

RECEIVING AND SHARING
THE MIRACLE OF
FORGIVENESS

“BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE
TRANSGRESSION IS FORGIVEN,
WHOSE SIN IS COVERED.”
PSALM 32:1



WELCOME

Dear Reader:

Amidst the tragedy of our times with which all of us are familiar there is another more heartening story. A miracle really. It's the miracle of forgiveness. A recent TIME magazine cover story has a church steeple and beside it the headline: "What it takes to forgive a killer." The cover story describes the experiences of those whose lives were ripped apart by the senseless death of loved ones who were concluding a worship service in their church in Charleston. What *does* it take to forgive a killer or any one for that matter?

Well it takes a miracle. Forgiveness is supernatural. By nature we retaliate and the worse the offense the more horrific the retaliation. By contrast forgiveness reveals a spirit that is from God. It is this spirit, this act, this attitude that will occupy the brief document in your hands. It is our prayer that the miracle of forgiveness will mark your life.

Pastor Steve Cook
Chaplain **Services**

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WHAT IS FORGIVENESS?

Let's start with the dictionary—Google's dictionary that is. Forgiveness is a noun and so we have: "*the action or process of forgiving or being forgiven*". So from there we look at the verb form of the root *forgive*:

- *stop feeling angry or resentful toward (someone) for an offense, flaw, or mistake.*

According to the *Oxford American Dictionary* it's no different. To forgive is to: "*cease to feel angry or bitter toward (a person) or to feel bitter about (an offense)*"

From these definitions we can conclude that forgiveness involves a change of feeling. But is this the Bible's definition? How does the Bible define or describe forgiveness?

Remarkably the word *forgiveness* only appears in seven verses in the King James Version (KJV) of the Scriptures. What we can learn from these on this subject is as follows:

- God is a forgiving God (Ps 130:4).
- Speaking against the Holy Spirit endangers a person of committing the sin for which there is no forgiveness (Mark 3:29).
- Forgiveness comes from Jesus as a gift (Acts 5:31).
- It is through Jesus that we can understand and appreciate the forgiveness of sins (Acts 13:38).
- When our eyes are opened and we turn from the darkness and power of Satan we are then prepared to receive forgiveness (Acts 26:18).
- Forgiveness is very costly—even the blood of Jesus (Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14).

Jesus said in the Lord's Prayer: "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthews 6:12). Forgiveness is cancelling a debt—it may be a literal debt of financial obligation but more typically it is a *moral* obligation. It is something which we owe God or someone but which we cannot pay. The only solution is forgiveness.

Biblical forgiveness is the miracle of God releasing us from the just penalty of our sin to experience the freedom of new life in Him! "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

The word "*forgiven*" appears much more frequently. It is very prominent in the sanctuary service of ancient Israel. No less than ten times we find the

phrase “it shall be forgiven him”—referring to the person who comes and brings an offering (see Leviticus 4:20, 26,31, 35, 5:10, 13, 16, 18, 6:7, 19:22; see also Numbers 15:25, 26, 28).

This act was crucial. Many centuries later, the apostle Paul put it this way in Hebrews 9:22: “Without the shedding of blood is no remission”—that is forgiveness—(it’s the same Greek word as the other New Testament passages). The offering, of course, represented Jesus, the Lamb of God (see John 1:29). It is through His shed blood that we can be forgiven—treated as though we had not sinned—by God.

Deuteronomy 21:8 Be merciful, O LORD, unto thy people Israel, whom thou hast redeemed, and lay not innocent blood unto thy people of Israel's charge. And the blood shall be forgiven them.

Here we see that forgiveness for the offense of innocent blood involved a solemn ritual to make official that the nation was not involved in this death. The procedure was involved and this shows that forgiveness is not to be looked upon in any casual way. It is not to be taken for granted.

Psalm 32:1 Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

Psalm 85:2 Thou hast forgiven the iniquity of thy people, thou hast covered all their sin.

To be forgiven is to have our sins “covered”. This means covered by the sacrifice of the blood of Jesus Christ.

- Personal forgiveness is being released from the chains of guilt—the condemnation of God.
- *Forgiving others is repeatedly releasing them from your condemnation.* “And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him” (Luke 17:4).
- *Forgiveness is telling someone that has hurt you that you do not hold it against them.*
- *Forgiveness is choosing to treat someone who has hurt you better than they deserve to be treated.* That’s you and me and everyone touched by the grace of Jesus Christ.
- *Forgiveness is . . . setting yourself free.* One classic example is Nelson Mandela, who spent years in captivity for anti-apartheid activities.

