

OUT OF THE DEPTHS: GOD'S FORGIVENESS OF SIN

Study Three

JESUS AND THE FORGIVENESS OF SIN

Martin Bleby

'I AM A SINFUL MAN!'

In these studies we have begun to see that we cannot know what sin is, or what forgiveness is, except by revelation from God. This is not just because as sinners we are self-deceived and self-justifying. Forgiveness lies at the heart of the very 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

So true forgiveness, and what it addresses, can come to us rightly only as we are met by God revealing Himself to us.

This was Peter's experience, after Jesus had used Peter's boat to sit in and teach the crowds on the shore:

And when he had ceased speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.' And Simon answered, 'Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.' And when they had done this, they enclosed a great shoal of fish; and as their nets were breaking, they beckoned to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.' For he was astonished, and all that were with him, at the catch of fish which they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men.' And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him (Luke 5:4–11, RSV).

Jesus gave Peter what would touch any fisherman's heart—two boatloads of fish. Peter experienced God in generosity towards him—'abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness'—as he had never before. And so he became aware of himself as a sinner as he never had

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

been before: ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord’. Peter would not have come to this of his own accord. It was something about the presence and action of Jesus in person that brought this about. Forgiveness as such is not mentioned here. But there is something here that goes beyond forgiveness and presupposes it: enlistment in God’s work of catching people into the net of God’s love. This is a powerful happening.

We are reminded of Isaiah’s experience when he ‘saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up’ in holiness and glory:

I said: ‘Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!’ (Isa. 6:1, 5 RSV).

This is a response that no person would come to naturally, especially one who may well have been a court official and chronicler.² Here forgiveness is quite explicit:

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out’ (Isa. 6:6–7).

Both the condemnation and the forgiveness of sin are brought about in the overpowering presence and action of the holy God. Without this, Isaiah would have remained ignorant of both.

Similarly David, confronted by the word of the Lord in the parable and its application related by the Lord’s prophet Nathan, came to full admission of guilt, and received full remission of sin:

David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the LORD.’ Nathan said to David, ‘Now the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die’ (2 Sam. 12:13).

Before this intervention, David considered himself in the right, even to having his anger ‘greatly kindled’ at another person who supposedly had committed a similar sin (see 2 Sam. 12:1–6).

In each of these instances, there is something full, thoroughgoing, clear and clean. David’s response in Psalm 51 typifies the attitude:

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me . . .
You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow . . .
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me (Ps. 51:2–3, 6–7, 10).

Apart from the revelatory saving action of God, human ‘repentance’ will have the mixed and self-concerned character of remorse, which changes nothing, and may serve to entrench and harden inner resistance:

For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death (2 Cor. 7:10).

² See 2 Chron. 26:22; 32:32; see J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1993, p. 286.

In contrast, this true repentance is invariably God-concerned. David had sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah, and had harmed himself and his kingdom. But what comes through to David in this saving revelatory moment is: ‘I have sinned against the LORD’—whose condemnation is received as just:

Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment (Ps. 51:4).

So also spoke the robber on the cross, as he hung beside the innocent Jesus and heard his prayer for forgiveness:

And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong (Luke 23:41).

There was something strong and penetrating about Jesus’ own person—his forthright righteousness and unimpeachable holiness—that, without letting the guilty go free, brought mercy through to people in God’s own steadfast love and faithfulness. Indeed, when the apostle John says, ‘The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ’ (John 1:17), the Greek words for ‘grace’ and ‘truth’ (*charis* and *alētheia*) roughly correspond to the Hebrew words for ‘steadfast love’ and ‘faithfulness’ (*chesed* and *emeth*), to which the law of Moses testifies (as in Exod. 34:6). What is at the heart of the nature of God comes in person in Jesus, and has its powerful immediate effects.

