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THE FORGIVENESS OF GOD

How can we know we have not gone too far? How can we be sure we have not made ourselves unforgivable in the eyes of God?

The answer is not found in our ability to forget, or in our ability to forgive ourselves, or even in our ability to feel forgiven. The answer is found in the extent to which God has gone to bear the pain and punishment of what we deserve.

Our prayer is that in the pages of this brief booklet we will find a freedom of conscience that will compel us to spend the rest of our lives telling others about the wonderful forgiveness of God.

Martin R. De Haan II

RIVER OF FORGIVENESS

Niagara Falls, on the border of the US and Canada, plunges 160 feet into a thundering, surging river. At the brink, 379,000 tons of water a minute rush over the edge. Niagara, however, is not the largest waterfall in the world. Neither is Africa's 355-foot-high Victoria Falls. While Victoria is twice as high and twice as wide as Niagara, she is dwarfed by Venezuela's Angel Falls. Dropping 3,212 feet, Angel Falls is about 20 times higher than Niagara!

Imagine being caught in the currents above Angel, or Victoria, or Niagara. Their difference in size would make little difference. There would be a point of no return, a moment of going over the edge, and then . . . a need for heaven's mercy.

The story of personal moral failure is similar. One fall may look greater than another. But in the waters of failure, there is little difference. James 2:10 says, "For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all." Once we go over the edge, all that remains is a need for mercy. All we can hope for is the kind of forgiveness King David looked for after his sexual affair with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11). In the grip of guilt that included cover-up and murder, David cried:

*Have mercy upon me,
O God, according to
Your lovingkindness;
according to the
multitude of Your
tender mercies, blot out
my transgressions. Wash
me thoroughly from my
iniquity, and cleanse
me from my sin. For
I acknowledge my
transgressions, and*

my sin is always before me (Ps. 51:1-3).

Was David unforgivable? Not according to the Bible. His story stands as a timeless reminder that a repentant person can find inexhaustible waters of mercy in the forgiveness of God.

What hope is there for those who can't forgive themselves?

Without the assurance of forgiveness, life can end in despair. Such was the case of a young college student. On a Canadian hunting trip, he became separated from two friends in a raging snowstorm. Though he found refuge in a lonely cabin, he died before help could arrive. When the Royal Mounted Police found his body, they discovered a note saying:

Dear Mother,
I am hungry and cold.
I'm afraid I'm going to die. The only question I can't answer is this:
"Will God forgive me?"

Although he was raised in a Christian home, he had become an agnostic in college. He died wondering if God would forgive him for the path he had taken.

Sometimes guilt alone makes people *want* to die. After the fatal shooting of Tejano singer Selena, the woman who pulled the trigger begged God for forgiveness. During a tape-recorded conversation with police, she expressed anguish and said, "Look what I did. . . . I'll never forgive myself. . . . I don't deserve to live."

Many of us saw another example of overwhelming guilt in the young mother who pleaded on national television for the return of her missing children. We

watched when she later confessed to taking her own babies' lives.

Is there hope for those who hate themselves for what they've done? How far will God go in showing mercy? What about serial killers like Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer who claimed to find spiritual peace behind bars? While society mourned the loss of their victims, these men said before their deaths that their recent faith in Christ had given them assurance of God's forgiveness.

***If God can
forgive a serial
killer, maybe there's
hope
for us all.***

Can God forgive a mass murderer? Would it be moral for Him to do so? Wouldn't

such forgiveness revictimize the families and friends of those killed? Or is the more important truth that if God can forgive serial killers who throw themselves at the mercy of His Son, maybe there is hope for us all?

What about us? What if we are not so much concerned that a serial killer gets justice as we are in finding mercy for ourselves? What if we cannot forgive ourselves? What about the shame and self-contempt that is draining the life out of us? Have we crossed the line? Can God forgive our ...

- Profanity
- Sexual perversions
- Violence
- Jealousy
- Lies
- Self-centeredness
- Bad parenting
- Divorce
- Drunkenness
- Neglect
- Broken promises
- Ungratefulness

HAVE WE BEEN TOO BAD TO BE FORGIVEN?

If we believe our emotions, we may feel we have gone too far. Our self-contempt seems deserved. But there's hope. God wants us to believe in His ability to forgive sins that we cannot forget.

God's ability to forgive is greater than our ability to forget.

