

“Father Forgive Them”

Is Absent in the Oldest Manuscripts

Overview

The traditional reading treats “Father forgive them” as a model of emotional pardon. However, the Greek verb ἀφίημι (aphiemi) has a broader range of meaning. It means “to send away, to release, to let go, to cancel a debt.” It is the same verb used when a king cancels an enormous debt, as in Matthew 18, and the same root Luke uses in 23:24, when Jesus reads Isaiah 61 and declares ἄφεσις (aphesis), the Jubilee release, to the captives. The word translated “know” in the prayer is οἶδα (oida), rooted in perception and sight, not γινώσκω (ginoskō), which denotes knowledge gained through experience. Jesus names a blindness, not an ignorance. The prayer asks the Father to release people who cannot perceive what they are doing.

A Summary

“Father forgive them” is the most quoted line from the crucifixion. The oldest copy of Luke 23 does not contain it. The Greek beneath the word forgive points to something the English never conveys. Papyrus 75 and Codex Vaticanus, among the earliest and most authoritative witnesses to Luke's Gospel, omit the prayer entirely. A later corrector added it back to Codex Bezae. The United Bible Societies' committee prints it in double brackets. The verse your pastor reads every Good Friday carries an editorial question mark that no one mentions. This article walks through the manuscript evidence, the two competing theories for why the verse was cut or added, and the verb at the center of the prayer that connects Luke 23:24 to a Jubilee passage in Luke 4, which no one places alongside it. After reading this article, the prayer stops sounding like an emotion and starts sounding like a mechanic.

An Examination of the Text

The oldest Bible on earth does not include the words, *“But Jesus was saying, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves”* (Luke 23:34, NASB). Papyrus 75 is the earliest substantial witness to Luke's Gospel, and scholars date it to between 175 and 225 AD. When you read through its columns to the crucifixion, this prayer is absent.

Unfortunately, it appears in more grief pamphlets than any other line from the crucifixion. It is the verse your pastor reaches for at the funeral; the one he reads when he has nothing else to say. It is the sentence Christians quote to end every argument about forgiveness. But the manuscript closest to Luke's original hand does not include it. Not as a footnote; not as a margin note; not even as a variant in the margin. The place where those words should be is MISSING. In addition, the manuscripts are only half the problem. The word your Bible translates as "forgive" in that verse does not primarily mean "forgive." It means something much older and more physical. Something Luke already defined earlier in his own Gospel, but for whatever reason, no one ever connected the two. The manuscripts tell you the verse was contested. The Greek tells you the word inside it was narrowed. And a passage in Luke chapter four tells you what the word was supposed to mean all along.

The question we are considering here is, "Was this verse removed or added — and what does the verb at its center actually mean?" Every English translation treats this verse as settled, yet the Greek text from which it was translated does not. Imagine a document older than your church building, your denomination, and every English Bible ever printed. Papyrus 75, discovered in Egypt in the 1950s, is housed in a climate-controlled vault at the Vatican Library. It is written in a careful, early uncial script and contains most of Luke and most of John. It is the single most important early witness to the text of Luke's Gospel that we possess. However, when you reach the crucifixion account in Papyrus 75, the soldiers cast lots, the rulers mocked, and the inscription hung above the cross, but the prayer "Father, forgive them" is absent. The text moves directly from the crucifixion to the casting of lots, with no prayer in between. So, what can we conclude? The scribe who copied this document either lacked the prayer in his source text or chose not to include it. Either way, the result is the same. The prayer is not there.

The Codex Vaticanus, written in the fourth century, is among the most respected manuscripts in the world. It has been housed in the Vatican Library since at least the fifteenth century, and scholars consider it one of the finest witnesses to the original Greek text of the New Testament. It also omits the prayer! So does the original hand of Codex Bezae. A later corrector wrote it back in, which tells you something important about how the early church handled this verse. Even in the scriptorium where Bezae was copied, the prayer was contested. One scribe left it out. Another scribe, working later in the same manuscript, decided it had to be restored. Conversely, Codex Sinaiticus, also from the fourth century, includes the prayer. So do the vast majority of later manuscripts. The Latin Vulgate and the Peshitta include it. The Byzantine tradition, which produced the majority of manuscripts that survived into the medieval period and shaped every English Bible from Tyndale through the King James Version, preserves it in full. This is not a scribal accident. This is a genuine fracture in the manuscript tradition, running through the earliest and most authoritative witnesses we possess.