Mandela has said: *“As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.” Nelson Mandela*

<http://www.cancercenter.com/discussions/blog/forgiveness-can-help-cancer-patients-focus-on-healing/> 2.26.2016.

- *Forgiveness is. . . choosing to forego “getting even” with someone who has mistreated you.*
- *Forgiveness is moving, by the grace of God, from victim to survivor.*
- *Forgiveness is not condoning a crime. But it may change a criminal into a saint! Remember the thief on the cross who accepted Jesus on the last day of his life!*
- Personal forgiveness is refusing to harbor ill-will in your memory toward and offender.

An infamous hired killer of the early 20th century was Harry Orchard. Having been arrested and almost certainly facing death by hanging—he came to himself. But it wasn't merely the fear of death that brought him to his senses.

The wife of Gov. Frank Steunenberg—Mrs Eva B. Steunenberg sent word to Mr. Orchard and expressed her desire to forgive him! Through the influence of the Holy Spirit and this godly act, Harry Orchard was converted to Jesus Christ. His sentence was commuted to life in prison which he paid in full. He testified: *“Iron bars and prison walls have kept my body captive, but my soul has long been free.”—Harry Orchard*

“If you give yourself to Him, and accept Him as your Saviour, then, sinful as your life may have been, for His sake you are accounted righteous. Christ's character stands in place of your character, and you are accepted before God just as if you had not sinned” (Steps to Christ 62).



Mrs Eva B Steunenberg



Harry Orchard

JESUS AND FORGIVENESS

As you might know Jesus proclaimed and practiced life-changing forgiveness. His statements remain *fundamental* to an understanding of the Bible's teaching on this important subject.

Jesus, in the Lord's Prayer said: "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). Here we see the imperative of forgiveness. Jesus directly connects our forgiveness of others with our own forgiveness.

The Lord not only preached forgiveness, he underscored that teaching with practical admonitions to his apostles: "*Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven*" (Matthew 18:21-22). Jesus then proceeded to share a rather lengthy parable about a man forgiven a debt of the enormous sum of an equivalent of \$7 billion+! (<http://chimes.biola.edu/story/2010/oct/27/parable-two-debtors/>) 3.15.2016.

He then proceeds to extract an unpaid debt from someone else for the sum of \$11,000 dollars. It was not an insignificant debt but in comparison to his own it is small...even paltry.

When he shows an unforgiving spirit toward this man it makes void his own forgiveness and he is doomed to pay all. And then Jesus concludes: "*So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses*" (Matthew 18:35).

Jesus placed a great deal of importance on the matter of forgiveness for His mission—why He came into the world—was not to condemn but to save (John 3:17). "*Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him. And the apostles said unto the Lord, Increase our faith*" (Luke 17:3-5).

Perhaps the greatest act of forgiveness was on the occasion of the woman, taken in adultery being brought to Jesus for "sentencing". This show of hypocritical piety on the part of religious leaders was an attempt to discredit the Savior. But unexpectedly He revealed the sins of the woman's accusers for they left "being convicted by their own conscience" (John 8:9). Jesus then turned and asked the woman: "Hath no man condemned thee?" (John 8:10). Then she heard what had to be the most precious words that ever fell on a condemned sinner's ears: "Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more" (John 8:11). His words masterfully sustained the integrity of the moral code of God's Ten Commandments. And at the same time make clear that when we come to Christ in repentance we are met with God's forgiveness!

BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF FORGIVENESS

On a short list of the greatest examples of forgiveness in the Bible, the story of King David's crime and subsequent forgiveness would have to be prominent. David took advantage of his position to bring shame on Bathsheba and then she became pregnant. He recognized what could happen if her husband found out the truth of the matter so to make it worse he had her husband killed. The Bible is terse about the reaction of heaven: "But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord" (2 Samuel 11:27).

Subsequent events reveal that God was not about to let this matter go unpunished. Through the prophet Nathan, the king pronounced judgment on himself in his condemnation of the rich man who had no pity on his neighbor (2 Samuel 12:1-5). Then David hear these piercing words: "Thou art the man" (v7) with the added depiction of the judgments which would come to his house and the public nature of his condemnation. "For thou didst it secretly: but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun" (2 Samuel 12:12).

