

God and Forgiveness



Sabbath Afternoon

MEMORY TEXT: “God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

HE WAS ONE OF THE MOST GRUESOME MURDERERS in American history. Jeffrey Dahmer had sexually abused, then murdered (and cannibalized), 17 young men. His crimes shocked the world. How could anyone, who walked on two legs and had opposable thumbs, sink so low? Dahmer, in his own macabre way, personified the words of Russian poet Joseph Brodsky, who wrote: “Man is more frightening than his skeleton.”

Yet, Jeffrey Dahmer had, in the last months of his life (he was murdered by fellow inmates), repented, been baptized, and openly professed faith in Jesus Christ, who, while we were yet sinners, died for us—a death that would include, one assumes, Jeffrey Dahmer. Because there was no chance of Mr. Dahmer being freed, his profession of faith did not come with the taint of dubious motives: He was not leaving prison, no matter what he believed.

Though God alone knows Mr. Dahmer’s heart, his story brings to light one of the most amazing of all Bible truths: God’s willingness to forgive even the worst of sinners.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: When did God start loving us? Did the Cross create God’s love for humanity? What role does confession have in the plan of salvation? Why is it necessary for sinners to confess before God? Is God’s love and willingness to forgive sin and evil greater than sin and evil themselves?

*Please study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 5.

AN ETERNAL LOVE.

The salvation of the human race does not result from a divine afterthought; our redemption hasn’t arisen from some sort of heavenly improvisation made necessary because of the unexpected rise of sin. On the contrary, God’s love for sinners existed even before there were sinners, even before the foundation of this world. We are saved by a God whose love for us is rooted in eternity. That concept is difficult for us to grasp for a number of reasons, one of them being that we as finite beings can’t even begin to grasp the concept of eternity. Nevertheless, the thought is comforting, that of being loved by an *eternal love*.

Look up these texts and write down in your own words the essence of what each is saying:

1 Cor. 2:7 _____

Eph. 1:3, 4 _____

Rev. 13:8 _____

Perhaps the most crucial point to remember regarding this notion of God loving us from even before we existed is that Jesus’ death on the cross did *not* change the way God feels about us. He does not love us because Jesus died; Jesus died for us because God already loved us.

What Christ’s death did, instead, was provide a way in which God—because of His preexisting love for sinners—could save them from the inevitable results of their sin, in a manner that does not violate the moral order of the universe. There seems to have been a self-imposed constraint on God; that is, He had to forgive sinners in a way that was in harmony with His own character as a righteous and merciful God. If all He had to do was “forgive,” there would have been no need for the Cross. The Cross solved the problem of how God could be both just and merciful at the same time (see Rom. 3:26).

Imagine living in a universe with one of these options: (1) There is no God or transcendent force at all. (2) There is some sort of deity who nevertheless does not care about us at all. (3) There is a God, and He hates us and likes to see us squirm (to quote Shakespeare, “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods/ They kill us for their sport”). (4) There is a God who loves us beyond our imagination. Take some time to go through each option. How does each one change your perspective on what your life means? Why, then, is our understanding of God’s attitude toward us so important?

Monday

March 31

CONFESSION.

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

If God’s attitude toward us is acceptance and forgiveness, why must we confess our sins? Does confession justify us before God? Does confession tell God something about us that He doesn’t know? Does confession appease God’s anger at our deeds, even the worst ones? Does confession change God’s attitude toward us?

If your answer to the last four questions above is “No” in all cases, then write down your reasons for believing that we need to confess our sins to God. Then compare them with what is written afterward:

Confession changes us, not God. We confess because God has announced that, as far as He is concerned, we are no longer His enemies. Confession is a means by which we better understand just how repulsive sin is to God. It helps us understand just what the issues and the consequences with sin are and how much it cost to redeem us from those consequences. Confession is our acknowledgment of our sinfulness and need of a Savior. Confession is a means of strengthening, in our own *lives*, our personal faith in Christ. Confession of sin before God is simply one aspect of what Paul talked about in Philippians 2:12, 13; it is part of the sanctification process.

Confession, then, is not for the purpose of persuading God to forgive us; it is, rather, a heaven-appointed means to enhance our understanding of how painful sin is to God and to ourselves. It also is a means of helping us heal spiritually from the effects of sin. This healing principle can be seen even on a purely worldly level: Who has not experienced, personally, just how good confession of wrongs can be when we confess to a person we have wronged, or even simply when we tell others about the wrong we have done? How much more so when we confess to God?

