

Focus On Forgiveness

By Ben Godwin

*“Blessed is he whose transgression is **forgiven**, whose sin is covered.
Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.” (Psalms 32:1-2 NKJV)*

Psalm 32 could well be considered the forgiveness chapter of the Bible. It is the companion of Psalm 51, David’s agonizing prayer of repentance. Both of these Psalms share the same context—the aftermath of David’s adulterous affair with Bathsheba and the subsequent cover up (the murder of her husband, Uriah the Hittite). For the duration of Bathsheba’s pregnancy, David lived with this unconfessed sin. Eventually, Nathan the prophet confronted him with a heart-piercing parable. As the dire consequences of his sin mounted, the broken psalmist repented, received forgiveness and expressed his gratitude for God’s mercy for us to read.

To fully understand forgiveness one must understand sin, since that is what we are forgiven of. **Transgression**, in the verse above, means “*to trespass*” or “*to cross over a boundary*.” In His Word, God has established certain moral and behavioral boundaries. Whenever we “*trespass*” or “*cross over*” those boundaries it constitutes sin and necessitates forgiveness. David, unfortunately, “crossed over” three of God’s boundaries:

1. “*You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife.*” (Ex. 20:17)
2. “*You shall not commit adultery.*” (Ex. 20:14)
3. “*You shall not murder.*” (Ex. 20:13)

For these sins David repented and received forgiveness. It should be noted that forgiveness does not automatically abolish the consequences that necessarily follow sinful conduct. If we sow to the flesh, we can be sure we will reap corruption, forgiveness notwithstanding. If we sow to the wind, we will inevitably reap the whirlwind. (Hosea 8:7) Too many people sow wild oats and then hope and pray for crop failure. It doesn’t work that way. “*Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.*” (Gal. 6:7-8)

Nathan prophesied that even though God would forgive David, as a result of his sin, “*the sword [war] shall never depart from your house*” and “*...[God] will raise up adversity against you from your own house.*” (2 Sam. 12:10-11) Internal strife and turmoil erupted in the palace. Consider the far-reaching repercussions that ravaged the royal family long after the king was forgiven:

- David and Bathsheba’s illegitimate child died seven days after it was born—2 Sam. 12:15-19.
- Tamar, David’s daughter, was raped by his son Amnon—2 Sam. 13:10-14.
- Amnon, in turn, was murdered by his half-brother Absalom in revenge for violating Tamar—2 Sam. 13:28-29.
- Absalom later plotted a coup against his own father’s throne, insomuch that David had to flee into exile from his own palace for several months—2 Sam. 15:1-15.
- Absalom, fulfilling Nathan’s prophecy, committed fornication with ten of David’s concubines on the palace roof —2 Sam. 12:11; 16:22.
- Absalom, against David’s wishes, was killed in battle—2 Sam. 18:9-15.
- God promised the sword would never depart from his kingdom, thus forever tarnishing his legacy as a man of bloodshed and precluded him from building the Temple—1 Chr. 22:7-8.

In light of these facts, it's no wonder why the tempter lures us with the temporary pleasures of sin (Heb. 11:25) while craftily concealing the consequences. Herein lies the deceitfulness of sin (Heb. 3:13), while it is fun for a season, its end result is devastating. Remember, every lure has hidden hooks. The sobering warning we glean from David's biography is that prevention is better than restoration. In other words, while forgiveness is readily available, it doesn't exempt us from reaping what we've sown. On the other hand, what a blessing it is to know that there is no failure too great for the grace of God to overcome! Let's examine the joy and the wonder of what it means to be forgiven.

