

*F*ORGIVENESS

FORGIVENESS

*Discover the Power
and Reality of Authentic
Christian Forgiveness*

GARY INRIG



Discovery House Publishers

Books, music, and videos that feed the soul with the Word of God

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Forgiveness
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*With gratitude to those with whom I have served as elders over the years at
Bethany Chapel, Reinhardt Bible Church, and Trinity Church,
bands of brothers who have
shared the load,
shown great grace,
and served our wonderful Lord.*

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INTRODUCTION

On September 11, 2001, life in the United States changed forever. Our early morning routine was interrupted by a phone call from our son in North Carolina, who said, rather insistently, "Turn on your television. A plane's flown into the World Trade Center in New York City." While I was trying to process that, he said, "Oh, no! There's another one!" As the television flickered on, I was stunned at what I saw and immediately recognized that this was no accident, but a deliberate attack. That was the beginning of a day filled with almost every negative emotion human beings can experience—fear, anger, grief, confusion, sadness, and the list goes on. The thought that people could hate others enough to commandeer commercial airliners, filled with innocent travelers, and fly them into the symbols of the nation's commercial strength (the World Trade Center towers) and its military strength (the Pentagon) in a deliberate attempt to kill innocent people was almost more than the mind could absorb. The feelings of horror aroused as we watched those massive towers crumble—taking with them the lives of trapped workers and courageous rescuers—will linger for a lifetime.

The events of that day were the work of skilled, determined, and evil terrorists, willing to carry out atrocities on ordinary people in pursuit of their depraved goals. We were learning firsthand what much of the world already knew—that some people are willing, and even delighted, to inflict incredible suffering on others in an attempt to further their cause. We cannot, and must not, underestimate the depths of evil to which such people will sink. So now we accept as

routine security measures that previously would have seemed to be totally unnecessary.

On the Friday following the September 11 attacks, when the atrocity was still raw and smoke continued to billow from the ruins, our small city held a prayer service in a large outdoor amphitheater at the center of town. Various pastors led in prayer, asking the Lord to minister His grace into the fear, pain, anger, grief, and anxiety we were all feeling. We prayed for heartbroken families; for courageous rescuers, digging relentlessly through the debris for remains of their fallen comrades; for the president and our leaders charged with making momentous decisions; and for ourselves, that we would respond appropriately. Most of the prayers were heartfelt but relatively predictable, until one pastor prayed, briefly but urgently: "Lord, you have commanded us to love even our enemies. So we forgive those terrorists who have perpetrated this act against us. We forgive Osama bin Laden."

I had been quietly murmuring my "amen" to the various prayers, but this one shut my mouth. I could not, or would not, say "amen." I almost blurted out, "No." But was my instinctive response either right or righteous? Was his prayer what I should have been praying? Did my Lord's teaching on forgiveness mean that I was to pray for the forgiveness of terrorists who had not only planned and carried out such an attack, but who were, at that very moment, almost certainly rejoicing in their success and plotting more such acts? Are Christians always to forgive all offenders immediately when they are wronged? Could we or should we forgive Osama bin Laden while searchers were still combing through the rubble at Ground Zero, hoping to discover survivors or even some bodily remains of the thousands of victims? Should people in California, most of whom were only remotely attached to the events, forgive Al Qaeda for what they had done to other people and families? After all, we weren't the ones sitting by our phones desperately hoping we would hear from or of a missing loved one. We weren't the ones standing on the streets of

downtown New York, with photos of our missing loved ones, anxiously seeking any morsel of information about their location or fate.

That moment crystallized questions that had been running through my mind for a long time about the nature of authentic Christian forgiveness. Too much of what I heard well-intentioned people say seemed trite, superficial, and simplistic. Sometimes they crossed a line into the realm of the foolish and harmful. This becomes apparent when the media barrages us with another story of a disgruntled employee or a disturbed student who has run amuck with an automatic weapon, gunning down coworkers or fellow students. As an almost automatic response, some people will quickly talk about the need to forgive the perpetrator. A few years ago a fourteen-year-old freshman named Michael Carnell shot and killed three of his fellow students engaged in a before-school prayer meeting in West Paducah, Kentucky. Within two days, before Michael had shown any remorse, other members of the prayer group erected a sign saying, "We forgive you, Michael." I deeply admire their desire to honor the Lord Jesus by their response. But is that the right way? Are true Christ-followers always to forgive instantly? Were they the right ones to declare forgiveness? One writer, observing such responses from his deeply held Jewish tradition, a perspective that insists on the necessity of repentance before forgiveness, wrote an article protesting automatic and immediate forgiveness. It was provocatively titled "The Sin of Forgiveness."¹ Did he have a point? Is it possible for some kinds of forgiveness actually to be sinful?