But what do we know about this forgiveness? What does the Bible tell us? Does it come automatically? To everyone? All the time? Not according to the Bible. God's offer of forgiveness comes with conditions. While He stands ready to forgive any brokenhearted

sinner, He does not *automatically* forgive, nor is He obligated to forgive. His forgiveness doesn't mean that we can ignore laws of natural or legal consequence (Gal. 6:7).

The Scriptures also show there are fresh-falling waters of forgiveness equal to the falls of our personal failures. In the following pages, we will see how much God has personally suffered to become "just and the justifier" (Rom. 3:26) of those who do not deserve to live. In the process we will see that:

1. God's love is equal to His anger.
2. God's mercy is equal to His justice.
3. God's forgiveness is equal to our guilt.

Through the wisdom of His love, God has found a way of satisfying the demands of His law while still offering forgiveness to the worst of sinners.

To make it easier to pass along the good news of this mercy to others, we will be working with a simple diagram to illustrate the problems and solutions of the forgiveness of God.

GOD'S LOVE EQUALS HIS ANGER

LOVE	GOD	ANGER
	SIN	
	US	

On July 8, 1741, Jonathan Edwards preached his famous sermon "Sinners In The Hands Of An Angry God." To a congregation so traumatized that some clung to railings for fear of sliding into the fires of hell, Edwards pleaded, "Oh sinner, consider the fearful danger you are in! It is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit,

full of the fire of wrath that you are held over in the hand of that God whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it and ready every moment to singe it."

Edwards went on to say, "The misery you are exposed to is that which God will inflict, to the end that He might show what the wrath of Jehovah is. God has had it on

***"Fear Him who
is able to destroy
both soul and
body in hell."
Jesus (Mt. 10:28)***

His heart to show to angels and men, both how excellent His love is, and also how terrible His wrath is."

Edwards' emphasis on the wrath of God is foreign to our generation. Yet an amazing thing happened as he quoted heavily from Bible texts warning of the anger of God. Terrified men and women woke from their sin long enough to see their desperate need for the forgiveness of God.

God's anger is not a denial of His love. His anger means He cares too much to ignore the harm we are doing to ourselves and to one another. Woven into the greatest love story the world has ever known is the unfolding drama of a God who loves enough to hate evil. He cares enough to be angry with religionists who trivialize sin in themselves, while separating themselves from those who need mercy. He cares enough to be angry with those of us who reduce sin to petty legalisms, while ignoring the needs of others.

Because God revealed

Himself in the mirror image of His Son (Col. 1:15), in Jesus we find an accurate picture of the balance between heaven's love and

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condemn us.***

anger. Jesus cared enough to be angry (Mt. 21:12). He loved enough to warn us of pending judgment (Jn. 3:36), while assuring us that His love is equal to His anger (Jn. 3:16).

We cannot afford to misunderstand the relationship between the love and anger of God. Jesus did not come to condemn us (Jn. 3:17). He came to save us from our sin and from His own wrath. Long before the

sermon of Jonathan Edwards, Jesus said, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt. 10:28). The truth about God’s love and anger is not found in one or the other. The truth is that His love is equal to His anger, and because of His love He found a way to show mercy.

GOD’S MERCY EQUALS HIS JUSTICE

LOVE	GOD	ANGER
MERCY	CHRIST	JUSTICE
	US	

Society is troubled when crime goes unpunished. For the murder of a child, we want the guilty to pay. For a

terrorist bombing, Middle Eastern custom demands that someone settle the score. The demand for justice is deeply rooted. The God of the Old Testament established the principle of eye-for-eye, life-for-life justice in a setting of legal witnesses and due process (Dt. 19:21).

How then can this same God pardon a sinner? How can justice be satisfied except by punishment of the guilty party? Who else can be held responsible for our sin? There is only one other possibility. Other than ourselves, the only one who can be held responsible is the One who gave us the freedom to sin. Like a parent who gives use of the family car to a 16-year-old child, God gave us the freedom, the time, and the capacity to sin. Is it possible for Him to offer to pay for our damages?

According to Scripture, that’s exactly what God did. At great cost to Himself, He

paid the price for our sin. In retrospect, we can see how much God was planning to pay when He said, “The life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls” (Lev. 17:11).

“How much do you love Me?” I asked. “This much,” He replied. Then He stretched out His arms and died.

