

The Biblical Meaning of Forgiveness

SCOTT HOEZEE

C. S. Lewis once observed that everyone typically agrees that forgiveness is a lovely and attractive idea and practice; and we generally feel that way, Lewis noted, right up until the moment when we actually have someone to forgive. Sometimes, when faced with the actual chance to offer forgiveness, suddenly it doesn't feel as lovely and attractive as it did in the abstract. Yet, we all know that life is not possible without forgiveness. As sinful people, we have no hope unless God is forgiving. As broken people, we can have no hope of being able to live together in any community or relationship if we cannot forgive one another. Well, today on *Groundwork*, we begin a series on forgiveness. Stay tuned.

DARRELL DELANEY

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, we are going to do a three-part series...a kind of short series, just three parts...on forgiveness. This is the first program, obviously. We are going to be pondering God's forgiving us, and what we learned about that from both the Old Testament and the New Testament. The second program, we will focus on our forgiving other people, and then the third and final episode, we will take up a number of things that, practically speaking, complicate our ability to offer someone forgiveness.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; forgiveness can be a real tricky topic for us believers because we have God's grace on one hand, and then our interactions with broken people, ourselves included, on the other hand. And so, how do we navigate this in a way that we know the difference of what it is and what it is not; and how do we allow scripture to show us, in practice, what we do? That is the point of this series.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And sometimes one way to understand that biblical conception that you just referred to, Darrell, is to look at the specific words that get translated as *forgive* or *forgiveness*. We will start with the Old Testament, which was originally in Hebrew. We will get to the New Testament in a minute; that was originally in Greek. Let's start with the Hebrew words, and to get at that let's listen to a passage from Exodus Chapter 34, beginning at verse 4: So Moses chiseled out two stone tablets like the first ones and went up Mount Sinai early in the morning, as the Lord had commanded him; and he carried the two stone tablets in his hands. ⁵Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. ⁶And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation." ⁸Moses bowed to the ground [at once] and worshipped. ⁹"Lord," he said, "if I have found favor in your eyes, then let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance."

DARRELL DELANEY

So, this scene is one of the more memorable scenes in the book of Exodus, where Moses is having this divine encounter with God, and he is getting the law, but he is also getting the character traits of God; and I wanted you to point out a few things about God's character that are very important in this passage when it pertains to forgiveness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

First we get the word *forgiveness* in verse 7...Exodus 34:7...and keep in mind, this is right after the incident with the golden calf...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, you talk about the need to forgive people, right? But in verse 7, the Hebrew word for forgiveness there is *n??ê*...and the main meaning of that word is literally to *lift off a burden*, okay; it is as though sin...sin against God, sin against one another...it is as though that sin puts a burden across someone's shoulders. It is heavy to carry. Life will not go well until someone can relieve us of this heavy burden; and that is what God is said to do for us; and that is what we have to do for one another...*n??ê*...that word comes up 659 times in the Old Testament. Sometimes it is literally for the lightening of a load; you know, you take something off a donkey's back, you relieved the load; but when it gets used in its more spiritual sense, then it means *forgiveness*.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, let me get this straight, Scott. You are saying that *n??ê* is a burden that is carried. When I sin against you, I put the burden on *you* or I put the burden on *me*? Make the clarity on where the burden is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; well, it is on both of us; and certainly...well, we will get to this later...but all sins are against God. So, what forgiveness does is it just relieves you of that burden. You know, sometimes when you reconcile with somebody...you forgive, you know...somebody says: Look, I forgive you. Well, literally you say: That is a load off my mind...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, or: That is a load that has been lifted off my back. That is exactly the meaning of *n??ê*—to relieve a burden; but it is not the only Hebrew word in Exodus 34; there is another one, too.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, this word here is called *salakh*; and that word is when only God can forgive that burden. So, in verse 9, when Moses asked God to forgive our wickedness, that is the word *salakh*; and in that one, it is not between you and me...it is not between one another...it is only God can remove this burden. So, *salakh* is that word.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Salakh is never used for me forgiving you or you forgiving your kids or something. It is only God's. It is used 46 times in the Old Testament, and it is only from God towards sinful people. It is not what happens when you forgive a spouse or a friend. That is *n??ê*, again. *Salakh* is a divine prerogative that only God can do; and as you said earlier, Darrell, what we see in Exodus 34 is also a revelation of God's character. God is gracious and kind and abounding in compassion; and so, God is inclined to do this for penitent people.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; and there is also a third Hebrew word associated with forgiving, and that is the word *kippur*, and that literally means to cover or to blot out; also translated as *atonement*. In fact, Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement in holy Jewish festivals, when proper repentance is expressed in the temple system and where correct sin offerings are burned on the altar, then their sins are covered. So, *kippur* is atoned for, and that is the other word that is a part of forgiveness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, those are three in the Old Testament. There is really only one main one in the New Testament, in the Greek, and that is *aphiemi*...or the verb is *aphesis*; and we can hear that, Darrell, in Matthew Chapter 6.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, Matthew Chapter 6, beginning in verse 12. This is the Lord's Prayer. Jesus is teaching this. He says: And forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors. ¹³And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. ¹⁴For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