However, our most important questions about forgiveness don't arise from lead stories on the evening news. They usually emerge out of the rough and tumble of daily life, the mundane interactions of ordinary events. We get mad at a close friend and begin to hold a grudge. A spouse disappoints or betrays us and shows no sign of remorse. An employer breaks a promise or takes advantage of us. Sometimes the level of offense rises to a higher order. Parents or caregivers abuse or mistreat us, emotionally, physically, or finan-

cially. A spouse abandons us for another person. A "friend" slanders us or abuses our friendship. The scenarios are endless. But two things are clear. First, we all will need to forgive or to be forgiven, because we all both sin and are sinned against. Second, we will struggle with forgiveness, because it always begins with pain. After all, I need to forgive only people who have hurt me in some significant way. I certainly don't need to forgive someone for some good thing he has done or for some joy he

Forgiveness of sins through the grace of God and the finished work of the Lord Jesus lies at the heart of the gospel.

caused me. It is because forgiveness is birthed in pain, pain that can sometimes be intense, that forgiveness can be one of the hardest things we are ever called to do.

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the subject of forgiveness to the Christian faith. Forgiveness of sins through the grace of God and the finished work of the Lord Jesus lies at the heart of the gospel. The wonder of God's forgiveness in Christ should grip the heart of every Christ-follower. We have been forgiven at an enormous cost, the death of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. Christians are forgiven people, who have been brought into the family of God through the grace and mercy of our forgiving God. The place to begin a true understanding of forgiveness, then, is with a careful consideration of God's glorious forgiveness. In our first few chapters, we will probe its basis, its conditions, and its responsibilities. We need to know why we can receive God's forgiveness, how we can receive it, and how we are to continue to live in it. God's Word gives us the answers, so we will turn our attention to several important passages that unravel various aspects of God's forgiveness in Christ.

If the Bible makes it clear that Christians are forgiven people, it also makes it clear that we are to be forgiving people. Being forgiven is wonderful; being forgiving probes to the core of our being. Therefore we need a clear picture of what true forgiveness looks like and

some good answers to some very difficult questions about it. If I forgive someone, does that require me to rebuild our marriage or our friendship? Do I just forgive, even though she won't admit she did anything wrong? How long do I wait—until I feel able or willing to forgive? How do I evaluate if his words represent genuine repentance or cheap regret or personal manipulation? Does forgiveness mean that I somehow forget all that has happened? Does my tormentor just get off scot-free, when he's put me through so much? I want to forgive. But how do I do it? What does it look like? Again, we will turn to God's Word for insight, clarification, and direction.

These are all important and relevant questions. However, a study of forgiveness cannot be simply an intellectual exercise. It inevitably forces us to face people and situations we might prefer to ignore. And that is something we cannot and must not avoid. A failure to forgive or to seek forgiveness can well be described as a kind of spiritual anorexia.² The tragedy of anorexia is that a person somehow becomes convinced that food, the very thing that is God's provision for health, is something dangerous, to be avoided. Even as her body wastes away, she clings to the notion that eating is bad for her. It is a delusion that kills, slowly but surely. In the same way, we can refuse to forgive or to seek forgiveness because we are convinced that this is a way to punish someone else or to protect ourselves. But it is a delusion that kills. It murders marriages, families, friendships, and churches. It poisons one's soul, and it can even kill. Researchers have discovered direct links between forgiveness and physical and emotional health. Chronic anger and stress, the almost inevitable consequences of an inability or unwillingness to forgive, are both toxic. They elevate blood pressure, as well as reduce both immune system functioning and stress hormone levels. One fascinating study indicates that forgiving others was associated with better

Researchers have discovered direct links between forgiveness and physical and emotional health.

self-reported mental and physical health among those over age forty-five. As one researcher observed, "The benefits of forgiveness seem to increase with age."³ Edward Hallowell puts it vividly:

You should learn to forgive for exactly the same reason you should quit smoking, work to lower your cholesterol, go on a diet to lose weight or take up exercise to control your blood pressure. Forgiving improves your life by improving your physical and emotional health and by increasing your chances of living longer. If that isn't reason enough to forgive, consider that living in anger and resentment can be as bad for you as smoking cigarettes or having high blood pressure or an elevated level of cholesterol. In other words, high blood pressure and resentment can kill you. . . . Scientific studies show that angry, resentful people have heart attacks more frequently than those who forgive more naturally. People who harbor anger and resentment are more likely to erupt and lose control, and they are more prone toward violence. They are more likely to self-medicate with alcohol or other drugs, and they are less able to make positive human relationships that last.⁴

I don't want to be misunderstood. The best reason for forgiving is not that we will live longer or feel better. It is not even that this may well be the means by which God brings substantial healing in our relationships. The best reason for forgiving or for seeking forgiveness is that, in this way, we will glorify God and reveal His character to those around us. That is the goal of all Christian living, and when we walk in obedience to Him, our desire to honor Him results in our being in the place where He can most readily bless us. So, as we walk the road of forgiveness, we are imitating Him, and in doing so, honoring Him.