It follows from this that there is nothing outside of God or apart from Jesus that can rightly testify to and bring into effect true repentance and forgiveness of sin:

It is a transcendent act to which the normal operations and processes of phenomenal reality are inadequate. Such an act cannot at all be described by formulas indicative of mechanical or immutable sequences; for . . . it represents the immediate entrance of God into our life to inaugurate a new attitude in which He and we shall henceforth stand to each other.³

This means that in our evangelising and preaching and teaching, we should never assume that people really know what sin is, or will understand and welcome a message of forgiveness. Some cultures have no words for sin, repentance or forgiveness—the closest some might come to them might be in notions of crime, being found out, cultural shame, and having punishment applied or remitted. It is possible that what we think of as sin, outside of a revelatory encounter with God, and our expectation of the kind of forgiveness that would deal with it, fall very far from the mark. For us, sin may be the falling short of certain standards we have set ourselves, and forgiveness may be whatever compensation we decide may put the matter right for us. To tell people that they can have ‘forgiveness’ for what they might already regard as their ‘sins’, without them coming to a confrontation with the living God, may still be a million miles from knowing God’s forgiveness of their sins, and may even serve to inure them against it.

Jesus said that when the Holy Spirit comes to ‘convict the world of [or prove the wrong about] sin’ it will be ‘because they do not believe in me’ (John 16:8, 9). That is the last thing that unbelievers, or even some who claim to be believers, would regard as most culpable. But, according to this, not believing in Jesus is the very thing that will prevent us from ever knowing what sin is, or from coming to forgiveness with regard to it.

³ H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness*, Nisbet & Co. Ltd., London, 1927, p. 181.

The very notion of forgiveness is an affront. It presupposes something that needs to be forgiven, and so is inherently judgemental and condemning. One of my own reactions to hearing a preacher once speak on Jesus' words, 'Father, forgive them . . .' was: 'Why would he need to pray that for me? What have I got that needs to be forgiven?'⁴ Only as God Himself comes in Christ to a person will there be clean and clear repentance and forgiveness of sin as it really is.

Even then—or especially then—we will never get to the bottom of it:

If atonement be the act of God, it has in it the unfathomable quality of God Himself. 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 it or reduce it without remainder to conventional and manageable terms.⁵

That is why 'God has not dictated to us, even in the New Testament, any final theory of His reconciling work':

The truth about atonement, like all truth in Christianity, is discoverable and verifiable only through submission to Jesus' power to set us right with God.⁶

Attempts to explain it rationally and neatly may be part of a refusal to come to this. We are pushed to stand before Jesus Christ.

Questions for Discussion:

- *What have we known of sin and forgiveness as a revelatory saving encounter with God?*
- *What notions of 'sin' and 'forgiveness' have we had or are we aware of outside of such an encounter? In what ways are they different?*
- *What makes conviction of sin and the gift of forgiveness a prerogative of the Holy Spirit, and what does this have to do with believing in Jesus?*

WHO CAN FORGIVE SINS BUT GOD ALONE?

Early in his ministry, Jesus established the priority of forgiveness in his ministry of healing:

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.' Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 'Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?' At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Stand up and take your mat and walk"?' But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins—he said to

⁴ The other simultaneous reaction was: 'My sins can't just be forgiven, just like that! There'll need to be a bit of fuss made over them!' The contradictory nature of these two simultaneous reactions is an obvious instance of the sinner's darkened mind.

⁵ Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness*, p. 195.

⁶ Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness*, pp. 194, 193.

the paralytic—‘I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.’ And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this!’ (Mark 2:1–12).

The reaction of the scribes is, ‘Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ The implied answer is, ‘No one’. What did they mean by that, and is this true? We are not obliged to take what the scribes say as infallible. They were at this time opposed to Jesus, and were inclined to find fault with him. They may also have misread the situation. Jesus did not say, ‘I forgive your sins’; he said ‘Son, your sins are forgiven’. So Jesus was not making any explicit claim to be the God who forgives sins.⁷ Even so, the scribes were probably right in taking it that Jesus was speaking at this time on behalf of God. That would be borne out by what Jesus said on another occasion: ‘The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works’ (John 14:10). Jesus does go on to say that ‘the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’ (Mark 2:10), and this relates to what John says: ‘the Father . . . has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man’ (John 5:26–27). This was, then, an instance of the forgiveness of God coming into the life of a human being, at Jesus’ say so. This, along with the healing that corroborated it, was sufficiently unusual to occasion a marked response:

. . . they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this!’ (Mark 2:12).

Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, ‘We have seen strange things today’ (Luke 5:26).

