

Forgiveness

1. God forgives

Geoff Henstock

This short series of articles considers the vital subject of forgiveness, in three parts:

Part 1. *The human need for forgiveness, the willingness of God to extend forgiveness and the fact that God's forgiveness is conditional.*

Part 2. *Forgiveness must be sought of God, with sins being repented of.*

Part 3. *If we wish to be forgiven by God we must forgive others.*

WHEN GOD created Adam, He saw he was alone, and, concluding that it was not good for man to dwell alone (Gen. 2:18), He created Eve to provide companionship for Adam and to allow him to produce a family and eventually a community. Adam and Eve were specifically commanded to reproduce (1:26-28), a command which predates the fall so it has nothing to do with the need to counteract the effect of the curse of sin and death. It is clear it was God's intention that large numbers of people should eventually exist. From the very beginning it was part of the Divine model for men and women to live in communities and to interact with others.

Living with others inevitably leads at times to friction and conflict, in view of our mortal state blighted by sin. It was not good for man to dwell alone, but dwelling with others inevitably means there will be clashes. This is as it should be; such difficulties develop our character and help us grow and mature. Learning how to resolve disputes and conflict is an important skill we must develop as we mature. Being able to forgive is vital if men and women are to live productive and happy lives while coping with the disappointments and trials that are their lot as mortal descendents of Adam and Eve.

God forgives

It was God Who determined we should live in communities, and it not surprising, then, that a willingness to forgive is a fundamental attribute of Almighty God. Moses describes the character of God in Exodus 34:6,7 in well-known words

which are a revelation of God's Name. This revelation was in response to a request from Moses that God should reveal His glory. In reply, God said He would show Moses His goodness and proclaim His Name:

"And he [Moses] said, I beseech Thee, shew me Thy glory. And he said, I will make all My goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy" (33:18,19).

We can see from this statement that God's glory is to do with His grace and mercy. God's glory is in essence moral rather than physical, which perhaps is contrary to how we might normally think of glory, and perhaps

how Moses thought of it.

In John 1 the Lord Jesus Christ is introduced as the Word made flesh. This concept of "the Word" (Gk. *logos*) embodies the plan and purpose of God; it speaks of His purpose expressed. In language which clearly harked back to Exodus, John described the Lord Jesus Christ in these terms: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth" (v. 14). The Lord Jesus Christ manifested God's glory, and this glory is what was revealed to Moses in Exodus 34.

In Exodus 34 God fulfilled the promise He made to Moses to reveal His glory. God made man in His image, and it is God's desire that man should reflect His character. Jesus manifested his Father's glory, and so must we if we wish to be sons and daughters of Almighty God. Forgiveness is a key element of the character of God:

"And the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation" (vv. 5-7).

Verse 6 says the Creator is merciful, gracious and longsuffering. These are all attributes of one

who is willing and able to forgive. And so verse 7 goes on to emphasise that our God does forgive. He “keep[s] mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin”. This threefold expression of God’s forgiveness in verse 7 is not just vain repetition. It reflects the richness of the Hebrew language in relation to sin, for there are many Hebrew terms for transgression. More importantly, however, it highlights the point that there is no limit to His forgiveness. God is not one who forgives only certain types of wrong. “Iniquity, transgression and sin” are all able to be forgiven.

God not indifferent to sin

But God’s willingness to forgive does not mean God does not care about wrongdoing. On the contrary, He is implacably opposed to sin in all its forms. Exodus 34:7 goes on to make the point that God will not forgive the guilty. God’s abundant grace does not compromise His righteousness. Salvation is offered to all, but only if they repent and turn from their wicked ways.

This is a vital point. Our God is a just God. He will not “clear the guilty”, or “leave the guilty unpunished”, as the NIV says. The point Moses makes is that God’s forgiveness is not unconditional. We may not presume upon God’s forgiveness. He is merciful and longsuffering, but only under certain conditions.

Mercy and grace are intrinsic to Almighty God; it is His glory. But there is no mention of God’s awesome power in this revelation. The passage speaks only of moral qualities. Of course, the Israelites had witnessed abundant evidence of God’s power to deliver His people. This was the generation who had escaped from Egypt, who had crossed the Red Sea only to see it close over and destroy Pharaoh’s pursuing army. If God could save His people from the living death they endured in Egypt it should have been obvious He could save them from sin and death.

Moses recognised the truth of this. The revelation of the glory of God’s character led Moses to intercede on behalf of the people. He immediately invoked the forgiveness of God on behalf of the nation:

“And Moses made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped. And he said, If now I have found grace in Thy sight, O Lord, let my Lord, I pray Thee, go among us; for it is a stiffnecked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Thine inheritance (vv. 8,9).