The Meaning of Forgiveness

- 1. To give mercy where judgment is deserved.** David, realizing what he deserved, pleaded, "*Have mercy upon me O God...cast me not away from Thy presence; and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.*" (Ps. 51:1, 11) His behavior demanded punishment. One could argue that David deserved to lose his throne, to be executed for shedding innocent blood, to be publicly humiliated for reproaching Israel or to even be eternally damned for disobeying God's law. What did God give him instead? Mercy! Mercy, the sister of forgiveness, occurs when God or someone else doesn't give us what we deserve. Notice that G-I-V-E is contained in the word **forgive**. Mercy is literally **given** away in the act of forgiveness. The beautiful thing about God's mercy is there is an infinite supply. In fact, His mercies are "*new every morning...*" (Lam. 3:22-23)
 - 2. To lift the burden and guilt of sin.** In Psalm. 32:1, the term **forgiven** stems from the Hebrew word *nacah*, meaning "*to lift.*" It implies that, through forgiveness, the burden, guilt and condemnation that follow sin are "lifted" from the person who repents, like a heavy weight being lifted off of their conscience. A heavy burden of shame lifted from David when he finally confessed and repented of his sin. No wonder he broke into song and rejoiced by penning such a profound Psalm. This is why a person who experiences forgiveness feels light, free and clean—the heavy yoke of separation from God is lifted. A vivid illustration of this can be found in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a book he wrote during a twelve-year imprisonment for preaching the gospel in the 1600's. The main character is appropriately named "Christian" in this classic allegory of a believer's trek from salvation to glory. Prior to his conversion, Christian is weighed down with a heavy backpack representing the burden of sin. The moment he kneels at the cross, the bands fastening the pack to his body are broken and it tumbles down a steep hill into a pond labeled "forgetfulness." Christian is free! The burden of sin is lifted! Christian has experienced the power of forgiveness.
 - 3. To forget the cause of offense.** The word **forgive** is actually derived from the two Old English words *forth* and *give*. Together they mean "*to completely dismiss from thought.*" In other words, to forgive is literally to forget. It is not that God can't remember, He simply chooses not to. A person who is granted pardon by a head of state is said to receive amnesty. **Amnesty**, a synonym for forgiveness, comes from the same Greek word, *amnestia*, that gives us amnesia meaning "*non-remembrance.*" Thus a link exists between forgiving and forgetting both in Scripture and language.
- **How God forgives by forgetting:**
 - By deliberately choosing not to remember our sins—Heb. 8:12; 10:17.
 - By casting all our sins behind His back—Is. 38:17.
 - By casting all our sins into the depths of the sea—Mi. 7:19.
 - By hiding His face from our sins—Ps. 51:9.

4. **To remove sin from one's record.** David's prayer, "*Blot out my transgressions*" (Ps. 51:1, 9), is indicative of God's power to abolish sin from the record books. To **blot** means to *remove, wipe away or smear out*. A blotter was used in Bible times to remove ink smudges from parchment. Once blotted, no trace of the smudge could be seen. Forgiveness deletes the splotches of sin on our life's ledger. If we sin, it is placed on our account. When we sincerely repent, God forgives us, and strikes that sin from the record. **Remission**, a forgiveness-related word, also conveys this concept. Among other things, remission denotes "*the canceling out of sin.*" (Mt. 26:28) The blood of Jesus has canceled out our past sins, clearing them from the record.

5. **To separate an individual from his sin.** Remission also means "*to dismiss*" or "*to send forth.*" In Romans 4:7, a direct quotation of Psalm 32:1, the Greek word translated **forgiven** is *aphiemi* meaning, "*to send off*" or "*to go away.*" It implies separation from or the departure of one's sins. So both forgiveness and remission entail a distancing of sin from a person. The scapegoat, also called *the goat of departure*, used each year by Israel on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16) served this purpose. The corporate sins of Israel were confessed over it and it was released into the wilderness, thus carrying the people's sins away from them. Psalm 103:12 reinforces this truth, "*As far as the East is from the West, so far hath He removed our transgressions from us.*" The significance of this is that once you begin traveling East, no matter how many times you circle the globe, you'll still be heading East. There is no point where the East meets the West. In contrast, if a person traveled North far enough, they would eventually arrive at the North pole and then, with their first step in any direction, would be going South. The point is that once God has separated sin from a person they will never be reunited with it again, unless they willfully choose to go back to it.

When God forgives sin, He makes it cease to exist—"*...Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.*" (Mi. 7:19) In the New Creation that John describes in Revelation 21:1, "*...There [will be] no more sea.*" If the sea will eventually cease to exist, then, logically, our sins, placed there by God, will also cease to exist. Sin that has been plunged beneath the blood of Jesus will ultimately be obliterated—at some point it will not exist anymore! Condemnation is, therefore, an illusion. The attempts of satanic powers to remind the believer of forgiven sin are rendered futile. Forgiven sin is as extinct as a dinosaur. The God who, in the beginning, made something out of nothing can reverse the process. Through forgiveness, He makes nothing out of something (our past sins). The only thing that can reunite a believer to his past sin is a willful decision to return to it. As far as God is concerned, it does not exist anymore!

