

FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

The meaning of forgiveness

In Scripture, ‘forgiveness’ occurs whenever humans who have violated God’s will cry out for and receive his mercy. It is different from mercy itself, which is God’s staying his hand of deserved judgment. He has mercy to some extent on all people (*cf. Matt. 5:45), but not all people are forgiven in a full and saving sense. Forgiveness begins with the acknowledgment of one’s guilt (1 John 1:9) in God’s eyes. It is completed when the offender is restored to full fellowship with God, experiencing his healing love, and with other people, to the extent this is possible (Matt. 5:23–24; Rom. 12:18).

The terminology of forgiveness

The frequent occurrence of ‘forgiveness’ and its cognates in Scripture points to its importance (NIV, 150 occurrences; RSV, 153). To this can be added occurrences of the closely related word ‘pardon’ and related forms (NIV, 7; RSV, 24).

In the OT, the major Hebrew words for ‘forgiveness’, and their basic meaning, are as follows: *slh*. (to forgive, pardon, send away), *ns’* (to bear, take away), *kpr* (to cover), *mhb* (to wipe away), and *ksb* (to cover). The Septuagint translators found it necessary to expand this vocabulary considerably, and use nearly twenty words and expressions: *aphiemi* (to forgive, e.g. Gen. 50:17a), *dechomai* (to receive, pardon, e.g. Gen. 50:17b), *prosdechomai* (to accept, pardon, e.g. Exod. 10:17) *aphaireō* (to take away, e.g. Exod. 34:7), *hileōs einai* (to be favourably inclined, propitious, e.g. Num. 14:20), *exhilaskomai* (to propitiate, make atonement, e.g. Num. 15:28), *euilatenō* (to be merciful, e.g. Deut. 29:20), *aniemi* (to forgive, e.g. Josh. 24:19), *airō* (to forgive, e.g. 1 Sam. 15:25), *hilaskomai* (to pardon, be merciful, e.g. 2 Kgs. 5:18), *katharizō* (to cleanse, e.g. Ps. 19:12), *euilatos ginesthai* (to be merciful, e.g. Ps. 99:8), *hilasmos* (expiation, atonement, e.g. Ps. 130:4), *athōō* (to let go unpunished, hold guiltless, e.g. Jer. 18:23), *hilatenō* (to be gracious, Dan. 9:19), *lambanō* (to remove, e.g. Hos. 14:2), *hyperbainō* (to overlook intentionally, e.g. Mic. 7:18), and *apoluō* (to acquit, remove; used with this connotation in OT apocrypha only, e.g. 3 Maccabees 7:7). Three of these terms are Septuagint neologisms (words occurring only in the LXX and works based on it): *euilatenō*; *athōō*; *hilatenō*. The vocabulary of forgiveness is complex and rich in both the Hebrew and the Greek OT.

The NT uses a much more limited selection of words. Most common is *aphiemi* (used with the theological connotation of ‘forgiving’ some forty times), which is the chief verb for ‘forgive’ found in the Gospels (but see Luke 6:37) and the only one found in James (5:15) and 1 John (1:9; 2:12). Less frequent but characteristic of Paul is *charizomai* (to grant grace to, forgive, e.g. Eph. 4:32); Paul may have been the first to use the word in this sense (see Shogren in *ABD* 2, p. 835). Luke uses the unusual *apoluō* (to pardon) in 6:37. The lone noun for forgiveness in the NT is *aphesis* (*e.g. Mark 3:29; Heb. 10:18), often used in the phrase ‘forgiveness of sins’ (*e.g. Matt. 26:28; Luke 1:77; Acts 2:38; 5:31; Col. 1:14).

The language of forgiveness in the OT history of redemption

The reality of forgiveness is often present in Scripture when explicit words for it are absent. It could be that God extended forgiveness to Adam and Eve when he covered them after the Fall (Gen. 3:21). He forgave Noah and his kin in order to spare them from the flood (Gen. 6:17–18). Covenant promises to Noah and his descendants (Gen. 9:8–11), made in the wake of sacrifices (Gen. 8:20), imply forgiveness; so also the promises to Abraham (Gen. 15:1–18). Having faith credited as righteousness (Gen. 15:6) bespeaks full pardon for sin, a point made and enlarged on by Paul (Rom. 4:1–16). While forgiveness was implicitly present prior to and during the patriarchal period, the first explicit mention of forgiveness in the OT is in the story of Joseph. His brothers relate the news (true or not) that their father Jacob’s dying wish was for Joseph to forgive them (Gen. 50:17). Joseph not only forswears revenge but expresses love and benevolence towards them (Gen. 50:19–21). These are hallmarks of true forgiveness.