Was this a veiled admission of divine guilt? Was God allowing for the possibility He had been wrong to give us moral capacity and freedom of choice? Is this why He put in motion a ritual system of sacrifice that would end up costing Him inexpressible pain? No. The last book of

the Bible shows that for all eternity, the choirs of heaven will declare God holy in all He is and does (Rev. 4:8). Throughout all eternity, heaven will show that God was right in giving us freedom to sin. Eternity will show His wisdom in letting us discover the wages of sin and the terrible consequences of our willful disobedience.

Throughout all eternity, heaven will also honor the justice and mercy of the Creator who lovingly chose to bear the burden of our rebellion.

The payment for our sin came at heaven’s expense. In an act of unparalleled self-sacrifice, God built a two-lane bridge of mercy and justice over the chasm of sin separating us from Him. On earth, Roman executioners drove nails into the hands and feet of God’s only Son. In heaven, a Father suffered as no human father has ever suffered. When it was

finished, God accepted the sacrifice as sufficient payment for our sin.

Justice was satisfied. In the eternal moments and infinite agony of the Son who cried, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mt. 27:46), the Creator Himself became sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21).

Three days later, Christ rose bodily from the dead. By the miracle of resurrection He showed heaven's acceptance of His sacrifice. An endless river of mercies began flowing from the cross on which He died. A legal foundation had been laid for the doctrine of justification by faith. According to the apostle Paul, God is *just* (righteous) to *justify* (declare righteous) all who come to Christ in faith. In the third chapter of Romans, he wrote:

By the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is

the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (vv.20-26).

GOD'S FORGIVENESS EQUALS OUR GUILT

LOVE	GOD	ANGER
MERCY	CHRIST	JUSTICE
SIN FORGIVEN	US	GUILT REMOVED

At this point, to complete the diagram, we can write *sin forgiven* and *guilt removed* in the remaining boxes.

Because of the unlimited scope of Christ's death on the cross, we have received forgiveness not only for past sins, but for all sins—past, present, and future.

Once-For-All. The moment we trust Christ as Savior, we are given immunity from punishment. The issue is settled: Our case is closed and God will not open the files of our guilt again. As the courts of earth honor the principle of

double jeopardy, so heaven will not judge twice those whose sins have been punished in Christ. We will not be tried again for the sins He bore in our place.

The wonderful truth of justification is that God by His own authority acquits us. While He doesn't "make" us righteous, He "declares" righteous those who have appealed to the death of Christ as payment for their sin. Because God "made Him who knew no sin [Christ] to be sin for us" (2 Cor. 5:21), God can be "just" and the "justifier" of those who accept His own payment for their sin (Rom. 3:26).

Does this mean we are no longer accountable for our wrongs? No. We are still subject to natural and legal consequences. We can still risk our reputation, health, and relationships by careless, unprincipled living. But we will not lose heaven.

We can still lose rewards

and a “well done” at the judgment seat of Christ, where our Lord will hold us accountable as His children. But those of us who are in Christ will never be condemned for our sin. That is why the apostle Paul could write:

Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God (Rom. 5:1-2).

Again, it is important to remember that the word *justified* in this verse is a legal term. It was used in ancient law courts to describe the status of a person who had paid the full penalty for his crime and was restored to his place in society.

In essence, God says to the person who trusts Christ, “Your sins have been paid

for. My Son died for you. Therefore, in Him you stand righteous before Me. You are forgiven of all your sin in a once-for-all transaction!”

Complete. The forgiveness God offers is comprehensive. It is complete and final—not just until the next inevitable sin. This is why in another letter Paul could quote Psalm 32:1-2 when he wrote:

*Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are **forgiven**, and whose sins are **covered**; blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall **not impute sin** (Rom. 4:7-8).*

Let’s look at three important terms in this verse that show the completeness of God’s mercy.

Forgiven. Think about a young, struggling mountain climber trudging up a steep trail with a large backpack. The burden is heavy for him. He weakens and lags behind. He sinks to the ground. Then

an older climber drops back, lifts the load off his back, and shoulders it himself. The young hiker feels revitalized and free and starts up the trail with joy ringing in his heart. The word translated “forgiven” means “to lift off, to carry away.” That is what happens to our guilt when God forgives us.

Covered. When we trust in Christ, our sins are removed forever. The Greek word translated “covered” in Romans 4:7 means “to cover over completely, to obliterate.” This means they are blotted out forever. Therefore, we don’t need to worry about being confronted by those sins again. We will not see them in a rerun at the judgment. They are completely removed. This promise made to Israel applies to all who trust Christ:

I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will

not remember your sins (Isa. 43:25).

