

My starting point for this series of articles was Romans 4:25, where we read that the Lord Jesus Christ was “*raised for our justification.*” That set me thinking about what other wonderful blessings flow from the resurrection and exaltation of the Saviour. The next of these blessings that I want to share with you is that of **forgiveness**. Our forgiveness is possible only because Jesus died and then rose from the dead and now lives for evermore: “*God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.*” (Acts 5:31)

There are a number of original Old and New Testament words used to convey the concept of the great theme of forgiveness, which occurs in almost every book of the Bible! That fact alone ought to be a tremendous source of encouragement to us, who constantly need to be forgiven. I do pray that this article will help you to have a deeper and more grateful appreciation of the amazing blessing of forgiveness.

We need to recognise that forgiveness has two aspects to it. The most important is being forgiven by God and then, flowing out of that, is our forgiving of others. So let's start with the first and notice that

OFFENCES AGAINST GOD CAN ONLY BE FORGIVEN BY GOD

That God is the only one who can forgive offences committed against Him is really very obvious. Even at the human level, I cannot go around forgiving people who have offended against you. Only you can do that.

One of the well-known incidents in the life of the Lord Jesus occurred in a house in Capernaum. The house was crowded with people, including Pharisees and teachers of the law, who were listening to Jesus's teaching. Four men carried a paralysed friend on a mat or some sort of makeshift bed and, because they could not get him through the blocked doorway, went up on the roof, made an opening and lowered him down in front of Jesus. What must have surprised the crowd most is that Jesus did not immediately heal the man but told him, “*Son, your sins are forgiven.*” This shocked the religious leaders especially, who reacted by “*questioning in their hearts, ‘Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?’*” (Mark 2:1–12) Though wrongly they refused to believe that Jesus was God incarnate, they were absolutely right in thinking that, ultimately, God is the only one who can forgive sins.

The psalmist is correct in stating, with respect to God, “*with you there is forgiveness*” (Psalm 130:4), implying clearly that it is no good looking to anyone else for it! Isaiah, prophesying on behalf of God, said, “*I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake.*” (Isaiah 43:25, NIV). And Jeremiah, also speaking for God, said, “*I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me*” (Jeremiah 33:8). It is to God we must look always for forgiveness, even including when rightly seeking forgiveness from another person whom we have wronged! The reason being that a sin against another human being is also a sin against the God who has created and sustains that person. That is why David, having sinned against so many people, still had to admit to God that, in the end, “*Against you, you only, have I sinned*” (Psalm 51:4).

Surely this is why Jesus taught His followers to say, when they pray, “*Our Father in heaven ... forgive us our debts*” (Matthew 6:9,12), because all our sins are ultimately an accumulation of indebtedness to God, and to Him we must look for forgiveness.

GOD'S FORGIVENESS IS BASED EXCLUSIVELY ON HIS SON'S ATONEMENT

The basis on which God the Father offers His forgiveness to us sinners is exclusively that of the sacrifice of His Son at Calvary. Writing of Jesus, Paul was inspired to state that “*In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins*” (Ephesians 1:7). Under the Old Testament sacrificial system, “*almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood there is no remission*” (Hebrews 9:22). The problem with those sacrifices is that “*it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins*” (Hebrews 10:4). Since it is against God our Maker that we have sinned, it is in Him alone that the means of our forgiveness can be found. It is just as Abraham told his son Isaac: “*God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering*” (Gen 22:8) – which is exactly what He did by giving His Son to be the Saviour of the world. The Old Testament blood sacrifices of animals were only pointing forward to the gift of Jesus Christ, who “*appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.*” (Hebrews 9:26)

That is why “*there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12), and why Peter told the people on the day of Pentecost that they must “*Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins*” (Acts 2:38). The only grounds on which God the Father can and will forgive any sinner are that come to him solely because Jesus “*gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father*” (Galatians 1:4). That is why Peter told Cornelius, and the people gathered in his house, “*that everyone who believes in him [Jesus] receives forgiveness of sins through his name*” (Acts 10:43).

The gospel is wonderful good news: “*Let it be known to you ... that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you*” (Acts 13:38). Have you yet turned to God for the forgiveness of your sins, depending on nothing other than the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ? If not, do that now without delay. Furthermore, be really encouraged to turn to God for forgiveness because...

GOD IS SO WILLING TO FORGIVE

This is a marvellous part of God's wonderful nature. *"Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger for ever, because he delights in steadfast love."* (Micah 7:18) When it says He 'passes over transgressions', it does not mean that He dismisses our sins as if they were of no account and do not matter. Rather, it means that, even as God sees our sins, He looks beyond them to focus on the means of dealing with them in His Son. He delights to do this because of His unwavering love for us. Truly He is *"The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin"* (Exod 34:6,7).