Forgiveness is prominent in the life and legislation of Moses. Pharaoh asks Moses to forgive him and to pray that God might halt the plague of locusts (Exod. 10:17); humanity's awareness of the need for divine forgiveness is universal and not limited to God's chosen people. Moses warns the people that rebellion against God's angel will not be forgiven, since the angel bears God's own Name (Exod. 23:21); people are not to presume on God's forgiveness. Forgiveness is frequently mentioned in the cultic sections of the Pentateuch, where animal sacrifice is said to atone for sin, resulting in forgiveness for the worshipper (*e.g. Lev. 4:20, 26, 31, 35; cf. P. House, *Old Testament Theology*, pp. 128–133). Through the OT sacrificial system forgiveness was freely promised and granted, provided that the worshipper approached the altar with a contrite heart expressed in the shedding of the blood of a suitable victim (N. Kiuchi, in *TynB* 50, pp. 23–31). In Moses' writings God is portrayed as 'maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin' (Exod. 34:7, NIV; cf. Num. 14:18). At the same time, those who turn away from God, who say 'I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way' (Deut. 29:19), must expect not forgiveness but rejection: 'The LORD will never be willing to forgive him; his wrath and zeal will burn against that man' (Deut. 29:20; cf. Jesus' reference to unforgivable sin [Mark 3:28–29; Matt. 12:31–32; Luke 12:10]). Forgiveness can be sought in prayer and granted by God, however, even when God's people as a whole are ripe for judgment (Num. 14:19–20).

God's willingness to forgive and the need for his people to seek forgiveness are prominent themes throughout the OT's historical books. Nehemiah echoes Moses' words regarding God's gracious, compassionate, and forgiving nature (Neh. 9:17). Solomon mentions God's forgiveness numerous times in his prayer at the dedication of the temple (1 Kgs. 8:30, 34, 36, 39, 50; cf. 2 Chr. 6:21, 25, 27, 30, 39). God responds with a promise to forgive his people when they humble themselves, pray, seek him and turn from their evil ways (2 Chr. 7:14).

The prophets dramatize two truths about forgiveness. One is that God is indeed a forgiving God, pardoning his people's sins in the long run even if judgment is necessary in the present (Dan. 9:9; Is. 33:24; Jer. 33:8; 50:20; Mic. 7:18). The other is that while God's patience and forbearance are vast, they have limits. There comes a time when forgiveness is no longer possible (Jer. 5:7; Hos. 1:6; cf. Josh. 24:19; 2 Kgs. 24:4).

The Psalms are perhaps the capstone of the OT's eloquent testimony to the God who forgives. The psalmist has found the only source of forgiveness and cries out to the Lord in order to receive it (Pss. 19:12; 25:11; 32:5; 65:3; 78:38). David's famous beatitude becomes a foundational truth for Paul a millennium later: 'Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered' (Ps. 32:1; cf. Rom. 4:7). God's forgiveness is not inconsistent with his punishment; both together constitute his loving guidance and care for his covenant people (Ps. 99:8; cf. 130:4), whether as individuals (like the various psalmists) or as a corporate body.

An important bridge between OT and NT is the God who forgives; the famous 'new covenant' passage in Jeremiah looks ahead to a time when the Lord will forgive his people's wickedness and remember their sins no more (Jer. 31:34). That time was graphically and explicitly foreshadowed in the OT, but came only with Jesus.