Think about it: Why would it be foolish to talk about being forgiven our sin if we were not required to even acknowledge what sin needs to be forgiven?

Tuesday

April 1

“FRIEND, YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN.”

“Some men came carrying a paralytic. . . . When Jesus saw their faith, he said, ‘Friend, your sins are forgiven.’” (Luke 5:18-20, NIV).

Though none of us would envy the paralytic, he did experience something that (more than likely) none of us ever had: He heard Jesus, with His own mouth, say to him, “ ‘Friend, your sins are forgiven.’ ”

Wow! How many of us would love to be in that position, that of actually hearing Jesus first call us “friend” and then tell us that our sins are forgiven? Talk about assurance of salvation!

Yet, whether we hear the promise directly from Christ’s mouth or whether we accept it from His Word, the final result is the same. The paralytic received the same forgiveness anyone else who is forgiven ever receives; there’s no difference between what happened to him (in terms of being justified by his faith) and what happens to any of us who, by faith, claims the forgiveness that Jesus offers.

Look up these verses: Are they not telling us basically the same thing that Jesus told the paralytic? Rom. 4:7; Eph. 4:32; Col. 1:14; 2:13; 1 John 1:9; 2:12. Why, then, should we have any less assurance of forgiveness than did the paralytic?

Many people intellectually accept the idea that God loves and forgives them; but, for one reason or another, the reality of what it is all about does not make an impact on their experience. They live in fear of eternal damnation, they are plagued by guilt, and they suffer from spiritual loneliness and emotional depression. Even though their minds tell them that He is near, God seems to them to be far away. Their religious experience is characterized by a deep insecurity.

Some of these might respond that they really cannot “believe it” if they do not feel it; others would say there might be emotional blocks that go back as far as their childhood that keep them from experiencing God’s forgiveness. But if we allow Jesus to “draw” us as He did the paralytic, nothing can prevent us from being forgiven.

What keeps people from believing they have been forgiven, despite the fact that the Bible tells them they *have been*? List three possibilities:

How would you answer each one of these?

FORGIVENESS GREATER THAN SIN.

“Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (Rom. 5:20).

Just as God’s love is a gift, something we cannot earn, so is His forgiveness. In fact, His forgiveness is one of the greatest tangible manifestations of that love. To be totally forgiven even the most heinous of sins (such as Jeffrey Dahmer’s) requires a love that we as humans barely can begin to understand (we can, like beggars, take with humility and appreciation only what’s being graciously offered us).

The New Testament writers view God’s grace as being infinitely greater than sin. No matter how terrible sin is—and we can see how terrible it is simply by opening our eyes and looking around at the world—the New Testament teaches that the power of God’s love and forgiveness is immeasurably greater than all evil and all sin. God’s love for us and His willingness to forgive us our sin and evil (thanks to the Cross) transcends all the evil in a world in which evil is all but in the air we breathe.

In Romans 5 the apostle Paul uses such phrases as “overflowing” and “much more” when he contrasts the grace of God to sin. The entire chapter sets up a series of contrasts between grace and sin.

In order to better understand Paul’s emphasis in Romans 5, list all the verses in which the words “much more” are used in this chapter. Indicate after listing the verse what the “much more” relates to.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Summarize in a few lines the essence of what Paul is saying in Romans 5. Look especially at the first five verses. What is his message here, and how could you use what he’s saying to help someone who is facing some spiritual discouragement: struggling with faith or unsure of salvation or discouraged because of sin in his or her life? Write a small note to that person, based on this chapter, that could help.

GOD’S FORGIVENESS ILLUSTRATED.

“Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven” (Matt. 18:21, 22).

Is there some point at which God’s forgiveness can be exhausted? Write your answer (along with some justification for it) on the lines below. Think your reasoning through to its logical conclusion. Also, what biblical examples can you find to support your position?

The rabbis taught that the law required God’s people to forgive someone three times. Peter, sensing that Jesus usually went “beyond” the Mosaic law, suggested doubling the requirement of the law and adding one for good measure. In addition, the number seven symbolized completeness in the Jewish culture. (See Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 243.)