Not Imputed. The word *impute* means “to charge to an account.” God charges to Christ our sins, and charges to our account the righteousness of Christ. He will not hold our sins against us. They will not affect our standing in heaven. The accountability of the judgment seat of Christ will be about rewards of service gained or lost. Punishment will not be the issue.

If you have never known the forgiveness of God, it can be yours right now. All that remains is for you to personally choose to trust in the One who has done so much for you. Look up these New Testament references to be assured of what God has promised:

- John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; 7:38; 11:25; 20:31
- Acts 13:48; 16:31
- Romans 1:16; 4:3; 5:1; 10:11

DIFFERENT KINDS OF FORGIVENESS

Once we are in the family of God, there's more to learn about the forgiveness of the Father. We learn, for instance, that more than one kind of forgiveness is mentioned in Scripture. While *forgiveness* consistently means “to loose” or “to remove” a barrier to relationship, different kinds of barriers and relationships may be in view.

1. God's Legal Forgiveness. This is God's once-for-all removal of all legal barriers to heaven. With the granting of this forgiveness, God acts as Judge to declare *all* sins “paid for in full.” From this moment on, Christ is our Advocate (1 Jn. 2:1). Along with His Father, He gives us legal immunity from any

accusation that could separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:28-39).

We need to remember, however, that this forgiveness is not universally applied. It is given only to those who personalize God's mercy. Like medicine, forgiveness is not effective until taken.

*Like medicine,
forgiveness must
be taken to
be effective.*

2. God's Family Forgiveness. This forgiveness occurs after we have been legally pardoned and born into the family of heaven. By this mercy, God removes relational barriers to our closeness with Him. In this forgiveness, He acts not as a Judge but as our heavenly Father.

When we disobey Him and do not correct ourselves (1 Cor. 11:31), He gets our attention with painful circumstances (see Heb. 12:4-11). The discomfort is for our good. It comes from a Father who loves to “forget” our sins when we honestly confess them and agree to place ourselves back under the control of His Spirit.

This kind of forgiveness is similar to what we experience in our own families. If a son takes the family car without permission and then lies about it, his parents aren’t doing him a favor by acting as if it didn’t happen. Before driving privileges can be restored, the son must own up to his wrong and be forgiven. His status within the family is never in jeopardy (legal forgiveness), but the basis for trust has been damaged, and family forgiveness is needed.

This is the forgiveness in

view in John’s statement to fellow members of the family of God:

*If we confess our sins,
He is faithful and just
to forgive us our sins
and to cleanse us from
all unrighteousness
(1 Jn. 1:9).*

3. People-To-People Forgiveness. Our forgiveness of one another is to be patterned after the way God forgives us. From His example, we learn that while our love for others needs to be *unconditional*, there is a place for *conditional* forgiveness.

Whether or not we consider an offense a “dead issue” will be determined by whether the offending party is willing to own up to the wrong. Christlike love makes it necessary sometimes to withhold forgiveness until the one who has done the harm admits responsibility for it (Lk. 17:1-10). (For more on this, see pages 23-26.)

WHAT ABOUT THE UNPARDONABLE SIN?

The Bible speaks of one unpardonable sin. Jesus talked about a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit that can never be forgiven (Mt. 12:31-32; Mk. 3:28-29). In addition, the apostle John mentions a “sin leading to death” (1 Jn. 5:16-17). What are these sins? Could we have committed them? How do we know whether we have crossed over the line?

The Blasphemy Against The Holy Spirit. Jesus said, “Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. . . . whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come”

(Mt. 12:31-32).

Before identifying the principle, let’s note a couple of facts. On the positive side, only blasphemy against the Spirit is called unpardonable. Every other sin can be forgiven. That is good news.

The good news is that every other sin can be forgiven.

It’s also important to see the context in which Jesus made His statement. He gave His warning to religious leaders who were publicly rejecting Him. The Pharisees heard Him speak, saw His miracles, and observed His blameless life. Yet they still attributed His supernatural acts to the power of Satan. That is how they blasphemed the Spirit.

Technically, this sin cannot be repeated today in the same way it was committed in Jesus' day. Jesus is not physically with us doing miracles that can be attributed to Satan.

