

## Finding Forgiveness For Your Sin (R. Alcorn)

It is a critical mistake to try to eliminate feelings of guilt without dealing with the root cause of guilt. No matter how often someone says "you have nothing to feel guilty about" to someone who has sinned against God and others, his guilt feelings will remain. Why? Because he knows better. Only by a denial of reality can he avoid guilt feelings. But such a denial is inherently unhealthy. It sets him up for emotional collapse whenever something reminds him of the sin. People need a permanent solution to their guilt problem, a solution based on reality, not denial or pretense.

Because it offers a solution to the guilt problem found nowhere else, I will quote from the Bible and cite references to specific biblical books, chapters and verses. This way you may look up these verses in a Bible yourself and think about them on your own.

Because of Christ's death on our behalf, forgiveness is available to all.

The word "gospel" means "good news." The good news is that God loves you, and desires to freely forgive you for all your sins, no matter how ugly or destructive. But before the good news can be appreciated we must know the bad news. The bad news is that there is true moral guilt, that all of us are guilty of many moral offenses against God. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

The Hebrew word for sin means literally "to miss the mark." Sin is falling short of God's holy standards. Sin separates us from a relationship with God (Isaiah 59:2). Sin deceives us and makes us think that wrong is right and right is wrong (Proverbs 14:12). The Bible says, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

Jesus Christ is the Son of God who loved us so much that he became a member of the human race to deliver us from our sin problem (John 3:16). He came to identify with us in our humanity and our weakness, but did so without being tainted by our own sin, self-deception and moral failings (Hebrews 2:17-18; 4:15-16). Jesus died on the cross as the only one worthy to pay the penalty for our sins that was demanded by the holiness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). Being God, and being all-powerful, he rose from the grave, defeating sin and conquering death (1 Corinthians 15:3-4, 54-57).

When Christ died on the cross for us, he said, "It is finished" (John 19:30). The Greek word (teleo) translated "it is finished" was commonly written across certificates of debt when they were canceled. It meant "Paid in Full." Christ died so that the certificate of debt consisting of all our sins could once and for all be marked, "Paid in Full."

### **The Bible is full of offers of forgiveness for every sin.**

Because of the work of Jesus Christ on the cross on our behalf, God freely offers us pardon and forgiveness. Here are just some of those offers:

Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. (Isaiah 1:18)

He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so is His love for those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for He knows how we are formed, He remembers that we are dust. (Psalm 103:10-14)

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I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more. (Jeremiah 31:34)

I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you. (Isaiah 44:2)

Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us: you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. (Micah 7:18-19)

Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him. (Psalm 32:12)

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy. (Proverbs 28:13)

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:1)

### **Forgiveness is a gift that must be received to take effect.**

The Bible teaches Christ died for every person, without exception (1 John 2:2). He offers the gift of forgiveness, salvation and eternal life to everyone: "Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life" (Revelation 22:17).

There is no righteous deed we can do that will earn us salvation (Titus 3:5). We come to Christ empty handed. Salvation is described as a gift. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). This gift cannot be worked for, earned or achieved in any sense. It is not dependent on our merit or effort, but solely on Christ's generosity and sacrifice on our behalf.

Like any gift, the gift of forgiveness can be offered to you, but it is not yours until you choose to receive it. There are cases where convicted criminals have been offered pardon by governors, but have actually rejected their pardons. Courts have determined that a pardon is valid only if the prisoner is willing to accept it. Likewise, Christ offers each of us the gift of forgiveness and eternal life, but just because the offer is made does not automatically make it ours. In order to have it, we must choose to accept it.

You may feel, "But I don't deserve forgiveness after all I've done." That's exactly right. None of us deserves forgiveness. If we deserved it, we wouldn't need it. That's the point of grace. Christ got what we deserved on the cross, so we could get what we don't deserve—forgiveness, a clean slate, a fresh start. Once forgiven we can look forward to spending eternity in heaven with Christ and our spiritual family (John 14:1-3; Revelation 20:11-22:6).

### **Because of forgiveness we need not dwell any longer on our past sins.**

God does not want you to go through the rest of your life punishing yourself for your sins. Jesus said to a woman who had lived an immoral lifestyle, "Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Luke 7:47-50). Jesus was surrounded by people who were rejected by society, but who found compassion, forgiveness and hope in his love.

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No matter what you have done, there is no sin beyond the reach of God's grace. He knows everything, so no sin we have done can surprise him. God has seen us at our worst and still loves us. The apostle Paul was a murderer—he had participated in the killing of Christians. He called himself the "worst of all sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15-16). Yet God not only forgave him, he elevated him to leadership in the church. ***There are no limits to the forgiving grace of God.***

Having trusted God to forgive us, we must resist the temptation to wallow in our guilt, for in fact we are no longer guilty. (The beautiful thing about God's grace is that it isn't based on pretending we didn't do something wrong, but realizing that even though we did, we are now fully forgiven.) It is easy to dig up and chew on our old sins like a dog digs up and chews on old bones. God, however, buries our sins forever (Micah 7:19). Christ asks us to accept his atonement, not to repeat it.

Many of us can identify with King David's description of the stressful feelings which plague the soul long after the deed is done:

When I kept silent [about sin], my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"—and you forgave the guilt of my sin. (Psalm 32:3-5)

You may feel immediately cleansed when you confess your sins, or you may need some help working through some of the things you've experienced. Either way, the fact remains that you are forgiven. You should try to forget what lies behind you and move on to a positive future made possible by Christ (Philippians 3:13-14). Whenever we start feeling "unforgiven," it's time to go back to all those verses from the Bible and remind ourselves of the reality of our forgiveness.

### **Forgiveness for the past should be followed by right choices in the present.**

Many people carry bitterness toward others who used and abused them. God expects us to take the forgiveness he has given us and extend it to others (Matthew 6:14-15). Among other things, this frees us from the terrible burden of resentment and bitterness. The warm light of forgiveness—both Christ's toward us and ours toward others—brightens the dark corners of our lives and gives us a new joy.

One of the first and most important things you need to do is become part of a therapeutic community, a family of Christians called a church. You may feel self-conscious around Christians because of your past. You shouldn't. A true Christ-centered church is not a showcase for saints, but a hospital for sinners. Most Christians understand God's grace enough that they will not condemn you for a sin you've repented of and Christ has forgiven. The people you are joining are just as human, just as imperfect, just as needy as you are. Most people in the church aren't self-righteous, and those who are should be pitied because they don't understand God's grace (Matthew 21:31). A good church will teach the truths of the Bible, and will also have people to provide love, acceptance, help and support for you.

One very healthy thing you can do is to reach out in love to others. When we focus on ourselves we tend to get drawn back into our past sins. When we focus on helping others, we experience the exhilaration of being used by God. You may find others who have and are struggling with temptations and situations you have faced. God can use your own experience to equip you to help them, and share with them the love and guidance he has given you. Ministering to others is a way of showing your love for God and for them. It is also an important part of your own healing and growth.