

FORGIVENESS

Matthew 6:12-15, Isaiah 1:18

By Raymond White

What people desperately want is to be innocent, to be free of guilt. Some people pursue that by convincing themselves that they were never guilty in the first place. Others know better and turn to God, the only hope of forgiveness in the universe.

[1] FORGIVENESS IN GENERAL

1 Kings 8:30 And hearken thou to the supplication of thy servant, and of thy people Israel, when they shall pray toward this place: and hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place: and when thou hearest, forgive.

Israel's prayers were always offered with one intention, that God would forgive. That's what the temple was about and the entire sacrificial system.

Job 9:15 Whom, though I were righteous, yet would I not answer, but I would make supplication to my judge.

Even if you really are innocent, you'd do better to plead for forgiveness.

Psalms 51:1 Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.

Blot out means to erase, or cover up like white out, or strike through. God has recorded my sins in a ledger, and I want him to delete his record of them.

Psalms 99:8 ...thou was a God that forgavest them, though thou tookest vengeance of their inventions.

This is interesting. God forgives *and* takes vengeance. Aren't the two mutually exclusive? Apparently not. "I forgive you but I will punish you anyway." Christians who want to acquit murderers in the name of forgiveness should pay attention to this verse.

Psalms 103:3 Who forgiveth all thine iniquities...

Ezekiel 18:21 But if the wicked will turn from all his sins that he hath committed, and keep all my statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die. :22 All his transgressions that he hath committed, they shall not be mentioned unto him: in his righteousness that he hath done she shall live.

[2] FORGIVENESS: AVAILABILITY AND LIMITS

Numbers 35:31 Moreover ye shall take no satisfaction for the life of a murderer, which is guilty of death; but he shall be surely put to death.

The object of Israel's sacrificial system was forgiveness. But not for murderers. That crime was just so heinous that there could be "no satisfaction" for it, no way to make it right other than to execute the murderer.

***Psalms 68:21** But God shall wound the head of his enemies, and the hairy scalp of such an one as goeth on still in his trespasses.*

If God judges harshly those who *persist* in their trespasses, then by inference he does *not* judge harshly those who do *not* persist in their trespasses. In other words, God forgives repented sins but does not forgive unrepented sins.

***Proverbs 1:28** Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me.*

***Isaiah 1:18** Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.*

These two verses seem to be at odds with each other. In the first, God has dug in his heels and will not forgive no matter how much they pled for it. In the second, God forgives everything. It seems to depend on what mood God is in at the moment.

***Matthew 12:32** And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him...*

There is a lot of confusion about this verse and there shouldn't be. It's really very simple. All it is saying is: "You hear my words and you see my miracles. If you doubt my words, fine, talk is cheap, anybody can say anything. But if you doubt my miracles then you're lost because that's God's best shot, there's nothing left that God can do to persuade you."

[3] REASONS WHY WE SHOULD FORGIVE

***Proverbs 19:11** ...it is his glory to pass over a transgression.*

It's to a man's credit to forgive. People notice.

***Proverbs 24:17** Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth: **:18** Lest the LORD see it, and it displease him, and he turn away his wrath from him.*

The logic here is interesting. If you're glad when your enemy falls, God may actually take *his* side against *you*!

This is highly practical. At the end of World War I, England and France punished Germany so severely with war reparations that the fed-up Germans finally turned their government over to Hitler which brought on World War II. But at the end of World War II, America handled things differently. Instead of punishing former enemies, America's Marshall plan reconstructed Germany along with much of Europe, and also Japan. Thus, America's former enemies became friends and allies.

How you treat your enemies after a war will largely determine whether or not there will be a next war.

Proverbs 24:29 *Say not, I will do so to him as he hath done to me: I will render to the man according to his work.*

One very good reason to forgive is simply that God says we should.

Matthew 6:12 *And forgive our debt, as we forgive our debtors. :14 For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. :15 But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your father forgive your trespasses.*

In other words, what goes around comes around. That this thought begins in the Lord's Prayer, indicates that reciprocal forgiveness is a reasonable thing to ask of God. We want and expect God to forgive us as we forgive.

[4] EXAMPLES OF FORGIVENESS

Luke 23:34 *Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do...*

This of course is the quintessential forgiveness text, Jesus forgiving the very people who are crucifying him. That raises the bar very high. But even here there seems to be a condition: "for they know not what they do."

Acts 7:60 *And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.*

It's been said that the church owes Paul to the prayer of Stephen. Stephen did not have to forgive, he could have cursed them as he died. Had he, Saul of Tarsus would never have become Paul and the church would have lost a lot.

[5] DID GOD FORGIVE DAVID?

Many people, including myself, are concerned for David's soul. It's a natural concern because we hate to see a good man destroyed because of a single mistake. But maybe our real concern is not so much for David as it is for ourselves. For if David — that great man who did everything for Israel and for God — could fall and not be forgiven, then what chance do we ordinary people have?

My first answer to the disturbing dilemma is just to note that God did forgive him.

2 Samuel 12:13 *And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord. And Nathan said unto David, The Lord also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die.*

But that, on its surface, seems inexplicable because of —

Numbers 35:31 *Moreover ye shall take no satisfaction for the life of a murderer, which is guilty of death; but he shall be surely put to death.*

Israel's sacrificial system was about forgiving sins, but not murder. Can God violate his own law and forgive murder? I suggest that he cannot.

