

THE GOSPEL OF GOD

Study Five

FORGIVENESS OF SINS: LUKE 23–24

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IS GOD A FORGIVING GOD?

There is plenty in the Old Testament to say that God is a forgiving God. This lay at the heart of God's revelation of Himself to Moses:

The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin (Exod. 34:6–7).

We would like to stop there, but the Lord went on, in a way that raises more questions than it settles:

yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
and the children's children,
to the third and the fourth generation (Exod 34:7).

Earlier God had made it clear that this was 'to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me' (Exod. 20:5). We begin to sense that forgiveness is no light thing, and that human beings can be very recalcitrant with regard to it, in the face of the strong mercy of God. The very notion that we need forgiveness may be offensive to us. If we sense that we do need forgiveness, we may want it to be given to us as our right. Yet, perversely, we may object to our sins just being forgiven, without a certain amount of fuss being made over them.

However this may be, there are some remarkable statements and promises made with regard to the forgiveness of sins:

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits—
who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the Pit,

who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy . . .
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us (Ps. 103:2–3, 11–12).

Come now, let us argue it out,
says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be like snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool (Isa. 1:18).

No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the LORD,’ for 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. 31:34).

To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him, and have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God by following his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets (Dan. 9:9–10).

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity
and passing over the transgression
of the remnant of your possession?
He does not retain his anger forever,
because he delights in showing clemency.
He will again have compassion upon us;
he will tread our iniquities under foot.
You will cast all our sins
into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:18–19).

On the basis of some of these statements we might conclude that God is a forgiving God—that’s the way He is—so sin is of little consequence, because it can be easily forgiven by God, virtually with a wave of the hand. Yet in the end we are not satisfied with that—we may even come to disdain it. For we realise that sin—whether the ‘big’ things like terrorism, genocide, child abuse, relationship breakdown, or the little realisations that come of our own tawdry selfishness—none of these things can be dealt with lightly, or simply swept under the carpet.

While it is evident that forgiveness is part of God’s nature, we pick up also that God has anger against sin, and we may wonder how these are related. We pick up a clue from the instructions laid down for the day of atonement:

For on this day atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before the LORD (Lev. 16:30).

This involves elaborate yet simple and solemn ceremonies one day in the year involving the slaughter and release of animals and the sprinkling of blood. However forgiveness comes, we sense that it is no light matter.

Questions for Discussion

- *What encouragement do we have from coming to know that God is a forgiving God?*
- *What things about that give us pause to be concerned?*

- *What have we thought about the relationship between God's forgiveness of sin and God's anger against sin?*

JESUS AND FORGIVENESS

In the New Testament, we see that Jesus exercised a ministry of forgiveness:

And just then some people were carrying a paralyzed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven' (Matt. 9:2; compare Mark 2:5).

'I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.' Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven' (Luke 7:47–48).

These actions of Jesus caused consternation for some: 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' (Luke 7:49); 'Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?' (Mark 2:7); while others took heart:

When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings (Matt. 9:8).

Jesus even released from condemnation one whose sin under the law of God required the death penalty (see Deut. 22:22), when he said to 'a woman who had been caught in adultery':

Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again (John 8:3, 11).

While we may be glad to see the woman walk free, the question could still occur to us as to how this relates to the law of God, and whether this constitutes condoning of evil and sin. What does it take for a sin to be forgiven?

The question becomes even more pressing when we hear Jesus say:

this is my blood of the [new] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins (Matt. 26:28).

Why him? And why his blood? How is this effective for the forgiveness of sins? And who are the 'many'?

Questions for Discussion

- *While we may be used to hearing that 'Christ died for our sins', what impact might that statement have on a person who has never thought that way before?*
- *How might we explain or present this to such a person?*

CHRIST DIED FOR OUR SINS

We are going to trace the narrative of Jesus' death and resurrection as related by Luke. The gospel narratives of these events are, on the whole, fairly bald and unadorned, with little explanation. So before we do that, we will look at some of the statements in other parts of the New Testament, particularly the Letters, regarding these events, and then seek to discern the reality of what they say in the gospel narrative.

