

## The Lord Forgives

I had a church member come to me and try to talk me into preaching about something else other than the character of God. It seemed to him that we had been on that topic a very long time. It reminded me of a story of Ellen White I once came across, when a cantankerous man would complain to her that all she ever preached on was Peter's ladder (add to your faith knowledge, and to knowledge virtue, and to virtue self-control, to self-control godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love), and it was true. She ended every sermon she preached with an appeal to climb higher along Peter's ladder. She never seemed to tire of the subject of character development. But this man *had* tired of it, so he approached Ellen White with his complaint in an effort to get her to change the subject. What she told him in response was classic. "Have you, brother, reached the final rung of that ladder?" He mumbled an incoherent response in the negative. She continued "Then I will keep preaching on Peter's ladder until you do."

We have a lot riding on getting the character of God right in our life. Our problem, the very problem that threatens our eternal existence, every one of us, is that we are categorically *not* like God in character. Get this right and the seal of God will be placed upon you. Get this wrong, and all you will have is *your* character, and God won't put His seal on *your* or *my* character. He only puts His seal on His character. Without the seal of God, all that is left for us is the mark of the beast. With so much depending on us getting this right, not being right, but being righteous, treating each other, feeling towards each other, thinking about each other like God does, we need to spend more time on this topic. Today's topic is no different. we are talking today about God's forgiving character.

Exodus 34:6, 7

And the Lord passed before Moses and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin..."

"Forgive" what does it mean?

Literally the word means to lift, as in removing a heavy burden. Picture in your mind a person under the heavy burden of sin like a load of bricks up on his back, forgiveness is lifting that heavy burden from his shoulders, lifting the weight from off his heart. The English word forgive conveys the idea of giving it ahead of time, like even before it is deserved. When someone has wronged us and we forgive them, it doesn't mean we brush off what they did, or excuse it. It means we remove the burden from their record before they do anything to deserve that. They may not be repentant, or sorry for what they did. But we forgive them. So if forgiveness means to lift, then

What do "iniquity and transgression and sin" mean?

If this is what God wants to lift off of us and carry away, then we need to know what it is exactly He wants to remove from us. Over the years I have read from and heard many interpreters of this expression "iniquity and transgression and sin" and try to explain it. Some have identified there are sins of commission (or things that we do, and shouldn't have), and sins of omission (things that we neglect to do, but should have done). One commentator identified there is the sin that represents our nature (as in — our sinful nature), there is the sin that represents our intentions (sins in our mind—like anger, hatred, lust, coveting, and the like), then there are the sins we do. Taken as a whole this phrase "iniquity and transgression and sin" means every form of sin imaginable...God can forgive it all.

Some passages in the Bible do not differentiate between these terms, they are used somewhat synonymously.

Psalms 32:5 is a perfect example

I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” and You forgave the iniquity of my sin.

**Psalms 51:1-5**

**Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight—that You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.**

But other verses keep things clearly delineated, as is the example in Exodus 34:7.

“forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin”

There are differences between these terms that need to be understood. Parsing this out...

“Iniquity” means a serious sins of perversity, or great evil, wickedness. Examples could include murder, adultery, lying, witchcraft, or the kinds of sins like king David was guilty of against Bethsheba and her husband Uriah.

“Transgression” means willful disobedience to the expressed will of God

“Sin” here means literally missing the mark — it’s the million things we do without knowing it, unintentionally because we were “born into sin” and don’t know any better. These are sins of ignorance. Being inattentive, forgetful, not following through on our promises. It is when we are convinced we are right about something when in fact, we have missed the mark.

So when the Lord says He forgives iniquity and transgression and sin, He means there is nothing He cannot forgive. We may feel unforgivable, but He *is* forgiving.

No matter the sin, there is forgiveness, and no matter the offense we need to repent of the thing we are guilty of. While forgiveness is proactive, relationships are conditional. We cannot have an ongoing relationship with God unless we comply with the conditions of that relationship. Like stop choosing to sin. Stop hurting the heart of God by choosing sin over him.

Psalms 103:1-4

Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: **Who forgives all your iniquities**, Who heals all your diseases, Who redeems your life from destruction, Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies.

1 John 1:9

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to **forgive us of all our sins**, and to **cleanse us from all unrighteousness**.

The Bible uses many metaphors to describe our sin and God's forgiveness of it.