Hear David's reaction: "I have sinned against the Lord" (v13). There is no attempt to excuse his crimes. He accepts God's judgment. And then comes the forgiveness: "And Nathan said unto David, The Lord also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die" (2 Samuel 12:13).

This man was guilty but now he is forgiven! "Blessed is the man whose transgression is forgiven" writes the penitent king, "whose sin is covered" (Psalm 32:1). And David writes further about this experience in Psalm 51. "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. . . restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit" (verses 10 and 12). Now there is no effort to cover up the matter. David's sin is covered in the only valid manner in which sin can be dealt with. It is honestly and openly acknowledged and turned over to God. In a sense, now it is God's responsibility.

And as the ages passed these sins which were forgiven by God mounted up and cried out for justice. That justice is seen in its fullness in the sacrificial offering of God's Beloved Son on the cross of Calvary. Here it was that the Lord "laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:7). It was here that God "set forth" His Son "to be a propitiation [or payment] through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission [forgiveness] of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God" (Romans 3: 25). In other words, forgiveness, while freely offered to us, is *not free to God*. For Him to forgive us means to defer the righteous judgment each sin deserves until such a time when the payment must be made. The payment or propitiation came due at the cross! Thank God that He was willing to pay our debt.

Thus “payment” was made for each of us and therefore each of us can be forgiven our sins.

As the account of David makes very clear, God does not counteract all of the consequences of our sin. It’s damage continues in the subsequent history of David’s family. David himself was never really the same after this tragedy. Forgiveness is not condoning crimes and evil; rather it is treating someone in a very undeserving manner, who has had a change of heart about the sin. Forgiveness is a vital step in undoing the damage that evil has done to our relationship with God!

David understood forgiveness by experience. When King Saul had attempted to kill him (1 Samuel 18:11) David did not hold it against him. Later David was hunted by the king. On one well-known occasion Saul stepped into the very cave where David and his men were hiding. One of them urged David to kill Saul on the spot. But David refused to do it. He only cut a portion of the king’s robe. Even that bothered the fugitive (1 Sam 24:2-5). This is the outgrowth of the spirit of forgiveness.



David Attacked by King Saul



King Saul Enters the Cave Where David is in Hiding

GUILT AND FORGIVENESS

Guilt is the sense that things are not right. Something is out of balance. It is the clanging of the alarm bell in the recesses of your soul, warning you to put things right.

Now here is the danger: this alarm bell can be silenced or at least diminished to the point of becoming inoperative in our hearts.

Guilt works, to some degree, according to the education of the conscience. And more than education—according to the amount of respect that we show for our conscience. In other words, how we react to a guilty conscience, determines the health of our conscience, going forward. It can be blunted, what the Bible refers to as “hardening”. Repeatedly we are told: “Harden not your hearts” (Heb 3:8, 15; 4:7). The apostle Paul expresses it very forcefully when speaking of those whose conscience is “seared with a hot iron” (1 Tim 4:2).

Guilt, to put it very directly, is a good thing. It indicates that our spiritual nerves are functioning and that God is able to arouse us to take action to avoid that which we have done to bring us into a sense of guilt.

Forgiveness is God’s answer to guilt. Moses, that great man of faith, on one occasion stumbled into anger. In response “He was assured that repentance, and faith in the promised Sacrifice, were all that God required” (Patriarchs and Prophets 472:2). God is asking for a whole-hearted decision to turn around *inside*. That is true repentance. Like forgiveness, repentance is God-given and comes to us through Jesus Christ (Acts 5:39).

Jesus also mentioned that the Holy Spirit is vitally involved in the guilt experience: “And when he is come, he will reprove [convict] the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment” (John 16:8). The Holy Spirit deals with us about *specific* issues. He puts His finger on some *particular* sin or act or trend or tendency which we need to deal with. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Having done that we are authorized by God to believe that He is faithful and just to forgive us! If we do our part settle it that God will do His.

Persistent guilt about confessed sin is automatically suspect. It is the enemy that continues to plague us with guilt about things which we have dealt with in God’s appointed way. This is one of the enemy’s devices by which he seeks to discourage us and lead us back into sin. Do not be misled. Believe in the Lord’s promise of forgiveness and rest in His pledged word. Do not listen to voices that would lead you to go over and over the same sin. The

real purpose of guilt and regret is to lead us to decide to never go back into sin. Never call into question the efficiency of what Jesus has accomplished for you on Calvary. He died to forgive you. He is predisposed to forgive you. He does forgive you when you ask Him.