Chapter 1

WIPING THE SLATE CLEAN

We were sitting at a table with four other couples, all strangers to my wife, Elizabeth, and me, making getting-to-know-you conversation. As we talked about how long we had been married, one woman's intensity surprised me as she revealed, "My mother said our marriage would never last. She said he was no good for me, and she didn't talk to me for forty years after we married. That was forty-seven years ago. Guess she was wrong." The wound may have been old, but the pain was obviously fresh!

Following her outburst, the man sitting next to her said, more quietly but with deep feeling, "That's nothing. My mother liked another girl I had gone with and wanted me to marry her. But I loved 'Joan.' We got married, but my mother never used her right name. She called my wife by the other woman's name for twenty years."

On the grand scale of human misdeeds, I admit these don't rank very high. They were petty cruelties, but they had wounded both couples to the soul. Such things don't usually make headlines, although they may, if they explode into violence. We live in a world of great evils, so that terrorists fly planes into buildings, explode bombs on crowded commuter trains, carry out suicide attacks in crowded public places, and take the lives of hundreds of school children. Political leaders in various countries prey on the prejudices of their followers, setting them like a pack of wild dogs on others in vicious acts of genocide. Executives in positions of great trust and responsibility feather their own nests and vote themselves huge salaries and benefits, even as they manipulate the financial statements of their corporations and destroy the life savings of hard-working

employees and stockholders. Religious leaders use positions of trust to prey sexually on vulnerable children and adults. Industries, in an unrestrained rush for profits, deny their civic responsibility and choose to pollute our environments, both physical and moral.

Those sins affect us, often directly. But more often, we have to deal with smaller and more personal sins. Even these can yield a bitter harvest. I almost never stand before an audience to speak without reminding myself that many of these listeners have been the recipients of behavior that can only be described as evil. Too many women have experienced the horror of rape or sexual abuse; too many children are being raised in broken homes because of irresponsible and self-indulgent parents; too many churches have been split apart, because people pursued self-serving agendas, whatever the cost to

Ask almost anyone the name of someone who has done him wrong, and you will not need to wait long to get an answer!

others. My heart aches when the local media tell of another young child whose life has been snuffed out because gang members engaged in a mindless act of rage or revenge. We regularly hear stories of employers or managers who abuse their positions, treating others unfairly and using them to maximize their own power. Ask almost anyone the name of someone who has done him wrong, and you will not need to wait long to get an answer! And many of those hurts are not merely imagined. All of us have been sinned against, sometimes in terrible ways.

But honesty forces us to admit that we have sometimes inflicted the pain. We have all sinned, against God and against other people. I don't find that easy to admit or even recognize, but it is undeniably true. We can try to deny our sins; to redefine them as something else; to rationalize them, shifting the blame to others; to repress them, drowning the accusing voice of conscience in busyness, distractions, or even chemicals. I would not deny that many of us carry around

false guilt, the harassing voice of an overly sensitive conscience. Nevertheless, all honest people are aware that they do not live up to their own best standards, never mind God's. In our more honest moments, we know that we have wronged others, usually those closest and most precious to us. Some of those offenses, whether done deliberately or unintentionally, are far from trivial in their effect. In fact, a person unable or unwilling to admit personal guilt is a very dangerous person. As Mark Twain said, "Man is the only animal that blushes—or needs to."

Is Sin Outdated?

Voices in our modern world tell us that the idea of sin is hopelessly outdated and judgmental. Sin implies the existence of moral absolutes that make actions right or wrong. Even after the atrocities of September 11, many ponder whether anything can be labeled as evil. All moral judgments, they tell us, are acts of tradition, preference, moral arrogance, or power. But this response is not only foolish, it is also enormously destructive. Neil Plantinga says it well:

Slippage in our consciousness of sin, like most fashionable follies, may be pleasant, but it is also devastating. Self-deception about our sin is a narcotic, a tranquilizing and disorienting suppression of our spiritual central nervous system. What's devastating about it is that when we lack an ear for wrong notes in our lives, we cannot play right ones or even recognize them in the performances of others.¹

Fortunately, the realities of modern life are pressing on us a more realistic appraisal of human nature. G. K. Chesterton said that original sin is the only doctrine one can confirm by reading the front page of the daily newspaper. Five months before September 11, *Newsweek* carried a cover article titled "The Roots of Evil." What do social scientists, philosophers, and theologians say?

