

May 21, 2006

Being Forgiven, Feeling Forgiven, Wanting Evidence of Forgiveness

Psalm 32:1-5 / Luke 7:36-50 / Job 7:17-21

Solomon once wrote: "There is nothing new under the sun." And in today's passage we find a prime example of that. Because what we find in this text, is Job wrestling intensely (over 3000 years ago!) with the very same thing I myself, and nearly every other Christian I've ever known has wrestled with at one time or another, to one degree or another — The yearning to be forgiven.

And not just "yearning to be forgiven," but what forgiveness IS / what forgiveness FEELS LIKE / and what forgiveness LOOKS LIKE in terms of how it evidences itself in tangible, visible ways in our circumstances and our life situation.

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You see, what Job struggles with in today's passage is the fact that he doesn't FEEL forgiven. Better yet, he doesn't SEE any visible, tangible evidence that he has been forgiven—though as a believer he knows God forgives confessed sin.

Like many Christians today, he wonders if he can really BE forgiven if he doesn't FEEL forgiven — for if one truly IS forgiven, shouldn't they FEEL like they are? Shouldn't that forgiveness be attended by some type of inner sense of release from guilt, or peace with God, or joyful liberation from feelings of shame, and remorse, and regret? Shouldn't the forgiven soul feel a heavy burden lifted from it when forgiveness occurs, a burden never to return?

And likewise,

If one truly IS forgiven, shouldn't there be some type of tangible evidence of that forgiveness — something they can literally point to — which in Job's case would obviously be the removal of his affliction?

If he's been forgiven, shouldn't part and parcel of that forgiveness be the restoration of his physical health? Shouldn't forgiveness trigger a noticeable change in one's life situation—like the removal of the painful consequences of whatever sinful act they have committed?

In fact, isn't that what Job's friends have been looking for all along—proof that he's repented, and thus been forgiven, which in their minds, would be evidenced by the removal of his affliction.

And by asking such questions, or making such assertions, Job and his friends drive us to consider the gospel—which is (at its very center and core) a message about forgiveness—

what it IS / how we can KNOW we've received it / and what EVIDENCES we can look for (if any) to confirm the reality that we've received it.

In fact, as Mike Mason correctly points out:

*“Much of the purpose of the New Testament epistles is to help Christians — people who have already placed their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ — to gain assurance, and thus enter fully into the joy of their salvation.”* That is, gain assurance of their forgiveness and thus enter into the joy of their salvation.

He's right you know. Even the truly saved person who has been justified, and accepted, and reconciled to God, is not able to experience the joy that salvation was meant to impart, nor experience significant growth in holiness, or victory over sin, so long as they are UNSURE of the fact that God has forgiven them.

As Horatius Bonar so truthfully and insightfully put it:

*“Forgiveness of sins, in believing God’s testimony to the finished propitiation of the cross, is not simply indispensable to a holy life, in the way of removing terror and liberating the soul from the pressure of guilt, but of imparting an impulse, and a motive, and a power which nothing else could do... a complete forgiveness, presented in such a way as to carry its own certainty along with it to everyone who will take it at the hands of God—this is a power in the earth, a power against self, a power over the flesh, a power for holiness, such as no amount of suspense or terror could create...”*

Which leads me to ask YOU: Do you know you're forgiven? Do you have that blessed and earnestly sought after ASSURANCE of forgiveness which the N.T. epistles seek so hard to convince you of? And if you do, can I ask what that assurance is grounded in?

Is it grounded on something so sure and so unchangeable that it would hold up under a flood of trials? Could you go through what Job went through, and still remain convinced (despite the constant insinuations of people like his friends)—that you are a forgiven, accepted, pardoned child of God whom He cherishes and delights in—even if everything you held dear was taken from you, and you suffered prolonged agony like Job?

You see, most people I know struggle (on occasion) with the assurance that they're forgiven. They struggle to believe that God really sees them as “whiter than snow.” That he has wiped their slate clean, and remembers their sins no more—daily giving them a fresh start, and refusing to hold any of their sins against them.

Some people I've spoken with couldn't fully accept that they're forgiven, because they felt they did something so horrible to another person, that it can't fully be forgiven. They injured, or maimed, or emotionally scared, or abused someone else who still suffers from the consequences of what they did, and so they feel it's not possible to be forgiven while that person is still suffering as a result.

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I remember reading of the struggle of a young 11 or 12 year old mid-western farm girl who was helping her dad by driving the tractor. It was a happy scene, until she mistakenly hit the gas peddle instead of the brake, and the tractor ran up onto the porch of the house, pinning her younger sister against the wall. And despite all her tears and pleadings and the efforts of her parents to save her sister, she died. And years later, writing as an adult Christian woman with kids of her own, she confessed how she still struggled to believe God had really forgiven her.

