

River of Forgiveness

(Matthew 9:6)

Niagara Falls, on the border of the U.S. and Canada, plunges 160 feet into a thundering, surging river. At the brink, 379,000 tons of water a minute rush over the edge. Niagara, however, is not the largest waterfall in the world. Neither is Africa's 355-foot-high Victoria Falls. While Victoria is twice as high and twice as wide as Niagara, she is dwarfed by Venezuela's Angel Falls. Dropping 3,212 feet, Angel Falls is about 20 times higher than Niagara!

Imagine being caught in the currents above Angel, or Victoria, or Niagara. Their difference in size would make little difference. There would be a point of no return, a moment of going over the edge, and then . . . a need for heaven's mercy.

The story of personal failure is similar. One fall may look greater than another, but in the waters of failure, there is little difference. James says:

"For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all." James 2:10

Once we go over the edge, all that remains is a need for mercy. All we can hope for is the kind of forgiveness King David looked for after his sexual affair with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11). In the grip of guilt that included cover-up and murder, David cried:

"Have mercy upon me, O God, according to your loving kindness; 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." Psalm 51:1-3

Was David unforgivable? Not according to the Bible. His story stands as a timeless reminder that a repentant person can find inexhaustible waters of mercy in the forgiveness of God.

Without the assurance of forgiveness, life can end in despair. Such was the case of a young college student. On a Canadian hunting trip, he became separated from two friends in a raging snowstorm. Though he found refuge in a lonely cabin, he died before help could arrive. When the Royal Mounted Police found his body, they discovered a note saying:

"Dear Mother,
I am hungry and cold. I'm afraid I'm going to die. The only question I can't answer is this: 'Will God forgive me?'"

Although he was raised in a Christian home, he had become an agnostic in college. He died wondering if God would forgive him for the path he had taken.

Hope For The Hopeless

Sometimes guilt alone makes people want to die. After the fatal shooting of Tejano singer Selena, the woman who pulled the trigger begged God for forgiveness. During a tape-recorded conversation with the police, she expressed anguish and said, "Look what I did . . . I'll never forgive myself . . . I don't deserve to live."

Many of us saw another example of overwhelming guilt in the young mother who pleaded on national television for the return of her missing children. We watched when she later confessed to taking her own babies' lives.

Is there hope for those who hate themselves for what they've done? How far will God go in showing mercy? What about serial killers like Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer who claimed to find spiritual peace behind bars? While society mourned the loss of their victims, these men said before their deaths that their recent faith in Christ had given them assurance of God's forgiveness.

Can God forgive a mass murderer? Would it be moral for Him to do so? Wouldn't such forgiveness revictimize the families and friends of those killed? Or is the more important truth that if God can forgive serial killers who throw themselves at the mercy of His son, maybe there is hope for us all?

What about us? What if we are not so much concerned that a serial killer gets justice as we are in finding mercy for ourselves? What if we cannot forgive ourselves? What about the shame and self-contempt that is draining the life out of us? Have we crossed the line? Can God forgive our:

Profanity	Bad parenting
Sexual perversions	Divorce
Violence	Drunkenness
Jealousy	Neglect
Lies	Self-centeredness

Different Kinds of Forgiveness

Once we are in the family of God, there's more to learn about the forgiveness of the Father. We learn, for instance, that more than one kind of forgiveness is mentioned in Scripture. While forgiveness consistently means "to loose" or "to remove" a barrier to relationship, different kinds of barriers and relationships may be in view.

God's Legal Forgiveness. This is God's once-for-all removal of all legal barriers to heaven. With the granting of this forgiveness, God acts as Judge to declare all sins "paid for in full." From this moment on, Christ is our Advocate (1 John 2:1), along with His Father. He gives us legal immunity from any accusation that could separate us from the love of God. (Romans 8:28-39)

We need to remember, however, that this forgiveness is not universally applied. It is given only to those who personalize God's mercy by making the decision to serve Jesus Christ as God, and to accept His finished work on the cross. Like medicine, forgiveness is not effective until taken.