The traits of temperament and character from which evil springs are as common as flies on carrion. "The capacity for evil is a human universal," says psychiatrist Robert I. Simon, director of the program in Psychiatry and Law at Georgetown University School of Medicine. "There is a continuum of evil, of course, ranging from 'trivial evils' like cutting someone off in traffic, to greater evils like acts of prejudice, to massive evils like those perpetrated by serial sexual killers. But within us all are the roots of evil."²

This insight is nothing new. It's as old as Adam and Eve who grieved the loss of one son by the hand of another. The Bible takes sin seriously, confronting us with the fact that we are all both sinners and people who have been sinned against. Romans 3:23 says it succinctly: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Is Forgiveness Real?

But Scripture also takes forgiveness seriously. Martin Luther wrestled deeply with his own sinfulness, and when he experienced God's grace, his life changed forever. As he wrote, "Where there is the forgiveness of sins, there is life and blessedness." From beginning to end the Bible speaks of the forgiveness of God. Our God is a forgiving God. In fact, one of the most important theological statements in the Bible is God's self-description to Moses in Exodus 34:6–7: "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished; He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." The rabbi called this passage "the thirteen attributes," because it gives such a full description of the character of God. In fact, this Scripture is so fundamental to a proper understanding of God that it is quoted or alluded to thirteen more times in the Old Testament.³ It is the John

3:16 of the Old Testament, the verse everyone knew by heart. The psalmist declared:

*If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins,
O Lord, who could stand?
But with you there is forgiveness,
therefore you are feared (130:3–4).*

Micah ended his book with the joyful declaration:

*Who is a God like you
who pardons sin and forgives the transgression
of the remnant of his inheritance? (7:18).*

Isaiah 55:6–7 gives us the wonderful promise:

*Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call on him while he is near.
Let the wicked forsake his way
and the evil man his thoughts.
Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him,
and to our God, for he will freely pardon.*

Most translations render the last phrase, "he will abundantly pardon." As Charles Spurgeon eloquently commented,

That is to say, he will really pardon. The forgiveness is valid; it is valid on earth in the court of conscience, and above in the court of heaven. The pardoned sinner is truly pardoned, and no one shall ever condemn him. His sin is not merely supposed to be gone; it is gone. It is not put a little way off from him, but "as far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgression from us."⁴

One of the special promises of the New Testament is "he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Our God is a forgiving God. It is a central

truth of His character and one of His greatest gifts to His people. He desires His people not only to delight in the freedom of their personal forgiveness through faith in the Lord Jesus, but also to become forgiving people who imitate Him.

John Bunyan's classic *Pilgrim's Progress* has been standard fare for Christians down through the centuries, although it has largely dropped off the radar screen of modern Christians. Bunyan's story is presented as a dream, which begins with a traveler dressed in rags, with a book in his hand (representing the gospel) and a burden on his back, a vivid symbol of the guilt and shame he carries. He has heard God's news, with its promise of a heavenly city, and he sets out as a pilgrim for that city. His name is Christian, and he makes his hard journey until he comes in sight of the cross. Then, in a beautiful passage, Bunyan describes the great moment of divine forgiveness:

Up this way therefore did burdened Christian run, but not without great difficulty, because of the load on his back. He ran thus till he came at a place somewhat ascending, and upon that place stood a cross and a little below, in the bottom, a sepulchre. So I saw in my dream that just as Christian came up to the cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from off his back, and began to tumble; and so continued to do, till it came to the mouth of the sepulchre, where it fell in, and I saw it no more.

Then was Christian glad and lightsome, and said, with a merry heart, "He hath given me rest by his sorrow and life by his death." Then he stood still awhile to look and wonder; for it was very surprising to him that the sight of the cross should thus ease him of his burden. . . .

Then Christian gave three leaps for joy, and went on singing,

"Thus far did I come laden with my sin,
Nor could aught ease the grief that I was in,

Till I came hither. What a place is this! . . .
Blest cross! blest sepulchre! blest rather be
The Man that there was put to death for me."⁵

Forgiveness is all about the grace of God. In God's Word we could look many places to see God's forgiveness. But I want to direct our attention to two passages. First, we will travel off the beaten path to a striking picture found in the Old Testament book of Zechariah. Then, in the next chapter, we will spend time where Bunyan's Christian did, at the cross of the Lord Jesus.