The sacrifice of Christ was “once for all” (Heb 10:10). Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness (see Heb 9:22). But the opposite is also true. Because of His shed blood there is forgiveness. It is only necessary to *ask* with a sincere heart for the blessing and *believe* that He hears and answers and *forgives* you! “Do not wait to *feel* that you are made whole, but say, ‘I believe it; it is so, not because I feel it, but because God has promised.’” (Steps to Christ 51:2 author’s emphasis).

*“Some seem to feel that they must be on probation
and must prove to the Lord that they are reformed,
before they can claim His blessing.
But these dear souls may claim the blessing even now.
They must have His grace, the Spirit of Christ,
to help their infirmities, or they cannot form
a Christian character.
Jesus loves to have us come to Him,
just as we are—
sinful, helpless, dependent.”*

Ellen G. White, Faith and Works 38.1

JUSTICE AND FORGIVENESS

Is forgiveness ethical? How can God forgive someone in the sense of overlooking their crime (sin) and letting them go free? ‘Where’s the justice in this type of transaction? The guilty are declared righteous! ‘Is that even fair?’— some might ask.

Justice is a major feature of God’s character of love. “Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?” Abraham asked some eighteen hundred years before the time of Christ (Gen 18:25). It is a question with an obvious answer. No work comparable to scripture has a higher ethical standard than the Holy Bible. This is because it is a communication from the God of Truth: “He is the Rock, his work is perfect: for all his ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he” (Deuteronomy 32:4).

And when it comes to forgiveness, notice how closely associated it is with justice. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). This makes the astounding claim that God is *just* to forgive us! Why is that? I believe that the answer lies in the fact that He has sent His Son to die in our place. Now that that great act has been made and the gift offered it would be unfair for God to withdraw it. Such a retraction would not be in harmony with His grace. In some sense it would be unjust. God does not make an offer of peace to then withdraw it.

Consider this passage which speaks to this matter. “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: *[notice how God freely justifies us or counts us righteous because of the work of Jesus]* Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation *[payment]* through faith in his blood *[the only article that could possibly offset our debt—life for life—in this case an infinite life for millions of finite lives]*, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; *[that is, God’s character stands clear in the matter of forgiving people for ages before the sacrifice of His Son. Remission was offered, but it was obviously given on the basis of what was coming, namely the sacrifice of His Son.]* To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness *[that is, His justice, the unimpeachable integrity of His character in this transaction of forgiveness]* that he might be just, and the justifier *[Here is the amazing genius of the gospel: God’s gift of the life of His Son is equal to the claims of His Law!]* of him which believeth in Jesus. (Romans 3:24-26).

Obviously forgiveness is in not “cheap grace”. Forgiveness is the most expensive rescue operation of the ages! It has cost God that which He values most.

Scripture makes clear that for the unforgiven sinner “every transgression and disobedience receive[s] a just recompense of reward” (Hebrews 2:2) and yet our Lord declares that “All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men” (Matt 12:31). That which enables us to harmonize these two facts is the cross of Jesus Christ. This is to be the focal point of humanity. At Calvary the claims of the Law are satisfied and the debt of our sins was fully paid. Not one sin has escaped God’s notice, as it is written: “all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do” (Hebrews 4:13). He paid it all in full in Jesus. As we sing: “Jesus paid it all”.

And so forgiveness is on the most solid and durable foundation—“For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11). No one but the divine Son of God could have made such a transaction.

That God would do such a thing for His earth-born sinful children pleads powerfully for a love and loyalty response.

*“Justice and Mercy stood apart,
in opposition to each other, separated by a wide gulf.
The Lord our Redeemer clothed His divinity with humanity,
and wrought out in behalf of man a character that was without spot or blemish.
He planted His cross midway between heaven and earth,
and made it the object of attraction which reached both ways, drawing both Justice and
Mercy across the gulf. Justice moved from its exalted throne,
and with all the armies of heaven approached the cross.
There it saw One equal with God bearing the penalty
for all injustice and sin.
With perfect satisfaction Justice bowed in reverence at the cross, saying,
It is enough.”*

(MS 94, 1899). Ellen G. White Comments, Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, vol. 7: 936

FAITH AND FORGIVENESS

Let's begin by defining faith. The classic definition is given in Hebrews 11:1: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Faith gives substance to the unseen realities of God. It is sustained and built up by Scripture: "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom 10:17).