This split dates to the second century and extends through the fourth, dividing the two manuscript families scholars trust most. In the twentieth century, the United Bible Societies' editorial committee printed the verse in double brackets. That symbol indicates the committee judged it ancient and important but textually uncertain. They included it because they could not

bring themselves to remove it, and they bracketed it because they could not prove it was in the original. Therefore, the verse sits in a kind of editorial limbo, printed yet questioned, present yet uncertain. The verse your pastor quotes every Good Friday with absolute confidence carries an editorial warning in the Greek text your pastor was trained on. Sadly, most congregations have never been told this. If the best manuscripts disagree, why does the verse survive? Because a man who lived before any of these codices was already aware of it. This man was Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon, writing around 180 A.D., and he appears to quote these exact words from the cross. That date is critical because Irenaeus was writing roughly at the same time Papyrus 75 was being copied. This means the prayer and the silence existed side by side.

The prayer circulated in the second century was known and quoted, but it did not appear in every copy of Luke's Gospel. The Syriac Didascalia, written around 250 A.D., paraphrased the prayer. Tatian's Diatessaron, the earliest known Gospel harmony, likely included it. Origen also referenced it, and Archelaus, in his Disputation with Manes, quoted it directly. The patristic evidence is early and geographically broad. It coexists with manuscripts that do not contain the verse at all. There are two competing theories, and they are not minor academic footnotes. They offer fundamentally different accounts of what happened to this verse.

- The first theory holds that scribes removed the prayer. After the Temple fell in 70 A.D., the early church separated from the synagogue, and tensions between Jewish and Gentile communities escalated. As a result, a prayer asking God to forgive those responsible for crucifying Jesus became theologically uncomfortable. Some copyists viewed the prayer as too lenient because the post-Temple reading demanded judgment. Accordingly, copyists in certain streams of the Alexandrian tradition, including those that produced Papyrus 75 and Vaticanus, omitted the verse from their copies.
- The second theory holds that the prayer was never part of Luke's original text. It was a revered saying of Jesus, preserved in oral tradition and early memory. A sympathetic scribe inserted it because he believed such a prayer belonged in the crucifixion narrative. It was a reverent act of preservation by a copyist who could not imagine the cross without this prayer. Once it was in the text, no future scribe would dare remove it, which is why most later manuscripts include it. Both theories account for the same manuscript evidence. Both are held by credentialed scholars. Neither has definitively prevailed.

This is the part your church omits: neither the answer nor the question. The omission is the very fact that the question exists at all. The fact that the most-quoted verse from the crucifixion carries an unresolved dispute running through the oldest manuscripts on the planet, and that no one standing behind a pulpit thinks you need to know about it.

Whether the prayer was cut out or later added, the verse appears in most Bibles. The word at its center carries something that the English translation flattens. Setting the manuscripts aside, even if this prayer is original to Luke and was in his Gospel from the moment he wrote it, there is a second discovery that changes what you hear when the verse is read aloud. The problem is

not the manuscripts; it is the verb. The King James Version reads: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." The word translated "forgive" is ἀφίημι (aphiāmi). Aphiāmi does not primarily mean "forgive." Thayer's Lexicon gives its base definition as "to send away, let go, leave alone, permit." It is the word used when a king canceled an enormous debt in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:27). The creditor aphiāmi the debt; he released it and sent it away. It is the same word used when Jesus released his spirit at the moment of death. Matthew 27:50 says that He aphiemi his own life. This word appears over 140 times in the New Testament. In most of those instances, it means "leave," "let go," or "release." "Forgive" is legitimate, but only in certain contexts. Those are a narrow slice of a wide verb. Here, it says to release them, send them away, and cancel the debt.