I see Jesus—here in this passage—he is making a connection between the forgiveness of the people and the forgiveness of the Father. He puts the equal sign in the middle, saying: If you forgive this way, the Father will forgive this; if you do not forgive this way, the Father will not as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the most literal meaning of that Greek word *aphiemi* is to leave or to release or to let something go. So, when Jesus calls his first disciples, Simon and Andrew, and then James and John, when we read that they left their fishing nets behind...or when James and John left their father Zebedee behind, it is this word...to leave, to let go; and you know, in this context it means to forgive. So, the idea then, Darrell, is that when God forgives us and when we forgive each other, we are letting something go. What are we letting go? Anger; a desire for revenge; holding a grudge; wanting to see punishment. Neal Plantinga has succinctly defined forgiveness as: Letting go of an anger you have a right to feel. These Greek words are what is behind Plantinga's defining forgiveness that way.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; and we are going to talk more about forgiving other people in the next episode; so, we are not going to get too much into it right now; but forgiveness is ever only needed when there is a very serious offense or sin involved. So, it is not going to be something that you brush under the rug or minimize or deny. It is an actual offense. So, you have to make sure that you are paying close attention to be able to name that and not brush it over.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; I mean, if on a crowded elevator somebody accidentally steps on your foot, you do not have to forgive them for that; or somebody spills water at the table, and maybe some of it gets on your pants, you don't have to forgive them. But, if somebody slanders your name behind your back; if a married spouse has an adulterous affair; well, these things rightly anger us and demand a response. If we are able to forgive then we are letting go of that anger and hurt.

Well Darrell, in just a moment we are going to continue to explore God's forgiveness of us. So, stay tuned.
Segment 2

DARRELL DELANEY

I am Darrell Delaney, with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Recently, I did a podcast, Darrell, with the biblical scholar, John Goldingay. Goldingay has done a lot of work with the book of Psalms in his career, and as we talked about some of the things he has learned over the

years, one thing may seem surprising to many of us, and that is that in the 150 psalms, there is actually very little confessing of sin. I think we all tend to think that penitential psalms—the psalms in which the psalmist confesses sins and seeks forgiveness—we think that is a primary feature of the Hebrew Psalter; but when you actually look at it, it turns out, not true.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, what we do find is a lot of praise, a lot of thanksgiving, a lot of psalms of singing; and we even hear lament. So, there are major keys that are praising and happy and positive, and there are minor keys that are like: God, how long? What are you doing? What is happening? But not many in regard to repentance.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, interesting. Not quite clear why that is so, but it is possible, I guess, Darrell, that in the Old Testament God's forgiveness is so tied into the whole sacrificial system in the temple that everybody knows how the sacrifices are supposed to go, and when that happens, then your sins are atoned for. So, it is all kind of wrapped up together. So, maybe they didn't have too many stand-alone psalms of confession that were not connected to what happened at the altar when birds and animals were sacrificed. So, maybe that is one of the reasons.

DARRELL DELANEY

I think that, because there are not many psalms of repentance, it highlights the importance of a well-known psalm, Psalm 51, because it is written in the scriptures, knowing that that system is in place. So, for David to name that, I want us to look at it. It is Psalm 51. It says: Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. ²Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. ³For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. ⁴Against you, against you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight... ⁷Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. ⁸Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. ⁹Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, Darrell, for many of us, those are pretty familiar words. It is a fairly well-known psalm. In fact, it is so well-known that maybe that is what makes us think: Oh, there must be a lot of psalms like that in the Hebrew Psalter, but actually, maybe not, as we just said.