But can this sin be committed in principle? What if we have made irreverent remarks about the Holy Spirit? Is it possible we have committed this sin and passed a point of no return? Not if we are concerned about our relationship with Christ. A person who has committed the blasphemy Jesus was talking about will not want to be reconciled to Him. Someone in an unforgivable state would not long for the acceptance and forgiveness of the Son of God. Such a person would be like the Jewish leaders who because of their envy and stubborn pride continued to reject Jesus till their death.

Unforgivable people are

those whom God has hardened in their own choices. The Holy Spirit no longer urges them to believe. These people will never long to believe in Jesus as their personal Savior. They will never worry about whether they can be forgiven.

***Unforgivable
persons are
hardened in their
own unbelief.***

If we are worried about whether or not God has accepted our belief in Christ, we are not unforgivable. Our concern shows that our heart is still soft and that we have not passed a point of no return.

Some might ask, "What about Esau? He tearfully showed repentance without

receiving mercy” (Heb. 12:16-17). Look at the context. Esau wasn’t begging for the everlasting forgiveness of his sins. He was crying because he had traded his family inheritance for a bowl of soup. When he realized what he had done, he found that it was too late to get his birthright back.

The Sin That Leads To Death.

This is different from the unpardonable sin. A sin that results in death can be committed by the Lord’s own people. The apostle Paul told believers in Corinth that because of their disrespect for “the Lord’s Supper” (Communion Table), some of them were weak, some were sick, and some had even died (1 Cor. 11:30).

The apostle John also mentioned the possibility of a sin that would result in death. Without identifying

any specific fatal behavior, he acknowledged in 1 John 5:16-17 the kind of sin that was committed by Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11.

A sin that leads to death takes a forgiven person home to heaven prematurely.

According to 1 Corinthians 11:30 and 1 John 5:16-17: (1) The sinning people who experienced premature death belonged to God. (2) Their “death” was physical, not eternal. First Corinthians 11:31-32 goes on to say, “For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.”

THREE MISBELIEFS ABOUT FORGIVENESS

The teaching that the forgiveness of God comes through faith alone in Christ finds some disagreement among church people. Some say forgiveness cannot be found without emotional repentance. Others say baptism is a necessary condition. Still others say good works are a requirement. Let's see what the Bible says about such conditions.

Repentance. Some suggest that we have not met the requirements for forgiveness until we have gone through a period of tears, earnest prayer, and deep sorrow for our sin.

The New Testament does call for repentance (Mt. 3:2; Acts 2:38; 20:21), but it is not a repentance that can

be measured in tears or emotions. Rather, it is something that has already occurred by the time we put our faith in Christ.

The basic meaning of the Greek word translated "repentance" is "a change of mind." We repent when we change our beliefs about God and ourselves. Rather than continuing to see ourselves as acceptable to God on our own merits, we begin to see how much we need the forgiveness of God.

*The repentance
God requires has
already occurred by
the time we put
our faith in Christ.*

If we have an overwhelming sense of God's holiness, we may

feel deep sorrow for the wrongs we have done against God and others. When we think about the way Christ suffered, we may be brought to tears. But the essence of repentance is a change of mind and beliefs about our sin, and about our need of Christ—not the feelings associated with it.

If we acknowledge that our sin is against God and turn in faith to Jesus Christ, we have done all that is necessary for forgiveness. This may or may not be accompanied by a deep emotional outburst. The change of mind is essential; bitter tears and deep sorrow are not.

Baptism. Some people say we cannot be forgiven by God unless we are baptized in the right way by the right people. But the Bible makes it clear that baptism is an evidence of salvation, not a requirement for it.

People who insist on baptism as a part of salvation usually quote Acts 2:38, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.” They say that if we are not “baptized . . . for the remission of sins” we cannot be forgiven.

The Bible makes it clear that baptism is an evidence of salvation, not a requirement for it.

Notice the key word *repent*. The basic condition is for us to agree with God that our sin is a violation of His moral law and to turn in faith to Jesus Christ. In addition, the preposition *for* [*eis*] in the phrase “for the remission of sins” does not

mean “in order to [be forgiven].” Its basic meaning is “with a view toward” or “in relation to.” When Jesus said the people of Nineveh “repented at [eis] the preaching of Jonah” (Lk. 11:32), He was saying they repented “with a view toward” or “in connection with” Jonah’s message.

In Acts 2, therefore, Peter was telling the men of Jerusalem to repent and let themselves be baptized “with a view toward” the remission of sins. Their baptism was to be an evidence of their repentance and forgiveness, not a condition for it.