This brings us to the second buried term. "For they know not what they do." The word for "know" here is οἶδα (oida), not γινώσκω (ginoskō). That matters! Greek has two verbs for knowing. Jesus chose oida, the word rooted in sight, perception, and awareness. Ginokō denotes knowledge gained through process. You ginokō a person by spending years with them. Oida denotes knowledge that comes from seeing. It arrives the moment your eyes open. But Jesus chose oida. In Acts chapter 3, Peter stands before the crowd that crucified Jesus and uses the same word. I oida, he says, that you acted in ignorance. The same verb, the same blindness. Jesus does not say they lack information. He says they lack perception; they cannot see what they are doing. Their blindness is not ignorance of facts. It is the absence of sight.

Release is not a feeling you generate. It is a debt you set down because the person who owes it cannot see the ledger. If you are asking whether Luke understood that aphiemi carried this weight, the answer is yes. He answered that question eighteen chapters earlier. Yet no one bothered to place the two passages side by side.

In Luke 4:18, before the parables, the healings, and the road to Jerusalem, Jesus stands in the synagogue at Nazareth, unrolls the scroll of Isaiah, and reads from Isaiah 61:1, *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised."* The word the King James Version translates as "deliverance" in that verse is aphasis, the noun form of aphiemi. It shares the same root and belongs to the same family. The same author uses it in the same Gospel. Luke uses this word throughout chapter four of his narrative. Jesus announces his mission using Jubilee vocabulary drawn from Isaiah 61, which itself draws on Leviticus 25. The Year of Jubilee occurs every fifty years. This is the year when debts are canceled, slaves are freed, the land returns to its rightful owner, and the entire economic and social order resets, because no human system of accounting is meant to be permanent. Isaiah took that vocabulary and turned it into a prophecy about a coming anointed one who would himself proclaim the release.

That is the vocabulary Luke chose to open the ministry of Jesus. When the time came for the ministry's final act, Luke returned to the same root, Aphasis: release, liberty, emancipation, and the formal end of captivity. 19 chapters later, hanging between two criminals on a Roman cross, Jesus used the same verb form. Aphas autois: release them, let them go, send the debt away. The

noun that opened the ministry becomes the verb that closes it. Thus, Luke 23:34 fulfills Luke 4:18.

So, the next time you hear the words from the cross in a sermon on forgiveness, you can ask three questions no one in the room expects,

- “Why did the preacher never mention chapter four?”
- “Why were aphasis and aphiemi never placed beside each other?”
- “Why was Jubilee never named?”

When those two passages stand together, the verse stops being a lesson about feelings and becomes a description of what Jesus came to do.

You know someone like this. You were told to forgive them, and you tried; you tried to summon a warmth your chest refused to feel. You have sat in services where this verse was read aloud, and you gripped the pew because you knew the expectation: Feel the forgiveness, release the grudge, and be like Jesus on the cross. When you could not feel it, you believed you had failed the verse. But you did not fail the verse; the verse was under-delivered to you. Aphiemi does not ask you to feel tenderness toward someone who broke something you cannot rebuild. It asks you to release the debt, set the stone down, and send the obligation away from you. Not because they deserve release; not because what they did was small; not because time has softened the wound. Because they were acting within a blindness that is not yours to cure. Oida! They could not perceive what they were doing. And the weight of holding them accountable for a debt they cannot see is one the text never asked you to carry. And the release is not something you manufacture from willpower.

Read the prayer again. It is addressed to the Father. Aphas autois, “Father, release them.” It is a request, not a performance or a self-help exercise. It is not an affirmation you repeat until it feels true. It is a request made to someone with the authority to cancel the debt. The Father is the source of release. You are the one who asks. The act of release does not begin in your emotional reservoir. It begins in the same source that authored the Jubilee in Leviticus 25, declared it through Isaiah 61, and enacted it at the cross through the lips of his Son. The verb is not in the past tense; it is in the present, indicating a continuous action. It is the same mechanism Jesus used in the only moment that mattered.

Whether this prayer was composed by Luke or preserved from the earliest memory of what Jesus said on the cross, the verb at its center offers you something English can never convey—a Jubilee action spoken in the same language Jesus used to launch his public life. The prayer remains the prayer. The cross remains the cross. But the word beneath is older than what you were told. And what it asks of you is simpler than what you were taught. Ask the Father to release them. He is the one who sends the debt away. You are the one who stops carrying it.