

FORGIVENESS

Background

In human terms forgiveness carries with it the idea of ceasing to feel anger or resentment against a wrong. Of pardon, or of being 'let-off' a debt that is owed. The deepest meaning of forgiveness in Scripture means the separation of the sinner from his sin. It goes deeper than the human idea possibly can. Forgiveness means, fundamentally, that the one against whom a wrong has been done decides not to hold that against the wrongdoer, and will exact no penalty for it. The wrong may be a sin against God himself or against a fellow human being (or both, as in the case of murder, for example, which is clearly a wrong against the victim and a sin against God's law). Simply to fail to love our Creator – or to disobey his law – is to sin against him, and is something, therefore, that needs to be forgiven.

When God forgives a sin there is relief from a load that has been carried. Above all, it means that the penalty for the sin does not have to be paid by the sinner. Forgiveness does not mean that the (forgiven) sin has no consequences in this world – sadly consequences may continue. The New Testament Greek word translated 'forgiveness' is '*aphiemi*' ('send away'). As we saw in Study No. 7, the forgiven sinner is 'justified' before God. The one forgiven may then say: 'It is as if I'd never sinned in the first place.' Of course, sinful lifestyles must be abandoned. Jesus says to a forgiven sinner, '...go and sin no more' (John 8:11b). A forgiven person is wise to avoid occasions of future temptation, especially if there is what some call a 'besetting sin'.

Old Testament

To whom can forgiveness be granted? In the Old Testament, the individual man or woman, truly repenting of sin (which would include confession, and restitution where the sin had been committed against another person) could be granted forgiveness. A blood sacrifice, in compliance with the law (*Torah*) would often be made, upon which forgiveness by God was granted. However, 'the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin'. The sacrifices in the Old Testament foreshadow the greater (final) sacrifice that would one day be made by Jesus. See Leviticus 4:20, 26; 5:10, 18 (details of sin offerings required); Numbers 15:25–26 (priests could make sacrifice for the community); Psalms 32:5; 66:18; 103:12 (the necessity to turn away from – to repent of – sin is emphasised); Isaiah 44:22 (God redeemed his people, swept away their offences and called them to return to him). In Jeremiah 31:33–34 we are shown that a time was to come when God's law would be written on the hearts of his people and they would know him personally, and know his forgiveness.

New Testament

The sacrifices of the Old Testament are completed in Jesus. (See Hebrews 9:22–28.) Jesus said, "*This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*" (Matthew 26:28). See also Matthew 9:2, 5–6. This is confirmation of Jesus' ministry to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29). It should be noted, however, that Jesus takes away the sins of the truly penitent. The sins of the impenitent remain.

Forgiveness is by the grace of God

'Grace' signifies that when forgiveness is granted it is a gift given *freely* (i.e. Christ has paid the penalty of sin, dying that we might live) but this does not mean that it is 'unconditional'. There is a need to truly repent, and the need to believe 'on' *Jesus* as the one who has paid the debt (taken the penalty) for one's sin. The 'on' in that sentence signifies far more than intellectual assent to propositions about Jesus, it also means personal, practical trusting in him, faithfulness to him, believing and acknowledging that his sacrifice, his death and resurrection really was for *you*, to take away *your* own sins and bring *you* into his way. True repentance is not merely feeling sorry. It includes stopping doing the sin, turning *away* from the sinful way of behaving, and turning *to* Christ! True repentance is not present or possible if we ourselves are unwilling to forgive. See Matthew 6:12, 14, 15; 18:21–35; Luke 17:3–4. See also Romans 3:24; 4:7; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 2:13; 3:13; Acts 10:43; 1 John 1:7; 2:2. Unforgiveness towards others will be punished (see again Matthew 18:21–35). God, in his true 'agape' love, is willing and ready to forgive completely a truly repentant sinner. It is ultimately our decision whether we receive that divine forgiveness or reject what is offered. Remember that, 'this is the day of salvation' – so tomorrow may be too late (see 2 Corinthians 6:1–2).

Final thoughts

Since only the one true God is holy, only he can forgive sins (Mark 2:7; Luke 5:21). We see Jesus' true divinity as in his earthly ministry he forgave sins. All sin is ultimately against God (e.g. Psalm 51:4). Forgiveness of sins is not available from the other 'gods', nor from the world's non-Christian religions. Even as a concept in discourse about other religions it does not carry the same meaning. For example, in animism there is no personal relationship with (nor awareness of a responsibility to) the only true and living God. Hinduism demands that all must suffer inexorable consequences in their supposed 'wheel' of reincarnations – and offers no hope of forgiveness. Buddhism does not know a forgiving deity. In Islam there is no personal god (no heavenly Father and no personal Saviour). Some of the differences between the religions are set out in the book entitled *The Empty Promise of Godism* which is available for free download on the Glory to Glory website – see especially chapter 6.

Forgiveness of sins is essential in order for there to be fellowship with God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit (see especially 1 John 1:3 and 2 Corinthians 13:14.) The apostle Paul's frequently-used phrase 'in Christ' and 'in the Lord' (164 times) signifies a profound communion with God, and refers to people whose sins have been forgiven. Forgiveness is at the heart of the Christian life and message.