

Paradise Lost and Restored: What is Forgiveness? (Part 3)

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I. Introduction

I know God says to forgive, but it's hard to do. How am I supposed to do it? And sometimes I still feel guilty even though God says I'm forgiven. How do I get rid of that guilty feeling? And why in the world are we still suffering for our sins if Christ already paid for them?

II. How do you forgive exactly? Being forgiven vs. *feeling* forgiven. If God paid for our sins, then why are we still suffering?

What does forgiveness itself mean? Two words that the New Testament uses for "forgive" mean *to cancel* as in canceling a debt, Matthew 18:27; Luke 7:42 (cf. 7:47-48). When God forgives us, this is what He does. He wipes our debt away, all of it as if it never happened, 1 John 1:9. Instead of seeing a sinner, the Lord sees a saint whom He created to live life differently, John 8:1-12—who did the scribes and Pharisees and everyone else who wanted to stone this woman see? An adulteress. Who did Jesus see? A woman created to live life in God's light, instead of Satan's darkness.

How do you forgive exactly? Forgiving someone is one of the hardest things to do in life, the bigger the sin, the tougher it is to forgive. So how can we do this...and truly mean it, not just mouth words but actually mean it enough to treat the person differently? You have to see them as a victim of the real enemy, Satan, Luke 23:34; 1 Peter 5:8, so that you can see the real person, the one who wasn't supposed to sin against you, the one God made, the one who was supposed to live their life in God's light instead of Satan's darkness.

For example, notice how God sees Cain. And it's not that God doesn't discipline Cain (or those who sin against you), He does. But notice that God sees Cain as a victim of the real enemy who's out to devour Cain and his relationship with God. This is why God protects him even though He disciplines him severely, Genesis 4:1-15...God sees the real Cain, not the one influenced by Satan.

Being forgiven vs. *feeling* forgiven, has someone ever forgiven you something so terrible but you still felt guilty months, perhaps years later? Or maybe you confessed your sin to God, but in your mind such a sin cannot be forgiven. So you still walk around with shame and guilt thinking that God is angry with you. How can we get over this *feeling* of guilt when God says we've been forgiven? First, we need to understand who really is unforgiven: the ones who haven't confessed their sin, 1 John 1:6, 8, 10. If you've confessed, then you're forgiven.

Second, who do you trust? God or your conscience? If you confess your sin to God, He promises that He'll forgive you, not only the sin you confessed, but every other sin you may've forgotten or been ignorant of, 1 John 1:9. But what if you still *feel* guilty, what if your conscience still bothers you? Again, who do you trust, God or your conscience? Who knows the truth of all things, God or your heart? 1 John 3:20. In order to get over the *feeling* of guilt, in order for our heart not to condemn you, you have to trust what God says not what you feel, 1 John 3:21. To say that we're still guilty after God's declared us forgiven, is to unwittingly set ourselves above God—this is sin.

Why did Adam and Eve have to suffer if God paid for their sin? God tells us that all our sins are forgiven because His Son paid for them all, Ephesians 1:7. If that's the case, then why did Adam and Eve (and all of us today) have to suffer for their sin?

1. What's the sequence of events? Did our world begin with suffering or perfection? God gave us perfection; everything was perfect. We lived in harmony with Him, each other, and our environment, Genesis 2. But then we sinned and perfection was destroyed. We now had disharmony with God, each other, and our environment, Genesis 3. This is the sequence of events that brought our suffering. Now, you might say, "But if God is a God of love and mercy and His Son paid for our sins, why didn't He leave suffering out of it?" God did show us mercy. Instead of killing us, which is what we deserved (Genesis 2:17; Romans 6:23), He not only let us live, He let us keep our original positions as kings and queens of earth, Genesis 3:16-19. Additionally, God is not going to leave us in this state of suffering. First, He does something about it now: He gives us His own Spirit to overcome our rebellious nature so that we can avoid a life of misery and instead have a life of peace and future glory, Romans 8:6, 9-17. Second, one day He's going to remove this suffering permanently. He's going to replace this dying body of flesh with a resurrection body that will never know pain, Romans 8:23; 1 Corinthians 15:42, 51-55. Third, He's also going to replace this earth which is now subject to decay with an earth that will never know corruption, Romans 8:21; 2 Peter 3:10, 13; Revelation 21:1. Therefore, once we "broke," so to speak, our perfect nature and the earth's, we have no choice but to live under its broken state until God replaces it.

So to complain about our suffering now is a bit like a death row inmate, who has been pardoned of his death penalty but kept in prison for life, saying, "Why don't you give me my freedom?!" The answer is quite simple, "What did this death row inmate deserve?" He deserved to be six feet under. Thus, we don't even deserve the thorns and thistles we have to deal with now. So anything we get after we've been allowed to live is undeserved. To complain that we have to live in a less than perfect world is rather ungrateful when we're the ones who destroyed it and it's especially ungrateful since God did not abandon us but instead promises us salvation now and in the future.

2. What kind of world would we have if there were no consequences? One of the consequences for our sin is that God kicked us out of the Garden of Eden. Why? It was actually an act of mercy. What?! Yes, it was. How so? Remember the sequence of events. We're no longer perfect creatures who always choose right. Instead, we now have a broken nature which constantly wants to choose evil instead of good. And if God allowed us to stay in the Garden, we would have eaten of the tree of life and been cursed to live in a corrupt state forever. To prevent this tragedy God kicked us out of the Garden, Genesis 3:22-24.

Another act of mercy was implementing severe consequences for our sin. What?! Think about it. What would life be like if we were allowed to live in a pain-free society where there were no consequences for choosing evil? This world is miserable enough as it is with the consequences God put in place. How much worse would Hitler's Holocaust, Stalin's mass executions, or Pol Pot's killing fields have been if they (and others like them) had free reign? This is a broken world with broken people and if God had not put in place consequences for our sins, the human race would have exterminated itself long ago.

III. Conclusion

Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."