Paul the apostle's simplest presentation of his gospel message is in these words:

I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared (1 Cor. 15:3–5).

To die ‘for our sins’ must have meant that, as Peter says:

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 . . . For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God (1 Pet. 2:24; 3:18).

The language of ‘sacrifice’ is taken up in the letter to the Hebrews:

he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself . . . Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood (Heb. 9:26; 13:12).

Paul elsewhere gives a fuller explanation:

since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith (Rom. 3:23–25).

The words ‘sacrifice of atonement’ are in other versions translated ‘propitiation’—as that which settles the matter of God’s anger against sin and sinners and brings God into a propitious or favourable relationship with us. Later Paul goes on to say:

God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:3–4).

It becomes clear that this condemning of our sin in the flesh of Jesus entailed some deep identification of Jesus with us as sinners, and of us with him as righteous:

For our sake he [God] made him [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

It also meant that Jesus came under God’s anger against sin and bore the curse that is due to us:

For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law’ . . . Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (Gal. 3:10, 13–14).

This is consistent with Jesus’ own explanation of his death:

it is written, ‘I [God] will strike the shepherd [Christ], and the sheep will be scattered’ (Mark 14:27).

It is evident that such a deep and painful identification could come about only by great love:

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 [propitiation] for our sins (1 John 4:9–10)

As John recounted:

Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end (John 13:1).

All this language may still remain relatively inaccessible to us if we have not heard or understood it before. Nevertheless, we can sense that the apostolic writers are trying to convey to us something very important, and we can seek to remain open to what they are saying. We can also test what they say against the narrative of the events of Jesus' death and resurrection, and see if their explanations fit.

Questions for Discussion

- *What do we find puzzling or disturbing about some of these statements?*
- *What does that tell us about what is going on inside ourselves?*
- *What do we find about these statements that settles us or brings us peace?*

AN INNOCENT MAN

We take up Luke's account of these events:

Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, and said to them, 'You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. I will therefore have him flogged and release him.' Then they all shouted out together, 'Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!' (This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; but they kept shouting, 'Crucify, crucify him!' A third time he said to them, 'Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.' But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished (Luke 23:13–25).

It is evident from this that Jesus is innocent, and not deserving of death. Three times Pilate the governor asserts this. Yet the crowd, with murder in their hearts, insist on his execution, and Pilate sentences him to death. We could see this simply as a gross miscarriage of justice at the human level. But something higher is happening here. Jesus had said to Pilate, 'You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above' (John 19:11)—that is, from God. Jesus had prayed, 'Father . . . not my will but yours be done' (Luke 22:42), and all this is happening in answer to that prayer. Can we think the unthinkable: that God the Father is giving Jesus over to this undeserved death? Jesus has no sin of his own to answer for, and so is not there on his own account. Yet God is putting him there, so on whose account is he there? For me? For you? What does that tell us about God, about Jesus, and about ourselves?

When tourists enter the Catacomb underground church at Coober Pedy, South Australia, they are invited to switch on the lights so they can see. When they do so, immediately a spotlight comes on over a rough cross made of mulga wood against the back wall. When this happened, one tourist cried out: 'Jesus died for his own sins, not for mine!' It is not known why he felt he needed to say that. On the basis of Luke's account so far, that is one thing we cannot say. So what is going on?

Questions for Discussion

- *Was God the Father giving Jesus over to undeserved death?*
- *Why would someone want to say, 'Jesus died for his own sins, not for mine!'?*

WEEP FOR YOURSELVES

A sense of dread foreboding comes over those who watch:

As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, "Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed." Then they will begin to say to the mountains, "Fall on us"; and to the hills, "Cover us." For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?' (Luke 23:26–31).

Jesus' words to the women alert us that something terrible is happening here—perhaps a worse crime than anything ever perpetrated—with fearful consequences. Are we not implicated somehow as well? If this is what we human beings are capable of doing to a perfectly innocent person—or to God in whose name he has come!—where do we stand now? If this is what we do at the best of times, what will we do when the bushfires strike the tinder-dry scrub in the fierce hot summer winds? What is all this for?

