

“They Know Not What They Do”

by Walton Weaver

Most of the time when Luke 23:34, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do,” is used, only the first part of Jesus’ prayer, “Father forgive them,” is discussed. But is not the last part also important? The words, “for they know not what they do,” show how unaware those who crucified our Lord were of the magnitude of their crime. They were totally ignorant of what they were doing.

We might be surprised just how much the Bible has to say about the ignorance of those who crucified Jesus. What did those who crucified Jesus NOT know about this horrendous act which they committed? Consider the following. *They did not know:*

THAT THEY WERE FULFILLING PROPHECY

We may safely assume, it seems to me, that the Jews at least should have known, but they did not. Though they were accustomed to searching the Scriptures, there were many things in them that they had failed to understand. Jesus challenged them on one occasion to search the Scriptures because they testified concerning him (John 5:39). After his death and resurrection he also said that both his resurrection and the very things that had been done in persecuting him and putting him to death were a fulfillment of the Scriptures (Luke 24:46).

What Scriptures would Jesus have had in mind? We know as a matter of fact that Psalm 22 was one part of the Scriptures Jesus recalled and applied to his own sufferings and death: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me” (v. 1); “He trusted on the Lord that he would deliver him: let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him” (v. 8); “They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture” (v. 18). Consider also Psalm 69:21, which states, “. . . in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink,” and Psalm 2:2, “the kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against his anointed.” Isaiah 50:6 also describes suffering and humiliation like that which Jesus experienced, when it says, “I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting.” Isaiah 63:3 depicts his loneliness as he had been forsaken by all to suffer and die alone: “I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there was none with me.” And who does not remember Psalm 34:20 which says, “He keepeth all his bones: not one of them is broken”? Isaiah 53:3-8, 12, you will recall, gives a detailed account of the suffering, trial and crucifixion, and Zechariah 12:10 declared, “. . . they shall look upon me whom they have pierced.”

THAT THEY WERE CRUCIFYING THE LORD OF GLORY

Of those who put Jesus to death the apostle Paul said, ". . . had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8). In this passage he identifies those who crucified Jesus as "the rulers" or "princes" (KJV) of this world (age). Paul may be thinking of the pagan rulers, or Romans, here, meaning Pilate and other Roman officials who were involved. We know, of course, that both Jewish and Roman leaders were guilty of crucifying Jesus. On the day of Pentecost Peter declared, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). He puts the blame for Jesus' death by crucifixion on the backs of the Jews in this statement. The Jews had turned Jesus over to the Romans that they might crucify him, so they were also guilty of the same crime. Earlier in this same sermon Peter shows that it was the Jews (through they did it by turning him over to the Romans courts) who crucified him: "Him, being delivered by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death" (Acts 2:23, NKJV). Yet, like it was with the Romans, what the Jews did here, they also did in ignorance.

In Peter's second recorded sermon in Acts, he says, "Yet now, brethren, I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers" (Acts 3:17; see also Acts 5:30, 31; 7:52; 10:39). All alike were guilty: the Roman rulers, the rulers of the Jews, and all others who cried out, "let him be crucified." But they all alike also did what they did "in ignorance." Neither the Romans nor the Jews knew they were crucifying "the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8), nor did they know him to be "Prince and Savior" (Acts 5:31), or "the Lord from heaven" (1 Cor. 15:47). Had they known these kinds of things about him, Paul says they would not have crucified him. As the God-man he was their only hope (Jn. 3:16, 17; Acts 4:12), God's "unspeakable gift" (2 Cor. 9:15), but they did not know it.

THAT THEY WERE BEING USED OF SATAN

The devil was the one behind the whole scheme: ". . . the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him. . ." (John 13:2). John 13:17 says, "And after the sop Satan entered into him [Judas]." The devil used Judas to betray Jesus "into the hands of sinners" (Matt. 26:45; Mark 14:41). Just as their fathers persecuted the prophets and "slew the ones which showed the coming of the Just One [Jesus]," so now, Stephen charges as they stone him to death, they had become the betrayers and murderers of Jesus (Acts 7:52). But the one behind it all was the devil. He put it into the heart for Judas to betray him, and he put it into the heart of the chief priest to find him guilty of blasphemy, and Pilate to condemn him.

But in reality, Jesus' death would prove to be a defeat for Satan. "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed, it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15). The contrast between the wound on the *heel* of Jesus and

the *head* of the serpent is striking. That it would be a strike *to the head* of the serpent means that it would be a mortal wound inflicted by the very one who was only slightly wounded himself ("on the heel"). No doubt both Satan and those being used by him would think that Christ's death on the cross would be the end, or final defeat, of Christ and his cause, but God had planned all along that it would be the very means by which Satan himself would be defeated and finally destroyed. Look, for example, at Hebrews 2:14: ". . . that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil," and 1 John 3:8: ". . . the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil."

THAT THEY WERE FULFILLING GOD'S DIVINE PLAN

Isaiah had announced many centuries before that "it pleased the Lord to bruise him: he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin. . . ." (Isaiah 53:10). Those who crucified Jesus were carrying out God's divine plan without knowing it. In a verse we quoted earlier, Peter said to his audience on Pentecost that the Jesus whom they had "taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain," had been "delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). This would not, however, excuse Judas who would betray him, according to Jesus' own pronouncement: "And truly the son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed" (Luke 22:22, NKJV). Jesus told Pilate, "Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above . . ." (John 19:11).