Note the language of verse 8: “Moses made haste”; there was no delay or prevarication. In verse 9 he besought God to extend forgiveness to His wayward people. This is a model for us. When we are reminded of the fact of God’s graciousness and willingness to forgive, it ought to generate an immediate desire to secure that forgiveness.

Forgiveness and the power of God

In Numbers 14 we see the same principle enunciated in language very similar to Exodus, but in that place Moses develops the subject and adds an important element. In Numbers 14 the faithless spies had just convinced Israel to turn their back on the promises of God and in effect declare they had no faith in God’s power to save. This angered God and He threatened to smite the nation:

“And the LORD said unto Moses, How long will this people provoke Me? and how long will it be ere they believe Me, for all the signs which I have shewed among them? I will smite them with the pestilence, and disinherit them, and will make of thee a greater nation and mightier than they” (vv. 11,12).

God could have used His incomparable power to snuff out the Israelites in an instant, as He did with the Egyptian host, but Moses appealed to Him to be gracious. In verse 13 Moses once again intervened on behalf of the people, and in verse 17 appealed to God to exercise His power, not in destruction, but in grace and mercy:

“And now, I beseech Thee, let the power of my Lord be great, according as Thou hast spoken, saying, The LORD is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression, and by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation. Pardon, I beseech Thee, the iniquity of this people according unto the greatness of Thy mercy, and as Thou hast forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now” (vv. 17-19).

Forgiveness is the great power of God. What a profound revelation! This takes us back to the language of Exodus 34. God graciously extended mercy to Israel. In Numbers 14:20,21 God linked His act of pardon with His glory: “And the LORD said, I have pardoned according to thy word: but as truly as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD”.

God would pardon the nation. His purpose would not be frustrated by the failure of man. And verse 21 points out that, in the end, His glory will fill the earth in spite of the failure of man in

the meantime. When will the earth be full of the glory of God? When it is filled with those who have been forgiven by God. But God went on to confirm He would not clear the guilty:

“Because all those men which have seen My glory, and My miracles, which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have tempted Me now these ten times, and have not hearkened to My voice; surely they shall not see the land which I swore unto their fathers, neither shall any of them that provoked Me see it: but My servant Caleb, because he had another spirit with him, and hath followed Me fully, him will I bring into the land whereinto he went; and his seed shall possess it” (vv. 22-24).

God is just. He was willing to pardon the people for their wickedness, but He would not

clear the guilty. The rebellious will not find a place in the Promised Land. Caleb was singled out for a special blessing, but the majority who were faithless still faced the consequences of their wickedness.

God is willing to forgive or pardon, but that does not mean we will be spared the consequences of our action. A man might commit a criminal act and later repent and ask God for forgiveness. We may be certain God will forgive, but the man will still be liable for the consequences of his crime, be it in the form of a fine, imprisonment or whatever. In Romans 6:23 Paul wrote, “the wages of sin is death”. This is universally true. Sinners who repent are forgiven, but they still reap the wages of their sin and die.

[\(To be continued\)](#)

Moses: earth's meekest man

18. Glory and shame

John Mitchell

The children of Israel, having received the Law, pledge obedience to it, but soon lapse into idolatry while Moses is in Mount Sinai receiving further revelations.

THE TRANSACTIONS that took place on Horeb's height were the supreme encounters with God experienced both by the nation of Israel and by Moses their prophet. The Apostle Paul, in reviewing the privileges that their nation had enjoyed at the hand of Yahweh, listed them as follows: being entrusted with the oracles of God; entering into covenant relationship with Him; becoming His peculiar treasure above all people; being given God's Law; and glimpsing God's glory (albeit mainly through cloud and fire) (Rom. 3:2; 9:4). These facets were all experienced at Sinai. And, despite their ill-usage of Moses at the time, he, as their intermediary in all the glory, became the one on whom the nation ever afterwards looked with pride as their greatest prophet.

Moses the mediator

Only the Ten Commandments were conveyed by the voice of Yahweh at Mount Sinai, and this so terrified the people that they pleaded henceforth that Moses should speak to them, not the

Almighty. Thereafter, with Divine approval, Moses became their intermediary with God in an intimacy so close as to be “face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend” (Ex. 33:11). Not until the coming of the Son of God did man have so privileged a relationship again.

Nor was Moses' experience a ‘one-off’ that lasted for only an hour or a day. The ‘Ten Words’ were only a beginning. Over a period of forty days, when the proper relationship with Yahweh had been established, the commandments were filled out with God's Law covering all aspects of affairs between God and man, man and man, and the welfare of the nation as a whole. There has never been anything like it in all the jurisprudence of mankind, nor in the manner in which it was given.

Having been invested with the office of mediator, Moses drew near to the dark cloud where God was, while the people stood aloof, and he received a series of precepts in extension of the commandments, and for the making of an altar on which to offer the nation's sacrifices. Those precepts, too numerous to go into here, ended with an assurance that God's angel would go before them and bring them into the Promised