God's Family Forgiveness. This forgiveness occurs after we have been legally pardoned and born into the family of heaven. By this mercy, God removes relational barriers to our closeness with Him. In this forgiveness, He acts not as a Judge but as our heavenly Father.

When we disobey Him and do not correct ourselves (1 Corinthians 11:31), He gets our attention with painful circumstances (see Hebrews 12:4-11). This discomfort is for our good. It comes from a Father who loves to "forget" our sins when we honestly confess them and agree to place ourselves back under the control of His Spirit.

This kind of forgiveness is similar to what we experience in our own families. If a son takes the family car without permission and then lies about it, his parents aren't doing him a favor by acting as if it didn't happen. Before driving privileges can be restored, the son must own up to his wrong and be forgiven. His status within the family is never in jeopardy (legal forgiveness), but the basis for trust has been damaged, and family forgiveness is needed.

This is the forgiveness in view in John's statement to fellow members of the family of God:

"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

People-to-People Forgiveness. Forgiving others is very important in God's eyes. Jesus made this crystal clear when He told His disciples:

"For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your father forgive your trespasses." Matthew 6:15-16

God demands that we forgive others with the same mercy and generosity with which He forgives us.

This is not always an easy thing to do. People can hurt us very badly. However, we must understand that forgiveness does not rest in our emotions. It is something outside of our emotions. There are basically 4 steps in forgiving someone:

1. We forgive as a act of our free will, NOT because we feel like forgiving. It is a decision that we make with our brains, not with our emotions.
2. We are required to forgive others as God forgives us. He wipes out our sins when He forgives them, and remembers them no more. This means that we must discipline our minds, taking every thought captive (2 Cor. 10:5). We can no longer allow ourselves to think about and dwell upon what someone has done to harm us in the past.
3. When we forgive someone we give up any right we may feel that we have to “getting even,” that is, to get revenge. (Romans 12:19)
4. When we have done these three things consistently, then we can ask God to step in and change our hurt and feelings about the whole incident, and He will do so.

Remember this: God does not require us to trust someone who has betrayed and deceived us. Love is a gift, trust is earned.

God may not even require you to remain in a close relationship with someone who has hurt you repeatedly, but He always requires you to forgive them.

Forgiveness of Self. This is usually the hardest type of forgiveness to deal with. Most of us struggle with feelings of guilt and shame long after we have confessed our sins to God. We may or may not feel forgiven by God, and we most certainly don't feel able to forgive ourselves. Either way, when feelings of guilt hound us, and they will, we need to remind ourselves that our forgiveness does not depend on how we feel.

Let's deal first with “feeling forgiven by God.”

Forgiven people can feel like they are hanging by a thread over the fires of hell. Forgiven people can be oppressed by the accuser of our souls (Satan), who stirs up old emotions the way we stir up the embers of a dying fire. Suddenly we are inflamed in the emotions of anxiety and despair and guilt. But those emotions are not telling us the truth about the forgiveness of God.

Forgiveness is something God does. It is not rooted in our own emotions. It doesn't depend on whether “we forgive ourselves.” Forgiveness is what God does in the books of heaven when He marks “canceled” over our debt of sin. We are forgiven when He declares us legally acquitted, regardless of how we might be feeling at the moment.