I've seen the same thing in regard to women who have had abortions / people who have been fooling around behind the wheel of a car only to lose control and hit someone / or people who said something very hurtful to someone they loved, only to have that person pass away before they could apologize or reconcile with them.

Such experiences make it hard, even for the earnest Christian, to believe that God has totally forgiven them and wiped that event from the record books of heaven. That it has absolutely no bearing whatsoever on how much He now loves, and cherishes and delights in, and unreservedly accepts them. They are indelibly etched into their memory like "little film clips" that replay over and over and over again—only to fill your heart with pain, disappointment, and shame each time you think of them.

**It's not unusual.** In fact, it's more common than you think. Christians who struggle with memories they wish they could erase / words they wish they'd never said and could now take back / things they wouldn't have done, or would have done differently if they'd only known what they now know, or had foreseen the hurtful consequences of their actions ahead of time — some of which were not sinful (like the girl on the tractor).

Have you ever done that? Have you ever wished you could go back and relive a certain day, or a certain hour, or maybe only a certain minute, so that things would have turned out differently than they have? As a pastor I've talked with many people over the years who have wished they could do so.

Yet you know what such a desire really is? It's an indication that to some degree, they don't really believe they are TOTALLY forgiven. That the slate's been wiped clean! That there's no "black mark" next to our name in God's book. That in the eyes of God, it's as if it had never happened!

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Maybe that's why Psalmist can say: "Blessed is the man whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him." It's a pair of verses Paul uses in explaining the Gospel in Romans 4:7-8, where he talks about what it means to have the righteousness of Christ credited to us—a righteousness that comes to us APART FROM WORKS—that is, apart from doing them, or having failed to do them, or having done something terribly wrong.

And notice, he didn't say, "Blessed are those who have never done anything significantly wrong, for their consciences will be clean." No! He's not talking about a blessedness that stems from a clear conscience, or an exemplary past performance. He's talking about a blessedness that stems from a forgiven past performance — even though that performance may have been pitiful or even wicked. Blessed is the person whom God has forgiven.

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You see, one of the main reasons why people struggle to believe they're forgiven, and often fail to FEEL forgiven, is because they are looking to the WRONG things for the EVIDENCE and ASSURANCE of that forgiveness.

That was obviously the case with Job in this passage. When he says in verse 21: "Why do you not pardon my offenses, and forgive my sins?"— is easy to see what he's looking for to convince him that he's been forgiven. It's the removal of his affliction. He's basically saying, "I'll know when God has forgiven me, when He takes away these painful sores and restores my health."

**BUT IS THAT TRUE? NO!** Not at all! WHY? Because his afflictions didn't come upon him as a punishment for some particular sin! Hard as it is to fathom, they came upon him because God was super-pleased with him! God delighted in Job! Like a proud dad, God says to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, there is no one on earth like him; he is a blameless and upright man who fears God and shuns evil."

And since his afflictions were NOT divine punishment for some sin he had committed, the removal of those afflictions could in no way be considered PROOF of a forgiveness granted by God for a sin Job hadn't committed!!!

And **LISTEN**: Neither Job nor I myself, are in any way suggesting he's sinless! To be blameless and upright merely means that a person is "innocent of willful, premeditated sins, or great transgression," as we read in Psalm 19. A blameless person is a person who has no glaring, stand out, in your face type of character defects, or sinful habits.

And I say that because some have taken verse 20 to suggest that Job thinks he's sinless, where he says, "If I have sinned..." But that's not true! In fact, the word "If" doesn't even appear in the Hebrew, and thus the phrase would best be translated, "I have sinned, [but] what have I done to you, O Watcher of men?"

It's Job's way of saying what thousands of other sufferers have said down through the ages. It's his way of saying: "I know I'm a sinner! I know very well that I sin all the time just like everyone else."

Something Job doesn't question at all! No, his question is this: "What specific, horrible, particular sin have I committed (above and beyond what all other men do) that has brought this unequalled suffering upon me as opposed to them? You're the Watcher of men. You know all men sin! And you know that many of those men sin far worse than I do! So why is it that you've made ME in particular your target? What specific thing have I done, which in comparison to other men, is so horrible that I've been singled out to suffer so intensely for it?" That's what he means! In the context, he denies having committed THAT type of sin.

You see, since afflictions are not always punishment for some particular sin (as in Job's case) their removal cannot be regarded as PROOF of one's forgiveness! I've known earnest saints who suffered immensely (though forgiven). Yet like Job, because they suffered so intensely, they doubted that they truly were forgiven.

