

Another marvellous blessing and wonderful comfort to a Christian's heart is knowing that God is a great and willing forgiver of sinners. The old hymn *Great God of wonders*, written by Samuel Davies (1723–61) carries in its refrain the question, 'Who is a pardoning God like Thee?' The answer, provided by the hymn, is that there is no other such god. Yes, it is true that the human race has made for itself numerous so-called gods. Hinduism claims to have thirty-three million of them! Then there are the gods of the other major and minor religions. But two things stand out:

- First, "*To you it was shown, that you might know that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him.*" (Deut 4:35) All other 'gods' are either lifeless constructions from inanimate materials – products of people's imagination – or elevated human beings. "*But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God*" (Jer 10:10). There is in fact no other actual god than the great God of creation, the Triune God: He is the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, sustains the universe and all life, and is the judge of all the earth. The great failure of the human race, in large measure, has been to recognise who its God really is; and consequently it goes on manufacturing its idols to this very day!
- Secondly, the fact is, that this one and only true living God is a wonderfully forgiving God: "*you, O LORD, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you.*" (Psalm 86:5) That is such a great and wonderful thing. Just think of the unimaginable state that the whole of humanity would be in were it to find out, on the day of judgement, that the only God that exists is not a forgiving God! Even now, to think of appearing before the judgement throne of the almighty holy God without any means of having even one of our offences against Him forgiven, and having to face His justified divine retribution for all our sinfulness, makes me shudder – doesn't it you?!

Therefore, what an overwhelming relief and amazing joy it is to discover that the God before whom we must all appear is the one and only true living God, with whom "*there is forgiveness*" (Psalm 130:4). It is a wonderful thing to discover that the Bible holds out the tremendous opportunity, for any one of us, to receive God's complete forgiveness.

In my last article, I shared some powerful Old Testament pictures of God's great forgiveness. This time I want to move into the New Testament, where this terrific theme is continued. There are three words in the original language which are translated into English as 'forgiveness' and give some more pictures of what it means.

A COMPLETE CANCELLATION

The first and most often-used word means to 'send away' or 'cancel completely'. One of the places where this is most obvious is in what we call 'The Lord's Prayer': "*forgive us our debts*" (Matt 6:12). Jesus described our sins as "*debts*" because every sin incurs an indebtedness to God – every sin is a failure to give to God what we owe Him. Every act of disobedience, or failure of obedience to God's holy Law, is a failure to pay Him what we owe. Years ago in our country, a person who could not pay off their debts could be sent to a debtors' prison. That is a graphic picture of what happens to us. We become imprisoned in our indebtedness to our God without the slightest hope of ever being able to pay Him back!

As sinners, we find ourselves in the same position as the prophet Ezra: "*our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens.*" (9:6) We even speak of someone having 'a mountain of debt' and despairing of ever being able to pay it off! No wonder Jesus taught His disciples to pray, "*Our Father in heaven ... forgive us our debts*" – please cancel them out completely, because we have no way to pay!

A RELEASE FROM OBLIGATION

The second word means 'to cancel completely the punishment due because of incurred indebtedness'. The word is used in Ephesians 1:7 – "*In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins*". Going back to the debtors' prison illustration, to be forgiven means, as far as God is concerned, that we are released from the prison of obligation to repay Him. The same word is translated in Luke 4:18 as "*liberty for captives*". When God forgives, He considers us no longer captive to indebtedness and so to be debt free! For people who have lived under a burden of debt for years, finally to be free of it is such a tremendous relief. That is how it ought to be for every sinner who receives forgiveness from God.

A FREE FAVOUR FROM GOD

The third word is very closely connected to the word which means 'grace' – that is, the bestowal of undeserved favour – which characterises the whole of our salvation: "*For by grace you have been saved*" (Eph 2:8). Or, as Paul noted to the Colossians, "*you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him [Jesus] having forgiven us all our trespasses.*" (Col 2:13). The gift of eternal life in Christ, with forgiveness of sins, is all part of the great work of saving grace; it is all a totally undeserved favour from our great God and Saviour.

There is a fourth word that is translated as forgiveness, just once in the New Testament, and it means 'to cover over'. "*Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered*" (Rom 4:7, quoted from Psalm 32:1). After a burial, once the mourners have left the grave side, the grave digger comes and covers the coffin over with soil. It always seems to me that that is the final symbolic act demonstrating that the deceased has gone. That is how God deals with our sins in forgiveness: as far as He is concerned, they are buried, covered over and gone, never to be exhumed!