Because it is so important to realize that forgiveness of God is something HE does, let's look at eight pictures of God's forgiveness as seen in the Old Testament. To do this, we are quoting from author David B. Kennedy:

1. God bags up our sins to throw them away. “My offenses will be sealed up in a bag. (Job 14:17, NIV)
2. God blows away the sin barrier. “I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist.” (Isaiah 44:22, NIV)
3. God takes away our sins. “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.” (Psalm 103:12, NIV)
4. God treats our sin like a vanquished foe. “You will tread our sins underfoot.” Micah 7:19, NIV)
5. God puts our sins out of His sight. “You have put all my sins behind Your back.” Isaiah 38:17, NIV)
6. God puts our sins out of His mind. “I will . . . remember their sins no more.” (Jeremiah 31:34, NIV)
7. God cancels the debt of our sin. “I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions.” (Isaiah 43:25, NIV)

8. God removes sin's stain and restores purity. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." (Isaiah 1:18, NIV)

What do I do if I cannot forgive myself? We receive so many letters and E-mails expressing this problem. People realize that God has forgiven them, but they cannot forgive themselves. They continue to feel the anguish of guilt over what they have done.

First of all, we need to remember that forgiveness is not an event that takes place in the emotions – either ours or God's.

If God has cancelled out our guilt, then what right do we have to continue to remember it and anguish over it? The answer is, none at all! This is where we have to go through the four steps of forgiveness we listed earlier. We must go through those same four steps concerning our selves. Then the battle field will be in our mind:

**"For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing [thought] that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ."
2 Corinthians 10:4-5**

The reason you do not feel you can forgive yourself is because Satan and his demon spirits keep throwing thoughts into your mind about what you have done. They keep stirring up the guilt. It is a matter of self-discipline to pay attention to what is going on in our minds, and to directly rebuke any thoughts that remind you of what you have done in the past. You literally need to speak out loud and say, "NO! You demons, I will not accept those thoughts. My sins are gone, forgiven and wiped out by God. Get your thoughts out of my head right now!" Then force your mind onto scripture until you have regained control over your thoughts. It is YOUR responsibility to discipline and control your thoughts and the guilt that comes with them.

(Please see Prepare For War by Rebecca Brown, M.D., chapter titled "The Double Minded Man" for an in-depth discussion of how to take control of your thoughts.)

If you are troubled with nightmares reminding you of your past sins, and causing you to re-live them in your dreams, you need to understand that these come directly from Satan and his demons. You need to go into God's courtroom and ask Him to render judgment between you and Satan in this matter. Once your sin is confessed and forgiven, Satan no longer has any right to bring those sins up to you again in either your thoughts or dreams. (See Standing on the Rock, chapter 8, for an in-depth discussion of this weapon of warfare.)

Forgiving yourself is an act of your free will, not your emotions. Walking out that forgiveness depends on your willingness to fight against Satan's kingdom which will try to keep you swamped in guilt and the self-destruction it brings.

Three Misbeliefs About Forgiveness

The teaching that the forgiveness of God comes through faith alone in Christ finds some disagreement among church people. Some say forgiveness cannot be found without emotional repentance. Others say baptism is a necessary condition. Still others say good works are a requirement. Let's see what the bible says about such conditions.

Repentance. Some suggest that we have not met the requirements for forgiveness until we have gone through a period of tears, earnest prayer, and deep sorrow for our sin.

The New Testament does call for repentance (Matt. 3:2, Acts 2:38; 20:21), but it is not a repentance that can be measured in tears or emotions. Rather, it is something that has already occurred by the time we put our faith in Christ. "repentance" is "a change of mind." We repent when we change our beliefs about God and ourselves. Rather than continuing to see ourselves as acceptable to God on our own merits, we "change our minds" to see how sinful we are and how much we need the forgiveness of God.

If we have an overwhelming sense of God's holiness, we may feel deep sorrow for the wrongs we have done against God and others. When we think about the way Christ suffered, we may be brought to tears.

But the essence of repentance is a change of mind and beliefs about our sins, and about our need of Christ -- not the feelings associated with it.

If we acknowledge that our sin is against God and turn in faith to Jesus Christ, we have done all that is necessary for forgiveness. This may or may not be accompanied by a deep emotional outburst. The change of mind is essential; bitter tears and deep sorrow cannot be a measure of repentance.