If sin is a debt, the balance has been paid in full. (Matt. 18:27)

If it is a weight of guilt, then the burden has been lifted. (1 Peter 5:7)

If our shame has been shackled to us, the chains have been broken. (Acts 12:7)

If it is slavery, then we have been set free. (Romans 6:6)

If sin is impurity, then we have been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb. (Revelation 7:14)

If it is a stain, it has been made as white as snow. (Isaiah 1:18)

If it has left us in darkness, the light has come. (Isaiah 9:2)

If our sin is a sickness, we may be healed. (2 Chronicles 7:14)

If sin is separation from God, we have been brought near again. (Isaiah 59:2; Ephesians 2:13)

If it is a broken relationship, we have been reconciled. (2 Corinthians 5:18-19)

If it is a filthy garment, we have been clothed in the robe of His righteousness. (Isaiah 61:10)

If our sin is a law working within us, then God has violated it. (Romans 7:23-25)

If our sin is a vicious addiction, our recovery is only 12 steps away. (John 8:34, 36)

If it is the sum of all our guilt, the Judge has declared us righteous. (Romans 3:23-24)

If it is our history, then God is the great revisionist. (Romans 11:30)

If it is a demonic possession, the evil has been cast out. (Matthew 8:16)

If it leaves us feeling lost, praise God we've been found! (Luke 15:6)

If it is a memory, the Lord has forgotten it. (Jeremiah 31:34)

If we have been weighed in the balances and found wanting, the Lord has tipped the scales in our favor.  
(Daniel 5:27; Job 31:6)

If it has led us into danger, we have been rescued. (Romans 8:35-37)

If it is our written record, it has been blotted out. (Isaiah 44:22)

If we have lived in error, the correction has come. (James 5:20)

If we have struggled with it our whole life, behold all things have become new. (2 Corinthians 5:17)

If our sin has enveloped us like a cloak, it has been stripped from us, and a pure, clean covering has taken its place. (Zechariah 3:4)

If you feel lost in a wilderness, He is there guiding you all along the way. (1 Corinthians 10:4)

If our sins keep resurfacing, we must remember they have been cast into the depths of the sea. (Micah 7:19)

However it is you regard your sin, God has a gracious response.

Our verse in Exodus 34:7 doesn't speak so much about sin, as it does about God's forgiveness. Remember the whole conversation Moses is having with God is to help Moses to come to know and understand "God's glory" and character. The question we need to answer is what does our passage say about God? God forgives, He lifts and removes the burden of iniquity and transgression and sin. Every offense we can inflict upon our relationship with God, whether we think about the individual parts separately or take it as a whole, be they small or great, once or often, a long time ago or just today, mundane or grave, whether they are part of our nature, or a choice we make, or an act we do, the whole lot of it meets its match in the forgiving character of God.

However it is you regard your sin, God has a gracious response. The goal of God, what God is pursuing is to have the whole mess of our life forgiven, cleansed right on out of us. Removed from our being root and branch, so that our life of sin can be replaced with a life like God's.

Ezekiel 18:31-32

“Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord God. “Therefore turn and live!”

A relationship with God is ours the moment we turn to Him. Repent means “Turn”. Turn to God. Turn away from that which is killing you, and turn towards the only one who can give you life the way it was meant to be lived. Therefore turn and live.

### **We Too Need to Forgive**

We've been speaking today about God and His forgiveness towards us. I think this is crucial. When we understand how willing God is to remove the burden from us, we too will become burden lifters. We are to forgive like God forgives.

Ephesians 4:32

And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.

Matthew 6:9, 12 - Lord's Prayer - “Father...forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”

In other words, be like God in character. Be forgiving like He is forgiving. In the same way every offense can be forgiven in God, we too must forgive those offenses committed against us...all of them. We are to forgive even as we are forgiven. If someone has done something against us whether intentional or not, whether once or oft repeated, whether it came from their sinful nature, or it was a willful wicked act, we too are to forgive as the Lord forgives. And what did we learn about God's forgiveness? Does it reach us before or after we turn from it? After. Does it come before or after we confess it? After. We are not under any requirement of heaven to forgive people who have wronged us but are not repentant, and have not confessed their wrongdoing. Now having said that, we need to be clear about something. When should we be willing to forgive our offender? Before or after he repents and confesses? Before. For our own well-being, we need to drop it to the depths of the sea. We need to blot it out. We need to forgive it and we need to forget it. For our own sake we need to let it go!

Forgiveness has nothing to do with whether a person is guilty or innocent. They *are* guilty. But forgiveness is relieving them of their guilt, it is lifting it off their shoulders, and removing the burden from off their heart. It is assuring them we do not hold it against them and never will. Whether you are the sinner or the sinned against, we need to determine here and now, nothing will stand in the way of our eternal relationship. I know this is risky. I know this is scary, but it has to be done. God once said to us,

“Come now, and let us reason together,” says the Lord, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.” Is 1:18

Like God, we need to come and reason together with our offenders. We are to discuss the arrangement, we need to let them know “though your sins are as scarlet they shall be as white as snow, though they be red like crimson they shall be as wool.”

Group Discussion Questions — Don't worry this is not a confessional! Get in groups of four or five...

1. Which is harder for you? To forgive others or to allow yourself to be forgiven? Try to explain why you think that is.
2. From the list of sin-and-forgiveness metaphors (see your handout) which one do you gravitate towards? What does it mean to you.
3. How can you pray for others in your group so they can better grasp the forgiving nature of God?
4. What are ways you can show others you forgive them?