Now, we just went over the three main Hebrew verbs in the first part of this program, and none of them are in Psalm 51, unfortunately. When the psalmist asks God to blot out his sins and to cleanse him, the words that are used there are exactly that. To blot out is to get rid of something. Cleansing is like washing dirt off your hands. But when it comes to seeking what is ultimately God's forgiveness, I think we can learn a lot about what is involved in forgiveness when we read Psalm 51.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; I think the first thing we need to notice is the line that says: ^(verse 4)Against you and you only have I sinned. I was thinking about this when, if you think about the parable that Jesus tells in Luke 15 about the lost son...the prodigal son. When he gets back to his father, he says: I have sinned against heaven first; and then he says: I have sinned against you. So, it is kind of baked into the Hebrew culture to understand that when you sin, no matter who you sin against, you are first sinning against God. You are sinning against heaven first.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; God is the holy and righteous Creator of the cosmos and of every one of our lives. So, whenever something goes wrong, it offends God; and Darrell, this is why...you just mentioned Luke 15...but this is also why, in the New Testament, that we have some of those stories, you know, about friends who bring their paralyzed friend to Jesus on a mat. In one story, he gets lowered through a hole in the roof; in another story...maybe this is a different person...the friends just lay him before Jesus; but you remember, Darrell, that Jesus doesn't not start with the obvious. He does not heal the man's legs...that is why he is there. No; he

forgives his sins and the Pharisees immediately hear blasphemy because if Jesus is just a human being, then he can only forgive sins that are committed against him, right? So Darrell, if I hurt you, you are the one who has to forgive me. But if I hurt you, Darrell, imagine what we would think if our *Groundwork* producer, Courtney, came to me and said: I forgive what you did to Darrell. I mean, she cannot do that. She is not involved in my sin against you, so she cannot just go willy-nilly, forgiving sins that had nothing to do with her.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; and so, that is how the Pharisees are reasoning with Jesus. They are saying: Jesus, only God can forgive sin, so what do you think you are doing here? You cannot forgive this paralyzed man's sins...*unless* he *is* God. Because if he is God, he definitely has to address the sin, because it is sin to him that happened immediately and first; and once he addresses the sin, everything else can be handled.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, give the Pharisees some credit. They are right; it would be blasphemy if Jesus were not God, because he has no business forgiving somebody else's sins.

So, when we sin, we sin against God, first of all. A second thing I think Psalm 51 teaches us...or reminds us of...is what we saw also in that Exodus 34 passage earlier in the program, and that is that God's forgiveness of us is rooted in and builds on the foundation of God's abundant compassion.

DARRELL DELANEY

His abundant compassion. The unfailing love that is mentioned in Psalm 51. I mean, other translations call it steadfast love, and others lovingkindness. That is the Hebrew word: *chesed*; and *chesed* is a word that is used 245 times in the Old Testament, and it is all over the place. This word is only applied to God, and not to people; not to one another or any other circumstances. It is a divine character trait that God shows.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is such a rich Hebrew word...*chesed*...that no single English equivalent quite captures it all, which is why you see different translations trying to get at it; but it is interesting that God's *chesed* is the number one reason the people of Israel praise and celebrate their great God Yahweh. I always think this is the Old Testament equivalent of what in the Greek of the New Testament is God's *charis*, or simply God's grace. So, at the core of God's holy character, there is this steadfast love that inclines God to forgive us; that makes God want to forgive us, if only we will give him the chance. It kind of reminds us, Darrell, of the words from Hebrews 4.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; Hebrews 4, picking up at verse 14, it says: Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who had been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. ¹⁶Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, it is not just any old throne, Darrell, that we approach when we confess our sins; it is a throne of grace. It is the throne of *charis*; it is the throne of *chesed*; the throne of God's lovingkindness; and the posture of God and the Savior who occupies that throne of grace does indeed give us the confidence and the boldness to ask to be forgiven. You know, I mean, if you have ever wondered: Boy, is there enough grace for me? Do I even dare confess my sin to God? What the writer of Hebrews is saying: You absolutely do, because you are going to a throne of grace. So, what do you think you are going to get? You are going to get grace.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; you are going to get grace because you have a God who is able to empathize because he has been through it; and he did it without sin, but he understands where we are. He understands how hard it is to

forgive people. He understands the burden that we carry from the personal side, and then he opens the door for us to do it.

In just a moment, we want to wrap up this program with some final reflections on God's forgiveness. So, stay tuned.

Segment 3

Scott Hoezee:

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Darrell, as we wrap up this program on God's forgiving our sins, let's dig into a few verses from the opening chapter of Paul's letter to the Colossians. So, here it is. Colossians 1, I am picking it up at the 9th verse...verse 9:

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, ¹⁰so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, ¹¹being strengthened with all power according to his glorious [might] (riches) so that you may have great endurance and patience, ¹²and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. ¹³For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, man; this is so beautiful, Scott. I love the fact that Paul is reminding them in prayer of what God has already done for them. That he is the initiator of forgiveness, and the first agent and actor. He shows his grace in the relationship first; and then Paul is actually allowing these believers in Colossi to remember what God has done, and that is the place from which they can start a relationship with one another, because he is going to get into some stuff that they...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and so, what it means, Darrell, is that we cannot earn God's forgiveness. We don't deserve it. We cannot earn our salvation. We cannot achieve our own salvation. We can only receive it; and when we receive salvation, forgiveness of sins is part of the package.