IS FULLY COMPREHENSIVE

One of the most wonderful things about forgiveness from God is that it covers *all* of our sins and sinfulness! “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness,*” (1 John 1:9) This really does mean that what we may think of as our biggest and most blatant sins can all be forgiven. In my first article on forgiveness, I pointed to a number of people who were forgiven the grossest of sins –adultery, cruelty, murder etc. Jesus said, “*every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people... And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven*” (Matt 12:31,32). The Lord Jesus promised that every sin we can commit can be forgiven, even that recurring “*sin which clings so closely*” (Heb 12:1). (I still like the old AV, which speaks of “*sin which doth so easily beset us*”.)

Some of us find that there are sins in our past that, we might say, ‘haunt’ us! We may still feel so ashamed of them that we just can’t get free of the sense of guilt! We may well feel that we will never be able to forgive ourselves! The great thing about God’s wonderful forgiveness is that we are not called to forgive ourselves: the entirety of our forgiveness comes directly from Him. Did I hear you say, ‘Hallelujah’?

You may be aware that Matt 12:32 carries a very important exception: “*but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven*”. This statement has caused some Christians a degree of concern, but really ought not to. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is holding and propagating the belief that Jesus was demon-possessed and thereby assigning His miraculous power to the devil. Such a belief, in effect, attributes the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the Lord Jesus to the devil! This is exactly the position the Pharisees took on seeing Jesus deliver a demon-oppressed man, when they said, “*It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons.*” (Matt 12:22–24). To go on holding the belief that the Holy Spirit was in fact the devil at work in Jesus is blasphemy against Him, and that is what is unforgivable!

We can be assured, therefore, that our Saviour is able and willing to forgive all of our sins, including what we might think of as our worst sins. He is able and willing to forgive all of our secret and obvious sins, all of our intentional and accidental sins, and all those sins of which we live in ignorance. Isn’t that wonderful and amazing! That great truth is summed up in verse three of the hymn *Give me a sight, O Saviour*, where we sing:

“Oh, wonder of all wonders, That through Thy death for me / My open sins, my secret sins, Can all forgiven be.”

IS ALWAYS AVAILABLE

Another very important element of God’s great forgiveness needing our consideration relates to the fact that, even after having come to the Saviour in faith for His forgiveness, we then go on, not only committing sins, but living with the sinfulness of our old fallen nature. Think about the obvious example with regard to the overarching command to “*love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might*” (Deut 6:5, repeated by Jesus in Matt 22:37). I don’t think there has ever been a minute in my life, certainly not before my conversion and not even ever since, when I could say that I have truly loved the Lord like that! Can you honestly say it is true of you?!

Putting it simply, if there is never a moment, even in our Christian lives, when we love God in every way, in everything, with all our being, then we are sinning against Him every minute of every day that we live on earth! Furthermore, the fact is that we shall go on sinning every moment of the rest of our lives until we are transformed for glory. No wonder Paul exclaimed, “*I see in my members [physical body and fallen nature] another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*” (Rom 7:23–25)

In the Lord Jesus we have forgiveness for all our daily sins. Surely that is why He taught His disciples to pray, “*Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts*” (Matt 6:11,12). Notice that the prayer for all that is needed to sustain our lives is to be a daily prayer, so “*and forgive us*” needs also to be prayed every day! The wonderful thing is that Jesus has taught us to pray this way because it is His Father’s great desire to give both sustenance and forgiveness to us.

FOR THOSE WHO REPENT

One of the great reasons why Jesus is exalted to the Father’s right hand is “*to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.*” (Acts 5:31) God does not just dole out forgiveness under any circumstances; He does not cancel the debt of people who have no intention of trying to stay out of debt in future! That is why Peter told the crowd, on the Day of Pentecost, to “*Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins*” (Acts 2:38). It is not that repentance and being baptized merit God’s forgiveness in some way, but that if sinners want forgiveness they need to mean it and then begin to show that they do.

In 1 John 1:9 there is the very important little word ‘if’: “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*” So let’s not hesitate to confess our sins and seek God’s forgiveness today and every day.

*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.*
