

THE FIRST WORD FROM THE CROSS

The last words spoken by a loved one are probably the words most indelibly impressed in your mind. There is special significance to words spoken by one who realizes that life is ebbing away. There is no time for frivolous talk, and words are carefully chosen. Such also are the words of Jesus, all of which are precious to the believer, but the final words, as uttered upon the cross by the suffering Savior, serve as a unique window to His soul. They have frequently been referred to as “The Seven Words From Calvary.” History records that there were thousands of Jews that had been hung upon Roman crosses for villainous deeds, but the words they spoke would not in any way resemble the words that mocking crowd would hear from Jesus’ lips the day He was crucified. I wish, in these few lines, to think on Jesus’ first utterance: “Father, forgive them: for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). What a contrast that must have been to the curses and hate-filled speech customarily heard on similar occasions! In that one sentence we find an invocation, a petition and an argument.

The invocation: His first utterance upon the cross was not addressed to His tormentors, or to the crowd of curious and taunting bystanders, but was a prayer, and the first word of that prayer was, “Father.” He spoke neither words of condemnation, nor words entreating mercy to the multitude, but addressed the heavenly Father. Even the pain and humiliation Jesus suffered that day could not stifle His faith. If ever there had been an occasion when it would appear God’s hand was no longer in control, it would have been that day as Jesus suffered the most unjust judgment ever meted out. Because it was the Father’s will, Jesus endured the cross.

The Petition: He neither cried out for mercy for Himself, nor for judgment against His executioners, but plead, “Forgive them.” It was the language of grace—unmerited favor toward even the worst of offenders. Until Christ, the common word was, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy,” but Jesus exhibited a worthier spirit of love. Certainly while He would have had the right as the Supreme Judge to pronounce eternal woe upon all, He instead chose grace and mercy. Surely, if Jesus had not prayed such a prayer as this, as someone once observed, the earth would have opened and swallowed them all up. Instead, their lives were spared that forgiveness could be offered to them, as Peter later would plead with them: “Repent and be baptized...in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38).

The Argument: “For they know not what they do.” Peter would later say to many of these, “I know that through ignorance you did it” (Acts 3:17). Saul of Tarsus, an early persecutor of believers, would later obtain mercy because, as he said, “I did it ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Tim. 1:13). However, though done in ignorance, justice demanded penalty. The guilty still needed forgiveness. However, the hand of judgment was withheld from the Jewish nation for the next 40 years as they had opportunity to repent and accept Christ, until God gave them up to the Roman armies to plunder and destroy. Surely it is only because of man’s ignorance that His judgment is delayed, for He is “longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9b).

–Ron