Not only will there be peace with God for the forgiven in heaven. There will also be total harmony between parties who offended one another in this life, those who made things right with God and each other. Imagine David, forgiven of adultery and murder, walking side by side with Uriah, the one against whom his crimes were committed. In heaven, where forgiveness covers all sin, David will feel no guilt and Uriah will feel no desire for revenge. Now imagine Stephen and Paul (formerly known as Saul). Paul was instrumental in Stephen's martyrdom, yet they will surely fellowship together beneath the Tree of Life. There will be no sense of remorse on Paul's part and no impulse for retaliation on Stephen's part. Oh, the beauty and the power of forgiveness! As Mark Twain said, "*Forgiveness is the fragrance the flower sheds on the heel that crushes it.*"

The Methods of Obtaining Forgiveness

The truth is everyone, even the righteous, needs forgiveness—“*For **this** shall every one that is godly pray unto thee in a time when thou mayest be found...*” (Ps. 32:6) The word **this**, in context, is clearly referring to forgiveness. While the supply of forgiveness is as infinite as God is (Ps. 103:3), still there are several Biblical stipulations for receiving forgiveness:

- **No guile.** Psalm 32:2 explains who can apply the promise of forgiveness—the person who comes to God without pretense (they don’t try to hide their sin, pretend it never happened, or otherwise attempt to justify it). The severity of King David’s punishment was, in part, due to the fact that he tried to cover up his sins—“*He who covers his sins will not prosper.*” (Pr. 28:13) Herein lies a paradox: if we cover our sins, God will expose them; if we confess our sins, God will cover them. (2 Sam. 12:12, Mt. 10:26) To obtain forgiveness, we must deal candidly with our sin. The irony was that both God and David wanted his sins covered. While David tried through deception to cover them, God wanted to cover them with his grace.
- **Confessing sin.** To appropriate forgiveness, we must confess our sin. “*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) Confession of sin is vital because open admission of sin is the first step toward change. If we want God to meet our need, we must first be willing to acknowledge we have a need. Confession is the recognition that we are at fault and that we are not shifting the blame on something or someone else.
- **Forsaking sin.** “*He who covers his sins will not prosper: but whoever confesses and **forsakes** them will have mercy.*” (Pr. 28:13) The availability of forgiveness should not be interpreted as a license to sin. Confession of sin with the intention to sin again is a mockery of grace. Those who expect to be forgiven must confess, repent of and convert (turn) from their sin. Jesus told the Adulteress Woman to “*go, and sin no more.*” (Jn. 8:11) The Woman at the Well “*left her water pot*” (and her promiscuous lifestyle) when she drank of the living water. (Jn. 4:28) Levi walked away from his tax-collecting booth to follow Jesus. (Lu. 5:27-28) Moses forsook Egypt and all its enticements. (Heb. 11:27) Forgiveness should be viewed like a safety net one uses sparingly not a free ride to take advantage of. The Bible says, “*... And **if** [not when] any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father...*” (1 Jn. 2:1) For God’s people, sin should not be the rule; it should be the exception to the rule.
- **Forgiving others.** Unforgiveness, along with the unpardonable sin—blasphemy of the Holy Spirit—is one sin God will not forgive, unless we repent of it. “*...If ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses.*” (See Mt. 6:14-15) If we refuse to forgive others, we shut off the source of our own forgiveness. If we hope to reap forgiveness, we must certainly be willing to sow it.

David described the emotional and spiritual anguish of living with unconfessed sin in these words, “***When I kept silence**, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer.*” (Ps. 32:3-4) It’s a hard thing indeed to run from God’s conviction. Imagine the sleepless nights of knowing he had stolen someone else’s wife. Imagine the guilt that plagued his conscience because he had an innocent man killed. Imagine the absence of God’s fellowship (“*If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me*”—Ps. 66:18). All of this could have been avoided if only David had immediately repented. As the hymn states, “*O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry, everything to God in prayer.*” Upon receiving forgiveness, however, the words of another great hymn of the church apply: “*My sin—O the bliss of this glorious thought—my sin, not in part, but the whole is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more...it is well, it is well with my soul.*”

