

OUT OF THE DEPTHS: GOD'S FORGIVENESS OF SIN

Study Four

FORGIVENESS OF SIN AT THE CROSS OF CHRIST

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WHY THE CROSS?

We have seen that forgiveness is at the very heart of the nature of God:

The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious . . .
abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness . . .
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin . . . (Exod. 34:6–7).¹

We have also seen Jesus pronouncing the forgiveness of sins in his earthly ministry:

Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven (Matt. 9:2).

Why can't we just leave it at that: accept that God is a forgiving God and treat ourselves and each other accordingly? Why should Jesus going to the cross have anything to do with it?

When Jesus spoke of the forgiveness of sins, and brought it to bear in the lives of people, he was not simply enunciating a general principle. We have seen that, however individual persons received forgiveness of sins in the Old Testament, God had promised a forgiveness of sins available to all in the last days:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant . . . they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more (Jer. 31:31, 34).

Jesus came amidst an expectation that this new and great forgiveness was close at hand:

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins (Mark 1:4–5).

¹ Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

This great forgiveness was associated with and was to be effected by the person of Jesus:

Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29).

Certainly Jesus bore testimony to what was in the Father's heart—as when he told the story about the loving father and the rebellious sons:

So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him (Luke 15:20).

The point and issue of the parable, however, was the one telling it:

This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them (Luke 15:2).

Certainly Jesus brought forgiveness to bear in people's lives, as when he said to the woman caught in adultery:

Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again (John 8:11).

Jesus had convicted all those present who had sin in their lives and dismissed them. He alone was left as one 'without sin'. He presumably had the right to 'cast the first stone' at her for this breach of God's holy law, but he did not. Why not? The answer again lies in his person, as the one in whose flesh God would condemn sin when he 'died for sin once for all' (see Rom. 8:3; 1 Pet. 3:18). 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are *in Christ Jesus*' (Rom. 8:1). The forgiveness comes through Jesus. Similarly, what made the difference to the Samaritan woman to turn her from shame and avoidance of others to bold and joyful proclamation of 'a man who told me everything I have ever done' (John 4:29)? She had said she was looking towards the coming of the Messiah, and Jesus had said to her:

I am he, the one who is speaking to you (John 4:26).

In the New Testament, then, forgiveness of sins comes through the person of Jesus. Jesus, as he said and did these things, had his heart set on going to Jerusalem, where he knew he would meet his death:

Then he took the twelve aside and said to them, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again' (Luke 18:31–33).

It was towards this that the whole of his life and energy was constrained:

I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! (Luke 12:49–50).

Jesus was also in no doubt that his death, while brought about by those who were fully responsible and answerable for their actions, was fully in accord with his Father's will, as written in the Scriptures:

For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born (Mark 14:21).

In this Jesus is an obedient and willing participant:

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father (John 10:17–18).

Jesus was also clear that the forgiveness of sins was there by virtue of his death:

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the [new] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’ (Matt. 26:27–28).

This is what he prayed for as they nailed him to the cross:

Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing (Luke 23:34).

We have seen how forgiveness came to the repentant criminal hanging beside him (see Luke 23:39–43). No less it must have come to the centurion who oversaw the crucifixion of Jesus, when the realisation came to him, ‘Certainly this man was innocent’—how else could it be that he ‘praised God’ (Luke 23:47) for what otherwise would have smitten him with guilt and shame?

The New Testament witness is clear: forgiveness from God comes once and for all through the death of Jesus on the cross. We will seek now to discover what we can of how this was so.

Questions for Discussion:

- *What have we known of the notion that God forgives simply because He is a forgiving God, and that’s it?*
- *What would we say about the necessity of the cross for God’s forgiveness of sins?*

THE JUDGEMENT OF THIS WORLD

As the time of his death on the cross approached, Jesus characterised it in this way:

Now is the judgment of this world (John 12:31).

There were a number of elements present. This was a time when the sin and evil of the world began to be borne in upon Jesus’ person in an intensive way: ‘Now my soul is troubled’² (John 12:27). This is paralleled in the other gospels by the agony in the garden of Gethsemane:

I am deeply grieved [My soul is very sorrowful *RSV*³], even to death (Mark 14:34).

In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground (Luke 22:44).

This has to do with his bearing of sin, as Peter later said: ‘He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross’ (1 Pet. 2:24) or, more literally, ‘He himself carried up our sins in his body

² Greek: Νῦν ἡ ψυχὴ μου τετάραται *nun hē psuchē mou tetaraktai*.