*Forgiveness is all about
the grace of God.*

Zechariah's Vision

About six hundred years before the birth of the Lord Jesus, any objective observer would have concluded that the nation of Judah had ceased to exist. Its capital city, Jerusalem, had been destroyed by the invading armies of the great empire of Babylon. Its inhabitants had been either carried away captive to Babylon (modern Iraq) or had fled for refuge wherever they could find it. Judah had been cremated; its national ashes scattered on the winds. No nation could hope to survive such treatment! Even more significant, this condition was due to the hand God turned in judgment against His own people because of their long history of covenant betrayal, rebellion, and failure.

But God had not abandoned either His people or His promises. Even as the devastation was taking place, He inspired His prophet Jeremiah to write to those already in exile, "'When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'" (Jeremiah 29:10–11).

The Lord acted just as He said He would. In 538 B.C., the power of Babylon was broken, and the new empire of Persia emerged as the

great world power. An edict of the Persian emperor reversed the Babylonian policy of exile, and the Jews were permitted to return to their homeland. Many of the Jewish people had made peace with their new location and lifestyle and had little or no interest in the total upheaval that a return to Judah would involve. Common sense said that it would be a huge undertaking to attempt to regain a foothold in their embattled homeland. The new occupants would certainly not welcome them with open arms! As a result, only forty thousand were willing to take the risk of return, under the political leadership of a governor named Zerubbabel and the religious leadership of a high priest named Joshua.

Upon their return, they found themselves as a tiny minority, surrounded by hostile enemies who had no interest in surrendering their newly acquired lands without a fight. Those enemies were not only determined to retain their land, but they also possessed superior resources and manpower. Humanly speaking, Judah's cause seemed hopeless.

But Judah's God was the living God, who delivers His people when they turn in faith to Him. One of the Lord's ways of calling them to faith was to send His prophet Zechariah, to whom the Lord gave a series of visions containing God's promises to and purposes for His people. The following passage is one of those visions, specifically directed to the nation of Judah at that particular time in history. But it also speaks powerfully to us as a marvelous dramatic portrayal of how God deals with broken, failing people who come to Him in faith.

Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. The Lord said to Satan, "The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?"

Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, "Take off his filthy clothes."

Then he said to Joshua, "See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you."

Then I said, "Put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the Lord stood by.

The angel of the Lord gave this charge to Joshua: "This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you will govern my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you a place among these standing here.

"Listen, O high priest Joshua and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch. See, the stone I have set in front of Joshua! There are seven eyes on that one stone, and I will engrave an inscription on it,' says the Lord Almighty, 'and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day.

"In that day each of you will invite his neighbor to sit under his vine and fig tree,' declares the Lord Almighty" (Zechariah 3:1–10).

We Stand Before a Holy God in Our Sin and Failure

Our passage presents a vision, not an actual historical event. Joshua the high priest (not Joshua, the great successor to Moses, who lived about eight hundred years earlier) is standing in the heavenly courtroom. He is there personally, but, as the nation's high priest, he is also the representative of his people. He stands in God's presence in a totally unacceptable condition, wearing "filthy clothes." This is not meant to be a fashion statement! In Old Testament worship great attention was paid to the sacred garments of the high priest. In the course of his duties, he was usually arrayed in splendid official robes "to give him dignity and honor" (Exodus 28:2). When he appeared in the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, he would wear "a sacred linen tunic" (Leviticus 16:4), a garment of simple purity. But it was unthinkable for him to appear before God in filthy clothes. So when he stands in such clothing before a holy God, we are intended to understand the defiled condition of God's people. They have a

long history of sin, rebellion, and apostasy and can make no claim on God's special favor on the basis of their merit or national righteousness. They are a blemished nation, with their shame on open display.

At Joshua's right hand there is another figure: "Satan, standing at his right side to accuse him" (v. 1). We are not given many portrayals of Satan in the Old Testament. In fact, the major description of his work is found in Job 1–2, a passage that has interesting parallels to this one in Zechariah. In the book of Job, Satan is the one who delights to attack and criticize God's people. When God challenged him with the godly character and personal piety of Job, Satan countered that the only reason anyone would serve God was out of self-interest. God had been good to Job; that was the only reason he or anyone else would serve Him. Were he to lose his blessings, Job would lose his faith! The Lord responded to Satan's challenge by giving Satan permission to attack Job. Satan lost no time. He unleashed a series of attacks on Job's health, wealth, and family, attempting to drive a wedge between Job and his Lord.