Intertestamental testimony to the need and possibility of divine forgiveness

Jesus did not enter a world ignorant of the need and possibility of forgiveness. Even pagan writers were aware of the problem of human sin (Horace, *Odes* 3.6), though they offer little help in solving it. Stoic appeals to reason's greatness were counsels of despair given the impersonal and mechanistic Stoic cosmology, and in any case resignation, not forgiveness, was the Stoic means of dealing with intransigent people or difficult circumstances. Most Jewish writers concurred with Philo (*On the Unchangeableness of God* 16.75) that 'there has never been a single man who, by his own unassisted power, has run the whole course of his life, from the beginning to the end, without stumbling'. The sense of need for forgiveness was present (though as understood in a Christian sense, not prominent, *contra* Charlesworth in *ABD* 2, pp. 833–835) in the Jewish world out of which the early church emerged.

A Qumran document speaks of perfect compliance with the law of Moses, the intentional violation of which leads to expulsion from the community for ever (*Rule of the Community* 8.20–9.2). Yet the same document expresses the hope that God will pardon sins through 'the greatness of his goodness' (11.11–15). Another pre-NT Jewish writing extols God's 'forgiveness for those who turn to him', promises forgiveness 'in the hour of [God's] visitation', and praises God's mercy and 'his forgiveness for those who turn to him!' (Ecclus. 18:19–21;

17:29; cf. 2:11). But in those documents God is said to judge according to works, not by the grace that Abraham's faith affirmed (Ecclus. 16:11–14), which implies that forgiveness is in part a matter of human merit (*cf. Ecclus. 28:2). Low-born people may be forgiven, but not rulers (Wisdom of Solomon 6:6).

One of the clearest Jewish expressions of the need for forgiveness is the Prayer of Manasseh 7: 'Thou, O Lord, according to thy great goodness hast promised repentance and forgiveness to those who have sinned against thee ...' The prayer is fictional rather than historical, but it shows that a hope for divine absolution of guilt before God existed at the time of Christ's appearing. The same hope surfaces in Luke 1–2 as numerous figures await 'the redemption of Jerusalem' (Luke 2:38) that the Christ child's arrival signified.

Forgiveness in the NT history of redemption

The messianic expectation presupposed particularly by Matthew and Luke is of a Christ who will win forgiveness for sinners; 'he will save his people from their sins', says the angel of the Lord (Matt. 1:21). Zechariah prophesies that Jesus will give God's 'people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins' (Luke 1:77). The message of the cross that would achieve forgiveness was latent in the pronouncements that attended the nativity. N. T. Wright's claim, that 'to a first-century Jew' forgiveness of sins 'is not in the first instance the remission of individual sins, but the putting away of the whole nation's sins' (**The New Testament and the People of God*, p. 273), is hardly compelling; the body politic that looked sincerely for corporate deliverance was the sum total of individuals maintaining dogged hope in their (personal) covenant God, e.g. Zechariah, Elizabeth, Joseph, Mary, Simeon, and Anna (Luke 1–2).

Forgiveness (of individuals and thereby, if at all, of the nation) was prominent in Jesus' earthly ministry. John the Baptist laid a foundation by 'preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Mark 1:4). Forgiveness is mentioned in the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:12 par.), and is the subject of both instruction and parable (Matt. 18:15–35). But Jesus not only taught forgiveness; he also granted it (Matt. 9:2), to the displeasure of sceptical listeners, who pointed out that only God can forgive sin (Matt. 9:3; cf. Mark 2:7). He prayed for forgiveness for his persecutors as he hung on the cross (Luke 23:34). The blood he shed there would be, he declared, 'my blood of the covenant ... poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (Matt. 26:28). After his resurrection he granted special authority to the apostles to remit sins (John 20:23); perhaps this was exercised particularly in gospel preaching and early church discipline. The story of Jesus' life, from infancy to ascension, is dominated by the account of his mission to provide forgiveness.

That forgiveness was proclaimed repeatedly during the several decades spanned by the book of Acts, which reports that the core of the apostolic preaching was 'forgiveness of sins' (2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18; cf. 8:22; see also C. Stenschke, in *Witness to the Gospel*, pp. 132–135). 'Forgiveness' as a theological term is relatively rare in Paul, whose preferred term *dikaioσynē* (righteousness, 58 times in the Pauline corpus) includes the less comprehensive concept of 'forgiveness'. But forgiveness is assumed as a *conditio sine qua non* of Christian fellowship (2 Cor. 2:7), a condition which Paul himself sought to satisfy (2 Cor. 2:10). In two of his prison letters Paul defines redemption in terms of 'the forgiveness of sins' (Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14), and in the same epistles he deduces the necessity of forgiveness among Christians from the fact that 'in Christ God forgave' them (Eph. 4:32). Therefore Christians are to forgive as the Lord forgave them (Col. 3:13). In Romans 3:25 God is said to have presented Christ as an atoning sacrifice 'to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance [*parensis*] he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished'. *Parensis* is however a stay of judgement, not full forgiveness. Paul tells the Lycaonians that in past times God 'let all nations go their own way' (Acts 14:16; cf. Acts 17:30), thus testifying to a God who forgives, but not extending the status of 'forgiven' to his listeners unless they accept his message.