If sin is essentially against God—as David said, ‘Against you, you alone, have I sinned’ (Ps. 51:4)—then forgiveness will need to come from God alone. So, in the Old Testament, application for forgiveness is made directly to God. Abraham questioned God with regard to the forgiveness of Sodom and Gomorrah (see Gen. 18:24, 26). Moses asked God to forgive the sin of the Israelites (see Exod. 32:32; 34:9; Num. 14:19–20). Solomon prayed to God to forgive the people who turn to Him in connection with the temple (see 1 Kings 8:30, 34, 36, 39), and God undertook to do that (see 2 Chron. 7:14). Direct appeal for forgiveness is made to God in the Psalms (see Ps. 19:12; 25:11, 18; 32:5; 65:3; 79:9; 85:2), in Job (Job 7:21), and in the prophets (see Dan. 9:19; Hos. 14:2; Amos 7:2).

The patriarch Joseph had a most full and natural understanding of God’s forgiveness, following the death of his father Jacob:

Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph’s brothers said, ‘What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?’ So they approached Joseph, saying, ‘Your father gave this instruction before he died, “Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.” Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.’ Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, ‘We are here as your slaves.’ But Joseph said to them, ‘Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.’ In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them (Gen. 50:15–21).

Joseph’s brothers fabricate a story designed to ensure that Joseph will forgive what they did to him many years before. Joseph’s response is, in effect: ‘Forgive? Who do you think I am—God?’ This is not a refusal to forgive them on the part of Joseph. Forgiving his brothers

⁷ John Stott maintains that it was part of ‘Christ’s claim to deity’ that ‘Jesus forgave sinners’ (John R. W. Stott, *Basic Christianity*, Inter-Varsity Press, London, 1971, p. 29).

has long since ceased to be an issue for Joseph, as over the years he has seen what they did to him subsumed into God's kindness and favour towards him and so towards them and their whole families. This the brothers have consistently failed to see and appreciate, giving way rather to fear and guilty apprehension of the worst (see Gen. 42:21–22, 28, 35; 43:16–23; 45:3). Joseph reassures them by testifying to what God has been doing in this situation, and by treating them with the kindness he has experienced from God. This, I believe, is the true context in which we must view our forgiveness of each other: 'be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you' (Eph. 4:32). The point we make here, however, is that true forgiveness is constituted from 'God alone'.

Elsewhere in the Old Testament, general or universally available forgiveness of sins (as distinct from just particular instances) is something promised and looked forward to. In the prophet Jeremiah, it is contingent upon finding one person who is just and true:

Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look around and take note! Search its squares and see if you can find one person who acts justly and seeks truth—so that I may pardon Jerusalem (Jer. 5:1).

However, the possibility of pardon seems remote:

How can I pardon you? Your children have forsaken me, and have sworn by those who are no gods. When I fed them to the full, they committed adultery and trooped to the houses of prostitutes (Jer. 5:7).

Yet, despite the broken covenant on Israel's part, God promises a new covenant that will have forgiveness at its heart, through direct personal relationship with God:

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).

I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me (Jer. 33:8).

In those days and at that time, says the LORD, the iniquity of Israel shall be sought, and there shall be none; and the sins of Judah, and none shall be found; for I will pardon the remnant that I have spared (Jer. 50:20).

This perhaps accounts for the excitement and large following that occurred when 'John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Mark 1:4). God's promised forgiveness was at hand!

The amazed response to what Jesus did with the paralysed man indicates that something new and powerful was happening in the ministry of Jesus. That which had been in God—promised and appropriated from time to time in the Old Testament—was now abroad and active in the human scene, and was happening through a human person. This was the lasting impression made on the crowd in Matthew's account:

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).

That the bringing of this forgiveness was not restricted solely to God and to Jesus became clear after Jesus' resurrection, when Jesus said to his disciples:

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 (Luke 24:46–48).

Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained (John 20:22–23).

God's forgiveness was on the march among human beings!

Questions for Discussion:

- *Why did the scribes consider it blasphemy when Jesus said, 'Son, your sins are forgiven'?*
- *What was Joseph's appreciation of God's forgiveness?*
- *What differences are there between forgiveness given in the Old Testament and the forgiveness abroad in the New Testament?*

ABUNDANT LOVE

One other instance of Jesus pronouncing the forgiveness of sins highlights the abundant love that is poured out in this gift:

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.' Jesus spoke up and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' 'Teacher,' he replied, 'Speak.' 'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?' Simon answered, 'I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, 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.' But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace' (Luke 7:36–50).