In the book of Zechariah, the situation is somewhat different. Satan had no need to point out Joshua's shortcomings. He is obviously unfit for the presence of God. Satan is there only as the prosecuting attorney, to make sure that Joshua's sins and shortcomings are properly pointed out and punished. He is acting as he always does, as "the accuser of our brothers" (Revelation 12:10), the one who wants us to wallow in our sins and failures, so we will feel disqualified from fellowship with God.

The third person involved in this encounter is described both as "the angel of the Lord" and "the Lord." We find this exchange of terms several times in the Old Testament: A person first described as "the angel of the Lord" is later addressed as "the Lord" Himself. The best explanation is that on these occasions the Lord Jesus took temporary visible form, prior to His incarnation.⁶ Joshua, in his filthy garments, is standing before God Himself. The obvious question? What will a

holy, righteous God do with a person whose sins and shortcomings are so blatantly obvious?

We return to Joshua—in an appalling condition. If anything, the translation “filthy garments” understates the reality. The Hebrew word describes filth such as dung, urine, and vomit. His garments were utterly unsuitable for the presence of other people, never mind the holy God of the universe! He looked awful and smelled even worse. What this filth represents is made clear when the angel says, “Take off his filthy clothes” and then declares to Joshua, “See, I have taken away your sins” (v. 5). The filth represents the disgusting reality of his sins, as well as the sins of his people.

We have a hard time recognizing how our sinfulness appears before the Lord. We take sin for granted, because we not only find it all around us, we constantly deal with it within ourselves. Definitions of sin can sound clinical: “Sin is any act—any thought, desire, emotion, word, or deed—or its particular absence that displeases God and deserves blame.”⁷ But the Bible is full of metaphors that tell us what sin is like. Neal Plantinga notes:

Sin is the missing of the mark, a wandering from the path, a straying from the fold. Sin is a hard heart and a stiff neck. Sin is blindness and deafness. It is both the overstepping of a line and the failure to reach it—both transgression and shortcoming. Sin is a beast crouching at the door. In sin people attack or evade or neglect their divine calling. These and other images suggest deviance: even when it is familiar, sin is never normal. Sin is disruption of created harmony and resistance to divine restoration of that harmony. Above all, sin disrupts and resists the vital human relation to God and it does all this disrupting and resisting in a number of intertwined ways.⁸

At times we get a glimpse of how deeply defiled we are. It was the experience of Isaiah, who in the presence of a holy God, could

only declare, "Woe to me!" (6:5), or more precisely, "I am ruined!" It is the declaration of a holy God that

*All of us have become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6).*

It is the universal condition: However we may appear to one another, we stand guilty before a holy God. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn memorably discovered in a prison camp in the Russian gulag, "If only there were evil people somewhere committing evil deeds and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"⁹ But for Solzhenitsyn that discovery was not a source of despair. Rather, it was the beginning of hope and salvation, as he began to look outside of himself to the grace of God as his only refuge.

Joshua's condition, like that of all of us, was not only appalling, but also precarious. To be covered with filth in the presence of God was to be in danger of final rejection. But he is totally silent, with nothing to say in his own defense. This is not the silence of denial but of admission, the recognition that I cannot deny what is plain to everyone, nor can I excuse or explain it. He is speechless, because there is nothing he can say in his own defense. How could he claim to be fit as long as he was wearing clothes like this? His guilt was self-evident. Paul tells us that this will be our universal experience before the heavenly throne: "so that every mouth may be silenced and all the world held accountable to God" (Romans 3:19). The first step in forgiveness is ownership, the silent acknowledgment that what God says about us is true. Martin Luther noted, "The unwillingness of the sinner to be regarded as a sinner is the final form of sin."

For years baseball fans have found themselves involved in the same argument, especially around the time for the announcement of the results of balloting for the National Baseball Hall of Fame: Should Pete Rose be inducted? No one doubts that, on the basis of his per-

formance on the field, he should be. The man known as Charley Hustle holds the record for most hits in a career and has a career record clearly worthy of enshrinement. But despite all his achievements, Rose had a significant gambling problem; all the evidence indicates that he gambled on baseball games, perhaps even some in which his own team was involved. This was in direct violation of an emphatic rule of baseball, in place since the infamous Black Sox scandal of 1919. Gambling is viewed as a major threat to the integrity of the game. Rose desperately wants to be in the Hall of Fame, but for thirteen years he could not bring himself to admit that he had done what the evidence clearly revealed he had. In fact, he emphatically insisted on his innocence before three different baseball commissioners. So there came an impasse. Until he would own his actions, major-league baseball found it impossible to forgive him.

