

God's forgiveness of our sins is another of the most wonderful blessings that flow to us as a result of the resurrection, ascension and glorification of our Lord Jesus Christ: *"God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins."* (Acts 5:31) In my last article I pointed out that only God can forgive sins committed against Him. Even our sins committed against others are also ultimately against God, for other people are His creatures. Then I pointed out that God's forgiveness is based exclusively on the atonement provided by His Son: *"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins"* (Eph 1:7).

The second half of my previous article looked at God's great willingness to forgive, as illustrated in the experience of a number of what we might describe as notorious sinners! My purpose was to encourage anyone who had not yet turned to the Lord Jesus in faith, for the forgiveness of all their sins, to do so without delay. Then also to help all of us gain a more grateful appreciation of the amazing blessing of forgiveness.

In this article I want to give some suggested answers to the question, *"What is forgiveness?"*, so that we may appreciate even more deeply what an amazing and marvellous gift God's forgiveness really is.

The Bible gives us a number of illustrations to show the wonder of God's forgiveness. Let's look at some in the Old Testament, where we read that it is:

THE REMOTEST REMOVAL

For *"as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us"* (Psalm 103:12). When God forgives it is as though He carries our sins as far away as it is possible to take them. The original Hebrew word means to put something far off – in fact, such a long way off that they could not be taken away any further! The strong implication is that, once they have been removed to that remotest of destinations, they are not going to be coming back again! A part of the ritual on the Day of Atonement was the high priest laying both hands on the head of a goat which was then taken to a remote area in the wilderness and released. It was a place from which the animal could never find its way back (Lev 16:20–22). This was a graphic picture of God's way of forgiveness, and the origin of our word 'scapegoat'! The astounding thing is that God the Father made His Son the scapegoat for our sin! The *"Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all"* (Is 53:6), and He has carried our sins so far away that they will never be found again!

AN ERASED OFFENCE

"I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake" (Is 43:25a) To blot sin out is to strike it from the record, to wipe it off the page. It means God is willing to relate to us as if the offence had never been committed. The same verse goes on to show that God also takes...

A DELIBERATE DECISION TO FORGET

"...and I will not remember your sins." (Is 43:25b) This decision of God reminds me of the fact that one of the great attributes of the love of God is that it *"does not count up wrongdoing"* (see 1 Cor 13:5 footnote); the NIV helpfully translates this statement as *"it keeps no record of wrongs"*. A sad trait of fallen human nature is that when someone who has wronged us crosses our mind, we remember what they have done! In forgiving us, God refuses to think of us in that way. He says, through the prophet Jeremiah, *"I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."* (Jer 31:34) God sets His mind on our forgiveness and refuses to focus on our faults, failings and sins.

King Hezekiah made this wonderful discovery and testified that *"you have cast all my sins behind your back"* (Is 38:17), with the assurance that God would not bring them again to the front of His mind!

A STORM AVERTED

"I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist" (Is 44:22). While we remain unforgiven, we live under the storm clouds of God's anger: *"whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him."* (John 3:36) But in forgiveness, God blows those dark clouds of judgement away completely, so that we can bask in the sunshine of His forgiving love. Notice that the verse also speaks of a 'mist'. In our country, at certain times of the year and especially in the mornings, we are used to being enveloped in a mist. Then, as the sun warms up the air, the mist evaporates and disappears. So the heat of God's passion to forgive can just as suddenly burn off the guilt of our sin and leave us breathing the warm air of His wonderful grace, thus averting the awful storm of eternal damnation.

A THOROUGH CLEANSING

"I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me." (Jer 33:8). This verse formed part of a number of wonderful promises to the idolatrous, backslidden people of Judah. Though God was going to discipline His people with invasion, defeat and exile, He promised them a wonderful restoration which would include His gracious forgiveness and cleansing. In this verse, the word *"cleanse"* means 'to declare clean' following the actual act of cleansing. God would so forgive and restore the people that He would be able to declare to the world that they were then thoroughly clean in His sight. The Lord made a very similar statement regarding the sinful people of Corinth, who turned to the Saviour for forgiveness, when He declared: *"you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."* (1 Cor 6:11)

A GREAT BURDEN LIFTED

“Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression?” (Micah 7:18) The word ‘pardon’ here means ‘to lift up’, the idea being that of removing a heavy load. In John Bunyan’s famous book, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Pilgrim is pictured as bearing “a great burden upon his back” which he described as “a burden that lies hard upon me”. Bunyan was portraying the convicted sinner loaded down with the guilt of their offences against God. Pilgrim carried that burden to the cross, where it was “loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from off his back, and began to tumble; and so continued to do till it came to the mouth of the sepulchre, where it fell in, and he saw it no more.” That is a wonderful picture of what happens to a sinner when they receive God’s pardon. All the weight of the burden of their guilt before God is lifted from them. No wonder God’s forgiveness is such a marvellous relief!