In addition, the following factors show that water baptism is not essential to salvation:

- Abraham was forgiven before he was circumcised, apart from any rite or ceremony (Rom. 4:9-10).
- Jesus declared people

forgiven before they were baptized (Mt. 9:1-7; Lk. 7:36-50; 18:9-14; 19:1-9; Jn. 8:1-12).

- Cornelius and his family received the Holy Spirit before baptism (Acts 10:44-48).
- The Bible shows that forgiveness and salvation are received by faith (Jn. 3:16; Rom. 5:1; 10:1-13; Eph. 2:10).

Baptism is an outward act by which we publicly identify with Christ and His church.

In the light of these factors, baptism should be seen as an outward act by which we publicly identify with Christ and His church. It is not a requirement for salvation.

Good Works. “But what about works?” some people ask. “Wouldn’t it be unfair for God to forgive on the basis of faith alone? Didn’t James say that faith without works is dead?”

Without a doubt, good works are important to every Christian. The Bible calls for good works. But good deeds are not a condition for receiving forgiveness (see Rom. 3:27-28).

Ephesians 2:8-10 shows that rather than being a condition for forgiveness, good works are the fruit and evidence of a forgiven life. Those who are saved through faith become God’s “workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works” (v.10).

But what about James’ statement that “faith without works is dead”? James was saying that genuine faith produces good works. Christlike

actions allow us to be justified, or declared right, in the eyes of those around us. It is the way we prove the reality of our faith (Jas. 2:14-26). Our good deeds are not a part of the basis of our forgiveness but a natural result of it.

***Rather than being
a condition for
forgiveness, good
works are the fruit
and evidence of
a forgiven life.***

To summarize: The wonderful message of the Bible is that forgiveness comes through faith alone. It is not faith plus repentance, faith plus baptism, faith plus good works, or faith plus anything!

SOME COMMON QUESTIONS

We should not be surprised if we continue to have questions about the forgiveness of God. We cannot easily step away from the relational and emotional issues that stubbornly refuse to be put to rest.

QUESTION 1: “What if I don’t feel forgiven by God?” Most of us struggle with feelings of guilt and shame. Long after we have confessed our sins to God, we are apt to feel unforgiven. We might fear that we have been rejected by God.

When feelings of guilt hound us—and they will—we need to remind ourselves that our forgiveness does not depend on how we feel.

Forgiven people can feel like they are hanging by a thread over the fires of hell. Forgiven people can be

oppressed by the accuser of our souls (Satan), who stirs up old emotions the way we stir up the embers of a dying fire. Suddenly we are inflamed in the emotions of anxiety and despair. But those emotions are not telling us the truth about the forgiveness of God.

Forgiveness is something God does. It is not rooted in our own emotions. It doesn’t depend on whether we forgive ourselves.

Forgiveness is what God does in the books of heaven when He marks “canceled” over our debt of sin. We are forgiven when He declares us legally acquitted, regardless of how we might be feeling at the moment.

Because it is so important to realize that the forgiveness of God is something *He* does, let’s look at eight pictures of God’s forgiveness as seen in the Old Testament. Author David B. Kennedy notes:

1. God bags up our sins to throw them away. “My offenses will be sealed up in a bag” (Job 14:17 NIV).
2. God blows away the sin barrier. “I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist” (Isa. 44:22 NIV).
3. God takes away our sins. “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us” (Ps. 103:12 NIV).
4. God treats our sin like a vanquished foe. “You will tread our sins underfoot” (Mic. 7:19 NIV).
5. God puts our sins out of His sight. “You have put all my sins behind Your back” (Isa. 38:17 NIV).
6. God puts our sins out of His mind. “I will . . . remember their sins no more” (Jer. 31:34 NIV).
7. God cancels the debt of our sin. “I, even I, am He who blots out your

transgressions” (Isa. 43:25 NIV).

8. God removes sin’s stain and restores purity. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (Isa. 1:18 NIV).

**QUESTION 2:
“Isn’t forgiveness something between us and God alone?”**

Yes. Biblically, forgiveness is very personal. No one else can decide for us whether we are going to believe in Christ for the forgiveness of our sins.

But personal doesn’t mean private. Those who have lost the weight of sin have every reason to go public. While someone who finds gold on his land might have reason to be quiet about his discovery, someone who finds a cure for AIDS, cancer, or the common cold would be a moral criminal for holding the information to himself.