Hebrews expresses the doctrine of forgiveness inasmuch as it centres on Christ's priestly ministry. The word itself, however, appears only in a quotation from Jeremiah 31:34 (Heb. 8:12), in a statement of the OT law's requirement for blood to be shed in order for sin to be forgiven (Heb. 9:22), and in a summary statement explaining the results of Christ's death; God forgives the sinful acts and guilt of those who put their trust in the gospel message, so that continuing sacrifice for sin is no longer required (Heb. 10:18). John's first epistle states that forgiveness follows confession and is not granted to those who deny their personal sinfulness (1 John 1:9–10). But though confession is important, sins are forgiven not because of a human act but because of 'the name' of the one who has won forgiveness (1 John 2:12).

The means and goal of forgiveness

‘But if there is anything in the whole of religion that we should most certainly know, we ought most closely to grasp by what reason, with what law, under what condition, with what ease or difficulty, forgiveness of sins may be obtained!’ (Calvin, *Institutes* III. iv. 2).

The objective means of forgiveness is Christ’s atoning death on the cross: ‘He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross’ (Col. 2:13–14). The OT belief that God provides both the atoning sacrifice (Lev. 17:11: ‘“I have given [the sacrifice] to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar”’) and the resulting forgiveness is a fundamental assumption of the NT writers. They appeal to it every time they describe the death of Christ as the payment for sin which sinners themselves could never have made. As for the OT saints, Hebrews declares that OT sacrifices for sin, while sufficient to mediate God’s grace to them (note the high status accorded to OT believers in Heb. 11), looked ahead to a final and climactic priestly gesture, one in which the high priest both presided over and was himself the ultimate sacrifice for sins (Heb. 10:11–12). The whole Bible proclaims a single objective means of forgiveness.

The subjective means of forgiveness have been disputed by different schools of interpretation through the centuries. According to the NT, the first means is faith, *i.e.* informed personal trust. A person hears of or otherwise discerns what Paul calls ‘God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature’ (Rom. 1:20), and is led to accept the message of Christ’s death for sin, not merely as a general truth, but as a fact of personal significance. The person comes to understand something of God’s holiness and his or her own abject unworthiness. This personal, compliant apprehension of God in his holiness may thereupon lead immediately to repentance, the only sane response when sinful flesh glimpses transcendent holiness (**cf. e.g.* Job 42:5–6; Is. 6:5; Luke 5:8; Rev. 1:17). Following the person’s acknowledgment of his or her guilt—not a merely academic admission but a plea for transformation supported by deeds (**cf. e.g.* Zacchaeus’ example, Luke 19:8)—forgiveness is granted (Luke 19:9; *cf.* 1 John 1:9). The process of forgiveness may therefore be summarized as faith—repentance—forgiveness.

The goal of forgiveness is far broader than the individual sinner’s rescue from eschatological woe, though that is a benefit not to be minimized. Forgiveness fully appropriated should result in the renewal of the will (Rom. 6:17–18). The forgiven person is more motivated and able to live a holy life, which comprises a comprehensive and growing trust in and love for God, love for others, and heartfelt compliance with God’s commands (see *e.g.* 1 John *passim*). Love is the goal of all Christian instruction (Matt. 22:37–40; 1 Tim. 1:5), and love as modelled by Christ (**cf.* 1 John 2:6) follows from forgiveness, as sinners estranged from God and other humans are cleansed from guilt and their broken fellowship is restored. Other goals of forgiveness, corollaries of divine love, include humble regard for others (Matt. 7:1–5; Titus 3:1–5), engagement in Christian mission to the world (Matt. 28:18–20; Jude 21–23), and the eternal praise of God. Such praise is mentioned in numerous passages in which his mercy or covenant love (the basis of forgiveness) is extolled (**e.g.* Ps. 136; Rom. 11:32–33; 15:9; 1 Pet. 1:3).