Faith is the hand that takes hold of God's forgiveness. Faith is willing to believe in God like Abraham "who against hope believed in hope..." (Rom 4:18). We may be tempted to doubt God's love for us and *how* He would be willing to forgive us our sins but that must never stop us from reaching out to receive the gift of His forgiveness. God asks that we turn to Him with all our heart but even that turning is the work of the Holy Spirit. "The goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance" (Rom 2:4).

Scripture makes plain our part and God's part in this miraculous transaction of forgiveness: "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will *abundantly pardon*" (Isa 55:7).

One story from the life of Jesus illustrates the how faith and forgiveness go together. A man, paralyzed was eager to see Jesus. How eager? Well, when the way was blocked by people crowding around the Savior, the man, carried by four friends, went to the roof of the house and opening it up, was lowered down into the very presence of Christ.

"When Jesus saw their faith, he said unto the sick of the palsy, Son, thy sins be forgiven thee" (Mark 2:5). The man was then healed of his paralysis and forgiven his sins and faith was the factor that brought the man where all this could be done. Faith always was rewarded by the Savior.

Believing in Christ is made a *condition* for forgiveness!
We are commanded: "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). This can be done only by faith.

Sin is something intangible although its consequences often leave scars. But what removes sin is believing in the warnings and promises of God: "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law. And ye know that he was manifested to take away our sins; and in him is no sin" (1 John 3:4-5). Sin is clearly defined and denounced as hostile to God's moral Law (which is a transcript of God's character). But, praise God!, His word is also clear that Jesus came to "take away our sins". We know this by faith.

When Paul received his mission from Jesus, he was sent to the unbelieving Gentile world: “To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me” (Acts 26:18). And this preaching of the gospel bore fruit throughout the pagan world. This is seen in the letters that Paul wrote to Gentile churches.

It is the “faithful in Christ Jesus”, Paul wrote, that receive “redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins...” (Ephesians 1:1, 7).

“Faith in Christ Jesus” brings the blessings of the gospel, “the inheritance of the saints in light. . .[deliverance] from the power of darkness” and an entrance “into the kingdom of [God’s] dear Son” and “redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:4, 12-14).

His own countrymen needed to hear this message of forgiveness and faith. We all need it. “Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the *forgiveness of sins*: And by him *all that believe* are justified from all things. . .” (Acts 13:38-39).

*“Come to Jesus, and receive rest and peace.
You may have the blessing even now. . .
Some seem to feel that they must be on probation
and must prove to the Lord that they are reformed,
before they can claim His blessing.
But these dear souls may **claim the blessing even now. . .**
Jesus loves to have us come to Him,
just as we are—sinful, helpless, dependent.”*

Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works* 37-38 (*emphasis added*)

THE CROSS AND FORGIVENESS

Allow me to be direct: The very point of the cross is forgiveness. In a very practical sense we see it in the experiences of Jesus leading up to and during His crucifixion.

As the Savior lay outstretched to be affixed to the instrument of torture He spoke those stunning words: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

Later in the day Christ spoke words of assurance to a dying thief: “Verily I say unto thee To day, shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

At the Lord’s death, the centurion, seeing the manner of Jesus’ passing and the spirit with which he endured the cross, “glorified God, saying, Certainly this was a righteous man.” “Truly this man was the Son of God” (Luke 23:47; Mark 15:39).

Such was the power of the cross of Jesus Christ. It’s purpose was to redeem and that is demonstrated as it happened historically.

This cross also speaks to the *cost* of forgiveness. The cost, that is, to God. The Bible says emphatically: “And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and **without shedding of blood there is no remission**” (Heb 9:22). In the previous section blood is directly linked to redemption and the forgiveness of sins (see Eph 1:7 and Col 1:17).

Blood speaks to the issue of how it is that God can forgive. He is willing to forgive. He is ready to forgive. He is a forgiving God but on what ethical basis can God pass by the requirements of His own Law for the sake of dealing with you and me in a forgiving and merciful manner?

The answer is—the cross! On the occasion of His crucifixion, Jesus was challenged by the onlooking and unbelieving people crowded near the cross: “...save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross” (Matt 27:40). Save Yourself. And of course He could have. But this was the matter of His great struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane. If there was any way that this cup [the cross] could be set aside... But the answer was the presence of an angel to strengthen Him to endure it! (See Luke 22:43).