Then early in 2004 Rose published a book in which he admitted that he had, in fact, bet on baseball. He even acknowledged placing bets with bookies up to five times a week while managing the Cincinnati Reds. That confession drew an intriguing response. His timing seemed intended to draw attention away from that year's Hall of Fame nominees and direct it toward himself and increase his book sales. Many who did read it were far from convinced that he was telling the whole truth when he denied that he had bet on games in which his own team was involved. Most of all, his confession seemed to lack a deep sense of remorse. As he said, "I'm sure that I'm supposed to act all sorry or sad or guilty now that I've accepted that I've done something wrong. But you see, I'm just not built that way. . . . So, let's leave it like this: I'm sorry it happened, and I'm sorry for all the people, fans and family that it hurt. Let's move on."¹⁰

The effect of Rose's "confession" was fascinating. Even some of his previously ardent supporters began to jump off the bandwagon. It seemed to most that he just didn't "get it," missing the difference between admission and confession. An offender doesn't have the option to say, "Let's move on!" He doesn't hold the upper hand in the

situation! Pete Rose desperately wants to be recognized for his achievements. But what he wants even more is induction on his own terms, and that isn't going to happen.

In the spiritual realm, acceptance into God's presence doesn't happen on our terms either. God cannot ignore our filthy garments. And neither will Satan! He is there in God's presence to make completely clear what kind of unworthy person is standing before Him. And so we are presented with the great dilemma. How can a holy God remain true to His own character and, at the same time, forgive the sins of a sinner? He clearly states His standards in Scripture. "I will not acquit the guilty" (Exodus 23:7). "He does not leave the guilty unpunished" (Exodus 34:7).

*The Lord is slow to anger and great in power;
the Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished (Nabum 1:3).*

What then is Joshua's future, if he can't deny his sin, if Satan won't ignore it, and God can't overlook it? That isn't just his problem, it's the problem of every one of us.

From a Gracious God We Receive Forgiveness

The amazing thing is that the one who speaks for Joshua is not Joshua but the angel of the Lord, the Lord Jesus Himself. Joshua stands before God as a believer, as one who is not trusting in himself, but in God. Joshua represents God's people, with its capital of Jerusalem, and the Lord "has chosen Jerusalem" (v. 2). This choice was certainly not based on merit; Jerusalem had abdicated any claim upon God. God's election is always on the basis of grace, and it is made evident by our faith. Joshua is "a burning stick snatched from the fire" (v. 2). Sticks don't crawl out of fires; they lie there hopeless, awaiting their inevitable destruction. But someone else may risk the flames to snatch out a burning stick. And that is the picture of God's dealing with Joshua and the central truth of all forgiveness. God

Himself entered the fire to remove by His power someone doomed to destruction.

This passage does not directly indicate how this divine deliverance would come about. Not until the New Testament, at the cross, do we begin to comprehend what was involved. Everything in the gospel centers on the cross. As Miroslav Volf notes, "Indisputably, the self-giving love manifested in the cross and demanded by it lies at the core of the Christian faith."¹¹ God Himself entered the fire to save us. God the Son took on human nature and entered time and space. He came, as He Himself said, "to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:9). That involved not only living among us, but also going to the cross to take our sins and our guilt. We will ponder that more deeply in the next chapter. But even here in the book of Zechariah, five hundred years before the Lord Jesus would come, there are pointers to that great event. When Zechariah tells us that God says, "I will remove the sin of this land in a single day" (v. 9), and later when he quotes the Lord as saying of the nation of Judah, "They will look on me, the one whom they have pierced" (12:10), he is prophesying, in remarkable detail, the work of the Lord Jesus on our behalf. "On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and impurity" (13:1). In both the Old and New Testaments, there is no final forgiveness apart from the work of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross.

Having defended Joshua to Satan, the Lord issues an order: "Take off his filthy clothes" (v. 4). Joshua cannot be in God's presence as he is. The Lord does not ignore our sins or minimize them. He orders their removal. So Joshua stands naked before his God: "See, I have taken away your sins" (v. 4). This is a wonderful picture of the divine act of forgiveness. Our sins are stripped away—removed and banished. It is God's work to remove them, since only He can.

One of the great themes of the Bible is to see what God does with the sins of His people when He forgives us. Remember that this

is always and only because the Lord Jesus bore them on Himself, on the cross. We need to rejoice in God's promise. I'll never forget one of the first new believers' classes I taught, when I simply read the passages that describe what God does with the sins of those He forgives. I sensed amazement and gratitude at the wonder of what God has done. A lot of excited conversation followed. God, in grace, sets us wonderfully and fully free!