³ Greek: Περίλυπός ἐστιν ἡ ψυχὴ μου *perilupos estin hē psuchē mou*.

to the tree'.⁴ Into this action of the judgement of this world in Jesus' death on the cross we would all somehow be drawn:

'I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die (John 12:32–33).

This would be the end of Satan's rule:

now the ruler of this world will be driven out (John 12:31).

No doubt this has to do with what Jesus says a little later:

the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me (John 14:30)

—presumably because 'in him there is no sin' (1 John 3:5)—and so no power any more over those who are drawn into Jesus in the judgement of this world on the cross. Jesus is also clear that this whole action is the will of God that Jesus has come to do, and so the Father is not to be asked to save him from it:

And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour (John 12:27; compare 14:31).

This whole action will be the Father glorifying His name—His love, His holiness, His righteousness (see John 17:11, 25; 13:1; 1 John 4:9–10):

'Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again' (John 12:28).

These elements, then, were present: the bearing of sin, the drawing-in of all people, the casting out of Satan, the nature and love of the Father.⁵ How, then, was this action of the cross the effective 'judgment of this world'?⁶

The Final Condemnation of Sin

God and people have been sinned against since the early days of the human race, and each instance of sin shows itself up as defiant, malicious and horrible. As long as it is done, however, against other people who are sinners, the sharpness of its edge can be blunted or blurred, because there is the propensity for it to be justified as to some extent deserved. But the event of the cross shows sin up in its true colours and as such condemns it:

And in Jesus men for the first time were up against pure goodness. Never before had sinners confronted unflinching and perfect love; never before, accordingly, had it been possible for sin's malevolent antagonism to perfect love to declare itself without reserve. Hence, by its treatment of Jesus Christ, man's sinfulness was exposed: its sheer evil was laid bare to the bone, reprobated, doomed, sentenced without appeal. What we are as sinners was lit up by a flash that told the whole and left nothing to be said.⁷

⁴ NRSV note.

⁵ For an explication of these elements, drawing upon some different passages, see Martin Bleby, *God's Holy Love: For Newcomers to Christian Faith* (NCPI, Blackwood, 2001), pp. 86–98.

⁶ The following draws on H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness* (Nisbet & Co., London, 1927), pp. 198–218.

⁷ Mackintosh, *Forgiveness*, p. 198.

If that is what we human beings are capable of—if that is what we do to such a one, and one who is avowedly from God—if that is what we do to God—then we all stand condemned without excuse.

The Final Confrontation of Evil

Sin is also judged by the stance Jesus takes against it. He had often declared his opposition against it in his words, as when he said:

I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire (Matt. 5:22).

It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person (Mark 7:20–23).

You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? (Matt. 17:17).

But the time comes when words are not enough:

But a profounder expression of antagonism to sin than speech is possible, and in Jesus' case became real. The best men have opposed sin by setting their life against it, by placing themselves in its path, at whatever cost, and constituting their personal being a dedicated obstacle to its progress. This path Christ pre-eminently chose. It was for Him not enough to denounce wrong; He went further and took the last step; He exhibited an utter opposition to sin by dying at the hands of sinners. By letting sinful men vent their hate upon Himself, He revealed and condemned sin as the absolute contrary of love.⁸

Demonstrators may put their bodies in the way of bulldozers, and so place themselves at risk, but with sinners motives and virtues are never unmixed. In this instance, where Jesus is entirely in the right, the condemnation is unmistakable and absolute. This goes beyond vengeance or retaliation, however justified that might have been—this personally takes the brunt of the evil. Not from a position of weakness either, but as an act of great strength:

There is in the holiness of God a radical opposition to wickedness which cannot express itself adequately in mere punishment, but can express itself only by receiving upon itself the assault of the sinful will.⁹

Or, we might say, by confronting this evil in its own Person. For here God places Himself in the way of evil:

The condemnation of sin uttered whether in language or in silence through Jesus' life and death is in fact uttered by the Eternal—not by a commissioned deputy or prophet merely, but by God . . . Through His eyes there looks out on us, with convicting and humbling power, the dread-inspiring holiness of God with which evil cannot dwell.¹⁰

What did Peter see when 'The Lord turned and looked at Peter' (Luke 22:61)? We are not told. What we do know is that Peter 'went out and wept bitterly' (Luke 22:62).

⁸ Mackintosh, *Forgiveness*, pp. 199–200.

⁹ Professor A. G. Hogg, quoted in Mackintosh, *Forgiveness*, p. 200.

¹⁰ Mackintosh, *Forgiveness*, p. 201.