“This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief” (1 Timothy 1:15). No greater love was ever demonstrated for sinners than that revealed at the cross. There we see to what depths (and we can only begin to measure it) God will go to save—to forgive—sinners. *“Oh, the mystery of redemption!*

the love of God for a world that did not love Him! Who can know the depths of that love which "passeth knowledge"? Through endless ages immortal minds, seeking to comprehend the mystery of that incomprehensible love, will wonder and adore" (Patriarchs and Prophets 63-64).

In some respects the cross of Jesus is the greatest mystery of all time! Why would God allow His Son to be nailed to the cross? Why would the One who showed Himself master of all the elements, wind and wave, consent to remain on the cross?

The answer to that question only creates another question which also begs for an answer. The answer to this question is the answer to the deepest of questions.

"Few give thought to the suffering that sin has caused our Creator.

All heaven suffered in Christ's agony; but that suffering did not begin or end with His manifestation in humanity.

*The cross is a revelation
to our dull senses of the pain that,
from its very inception,
sin has brought to the heart of God."*

Education 263:1

THE PHYSIOLOGY OF FORGIVENESS

A profound link exists between forgiveness and health. Herbert Bensen, MD of Harvard Medical School, coined this expression *the physiology of forgiveness* and he says that “being unable to forgive other people’s faults is harmful to one’s health”.

“Early publications of case studies and therapist observations suggested that forgiveness of deep offenses from other people can be psychologically helping in many ways”. The authors document various cases in point of the efficacy of *forgiveness therapy*: Elderly women with a variety of injustices against them. College students with emotionally distant parents. Incest survivors. Men hurt by the abortion decision of a partner. Drug rehabilitation. Emotionally abused women. Cardiac patients. Terminally ill, elderly cancer patients. Adult children of alcoholics. Adult children of divorce. (*Forgiveness Therapy: An Empirical Guide for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope*. Robert D. Enright and Richard P. Fitzgibbons, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. 2015, 4:1; 87).

Arlene R. Taylor PhD says: “When you say ‘I forgive you’, you’re also saying ‘I want to be healthy.’” She then references Drs. Arnold and Barry Fox who say: “The act of forgiving allows the body to turn down the manufacture of catabolic chemicals and instructs the subconscious to banish negative feelings from the mind” (see below).

- Anger increases adrenalin and dopamine
- Sadness decreases levels of serotonin

If you choose unforgiveness, studies have shown negative side effects, including:

- Increased stress levels and muscle tension
- Increased levels of adrenaline and cortisol
- Increased blood pressure and heart rate
- Elevated risk for depression, heart disease, stroke and cancer
- Suppressed immune function
- Impaired neurological function and memory

According to Dr. Michael Barry, author of *The Forgiveness Project*, says that of all cancer patients, sixty one percent have forgiveness issues and of those more than half are severe. “Harboring these negative emotions, this anger and hatred creates a state of chronic anxiety”, he said. “Chronic anxiety very predictably produces excess adrenaline and cortisol, which deplete the natural production of killer cells, which is your body’s foot soldier in the fight against cancer.” <http://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/healthscience/2015/June/The-Deadly-Consequences-of-Unforgiveness> 2.25.2016

“Research Research associates the unforgiving responses of blame, anger, and hostility with impaired health (Affleck, Tennen, Croog, & Levine, 1987; Tennen & Affleck, 1990), particularly coronary heart disease and premature death (Miller, Smith, Turner, Guijarro, & Hallet, 1996). Further, research suggests that reductions in hostility - brought about by behavioral interventions that emphasize becoming forgiving - are associated with reductions in coronary problems (Friedman et al., 1986; Kaplan, 1992). <http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/VanOyenWitvliet-GrantingForgiveness.pdf> 2.25.2016

“Unforgiving responses (rehearsing the hurt, harboring a grudge) are considered health eroding, whereas forgiving responses (empathizing with the human condition of the offender, granting forgiveness) are thought to be health enhancing. . . Research associates the unforgiving responses of blame, anger, and hostility with impaired health”). *Psychological Science*, Friedman (1986), Kaplan (1992) <http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/VanOyenWitvliet-GrantingForgiveness.pdf> 2.25.2016