The double fruit of forgiveness: reconciliation with God and with others

‘Reconciliation’ in Scripture pertains most directly to the atonement proper, but it also has direct links with the idea of forgiveness. It may be defined as the restoration of fellowship between estranged parties.

The word is rare in (if not absent from) many modern translations of the OT (**e.g.* NIV; but see NRSV 1 Sam. 29:4). The concept is however present throughout the OT as God speaks and acts to fulfil the promise of Genesis 3:15, to abolish the enmity (alienation, estrangement) that sin introduced into human existence, both between God and humanity and in human relationships.

OT apocryphal writings foreshadow the NT use, with theological connotations of the ‘reconcile’ word family. But in 2 Maccabees 1:5 (**cf.* 2 Macc. 5:20) God is said to be reconciled to sinners; in canonical Scripture sinners are reconciled to God. 3 Maccabees 5:13 calls God ‘easily reconciled’ (*enkatalaktos*); this implies not only that it is God who is reconciled, but that the process of reconciliation is unproblematic; the NT stresses the great cost involved in the reconciling sacrifice of God’s own Son.

The word ‘reconcile’ and its cognates occur some sixteen times in the NT, mostly in Paul’s writings, where they are found in three clusters. In the first, Paul stresses that believers were reconciled to God through Christ’s death while they were still ‘God’s enemies’; this is a ground for rejoicing (Rom. 5:10–11). In the second, Paul calls the whole gospel ministry of apostolate and church ‘the ministry of reconciliation’ (2 Cor. 5:18); it is grounded in the fact that ‘God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them’ (2 Cor. 5:19). It is therefore incumbent on Paul’s readers to ‘be reconciled to God’ (2 Cor. 5:20). A third cluster of Pauline references is found in the prison epistles. In one passage Paul stresses the outcome of God’s saving work in Christ, *i.e.* sanctification, through which believers are presented to God ‘holy and without blemish and without reproach’ (Col. 1:22, author’s translation). In another he focuses on the universal scope of the blessedness (‘peace’) effected by Christ’s cross (Col. 1:20). In yet another he underlines the social dimension of Christ’s death; by it Jew and Gentile, paradigmatic for all humankind and the fractured creation, are made into ‘one new man ... through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility’ (Eph. 2:15–16).

The words that Paul uses (the noun *katallagē* and verb *katallassō* in Romans and 2 Corinthians, the verb *apokatallassō* in Colossians and Ephesians) all connote the estrangement between God and humans being brought to an end through Christ. The alternative is a needlessly barren (and contentious) life in this age and divine judgment in the age to come.

Jesus points to the need to be reconciled (*diallassomai*) ‘to your brother’ as a precondition of true worship (Matt. 5:23–24). He implies that his listeners should be reconciled (*apallassō*) to God in the light of the signs of the times (Luke 12:58; *cf.* vv. 54–59).

The correlation of forgiveness and reconciliation

While there is always much good in God’s world for which to be thankful, the 20th century ended on the same note of social disintegration, strife, warfare and religious persecution that characterized the whole century. Reconciliation, realized in concrete acts of human forgiveness, whether between individuals or between groups, seems to be increasingly rare. *De facto* tribalism and ethnic feuding are rampant and highly destructive, in places too numerous to list. Atrocities that forgiveness might have averted have been seen in virtually every part of the world. A recent study concludes that ‘churches have rarely exercised their ministry of reconciliation’ (G. Baum and H. Wells (eds.), *The Reconciliation of Peoples*, p. 185). It also asserts (p. 189) that ‘the process of reconciliation demands ... conversion, a change of mind and heart’.

Only where Christ’s death for sin is taken with apostolic seriousness can the rains of divine restoration wash human hate away and moisten seeds of love. The prospects for real and lasting forgiveness in the many trouble spots of the postmodern world depend on the grace God grants as the gospel of his reconciling Son is proclaimed, believed and applied.

See also: ATONEMENT.

Bibliography

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