

**Q** Since Israel is guilty of crucifying their Messiah, what practical effect did the Lord's statement in Luke 23:34 "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*" have upon the Jews?



**A** In general, I believe the Lord's prayer on the cross "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*" reveals the Lord's heart with respect to sinful man. It was not His desire to impute sin to man, but to forgive him. In this way He reflected the mind and heart of God; "*To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them*" (2 Cor. 5:19).

In relation to the Jews, "*Father, forgive them*" is closely connected with the provisional offer held out to Israel in the first seven chapters of the book of Acts.

The sending of the Messiah, God's Son, was the final test God had for the nation of Israel. We see this in the parable of the husbandmen in Matthew 21, and Mark 12. "*Having yet therefore one beloved son, he sent also him to them the last, saying, They will have respect for my son. But those husbandmen said to one another, This is the heir: come, let us kill him and the inheritance will be ours.*" The nation of Israel is guilty of the death of Christ, inasmuch as they crucified Him saying "*His blood be on us and on our children*" (Matt. 27:25). Note that this guilt is in a national sense, not individually.

In grace, after being lifted up on the cross, Jesus "*made intercession for the transgressors*" (Isa. 53:12) when He cried "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*". This provided the basis for God to give an extension of grace to Israel after the cross, which we read of in Acts 1-7. For example, Peter preached, "*And now, brethren, I know that ye did it in ignorance, as also your rulers; but God has thus fulfilled what he had announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ should suffer. Repent therefore and be converted, for the blotting out of your sins, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and he may send Jesus Christ, who was foreordained for you, whom heaven indeed must receive till the times of the restoring of all things, of which God has spoken by the mouth of his holy prophets since time began*" (Act

3:17-21). God had opened an offer of forgiveness to Israel, provisional on their receiving the witness of the Spirit. We can read in Hebrews 2:4, for example, that God was bearing them witness *“both by signs and wonders, and various acts of power, and distributions of the Holy Spirit, according to his will”*. If Israel would receive this witness, and repent of their sin, God would bring in the times of refreshing; the Millennial reign of Christ. This witness was believed by many (the elect), but it was rejected by the nation at large. Stephen was raised up to bear witness to Israel’s rejection, both of Christ, but also of the Spirit; *“O stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers, ye also”* (Acts 7:51). This is why Saul of Tarsus was not raised up to unfold the truth of the Church until the provisional offer to Israel was rejected, and Stephen was stoned.

We see this in the parable of the fig tree, earlier in this very same gospel of Luke (ch.13). The man came seeking fruit from his fig tree three years, but found nothing on the tree. It pictures Christ’s three years of public ministry to Israel (the fig tree) culminating in the cross. The conclusion? Israel is an utter failure; the tree should be cut down. *“But he answering says to him, Sir, let it alone for this year also, until I shall dig about it and put dung, and if it shall bear fruit—but if not, after that thou shalt cut it down.”* In grace, one more year was given to the fig tree, with additional cultivation and fertilization, for one final witness. This corresponds to the early chapters of Acts, where forgiveness was held out to the guilty nation of Israel, if they would receive the witness of the Spirit sent down at Pentecost.

To summarize, the Lord’s prayer of forgiveness on the cross did not absolve Israel of their blood-guiltiness, but it did become the basis for God to offer a provisional pardon to the nation.