God is like this because He wants us to enjoy the richest possible blessings of knowing Him. As one of the psalmists noted in his prayer, *"with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared"* (Psalm 130:4) – not that we might be terrified of God but that, being forgiven, we can begin to get to know Him and understand His greatness, His magnificence and something of His glory, and then stand in awe, worshipful respect and reverence before Him.

No matter what you or I may have done, or yet will do, we must never even begin to think that God is unwilling to forgive us. We have the testimony of a rich history of people whom He has forgiven. King David was forgiven for his adultery, deception and murder (2 Samuel 11–12; Psalm 51). King Ahab, who reigned in the northern kingdom of Israel for twenty-two years, *"did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him"* (1 Kings 16:29,30). There follow five chapters outlining Ahab's despicable behaviour until he humbled himself before God and God withheld His judgement from him. *"Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his day"* (1 Kings 21:29). How gracious God was to such a wicked man!

Perhaps an even more despicable ruler was Manasseh, who reigned over the southern kingdom of Judah for fifty-five years. He had greater privileges than Ahab, living in the same city as the temple, with priests and prophets on hand. Yet he sank himself and led his people into the depths of idolatry, proliferating idols in Jerusalem and throughout the country. Not satisfied with that, he led the people in worshipping the sun, moon and stars. He even built idolatrous altars in the temple and burned some of his own sons to death as sacrifices. Instead of seeking guidance from God, he turned to fortune tellers, mediums and necromancers. Along with all that he was a murderous tyrant, turning the streets of the city into rivers of the blood of innocent citizens. When God used his prophets to speak to that vile man, he just defiantly ignored Him, so God sent the Assyrian army to attack Jerusalem, capture Manasseh and drag him off to Babylon in chains.

Then we read that *"when he [Manasseh] was in distress, he entreated the favour of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. He prayed to him, and God was moved by his entreaty and heard his plea and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God."* It is truly amazing that God should respond with such grace to the prayer of this wicked man so as to restore him to his home and throne. It is very gratifying to read that Manasseh's repentance and prayer were genuine, because, on being returned, he purged Jerusalem and the temple of the idols he had erected and altars he had built and restored the worship of God. We read all this in 2 Kings 21 and 2 Chronicles 33. No wonder, as we saw earlier, that the prophet Micah expressed his deep adoration for the Lord in the words, *"Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression"* (Micah 7:18).

As we go into the New Testament, we discover some very disreputable people finding forgiveness. Such as the demon possessed Mary Magdalene, the swindler Zacchaeus and one of the two thieves who were crucified alongside Jesus. Yet by far the most powerful demonstration of God's willingness to forgive occurred even while the sinew-crushing and bone-splintering nails were being hammered through the hands and feet of Jesus as He was fastened to the cross. Looking up to heaven, Jesus prayed, *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."* (Luke 23:34) This was the most important prayer that could ever have been prayed for those Roman soldiers and their commanding officer as they nailed Jesus down. I wonder if that prayer was answered not long afterwards: *"When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!"*" (Matthew 27:54). I wonder if that is when they received forgiveness? Eternity will tell!

We go on to read of other people responding to the gospel and being forgiven. On the day of Pentecost, for example, many of those who were responsible for handing Jesus over to lawless men to be crucified were told to *"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit ... and there were added that day about three thousand souls"* (Acts 2:38–41)

The prime persecutor of Christians in the early church is another great example. Saul of Tarsus went around *"breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord"* (Acts 9:1). Later he said that *"formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy"* (1 Timothy 1:13). God was so willing to forgive even Saul.

We read also in the New Testament of the citizens of Corinth, a city notorious for its wickedness, who are described as *"sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, men who practise homosexuality, thieves, greedy, drunkards, revilers, swindlers."* The by-then-forgiven Paul was inspired to write to those who had become Christians and state very bluntly, *"And such were some of you."* The wonderful thing is that he goes on to say, *"But 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 Corinthians 6:9–11) How wonderful that such people could be so freely forgiven by the holy God against whom they had so grievously offended!

Surely these, and other Bible examples, powerfully encourage us to look to the wonderful gracious God for the forgiveness of our sins. We have the most amazing, gloriously-forgiving God and Saviour. There is no-one like Him in heaven, and certainly not on earth. 'O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord!' Let us never fear or hesitate to look to Him for His forgiveness.