And I've also known wicked people who lived in such comfort, that if their circumstances were the proof of forgiveness, one would have to assume they were forgiven, even though they remained arrogant, blasphemous, unrepentant, God-hating sinners till the end.

Job was one of the former. He was a forgiven person who suffered intensely though forgiven. He was a "righteous man." And in the Bible, a "righteous man" is one who is counted righteous by receiving in faith the righteousness of God that comes from Him as a gift credited to them by faith.

Paul picks up that whole theme in Romans chapters 1- 4. Sinners CANNOT be considered "righteous"— they cannot be "justified" on the basis of any righteousness in themselves, since

such righteousness is always flawed, and stained with sin, and therefore unrighteous righteousness! Which is why they must have the perfect righteousness of God credited to their account by faith, or be eternally lost!

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And that was true even in the Old Testament, which is why one of the O.T names of God was:  
*“The Lord OUR Righteousness”* (Jer. 23:6, and 33:16).  
 Or *“The Lord who is Himself OUR righteousness.”*

Likewise the Psalmist says, “But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord’s love is with those who fear Him, and His righteousness with their children’s children...” (Psalm 103:17). Whose righteousness? God’s flawless righteousness!

“In the Lord alone are righteousness and strength,” says Isaiah, “In the LORD all the descendants of Israel will be found righteous (literally “counted righteous” or “justified”) and will exult” (Is. 45:24-25). And how does one come to be “in the LORD”? By trusting in Him—the only one in whom we find righteousness and strength. It’s just another example of justification by faith in the O.T.!

“I delight greatly in the LORD,” says Isaiah, “my soul rejoices in my God. For He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness...” (That is, God places the robe of His own impeccable righteousness upon the believer, thereby making him righteous by imputing to him His own flawless righteousness!) (Is. 61:10).

Likewise, we are told way back in Genesis 15:6 that Abraham: “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” The term “credited” is a financial term. It is having something counted to be ours, before we actually possess it. It’s like having a spiritual credit card.

When you get a Credit Card, Visa, or Citibank, or whoever, extends to you a \$7500 “line of credit.” You don’t have the money. It’s neither in your hand, nor in your bank account! But the company credits it to your account, and you can use it as if you did have it in your hand (even though you don’t)!

That’s what God did for Abraham. Abraham was NOT righteous—he was a sinner just like everyone else! He wasn’t chosen because he was righteous! He was chosen and then MADE righteous by trusting God, who then credited His own perfect righteousness to Abraham’s account. He was counted righteous, even though he was not truly righteous in and of himself!

And the same is true for us: God credits His own perfect righteousness to us the moment we believe! "These words, 'it was credited to him,' says Paul in Romans 4:23-24, "were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead."

And that, my friends, is the Gospel! God credits His perfect righteousness to anyone who will "believe in the Lord Jesus Christ," OR, "believe in Him who raised our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead," as Paul here puts it. Something that was as true for Job as it is for us — yet something that he, and we also, often lose sight of. And when we do, we lose with it the assurance of our forgiveness.

And here you're probably all sitting there saying:

"Ok, Jeff, how did we get from the topic of forgiveness to the topic of imputed righteousness, or the righteousness of Christ credited to the believers account? What does all that have to do with FORGIVENESS?"

**And the answer? EVERYTHING!** For in Rom. 4:6 Paul speaks of "the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works" and immediately quotes Psalm 32:1-2, "Blessed is the man whose transgressions are forgiven..." Showing us that in Paul's mind, forgiveness comes by having Christ's righteousness credited to one's stead.

So quickly, let me show you how the righteousness of God or the righteousness of Christ, credited or imputed to us by faith, tells us: 1.) What forgiveness is, and 2.) How it is the only way we can have an unshakable assurance that it is ours.

So **FIRST** — What forgiveness is. Paul tells us that in having the righteousness of Christ credited to us, we are thereby "justified." And the word justified means, "to be declared not guilty in regard to sin."

In a court of law, after a person's innocence was established, the judge would stand up and declare before all, "The accused is JUSTIFIED. I find him, NOT GUILTY. He is a free man and absolved of all charges against him. He is freed from all liability and punishment for the crime of which he was accused."

Of course, in regard to the Gospel, it's a bit different. Because in the Gospel, God doesn't declare us "justified" or "not guilty" on the basis of our INNOCENCE. Rather, as SINNERS truly guilty of violating His law, He pronounces us "not guilty" despite the fact that we are guilty!

The Law proves us guilty, and yet in spite of our actual guilt, God by His grace, chooses to pardon us and declare us righteous and not guilty on the grounds that some-one else already bore in His own body the full penalty for every one of our sins and evil deeds—without exception. There is not one sin we have committed, or will commit, that Jesus did not already die to forgive.