Jesus’ response to Peter must have startled the disciple and the rest of His hearers. It challenged Peter’s assumption about forgiveness as an action that could be added up, like money in the bank. Each time someone forgives, he or she keeps a record until the limit is reached; then that person can retaliate. Talk about living according “to the letter of the law” (this thinking is somewhat parallel to one of the conventions of war: Soldiers are not supposed to shoot paratroopers while they are coming down from the air; once they hit the ground, then the soldiers can shoot them).

What was Jesus saying in this verse? Is there something magical about the number 490 or 77 (the Greek can be read both ways)? Did Jesus really want people to count that high and then stop forgiving? Or, instead, does this story represent how God will never stop forgiving us, as long as we seek that forgiveness? Again, think through the implications of wether, in fact, this is the message Jesus wanted us to learn by answering Peter as he did. In light of Paul’s words that “God is not mocked” (Gal. 6:7), what wrong conclusions could someone possibly draw from this wonderful truth?

FURTHER STUDY: Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, “God’s Love for Man,” pp. 9–15; *Christ’s Object Lessons*, “The Measure of Forgiveness,” pp. 243–251.

The heart that has once tasted the love of Christ, cries out continually for a deeper draft. . . . Every revelation of God to the soul increases the capacity to know and to love. The continual cry of the heart is, ‘More of Thee,’ and ever the Spirit’s answer is, ‘Much more.’ Romans 5:9, 10. For our God delights to do ‘exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think.’ Ephesians 3:20. To Jesus, who emptied Himself for the salvation of lost humanity, the Holy Spirit was given without measure. So it will be given to every follower of Christ when the whole heart is surrendered for His indwelling.”—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, pp. 20, 21.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. **“Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you” (Matt. 5:43, 44). If God commands me to love my enemies, does He not do the same? If God loves His enemies, does He love His chief enemy, Satan? Would He not have been willing to forgive even the devil if he genuinely had repented? If this is true, then the tragedy of the destruction of the wicked is that they all are sinners who could have been forgiven but have refused to accept the forgiveness God made available. Do you agree with this line of reasoning? Write your reasons either way.**
2. **Why do some people feel it necessary to “earn” a forgiveness that is freely given?**
3. **Why does knowing that there is no way I can destroy God’s love or willingness to forgive make it possible for me to be more honest with God than I can be with even my own spouse, parents, or siblings?**
4. **What do you say to someone who says “If I confess and am forgiven, why don’t I feel forgiven? Why does the burden of guilt still sit heavily upon me?” Or what do you say to the person who says “Look, I confessed my sins, God has forgiven them, and now I don’t want to hear any more about them, or what problems they might have caused. I am forgiven; that’s all that matters”?**



In Search of Peace

Mahama Daari

I come from a pagan background. My family worshiped Tigani (tee-GAH-neh), the supreme god in my village in Ghana. I knew no other religion until I was 16 and enrolled in a Catholic school, where religion was a compulsory class. However, I never considered Christ’s love or His sacrifice for me personally. I finished school and forgot about Christianity.

I began working as a teacher in northern Ghana. One day I met Andrew, a man who came from my home village. When we were in elementary school this boy left our traditional religion to become a Christian. We all made fun of him. Now Andrew was a pastor. He often visited my house, and the conversation usually turned to Christianity. Sometimes I felt that his talk about religion was a nuisance. I told him that the Christians I had known were no better than the pagans. “What is there in Christianity that would make me want to be one?” I asked.

But Andrew did not give up. He invited me to a Revelation Seminar he was leading. I attended the first night just to please Andrew, but I found the presentation made sense. I felt compelled to attend the entire series. Little by little I began to see the essence of Christianity.

As I studied, I drew closer to Christ. I used to live for a drink, but suddenly the taste of alcohol made me sick. Other vices I had enjoyed now turned my stomach. I realized God was changing me, and eventually I asked Christ to take over my life.

My wife is a Christian and attended the Revelation Seminar with me. When I decided to be baptized she gladly stood beside me, for God had answered her prayers. She has not yet joined the Adventist church, but I am praying for her.



God has changed me so completely that my friends hardly recognize me. I talk about God instead of sports or business or money. I thank God, who loves me and sent my friend Andrew to show me the way to Him.

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