Question for Discussion

- *Can we hold ourselves aloof from this? Or are we implicated too?*

'FATHER, FORGIVE THEM'

We now come to the heart of what is happening here:

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:32–34).

This is not just nice thought or a heroic prayer. This gives us a clue as to why Jesus is going through this. It is so there will be forgiveness. It is to remove the separation, the antipathy, between us, who would do such things, and God. It is to give us direct access to God and his love and glory. Jesus is praying: Father, do all that is necessary in me to make this possible. Forgiveness cannot come by God condoning sin.¹ God can never say, 'That's all right' to sin and sinners. It's got to go deeper than that. Sin and sinners need to be judged and dealt with. Jesus is asking here for that total, radical, cleansing, redirecting judgement, that is our only true forgiveness, to happen in him, and to us in him.

¹ Seen as a clue in a crossword puzzle: 'forgive'. The solution: 'condone'! No!

Is he making excuses for us when he says, ‘they do not know what they are doing’? Not at all—in fact the opposite. He is saying: They are so far gone in evil they don’t even realise what they are doing—Father, make it so that there is forgiveness for them even in that!

Questions for Discussion

- *How do we hear those words ‘Father, forgive them’ for ourselves? As a rebuke? As an imposition? As an impossibility? As a relief? As love?*

‘SAVE YOURSELF!’

Intense pressure comes on the one committed to saving others to abandon that and save himself:

And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!’ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’ There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’ (Luke 23:34–39).

Three times, from three different directions, comes the taunt, ‘Save yourself!’ Especially if he is the Messiah, who was expected not to die but to live forever (see John 12:34). Saving ourselves at the expense of others is to participate in the essence of sin. It is not as if he couldn’t call upon his Father to send immediately twelve legions of angels to rescue him (see Matt. 26:53). But save himself was the one thing he would never do. Why not? Because he was not there for himself, but for someone more important to him than himself. Was it you? Was it me?

Questions for Discussion

- *What experience have we had of looking after ourselves rather than others, or of putting our own safety before theirs?*
- *What does it mean to us to have Jesus put us and our needs before his own?*

JESUS, REMEMBER ME

Before it is all over, we see the forgiveness already coming into operation:

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ He replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise’ (Luke 23:39–43).

Other gospels tell us that both the criminals taunted Jesus (see Mark 15:32; Matt. 27:44). So this one has a remarkable change of heart. From living a life for himself, opposed to any authority but his own, to fearing God. From railing against his sentence of condemnation to

accepting it as deserved. From taunting Jesus to honouring him as one who ‘has done nothing wrong’. From one who, being a thief, had no inheritance in the kingdom of God (see 1 Cor. 6:9–11) to one who fully desired to be there, face to face with the King—and was accepted! This is the gift of repentance and the forgiveness of sins, in full, for ever.

Questions for Discussion

- *Do we look for forgiveness that is total and lasting, or would we rather look for something more partial—a measure of relief or a halfway house to help us on our way?*
- *Where does total forgiveness leave us in relationship with the King?*

THE COST AND THE TRIUMPH

What makes all of this possible, and what that meant personally for Jesus, and what the outcome is, are alluded to in the barest of terms:

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’ Having said this, he breathed his last (Luke 23:44–46).

We are not told here what the darkness and the failing of the sun’s light meant. In other accounts Jesus cries out at the end of the three hours of darkness: ‘My God, my God, why did you abandon me?’ This indicates what he had been going through. The Father had given him over to our sin and the deadly outworking of its judgements (see Rom. 8:32; compare Rom. 1:24, 26, 28).² God took him to the terrible place of final judgement on all of sinful humanity, and left him there, until it had all been expended and complete.

As a result, the separation between God and us, signified by the curtain blocking the entrance to the holiest inner chamber of the temple was ripped apart ‘from top to bottom’ (Mark 15:38)—by no human hand, giving us unrestricted access to God and all His glory. Jesus’ final words show that the trusting relationship with the Father is still fully intact, and open to us all. He and his completed work are fully approved and accepted by the Father, and in him so are we.