**LISTEN**: The punishment for every one of your sins was already paid in full by Jesus Christ, when your guilt for them was imputed to Him, and taking upon Himself all the guilt for all your sins, He died for each one, in your place, as your substitute, so as to absolve you from all culpability, and any liability to punishment, or condemnation for ANY OF THEM..

THAT IS WHAT FORGIVENESS IS — being truly and actually guilty (and worthy of the severest punishment for every single sin), and yet on the basis of Christ's death for your sin, having God release you from ALL liability to condemnation and punishment for EVERY SINGLE SIN—past, present, and future—no sin, no matter how horrible, being excepted.

It doesn't matter what you have done, or how many times you have done it, if you have trusted in Jesus you are ENTIRELY forgiven. And the only way to suggest you are not, is to suggest that the sacrifice of Jesus was NOT sufficient to pay the penalty for all your sins. It is to say that His work on the cross was INADEQUATE, and thus in actuality, to DISBELIEVE the gospel! (Showing us that it is possible to believe in Jesus and not believe the Gospel.)

Don't do it, my friends! When Jesus said, "It is finished," He meant it! His atoning work was DONE, and TOTALLY sufficient to pay the penalty for every sin any believer would ever commit!

And then **LAST**, how can we have an unshakable assurance that we ARE forgiven, and thereby be kept from looking to FALSE EVIDENCES that can only make our forgiveness LESS certain?

The answer again rests in the righteousness of Christ credited to us by faith, or better yet, it rests in what the righteousness of Christ credited to us by faith consists of.

And here, George Whitefield tells us what it does consist of:

*"(Jesus)," he says, "obeyed, and thereby fulfilled the whole moral law in our stead; and also died a painful death upon the cross, becoming a curse for, or instead of, those whom the Father had given Him... Being God and man in one person, he wrought out a full, perfect, and sufficient righteousness for all to whom it was to be imputed. Here, then, we see the meaning of the word righteousness. It implies the active as well as passive obedience of the Lord Jesus Christ. We generally, when talking of the merits of*

*Christ, only mention the latter, that is, His death; whereas the former, that is, His life of active obedience is equally necessary. Christ is not such a Savior as becomes us, unless we join both together. Christ not only died, but lived; not only suffered but obeyed for, or instead of, poor sinners. And both these jointly make up that complete righteousness which is to be imputed (or credited) to us."*

So, what is the "righteousness" God credits to us? It is the perfect obedience accrued by Him in His LIFE, and the complete pardon of every one of our sins secured for us by His DEATH—a 100% pardon for every sin I ever have or will commit, and a flawless obedience that compensates for, or "covers," every one of my disobediences! When I trust in Christ God credits both those things to me. That is His promise!

"These words, 'it was credited to him,' were written not for him alone," says Paul, "but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—(that is, 100% pardon for every sin, and flawless perfect obedience to cover every one of your disobediences)"

If you HAVE trusted in Christ, or if you WILL trust in Christ, these gifts are yours! Irrevocably yours! You possess them (God be praised) even if on occasion, you like Job, don't FEEL that you do!

People of faith don't rely on feelings, they trust in promises! If you have to feel forgiven, to be forgiven, then you'll never be assured of your forgiveness, for feelings come and go at the drop of a dime!

**You don't have to feel anything**—you merely need to believe God's promise that when you look to Christ in faith, HIS righteousness is credited to you. And it's yours—you possess it by divine decree—even if you don't feel a thing!

And I'm NOT saying you won't occasionally feel it when a burden of guilt and shame is lifted from the conscience. But I am saying that the one who depends on those feelings for their assurance of forgiveness will never be sure of it. It can only feed uncertainty!

The same is true of tears, or remorse, or contrition, or any other godly fruit. For who is to say you've ever done enough, or done it well enough, or done it long enough and purely enough to ensure forgiveness?

The person who looks to anything other than the promise of God to credit to them the merits of Christ's righteousness as a gift of grace, will never be sure of their forgiveness—ever! Especially when things go sour, and trials abound. Every other way of trying to assure myself of my forgiveness only makes me more uncertain!

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My friends, if you have trusted in Jesus for your forgiveness, you **ARE** forgiven! It's yours, even if you like Job, don't feel a thing, or even if you like Job feel that ***JUST THE OPPOSITE IS TRUE*** because of your circumstances.

It's yours, as a gift secured for you by Christ, and credited to you by faith. And that's why you can **KNOW** it's yours—because it doesn't depend on **YOU** or your performance, or what happening to you, but on what Christ did for you, and God's promise to give it to you if you will only look to Him in faith!