Which comes first: the woman's love, or her forgiveness? Is her display of love that which prevails upon Jesus to say, 'Your sins are forgiven'? This translation makes the order clear: 'her sins, which were many, *have been* forgiven; *hence* she has shown great love'—she was showing much love because (presumably some time before she came in) she had already received the forgiveness of all her many sins. The parable Jesus told clinches it: the one who is forgiven more loves more—the love follows upon the forgiveness. Even so, Jesus does reassure her directly, after all this has happened, that her sins have indeed been forgiven, that her faith is on the right track, and that she can go in peace. Even after forgiveness has come to us, we often need that reassurance.

The emphasis here is on the abundance of love. The outpouring of the woman's tears, sufficient to wash a man's feet, her drying of his feet with her long hair, her continued kissing of his feet, and her profuse anointing of his feet with ointment, is an extravagant and sensuous action. Whatever Simon and the others might think, Jesus is not fazed by it. He recognises that she has come into the extravagant and abundant love of the heavenly Father

through the forgiveness of sins, and her affectionate gratitude and outpoured love are correspondingly great. The fullness and freedom of her response is a tangible sign of the great love that has come to her. Compare what the apostle Paul says:

... the grace of our Lord *overflowed* for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 1:14).

... God, who is *rich in mercy*, out of the *great love* with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the *immeasurable riches of his grace* in *kindness* toward us in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:4–7).

In Luke 7 Jesus contrasts the woman's generosity of spirit with the meanness of one who has been 'forgiven little'—presumably because he had little that he thought needed forgiveness (yet in that meanness showed how much he needed it!).

There are varying accounts of a similar incident in each of the other three gospels (see Matt. 26:6–13; Mark 14:3–9; John 12:1–8). None of those mention the forgiveness of sin. Each of them is placed in close proximity with the cross, and is linked with it by Jesus' words: 'she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial' (Mark 14:8). It seems that this woman, unlike the other disciples, had an intuition that Jesus would soon suffer a violent death and a hasty burial, and so came beforehand to administer the last rites and pay her final respects. But in the lavishness of her ministrations—John says, 'The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume' (John 12:3)—she was also testifying to an abundant love and blessing that would be in that terrible action. Thus Jesus acknowledged that what she had done expressed the heart of the gospel of God: 'wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her' (Mark 14:9).

In the next study we will seek to trace how this is so in the action of the cross, prepared in the heart of God from before the foundation of the world. We may well find that this action could come from nowhere else but the heart of God—no one else could possibly have dreamed it up, and no sense can be made of it otherwise. We may also find, however, that we can never come to the end of the mystery—any more than we can finally fathom the person we have been married to for many years!

Again, the wise man will look with suspicion on theories of atonement which are only too complete. There is in the Christian mind an instinctive revolt from easy and shallow views. We rightly suspect all interpretations of a simplicity so transparent as to render it an insoluble problem why great minds in every age should have pondered over the *mysterium crucis* [the mystery of the cross].⁸

There can be a time in our lives when we feel the need to work it all out. With that can go a need to convince everyone else that we are right.⁹ This may leave us a little impatient with those who humbly ponder the mystery. But there also comes a time when our greatest need, for our own and for others' sake, is simply to 'know him who is from the beginning' (1 John 2:13, 14). For this to be so, we need to revisit, and never leave, the place where His heart is laid bare.

Questions for Discussion:

- *What is the connection between the extravagant love shown towards Jesus by the woman in Luke 7:36–50 and the forgiveness of sins that she received?*
- *Why is it that 'the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little' (Luke 7:47)?*

⁸ Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness*, p. 195.

⁹ See Martin Bleby, *The Vinedresser: An Anglican Meets Wrath and Grace*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1985, pp. 5–6, 10–11.

- *What is the attraction of ‘easy and shallow views’ of the atonement ‘which are only too complete’? What is it that makes us suspect or be dissatisfied with them—or embrace them?*