The Final Bearing of Just Judgement

We all know that people suffer consequences as a result of sin. What the Bible testifies to is that these consequences are part of a moral order personally administered by the just and holy God. What we find is that these consequences do not follow strict legal procedures by which certain punishments are calibrated to fit specific crimes. Like the nature of sin itself, the process is much more tortuous and dynamic than that. Much of the consequences consist in people being given over to the degrading, perverse, debasing profligacy of the wickedness that is in their own hearts, as this is pressed out into its grim and defiant outworkings—this is how Paul the apostle says ‘the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth’ (Rom. 1:18; see 1:18–32).

We also know that this suffering of the consequences of sin is not restricted to the perpetrators, but that the apparently innocent suffer along with, and sometimes more than, the obviously wicked (as in Job 10:15; 21:1–34; Ps. 69; 73). At best this can happen when ‘the righteous suffer with and for the sinful on account of their sin’¹¹—they take on this suffering by refusing to dissociate from the sinful, and they bear it, if possible, to be able to bring some benefit to the ones who sin. Yet, being sinful themselves, these ‘righteous’ cannot wholly substitute for the sinful, nor can they be expected to bear the full weight of human sin:

No one can redeem the life of another
or give to God a sufficient ransom—
the ransom for a life is costly,
no payment is ever enough . . . (Ps. 49:7–8, TNIV).

What happens when the one from God enters into this heaving morass? Sometimes when we hear the words ‘the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all’ and ‘upon him was the punishment that made us whole’ (Isa. 53:6, 5), we can entertain notions so simplistic that they do not correspond to the real world:

It was not that God stretched His hand from the sky, seized the mass of human iniquity, transferred it to Jesus by capricious fiat, then chastised Him for it. God does nothing in that way.¹²

What then did happen?

But when Jesus entered into our life, took the responsibility of our evil upon Himself, identifying His life with ours to the uttermost and placing Himself where the sinful are by strong sympathy in a fashion so real that the pain and affliction due to us became unspeakable suffering within His soul—*that* was the act of God, that (if we take seriously Jesus’ oneness of mind and will with the Father) was indeed the experience of God. In no way other than by letting sinful wills do their worst to Jesus could it be openly demonstrated, and for ever, what sin involves in God’s righteous judgment.¹³

This was the final judgement of God on all human sin. P. T. Forsyth puts it this way:

Our suffering can only finally be dealt with by Him who is more concerned about our sin; who is strong enough to resist pity till grief has done its gracious work even in His Son; and who can endure not only to

¹¹ Mackintosh, *Forgiveness*, p. 203.

¹² Mackintosh, *Forgiveness*, pp. 205f.; compare: ‘We must renounce the idea that He was punished by the God who was ever well pleased with His beloved Son . . . Expiation . . . is the very opposite of exacting punishment; it is assuming it’ (P. T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, NCPI, Blackwood, (1910) 1984, pp. 79, 206).

¹³ Mackintosh, *Forgiveness*, pp. 205–206.

see the world's suffering go on for its moral ends, but to take its agony upon His own heart and feel it as even the victims do not, for the holy purpose, final blessing, and the far victory of His love.¹⁴

Not only was it borne by Christ, but it was acknowledged by him as just, in a trusting and intimate relationship with his Father that held fast through it all:

‘He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.’

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed (1 Pet. 2:22–24).

P. T. Forsyth adds:

His practical and entire expression of holiness from the midst of the sinners He loved is the divine significance of His blood. No obedience to a holy God is complete which does not recognise His judgment, and recognise it in the practical way of action by accepting it . . . and it confesses it practically, silently, in act and suffering. And who but God could adequately confess in action the holiness of God? And who but the sinless could confess the sin of man? Who else but the holy could realise what it meant as sin?¹⁵

Nor was this detached or apart from us, but was ‘from the midst of the sinners He loved’. In ‘identifying His life with ours to the uttermost’, he ‘was numbered with the transgressors’ (Isa. 53:12; see Luke 22:37). This opened the way for us to be united with him by faith. So when Paul, face to face with the risen Lord Jesus, realised that he stood condemned by the law of God he thought he was keeping, it came to him as:

I have been crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:19).

The judgement he accepted was rightly ours. We were judged in him. The humble will add, ‘And a good thing, too!’

Questions for Discussion:

- *What is the relationship between the cross as ‘the judgment of this world’ (John 12:31) and the cross as a foolish offence to those who do not believe (see 1 Cor. 1:18–25)? How is it good news for those who do believe?*
- *What human experiences have we had of the condemning of sin, the confronting of evil, and the bearing of judgement? What are their human limitations?*
- *What is the necessity and effectiveness of these things being carried through by God Himself?*

THE LOVE OF GOD

John begins his account of the passion of Christ with these words:

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end (John 13:1).