A BURIAL AT SEA

The very next verse says, “You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.” (Micah 7:19) Forgiveness is like God throwing our sins overboard. These days we have very sophisticated underwater search devices, including sonar equipment and deep diving vehicles, either manned or remotely controlled. The most famously located and filmed wreck is that of the *Titanic*, lying nearly 2.5 miles down on the Atlantic sea bed. When Micah received his prophecy in the eighth century BC, however, the oceans were mainly vast uncharted wastes. Once something was buried in “the depths of the sea”, there would have been no possible way of locating it again. This is another wonderful picture of how God deals with our sin when He forgives: He puts it beyond recovery!

When I was a youngster in Sunday School, we used to sing a simple chorus which said:

*Gone, gone, gone, gone! Yes, my sins are gone.
Now my soul is free, and in my heart’s a song.
Buried in the deepest sea – yes, that’s good enough for me!
I shall live eternally! Praise God, my sins are gone!*

I trust you can joyfully praise God that your sins are gone, and gone for ever, because of the great forgiving love of God.

An important blessing from taking a brief survey of God’s forgiveness in these Old Testament verses and pictures is that it completely debunks the ridiculous idea that the Old Testament is only about God’s anger and judgement. Some say that we cannot find much, if anything, about His love! The glorious willingness of the Holy God graciously and lovingly to forgive sins is powerfully displayed throughout the Bible, even beginning with the account of the fall. Immediately Adam and Eve disobeyed God, He promised the Saviour who would bruise Satan’s head while suffering the bruising of his heel (Gen 3:15). This was a wonderful foretelling of what Christ would accomplish, on the cross, for the forgiveness of sinners.

Furthermore, these Old Testament verses are a great incentive to seek the Lord for forgiveness. It is as though He is constantly trying to persuade us, not only of His desire to forgive, but also that we can be assured of His forgiveness if we turn to Him in acknowledgement of our sin and need. It seems to me that Isaiah was arguing such a case in saying, on God’s behalf, “Come now, let us settle the matter,” says the Lord. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.” (Is 1:18) It is as if God is protesting, “Why hold back? Why not just come to me? Here I am, fully able and totally willing to deal with all the sin, failure and corruption that blights your soul and life. Come to me and I will make you a thoroughly cleansed and renewed person for time and eternity!”

Through the prophet Hosea, the Lord issued a heartfelt invitation to turn to Him for forgiveness: “Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take with you words and return to the Lord” (Hosea 14:1). That declaration was not intended for the ancient children of Israel alone, as Peter made clear on the Day of Pentecost, when he told people from various nations that “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved ... for the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” (Acts 2:21,39). If you feel the Lord is calling you to turn to Him for the forgiveness of your sins, then you can be assured that the “everyone” includes you, so you can call on Him even now for His full and free forgiveness.

So, thinking about what Hosea said, what words do you need to take with you in seeking God for forgiveness? The simple answer is, use your own! Tell Him in your own words that you know that you are a sinner, and confess to Him the sins you are well aware of. Take to heart the truth that Jesus Christ gave His life as a sacrifice to bear your sins in his body on the cross (see 1 Peter 2:24); trust your eternal soul to Him, and receive Him as your Saviour.

If you want some Bible words to take to God, use the words of King David when he asked for forgiveness: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.” (Psalm 51:1–3). The wonderful thing is that God is ready to do all that for you.

I can still remember vividly one Sunday evening, in late March 1956, when I knelt down at a bench seat in the back room of a chapel in Birmingham and asked the Lord Jesus for His forgiveness. I immediately felt my burden of guilt lifted, my sinful soul declared clean and the storm of God’s wrath for ever averted. Not everyone has that same experience of God’s forgiveness – for many Christians, the assurance of God’s saving grace and forgiveness blossoms over time. The vital thing to understand is that God’s forgiveness is assured, not because of how we receive it, but on the basis of what His Son Jesus has done in dying to bear away our sin and rising again to forgive our sins. All we have to do is to believe and rely on Him.

*When Satan tempts me to despair / And tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look, and see Him there / Who made an end of all my sin.
Because the sinless Saviour died, / My sinful soul is counted free;
For God, the Just, is satisfied / To look on Him and pardon me.*