According to the New Testament, those of us who have found something more valuable than gold owe our discovery to those still struggling (Rom. 1:14-16). The eternal burden and guilt of sin is far more dangerous than AIDS.

**QUESTION 3:
“Why does the Bible say God will not forgive us if we don’t forgive one another?”**

Jesus said:

If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Mt. 6:14-15).

The answer is in the context. By this statement, Jesus was not teaching lost people how to be saved. He was teaching His own disciples how to stay in good family relationship with the Father.

**QUESTION 4:
“Does this mean we should always forgive others unconditionally?”**

No. Like so many other principles of Scripture, there is a time to forgive and a time not to forgive. While we are always to love others unconditionally (by seeking their good rather than their harm), Jesus Himself teaches us to forgive people *when* they acknowledge their wrongs (Lk. 17:1-10; Mt. 18:15-17).

We do not love well when we allow our brothers or sisters to knowingly harm us without holding them accountable.

QUESTION 5: “But what about Jesus’ teaching that if we don’t forgive others, He will not forgive us?” By comparing this Scripture with other passages, we must conclude that Jesus was referring to

an unwillingness to love those who have harmed us, and an unwillingness to forgive those who have repented of the wrong they have done (Lk. 17:3-4). What He will hold against us (in a family sense) is our determination to withhold from others the kindness and forgiveness that He has shown to us. This is a “family issue,” not a factor that could determine our eternal destiny.

QUESTION 6: “But doesn’t God forgive us unconditionally?” Aren’t we to forgive others as He has forgiven us?” When the apostle told us to “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:32), he made it clear that we are to pattern our forgiveness after God’s forgiveness of us.

God does not forgive unconditionally. First He

grants legal pardon to those who meet the condition of acknowledging their sin and believing in His Son. Then He extends family forgiveness to those sons and daughters who confess their sin and seek to be restored to the Father (1 Jn. 1:9).

QUESTION 7: “If we have been forgiven by God, why won’t people let us forget the past?” Being forgiven by God does not release us from the natural consequences of our sins. Crimes against the state must be subjected to legal due process. Acts against individuals deserve restitution. The forgiveness of God does not qualify former embezzlers to be entrusted with other people’s money, just as it does not give us reason to entrust our children to someone with a history of molesting. This is wisdom.

THE EFFECTS OF GUILT

When we sin and refuse to come to Christ for forgiveness, our guilt may express itself in a number of different ways. For instance, before David repented of the terrible sins of adultery and murder, he experienced physical, emotional, and spiritual anguish. In Psalm 32:3-4, describing how his guilt affected him, he wrote these words:

When I kept silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all the day long [emotional]. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me [spiritual]; my vitality was turned into the drought of summer [physical].

Here are some ways we may be affected by guilt.

1. Physical.

Unresolved guilt may affect

us physically. It usually manifests itself in one of these ways:

- listlessness
- imagined sickness
- real illness
- headaches, stomach disorders, vague pains
- exhaustion

If we try to run from our guilt, immersing ourselves in work or turning to sin in reckless abandon, we will pay a price. Eventually our bodies will force us to slow down.

2. Emotional.

Psychologists and counselors see these emotional effects of guilt:

- depression
- anger
- self-pity
- feelings of inadequacy
- denial of responsibility

3. Spiritual.

Unresolved guilt may have the following spiritual effects on us:

- a sense of alienation from God

- inability to pray
- reduced fellowship with believers
- no feeling of joy
- inability to read the Bible

4. Relational. A lack of forgiveness will have an impact on our relationships with others in these ways:

- irritability
- blaming others
- withdrawal
- profuse apologies
- inability to relax
- self-justification
- refusal to accept compliments
- outbursts of temper

David's entire life was affected by his guilt. It touched him physically, emotionally, spiritually, and relationally. But he cried out to God, found the assurance of forgiveness, and was able to enjoy life again—damaged but hopeful.

Would David have been more honorable not to seek God's forgiveness? Would

he have been more respectful of his victim's survivors to refuse any mercy? Would self-condemnation and suicide have been a more noble course of action?

David's entire life was affected by his guilt. It touched him physically, emotionally, spiritually, and relationally.

Only if there is no life beyond the grave. Only if the rest of us were not sinners. Only if a forgiven person has nothing to offer. Only if God doesn't love us enough to long for our restoration. But as the Scriptures show, God loves sinners.

BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF THE FORGIVEN

Adam And Eve.

The first humans to sin also became the first to experience God's forgiveness (Gen. 3).

Aaron. Although he was involved in making a golden calf, Aaron later was appointed head of the priesthood (Ex. 32; Lev. 8).

Aaron And Miriam.

When they opposed Moses' God-given authority, Miriam was stricken with leprosy. But they confessed and were forgiven and cleansed (Num. 12).

Eliphaz, Bildad,

Zophar. Although these men falsely accused Job and misrepresented God, they found forgiveness (Job 42).

Rahab. This Jericho prostitute turned to the Lord of Israel and became

part of Jesus' family tree (Josh. 2; Mt. 1:5).

David. Although he was guilty of adultery and murder, David repented and confessed his sin. He was spoken of as a man after God's own heart (2 Sam. 11-12; Ps. 51).

A paralytic. To demonstrate His authority, Christ forgave and healed this disabled man (Mt. 9:2-8).

Matthew. This tax collector with a bad reputation became Christ's disciple (Mt. 9:9-13).

A repentant criminal. When he cried out to Jesus on the cross, this thief was welcomed into Paradise (Lk. 23:40-43).

Peter. Although he denied Christ three times, Peter became a pillar in the church (Mk. 14:66-72; Jn. 21:15-19).

A Woman Caught In Adultery. Her

accusers backed away and Christ forgave her sins (Jn. 8:1-11).

Zacchaeus. This greedy tax collector climbed a tree to see Jesus and came down to receive forgiveness (Lk. 19:1-10).

Nicodemus. Officially part of the group of ruling Pharisees who provoked Christ's strongest condemnations, Nicodemus recognized Jesus as Savior and Messiah (Jn. 3:1-21; 19:39).

Paul. Killer of Christians and self-confessed "chief of sinners," Paul is a prime example of the grace of God (Acts 9; 1 Tim. 1:15).

Corinthian Believers. Once they were idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, greedy, slanderers, and swindlers, but now they had experienced God's forgiveness (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

The Public Sinner Who Washed Jesus' Feet With Her Tears.

When a religious Pharisee objected that Jesus would let such a woman even touch Him, Jesus said:

"There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?" Simon answered and said, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more." And He said to him, "You have rightly judged." . . . Then He [Jesus] said to her [the public sinner], "Your sins are forgiven" (Lk. 7:41-48).

“WOULD GOD FORGIVE ME?”

The following anonymous story is a personal testimony from a believer who struggled with not feeling forgiven by God.

I had been a Christian for several years, but during that time I had occasional distressing bouts with anxiety. I just could not believe that God had actually forgiven me. Sometimes I even doubted that He was capable of forgiving a woman whose sins were as bad as mine.

I remember vividly an evening when I was looking through my photo album. As I walked back over the years, the pictures seemed to condemn me anew. They brought back to my mind the kind of life I had lived before I had confessed my faith in Christ. As I turned the pages, photo after photo leaped into focus and

pointed a finger of accusation directly at me.

It all came back in huge, overwhelming waves of condemnation. The drinking (I used to brag about being able to drink anyone under the table); the smoking; the friends who swapped wives among themselves; the angry chip on my shoulder about not knowing the man who caused my birth. Then came a messy divorce, followed by a physical involvement with a man I knew I didn't love.

I closed my eyes to escape the pictures. But all I could see were nails being driven into the hands of Christ. I agonized. The photo album brought all my sins back. All my Christian joy was gone. I could see only my unworthiness, the blackness of my sin, and my terrible guilt. Shame engulfed me. I felt totally worthless and condemned.

I pleaded with the Father

to help me. The Bible had become a staff of life to me, so I turned to it in desperation. Was I truly forgiven of all my sins? God led me to these verses:

Do not remember the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing, now it shall spring forth; shall you not know it? I will even make a road in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins (Isa. 43:18-19,25).

My heart welled up with joy. My smile returned, for I knew I was forgiven and that I didn't have to remember who I used to be. I realized that I am the Lord's—for His glory and praise.

I know now that Satan, the accuser of the brethren,

used those memories to oppress me. He wanted to cripple me, to make me ineffective in the service of God. But the truth of the Bible had once again triumphed.

“In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.”
Ephesians 1:7

When I look at my picture album now, I see the “new me”—not the one captured by past sins. I am covered forever with the robe of the righteousness of Christ!

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