Consider these Old Testament statements about what God does with our sins:

He drowns them: Micah 7:19

*You will again have compassion on us,
you will tread our sins underfoot
and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.*

He erases them: Isaiah 43:25

*I, even I, am he who blots out [wipes away]
your transgressions, for my own sake,
and remembers your sins no more.*

He dissolves them: Isaiah 44:22

*I have swept away your offenses like a cloud,
your sins like the morning mist.*

He puts them behind his back: Isaiah 38:17

You have put all my sins behind your back.

He forgets them: Jeremiah 31:34

*For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.*

He covers them: Psalm 32:1

*Blessed is he
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.*

He does not record them: Psalm 32:2

Blessed is the man

whose sin the Lord does not count against him.

He totally removes them: Psalm 103:12

As far as the east is from the west,

so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

Wonderful as these statements are, in the New Testament we reach the high point of understanding forgiveness.

He forgives them: Ephesians 1:7

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace.

Colossians 1:13–14

... the Son ... in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He wipes them out and erases them: Acts 3:19

Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.

He takes them on Himself: 1 Peter 2:24

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness, by his wounds you have been healed.

He does not charge them to our account: 2 Corinthians 5:19

God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them.

He charges them to Christ's account: 2 Corinthians 5:21

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

He nails them to the cross: Colossians 2:13–14

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins,

having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.

He purges us from them: Hebrews 1:3

After [the Son] had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

He does away with and puts away sins: Hebrews 9:26

But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.

1 John 3:5

You know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins.

He cleanses and purifies us from them: 1 John 1:7

The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

He sets us free from them: Revelation 1:5–6

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory for ever and ever! Amen.

From a Gracious God We Receive Righteousness

But the forgiveness of sins is only the beginning of what the Lord does for His people. Let's pick up Zechariah's vision: Joshua stands

Forgiveness of sins is only the beginning of what the Lord does for His people.

naked before a holy God. Having said, "I have taken away your sin," he also says, "I will put rich garments on you" (v. 4). The Lord then gives orders to His attending angels: "Put a clean turban on his head." They not

only put on the turban, but "they clothed him" (v. 5) in the rich garments God had promised. He stands now before a holy God in garments provided by God Himself. Such garments were worn only on special occasions, and a turban was a symbol of office and ministry.

Again we are pointed to the Lord Jesus. Christians are forgiven, but they are much more than forgiven. We are declared righteous by God Himself, and He does not merely declare us righteous; He imputes the righteousness of Christ to us. We have become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21), a righteousness that is not ours, but which comes through faith in the Lord Jesus (Philippians 3:9).

When I was a child in Sunday school, we were taught definitions of Bible words. *Justified*, I was told, means that in God's eyes I am "just as if I had never sinned." That was very helpful, because I still remember it, and it describes one important aspect of justification. To be justified is to be forgiven, but it is much more than that. It is to be declared righteous, to have been dressed by God in the righteousness of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. God does not see us as people in excrement-covered garments, or even as people washed and naked before Him.

Nor does He see us as only partially covered. A friend recalls hearing a preacher compare the righteousness that God gives us to a hospital gown. Well, whatever the virtues of such gowns, they provide a very inadequate covering! You had better keep your back to the wall! The preacher went on to describe how we need to provide the rest of the covering by our own righteousness. My friend immediately realized the hopelessness of that. He didn't need a partial covering, but a complete one. And that is what he found when he came to Jesus. By God's grace, through faith in His Son, we are declared righteous and clothed fully, freely, and luxuriantly in the perfect righteousness of Christ, with His merit transferred to our account. This is the gift of the cross.

During the presidency of Andrew Jackson, a postal clerk named George Wilson robbed a train and, in the process, killed a guard. He was captured, convicted of murder, and sentenced to hang. But there were doubts about some issues related to the case, and President Jackson intervened, offering a pardon. But because Wilson hated Jack-

son, he refused the pardon. The nation was young, and no one had ever refused a pardon. The Supreme Court was asked to decide whether someone could do such a thing. Chief Justice John Marshall handed down the decision: "A pardon is a parchment whose only value must be determined by the receiver of the pardon. It has no value apart from that which the receiver gives to it." Because George Wilson had refused the pardon, whatever his reason, he would suffer the full penalty for his crime by being hanged.

What foolishness! If we turn our backs on the forgiveness freely offered by our crucified Savior, we do the same thing. Our God is a forgiving God, and we can live in the freedom of full, final, and finished forgiveness. But we must receive the gift He offers through faith in His Son. When we do, we are able to start over again, knowing that we are clean, inside and out, in the presence of a holy God. The striking paradox is that, when we choose neither to hide our sin nor to deny our sin, but to own it before the holy God, we are set free by His grace in Christ.