And that leads me to my second answer to the dilemma which is: maybe David did not commit a murder after all.

Let's explore that possibility, but before we go there, let's first look at God's opinion of David in retrospect. When it was all over, and David was dead, and his descendants inherited his throne in succession, what did God have to say about David? God used David as the high-bar to measure all subsequent kings. Basically, God's message to all the kings of Judah and Israel was: "If you want to be a good king, be like my servant David."

That would be a strange high-bar indeed if David were an unforgiven, damned murderer.

1 Kings 3:14 *And if thou [Solomon] wilt walk in my ways, to keep my statutes and my commandments, as thy father David did walk...*

Once again God affirms that he did indeed forgive David's sin with Uriah. The sum of David's life is that he kept God's statutes and commandments.

1 Kings 11:6 *And Solomon did evil in the sight of the LORD, and went not fully after the LORD, as did David his father.*

It's interesting how fully God yet defends David despite his error with Bathsheba and Uriah.

1 Kings 11:34 *...for David...whom I chose because he kept my commandments and my statutes.*

1 Kings 14:8 *Thou [Jeroboam] hast not been as my servant David, who kept my commandments, and who followed me with all his heart, to do that only which was right in mine eyes.*

1 Kings 15:3 *...and his heart was not perfect with the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father.*

It is as though David's sin with Bathsheba and Uriah never happened.

1 Kings 15:5 Because David did that which was right in the eyes of the LORD, and turned not aside from any thing that he commanded him all the days of his life, save only in the matter of Uriah the Hittite.

Uriah finally gets at least a footnote, but it's hardly a wipeout of David's career.

1 Kings 15:11 And Asa did that which was right in the eyes of the LORD, as did David his father.

Good or bad, each king is compared to David.

2 Kings 16:2 Twenty years old was Ahaz when he began to reign, and reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem, and did not that which was right in the sight of the LORD his God, like David his father.

After all this long string of generations, the author is still comparing kings to David who, in the author's view, did "right in the sight of the LORD." And, by the way, this includes the final king of Israel, the eternal king Jesus Christ. That fact is so important that it is the opening verse of the New Testament.

Matthew 1:1 The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David...

All of this is, of course, circumstantial. But still, it is persuasive in that it persuades us to believe that God really did forgive David as he said he did.

But maybe that causes us to wince: Where is the justice for Uriah? How can God forgive so blatant a murder? And if murder is unforgivable, how can God forgive David? Doesn't the law demand the life of the murderer?

These are fair questions. I will now take those questions head on. I want you to imagine for the moment that I am David's defense attorney, standing before God the judge, and you the jurors. Here's my case for David:

Your Honor, and ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I claim that David never committed a murder at all. Oh, he *intended* to all right, and *tried* to. But he is not on trial here for *attempted* murder but for *actual* murder, and of that, I claim, he is innocent. The basis of my argument is simple: you cannot murder a corpse.

This idea came to me from a who-done-it movie (I don't recall the name of the movie. Was it an Agatha Christie story? I don't know.) The accused drove a knife through the victim's heart — an act of cold blooded murder, surely.

But there was only one problem for the prosecution, and that is this: the victim was already dead, and had been dead for an hour before the knife attack. Someone else had poisoned him first

Of course the accused didn't know that, and he really did stab the victim through the heart to murder him. But is that a crime? Can you be guilty of murdering a corpse?

So, we are left with this question: What's the penalty for stabbing a corpse? Or, in the worst case, what is the penalty for attempted murder? Attempted murder certainly is a

crime, and violating a corpse may be. But surely neither is a *capital* crime. Neither of these crimes is actual murder.

I claim that the death of Uriah is like that. David tried to kill him, plotted to kill him, arranged to kill him, but in fact Uriah died from another cause before the murder could be carried out. Thus God, in fact, protected David from his own evil plan.

Let's look at the facts of the story.

2 Samuel 12:16 And it came to pass, when Joab observed the city, that he assigned Uriah unto a place where he knew that valiant men were. :17 And the men of the city went out, and fought with Joab: and there fell some of the people of the servants of David; and Uriah the Hittite died also.

Joab was *intending* to murder Uriah per David's instructions. But before he could pull it off, the Jews lost a tactical skirmish and several men died, including Uriah.

So tell me. Just what are we accusing David of? Attempted murder? Certainly. Malicious intent? Of course. Negligence? Yes. Incompetent generaling? I imagine Joab's error was a tactical blunder, maybe even manslaughter. But murder? How? Uriah died gallantly doing his duty with the rest of his fallen comrades, as also the millions of other good soldiers throughout history who died for their good cause.

And what of the generals and kings and presidents who ordered them to it? Patton and Lincoln and Washington? Are they all guilty of murder because they ordered their troops into harm's way? You may argue: But David's intent was malicious murder! I argue back, Yea? So what? He didn't pull the trigger! Fate denied him, or God spared him. Uriah died in battle. So I ask you, just what are you accusing David of?

To David's credit, although he could have pled innocent (as Saul did), he nowhere does. He instead pleads guilty as charged.

Psalms 51:3 For I acknowledge my transgression: and my sin is ever before me. :4 Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.

David never looked for an out, but felt tremendous guilt, as well he should. But to those of you who want to lock him away forever without access to forgiveness and use the technicality that "murder is unforgivable," well, I just beat you back with another technicality: *he didn't do it!* God, or fate, or just plain good luck protected him from that guilt.