Manifesting Forgiveness

Manifesting forgiveness is crucial to receiving forgiveness. The dilemma is that people are often difficult to forgive, especially if they refuse to admit their error or don't offer an apology. Scripture teaches us to forgive regardless of the offense or the attitude of the offender. Holding a grudge against someone always hurts us more than it does them, because we can only be forgiven to the same degree that we forgive—Mt. 6:12, Lu. 11:4. William Ward wrote, *"We are most like beasts when we kill, we are most like men when we judge, but we are most like God when we forgive."*

In Matthew 18, The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant illustrates the disparity between our sin debt to God and the sin debt of others against us. There is no comparison! Jesus used two monetary figures for the two debts: to represent our sin debt to God, He used the astronomical sum of 10,000 talents (equivalent to about \$150 million). To represent other people's sin debt to us, He used a meager 100 pence (or about \$4.00). In comparison, the amount of forgiveness others require from us is eclipsed by how much we need from God. The moral of the parable: if God has forgiven us of our massive sin debt, we, in gratitude, should be willing to clear others of their miniscule sin debts to us. In keeping with another parable, we who have been *"forgiven of much,"* should *"love much,"* both God and man. (Lu. 7:41-47)

- **We are instructed to manifest forgiveness:**

- With frequency (490 times, if necessary)—Mt. 18:21-22.
- Regardless of whether or not the offender seeks our forgiveness—Mt. 5:23-24.
- If we expect to be forgiven ourselves—Mt. 6:14-15, Mk. 11:25-26, Lu. 6:37.
- When the flesh desires revenge—Lu. 6:29, Ro. 12:17-19.
- When it would be easy to harbor bitterness—Eph. 4:31-32.
- Toward our relatives in family and in Christ—Lu. 17:3, Col. 3:13.
- Toward even our enemies—Ro. 12:20-21, Mt. 5:43-44, Lu. 6:27-28.

Jesus, of course, is the consummate model of manifesting forgiveness. In the closing hours of His life, He demonstrated forgiveness to His enemies. He overcame evil with good and taught us to do the same. As Charles Spurgeon said, *"Let us go to Calvary to learn how we may be forgiven. And then let us linger there to learn how to forgive."*

1. He forgave and healed Malchus: Lu. 22:50-51, Jn. 18:10. Malchus, a member of the mob that arrested Jesus in Gethsemane, had his ear cut off by Peter's sword, which Jesus promptly healed. What a display of compassion to heal His own enemy! If Jesus forgave and healed His enemy, how much more will He forgive and heal His friends.

2. He forgave his own murderers. In one of His seven statements from the cross, Jesus prayed, *"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."* (Lu. 23:34) Included in that statement were not only the religious leaders who conspired, the Jews who consented and the Romans who executed His death, but every fallen man whose sin made the cross necessary. Since our sin helped put Jesus on the cross, we too were the enemies He forgave and for which He died. (Ro. 5:8)

3. He forgave the dying thief. The only thing they had in common was their method of execution. One was a criminal, the other the just Judge of all the earth. One was guilty as sin, the other was the only innocent man to ever live. At first, both thieves blasphemed Jesus (Mt. 27:44) but then one had a change of heart, perhaps when he heard Jesus forgive his own murderers. To the thief's request to be remembered, Jesus replied, *"Today shalt thou be with me in paradise."* (See Lu. 23:39-43) That thief, though crucified on earth for his crimes, now walks a free man in heaven due to the power of forgiveness.

Could it be that the reason God showed David mercy after his sin was the fact that he had been so merciful to his predecessor, King Saul? Remember, he spared Saul's life twice when he had the opportunity to exact revenge and kill him. Notice David's favorable attitude toward Saul after the King had mistreated him for years. (1 Sam. 24:9-10, 2 Sam. 9:1) Also notice David's reaction to the news of King Saul's and Absalom's death after both caused him extensive grief. (2 Sam. 1:17-27; 18:32-33) When you consider David's willingness to forgive and how he was forgiven, it brings to mind the words of Jesus, "*Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.*" (Mt. 5:7)

President Abraham Lincoln was asked how he was going to treat the rebellious Southerners when they had finally been defeated and returned to the Union of the United States. The questioner expected that Lincoln would be angry and full of vengeance. Instead, he was shocked when Lincoln replied, "*I will treat them as if they had never been away.*" Now that exemplifies the tender heart of God and the true spirit of forgiveness.