So, we recently actually did a *Groundwork* series on grace and good works and we made it clear that the clarion message of the gospel is: we are saved by grace alone through faith alone; and now Paul is reminding the Colossian Christians of the same thing. In fact, in the verses that we just read, Darrell, God is the origin of everything Paul mentions. So, God fills us with knowledge and wisdom, and this is what enables us to bear good fruit. God strengthens us with all power to give us endurance and patience. God has qualified us to share in his inheritance as his holy people in his kingdom of light. God has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into his Son's kingdom, where we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins; it is all God.

DARRELL DELANEY

And because God makes it clear that he is the initiator, he actually creates the capacity for a believer to walk in that same forgiveness by his Spirit. So, our redemption is identical to our receiving forgiveness. So, like you said earlier, if we receive it, then we actually have what we need to give to someone who offends us and who breaks a relationship with us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; of course, you know, we cannot earn redemption; we cannot earn forgiveness; and so, even though we ask for forgiveness over and over in our lives, we don't get forgiven, firstly because we asked to be forgiven, but we are forgiven because God has already put us in a spiritual position in his kingdom of light where forgiveness is very simply the currency of the realm.

Actually, another thing we could note: It also might be a bit surprising...I was quite surprised when I found this out working on this program, Darrell...that forgiveness is not mentioned in the New Testament...it doesn't crop up as often as you might guess. The words *forgive, forgiving, forgiveness*...they only crop up 62 times in the New Testament; but 47 of those are in the four gospels and the book of Acts. In all the rest of the New Testament, forgiveness gets mentioned just 15 more times in the other 22 books; and what is more, in nine of Paul's 13 letters forgiveness is not mentioned at all. We could maybe wonder why.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; I wonder why that would be. I think because Paul, when he wrote to the Colossians, forgiveness is wrapped up in the salvation story...in the redemption. It is part of the kingdom package that God gives. So, when Paul and other New Testament writers...they didn't feel the need to mention it because it was implied in everything else they had said about being saved by grace alone. I think they kind of understand that, when you say you are saved by grace through faith, in what Jesus Christ has done, then the forgiveness is attached to that because of the atonement at the cross.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; so, maybe it is a fish concluding that it didn't need to think much about water because they are already immersed in it all the time. So, what is there to talk about? It is just here. So, switch up the image: In God's kingdom of light, forgiveness is the very air we breathe. We are just marinating in God's gracious forgiveness of our sins all the time. That just is part of what it means to be in the kingdom.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; and to not see the need for that forgiveness means that we are going to be a very different place. I think 1 John 1 makes this clear. It reads: ⁵This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. ⁷But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. ⁸If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, again, it is sort of like...John doesn't talk about this as much...but Paul, as we noted many other times on *Groundwork*, Paul's favorite prepositional phrase in Greek is *en Christo*—in Christ. We live now in a new situation. We have a different spiritual zip code now, because we live in Christ, which is in that kingdom of light that was talked about in the previous passage; and when you are in that kingdom of light, you see things. When you walk in the light, you see things. One of the things you see: Your own sins the light exposes. So, you cannot deny your sins. You cannot say: I don't even need forgiveness. No; I mean, that just shows you are not actually in Christ, because you are not walking in the light; you are walking in the dark. You are self-deceived. You have blinders on. So, when you are walking with God, in God's light, you see what is what; and one of the things you see...it is not pleasant...but one of the things you see is: Hey, I need grace. I need to be forgiven.

DARRELL DELANEY

What you just said reminded me of Isaiah 6, when Isaiah the prophet sees God high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple. In this powerful image, the first thing he said is: Woe to me; I am a man of unclean lips; I come from a people of unclean lips.

When you come into the presence of God and his perfect holiness, it makes you more self-conscious of your sin if you are walking in that light; but the good news is the atonement is there for you, and he is willing to accept your confession, and then you know you are walking in the light.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is interesting because in a lot of traditions, including the Reformed tradition that you and I are both part of, Darrell, we have kind of modeled our worship services on Isaiah 6, right? We begin with a greeting from God. We begin with a great hymn of praise; and what is next after we have seen God again? Confession of sin—confession and assurance of pardon.

DARRELL DELANEY

Assurance.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We have that come after the opening, because when you see God...like Isaiah...when you see God high and holy lifted up, you have just sung to him, and you look back at your own life and say: Oh, oh; I need forgiveness. And the good news, as you just said, Darrell, is that forgiveness is always there because of God's great mercy and compassion. We are forgiven, thanks be to God.

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Darrell Delaney. Join us again next time as we continue our study of forgiveness by looking at what the Bible teaches us about forgiving one another.

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DARRELL DELANEY

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