Questions for Discussion

- *Does any provision other than this fully and rightly deal with and settle the matter of human sin and sinners?*
- *Can we, in the light of this, entrust ourselves fully to God?*

RESPONSES NEAR AND FAR

The varied responses of those watching indicate possible levels of response that we can take:

² The same word *παρέδωκεν* *paredōken* is used in each of these places. This is also the word used for Judas betraying Jesus or handing him over to the authorities (see Mark 3:19).

When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, ‘Certainly this man was innocent.’ And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things (Luke 23:47–49).

There are those who turn away, beating their breasts—as well they might. But perhaps they remain in this state of self-condemnation and guilt. There are those acquainted with him, who still keep their distance. And there is the centurion who oversaw the execution, who comes out with the astounding statement: ‘Certainly this man was innocent’! The realisation came to him that he had been responsible for putting to death an innocent man. What would that do to us? We would expect him then to be filled with regret, shame, remorse and self-accusation. Instead he ‘praised God’. Praised God that he had murdered an innocent man? Surely not! A greater realisation had come: God had made it so that this executed one in his righteous innocence had borne and taken away the unrighteousness of sinners—this unjust executor included! Along with us.

Knowing that forgiveness of sins comes only through the death and resurrection of the Messiah raises important questions about the nature of sin, and the way forgiveness comes and is received, and how we are to live in it and proclaim it. This takes us into areas of righteousness, judgment, wrath, mercy and steadfast love that many only skim the surface of.

Many may be glad for forgiveness to come, paracetamol-wise, as a relief from pain and guilt, and we may be glad to be able to administer it that way. This can leave the inner person unchanged underneath—a very dangerous combination. Even when we take into account issues of wrath and judgment, we can still speak of the action of forgiveness at one remove—as something that happened to our sins, but not to us.

God’s word is clear: the sinner must die.³ Paul says, ‘I have been crucified with Christ’ (Gal. 2:19) and ‘you have died’ (Col.3:3). We cannot just stand back and watch. We are drawn into it—albeit unwillingly, not of our own wills (see John 1:13). ‘If we have died with him, we will also live with him’ (2 Tim. 2:11)—and not otherwise. If Jesus died on the cross, and we did not, then we are still walking around as unregenerate sinners, and the best any so-called ‘gospel’ can do with that is damage control.

The gospel that speaks of forgiveness as the death of the sinner will never be attractive to unforgiven sinners, and its messenger will come under fire from them. But for those on whom the Holy Spirit lays it in the gospel-word that comes, it is life and joy.

Questions for Discussion

- *At which level of response would we characterise ourselves?*
- *At which level has God placed us?*

REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS OF SINS IS TO BE PROCLAIMED

In appearances after his resurrection from death Jesus made plain that all this was ‘according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God’ (Acts 2:23), as declared previously in the Scriptures:

‘Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures (Luke 24:26–27).

³ See Ezekiel 18:20: ‘The person who sins shall die’; compare Gen. 2:17; Rom. 5:12; 6:23; Eph. 2:1, 5; James 1:15.

As a result of what has now happened, repentance and forgiveness of sins has come to be for all. Those caught up in it are to proclaim it to others, in the power that comes from God:

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high (Luke 24:45–49).

So has it happened ever since, and so we do.

Forgiveness, total forgiveness,
What joy to know we have no past,
For all our failure is fully dealt with,
The cross has made us free at last.

Jesus, He took our place there,
The Father judged our sin in Him,
The debt is paid now, the anguish ended,
For all of those who trust in Him.

And as He is, so are we in this world.

Because it’s gone now, our guilt is gone now,
Satan’s accusing can find no hold,
The Father sees us as pure and holy,
His wandering sheep back in the fold.

Father, He is our Father,
And how we love to do His will.
By grace adopted into His family,
And called his love for all to tell.

So let us sing of His glorious grace.

For He is worthy, this one is worthy,
Of all our love, of all our praise,
And now we love Him, we will obey Him,
And give Him thanks through all our days.

O, Father, we will worship You, evermore.

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