¹⁴ Forsyth, *Cruciality*, p. 168.

¹⁵ Forsyth, *Cruciality*, p. 207.

It sets the parameters of what was to happen. The whole event from beginning to end was God's love fully exposed in raw action. John the apostle says this is how we know what real love actually is:

God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:9–10).

When we view the Father's condemnation of sin, confronting of evil and bearing of judgement at total personal cost to Himself in His Son, using up all the resources of His Spirit (as in Heb. 9:14)—all for the good of each one of us sinners—we can say with Paul:

the Son of God . . . loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:20).

This was the full expression and enactment of the way God has always been—as when it is said with regard to God's relationship with Israel:

For he said, 'Surely they are my people,
children who will not deal falsely';
and he became their savior.
In all their distress he was distressed;¹⁶
the angel of his presence saved them;
in his love and in his pity he redeemed them;
he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old (Isa. 63:8–9).

The old translation is: 'in all their affliction he was afflicted' (RSV). Here we see and experience it in person, in our human flesh, once for all time. Hence Augustine of Hippo wrote:

It was mainly for this purpose that Christ came, to wit, that man might know how much God loves him; and that he might learn this, to the intent that he might be enkindled to the love of Him by whom he was first loved, and might also love his neighbour.¹⁷

Is God's love opposed to His wrath? The cross is the one place where we see most clearly that it is not. They are all of a piece. God is love, and His wrath is the wrath of His love.¹⁸

THE SILENCE OF THE LAMB

One thing that is remarkable about Jesus' trial and suffering is how little he said. What he did say was highly significant and appropriate, but for the most part he remained silent:

The high priest stood up and said, 'Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?' But Jesus was silent (Matt. 26:62–63).

Then Pilate said to him, 'Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?' But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed (Matt. 27:13–14).

¹⁶ *NRSV* note; this is the better translation, according to J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1993), p. 513.

¹⁷ Quoted by Mackintosh, *Forgiveness*, p. 207.

¹⁸ The receiving and understanding of this, however, can come only by humble faith. After one sermon I preached, I received two opposite responses. One person said, 'You are always talking about God's wrath'. The other said, 'I've never heard anyone speak so much of the love of God as you do'!

This was in keeping with the prophecy:

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth (Isa. 53:7).

For the most part, the time for words was over. The task that Christ confronted was necessarily to be borne for the most part in silence. But it was by no means a silence of passivity, but a silence of great strength and power:

‘He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.’
When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly (1 Pet. 2:22–23).

At one stage, the silence of the man on the cross matched a silence from the heart of God—the silence of abandonment. During this time Jesus spoke not a word, but the word he spoke at the end of it gave some indication of what was going on in that silence:

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Mark 15:33–34).

Geoffrey Bingham depicts it this way:

After the mocking and the screaming hate, and the deafening ribaldry came the quietness. The glaring evil could not penetrate the iron wall of holiness about him and the deep pity of its love. They could draw no answer from him, no response equivalent to their hurting. It was not that he did not hear it, and that every accusation was not a barb, nor every vituperation an excruciating sting—it was! It was that his holy love opened its arms, as indeed those arms were pinned wide, and in them he embraced the filth and pollution, the suppurating evil of it, from men and fiends, from foes and friends, and took it to himself to both hug and destroy.

None could rescue it from him. It was as though a great maw opened within him and into it was poured the stain and the shame, the guilt and the degradation, the convulsions of sorrow, and it disappeared and was covered over.

As I have said, even the vilest thing fell silent, baffled and defeated by this unspeakable power, this simplicity of love, this tenderness of acceptance, this gentle glory of wounding . . .

The whole enormous world of evil fell into that maw of love, and was taken to its exhaustion, its destruction, its extinction. Even while it pitted its blows against him, and battered at the inner citadel of his pure mind and conscience, he let the strong pure waves of his love flow across it and still it for ever.¹⁹

We can give a study on the forgiveness of love that comes to us through the cross of Christ—and the word of the cross must be spoken and will do its work—but let us never think that in our choice and ordering of words we have the matter sewn up:

Whatever the meaning of the cross, at least it evokes awe and wonder. We perceive that it brings salvation, and we thank God for it, but we cannot measure or reduce it without remainder to conventional and manageable terms.²⁰

¹⁹ Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Bright Bird and Shining Sails*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1981, pp. 47–8.

²⁰ Mackintosh, *Forgiveness*, p. 195.

If silence—divine, strong and active—is at the heart of the mystery of our salvation in the cross, then we do well to recognise that the length, breadth, depth and height of the love of God is beyond words—‘Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!’ (2 Cor. 9:15)—and spend some time before it in humble silence ourselves.