“Several studies have shown that forgiveness is associated with physical and mental health.” *Journal of Adult Development*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2001. Karen Swartz, M.D. in the journal *Johns Hopkins Medicine*, states in an article entitled “The Healing Power of Forgiveness” that the benefits of forgiveness include: “Blood pressure is lower. People report needing fewer medicines. They report having better sleep. They report physically feeling better and having fewer physical complaints.” *Summer 2014, Issue 25*. http://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/news/publications/johns_hopkins_health/summer_2014/the_healing_power_of_forgiveness 2.26.2016

It’s significant that King David, a man that is so prominent in reference to forgiveness would write, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit:

*“Bless the LORD, O my soul:
and all that is within me, bless his holy name.
Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits:
Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases;
Who redeemeth thy life from destruction;
who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies;
Who satisfieth thy mouth with good things;
so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”*

Psalm 103:1-5

FORGIVING YOURSELF

Forgiveness of others is an indispensable element of spiritual health. We understand that we need to forgive others—even if they don't deserve it. But then...none of us *deserves* it.

But what about forgiving yourself? Should you? Can you? How do you forgive yourself? How do you know when you have forgiven yourself? These are not easy questions to answer.

When we forgive someone else it usually involves treating that person with respect and compassion and mercy. The same should hold with forgiving ourselves. It is not right to hold a grudge against yourself. It is not right to treat yourself in any way less than God treats you. He has forgiven you and you should as well.

If we sin it is clear that God forgives us when we come to him in repentance and faith (1 John 1:9). And it is equally plain that we are to forgive those that have offended us (Ephesians 4:32)! But forgiveness, biblically speaking, invariably involves *someone else*. Principally God (see Ps 51:4). Practically speaking, forgiving yourself, I believe, is coming to the place of *forgetting* what you have done. And this is a gradual process.

Peter is a classic example of this. After repeated warnings from the Lord Jesus he denied him in the most blatant, and public manner. Was he subsequently forgiven? Yes. Did he repent? Yes. Was he publically re-admitted to the apostolate by His Lord in his three-times answer to Jesus' question: "Peter, do you love me?" Yes!

And yet, years later, long after his sin and restoration. Peter still carried the scars of his crime. In a classic history of the rise and development of the apostolic church the author describes the approaching death of Peter with this insightful statement: "*Peter had sincerely repented of that sin and had been forgiven by Christ, as is shown by the high commission given him to feed the sheep and lambs of the flock. But he could never forgive himself. Not even the thought of the agonies of the last terrible scene could lessen the bitterness of his sorrow and repentance.*" (Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 538).

Notice that it is clear that Peter had repented and was forgiven by Christ Himself. In this instance forgiveness of oneself is another way of saying that **he could not forget** the bitterness and sorrow of his repentance. In some respects it was like a scar from a serious wound. The wound had healed but the memory lingered.

It has been said “Self is the enemy we most need to fear” (Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, 485). Thinking about forgiveness—as with all spiritual truth—we need to keep the emphasis where it belongs—Christ has forgiven us and this we *must* believe! We must keep our focus on Jesus at every step or we will be in danger of being overcome with discouragement.

Consider this good counsel: *“Every Christian will have a hard battle to fight with wrong habits. He must overcome his unbelief, his deformity of character, his inclination to self-indulgence. His long resistance of light, warnings, and appeals has left its mark upon his life; and although God has forgiven him, he feels that he cannot forgive himself. He often thinks of what he might have been in physical and moral strength if it were not for that sinful past. But to him I say, “Look and live.” The Lord declares, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.” “As the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him.” His promise is, “I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”* (Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, January 13, 1891:13).

While it is true that we may continue to struggle with our own feelings of regret and our fears of the results of our sins we must strive to remember that while we may not be able to forgive ourselves—that is forget what we have done—God promises to do just that! He says: “I will remember their sin no more” (Jeremiah 31:34; see also Hebrews 8:12 and 10:17). No less than three times is this fact pledged to us by God. He will remember our sins *no more*. If God forgives and forgets then so should we.

We must remember that the adversary will attempt to bring up our sins and seek to cause us to doubt. At that very time it is our privilege to claim this miracle of God’s forgiveness. Hold up the shield of faith and choose to look to the One whose own blood has “washed us from our sins” (Revelation 1:5).

*And hereby we know that we are of the truth,
and shall assure our hearts before him.
For if our heart condemn us,
God is greater than our heart,
and knoweth all things.
Beloved, if our heart condemn us not,
then have we confidence toward God.*

1 John 3:19-21

NOTES

