole to creep out of the world at. I am about to take a leap into the dark.”

FAMOUS “LAST WORDS”

I have always thought it unfortunate that the seven sayings of Jesus on the cross have been called his “last words,” because the perhaps unwitting implication is that Jesus did not rise again and therefore never said anything else. Jesus did rise again, of course. The existence of Christianity is one of the best proofs of that astonishing fact. And Jesus had more to say, even before he returned to heaven forty days after returning to life. Those words are the true “last words,” if any are.

On the other hand, the sayings from the cross, although wrongly called Jesus’s last words, are significant for several reasons: (1) they show that Jesus was in clear possession of his faculties until the very last moment, when he delivered up his spirit to God; (2) they show that he understood his death to be an atonement for the sin of the world; and (3) they show that he knew his death would be effective in doing that. He was satisfied with what he was doing, and he did not die in despair. Moreover, the words also exhibit his well-known concern and love for other persons, even at the moment of his most acute suffering.

Jesus’s words from the cross are these:

1. *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”* (Luke 23:34). These words are a prayer for God to forgive those who were crucifying him. They show the merciful heart of the Savior.
2. *“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise”* (Luke 23:43). These words were spoken to the believing thief and were a confident promise of salvation. They show that while life lasts, it is never too late to believe on Jesus and be saved.
3. *“Dear woman, here is your son”* and *“Here is your mother”* (John 19:26–27). Here Jesus commended his mother,

Mary, to the care of John, one of his disciples. It shows Jesus's concern for family ties.

4. *"I am thirsty"* (John 19:28). This request shows the true humanity of Jesus. But it also shows his concern that every facet of his death be in accord with the Bible's prophecies about him.
5. *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Mark 15:34; Matt. 27:46). This statement is the most shattering of all. It reveals more than any other what was really happening on the cross. It teaches the nature of the atonement and what our salvation cost God.
6. *"It is finished"* (John 19:30). These are the most important words, because they refer not to Jesus's life, as if he were saying, "It is over," but to his atonement for sin. It is because Jesus made a complete and final atonement for sin that we can be sure of our salvation.
7. *"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit"* (Luke 23:46). These words show Jesus to have been in control of his life until the very end. They also show that the relationship between himself and the Father, which earlier had in some sense been broken, was now restored.

These sayings have fascinated preachers and laypeople for two thousand years. They have been interpreted as teaching seven duties: (1) to forgive our enemies, (2) to have faith in Christ, (3) to honor our parents, (4) to set the highest possible value on the fulfillment of God's Word, (5) to cling to God even in life's darkest moments, (6) to persevere at whatever task God has given us to the very end, and (7) to yield all things, even life itself, to God at God's bidding.

Yet far more important than looking at these words to learn our duties is to look at them for what they teach us about the nature and work of Christ himself, which is how we are looking

at them in this book. They teach that Jesus died to save us from our sin; that is what his coming to earth was all about. They teach that as long as we are alive, it is never too late to turn from our sin and trust in Jesus as our Savior. The dying thief did that, and he was told by Jesus, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). It is our greatest wish that as a result of this book, some might pass from spiritual death to spiritual life, as that man did.

A GREAT FORGIVENESS

We start with the first of these “last” sayings: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). These words were spoken in the first moments of the crucifixion when Jesus, along with the two criminals who were executed with him, was stretched out on the rough timbers and felt excruciating pain as the thick iron nails were driven through the bones of his wrists and feet and the cumbersome cross was hoisted upward and allowed to fall down suddenly into the hole prepared for it. Death by crucifixion was probably the most cruel and lingering mode of execution ever devised by human beings.

But the crucifixion of Jesus was not only *cruel*. In his case it was also *unjust*, because he was innocent of any crime. That very morning the judge in his trial, Pontius Pilate, had declared him innocent—not only once but three times: “I find no basis for a charge against him” (John 18:38; 19:4, 6). Pilate had consented to the crucifixion only because Jesus’s enemies had threatened to send a report to Caesar saying that Pilate was harboring a dangerous insurrectionist, a person who made himself out to be a king. That is why Pilate attached his written notice to the cross: “This is the King of the Jews.” He didn’t want anyone to be able to say that he was soft on political pretenders.

Not only was the crucifixion cruel and unjust, but it was a *disgrace* and a *humiliation*. Cicero, the famous orator, said rightly,

although with an exalted sense of Roman dignity and ethnic pride, “To bind a Roman citizen is a crime, to flog him is an abomination, to slay him almost an act of murder: to crucify him is—what? There is no word that can possibly describe so horrible a deed.”¹

Here is the situation. Jesus was cruelly, unjustly, and disgracefully executed. Yet, in the very moment of his most acute suffering, he prayed for forgiveness for his enemies: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

Did God hear that prayer? Of course, though we will never know the full extent of God’s answer until we get to heaven and find out how many who were involved in that unjust trial and crucifixion later repented of their sin and came to believe on Jesus as their Savior.

John Charles Ryle, a great Anglican bishop of the last century, wrote, “We have probably not the least idea how many of the conversions to God at Jerusalem which took place during the first six months after the crucifixion, were the direct reply to this marvelous prayer. Perhaps this prayer was the first step towards the penitent thief’s repentance. Perhaps it was one means of affecting the centurion, who declared our Lord ‘a righteous man,’ and the people who ‘smote their breasts and returned.’ Perhaps the three thousand converted on the day of Pentecost, foremost, it may be at one time among our Lord’s murderers, owed their conversion to this very prayer. . . . We may be sure that this wondrous prayer was heard.”²

Many people have been converted by this prayer since that time as it has been explained in scores of preaching services. It teaches that Jesus is amazingly compassionate, inexplicably gracious. There is no one on earth, either now or at any other time, who is too far gone in sin or too hard of heart for him to care for. He cares for you and offers you forgiveness for your sin, if you will have it. If you are seeking any encouragement to repent and believe on Christ, this prayer provides it.

FORGIVENESS AT A GREAT COST

There is something else we should understand about this first saying of Jesus from the cross, and it is this: Not only was this a prayer for forgiveness and a great forgiveness at that—it was also a forgiveness prayed for at an enormous cost. This is because forgiveness does not come cheap. And the reason it does not come cheap is because God is God, the holy and just ruler of the universe, and a just God must act justly. Even God, especially God, must do what is right.

What is right? The right thing is that sin be punished—evil must be judged. If God were to act justly in this situation and do nothing else, we should expect that Pilate who judged, the soldiers who killed, the leaders who plotted, and the people who cried out for Jesus’s death be punished. Because their sin was the great one of murdering the only beloved Son of God, they should have been punished for their sins in hell.

We can understand how God might want to forgive at no cost. We would like to do that too. Who does not want to be forgiving? But how can a just God both forgive and be just at the same time? The answer is the cross. And it is why these particular words were spoken from the cross and not before or in some other situation. It is because Jesus was taking the place of sinners in his death, taking your place and mine, that he was able to pray, “Father, forgive them.” God was able to forgive because he was not simply forgetting about or overlooking sin. He was dealing with it. He was providing for its just punishment. But he was punishing it in the person of his Son rather than in the person of the sinner.

This is the very heart of God—forgiving but at a tremendous cost.

That does not always sound right to ears that are more accustomed to the thinking of our secular world than to the teachings of the Bible. But it had better be right, since it is our only hope

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of being able to stand before God when we ourselves die and are required to give an accounting for our lives. We will not be able to plead innocence of sin, because we are not innocent. Our only hope will be the death of Jesus Christ on our behalf.

Can we believe that? We can, since God himself encourages us to do so. The Bible says, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). This is not only the heart of God. It is the heart of Christianity.