God wants us to express to Him our change of mind. God Himself writes about this change of mind expressed through words, not necessarily through some extreme emotion.

**“O Israel, return to the Lord your God,
For you have stumbled because of your iniquity;
Take words with you,
And return to the Lord.
Say to Him,
‘Take away all iniquity;
Receive us graciously,
For we will offer the sacrifices of our lips.’” Hosea 14:1-2**

The important part of repentance is that we now change our minds to see sin how God sees it, and thus cease to do it.

Baptism. Some people say we cannot be forgiven by God unless we are baptized in the right way by the right people. But the Bible makes it clear that baptism is an evidence of salvation, not a requirement for it.

People who insist on baptism as a part of salvation usually quote Acts 2:38, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.” They say that if we are not baptized, we cannot be forgiven.

Notice that the key word is repent. The basic condition is for us to agree with God that our sin is a violation of His moral law and to turn in faith to Jesus Christ. In addition, the preposition for, in the phrase “for the remission of sins” does not mean “in order to be forgiven.” Its basic meaning is “with a view toward” or “in relation to.” When Jesus said the people of Nineveh “repented at the preaching of Jonah” (Luke 11:32), He was saying they repented “with a view toward” or “in connection with” Jonah’s message.

In Acts 2, therefore, Peter was telling the men of Jerusalem to repent and let themselves be baptized “with a view toward” the remission of sins. Their baptism was to be an evidence of their repentance and forgiveness, not a condition for it.

In addition, the following scriptures show that water baptism is not essential to salvation:

Jesus declared people forgiven before they were baptized (Matt 9:1-7; Luke 7:36-50; 18:9-14; 19:1-9; John 8:1-12)

Cornelius and his family received the Holy Spirit before baptism (Acts 10:44-48).

The Bible shows that forgiveness and salvation are received by faith alone. (John 3:16; Romans 5:1, 10:1-13; Ephesians 2:10)

In light of these scriptures, baptism should be seen as an outward act by which we publicly identify with Christ and His death and resurrection. It is not a requirement for salvation.

Good Works. “But what about works?” some people as People ask. “Wouldn’t it be unfair for God to forgive on the basis of faith alone? Didn’t James say that faith without works is dead?”

Without a doubt, good works are important to every Christian. The Bible calls for good works. But good deeds are not a condition for receiving forgiveness.

“Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.” Romans 3:27-28

Ephesians 2:8-10 shows us that rather than being a condition for forgiveness, good works are the fruit and evidence of a forgiven life. Those who are saved through faith become God's "workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works." (v. 10)

Our good deeds are not a part of the basis of our forgiveness, but a natural result of it.

To summarize: The wonderful message of the bible is that forgiveness comes through faith alone. It is not faith plus repentance, faith plus baptism, faith plus good works, or faith plus anything!

When you feel you are about to go over that water fall, cry out to God in faith, and He will always hear and forgive you!

Urgent Prayer Request and Need

I, Daniel, am asking for your prayers and help. As most of you know, Rebecca spent much of the month of November ministering in Africa. Thousands were set free, and thousands more had their lives completely changed through her ministry. When we are able, we will be posting numerous pictures of her trip on our web site found at www.harvestwarriors.com.

BUT, there is often a price to be paid for making inroads against Satan's kingdom. Rebecca became ill while she was in Africa, and her condition has steadily worsened since she has been home. At the time of this writing I have to take her to see a specialist tomorrow morning. She is scheduled to have an MRI and numerous other very expensive and difficult tests. Our biggest problem is that we have never been able to afford health insurance. The initial cost of these tests alone will be near \$10,000, which we simply do not have. My specific requests are as follows:

1. Please pray that God will extend His hand of mercy and quickly bring complete healing into Rebecca's body.
2. Please pray that God will give the doctors supernatural wisdom in her case, and that she and I will be used as witnesses for God wherever this leads us.
3. Please pray and ask the Lord about helping us financially. Not only do we need to meet the medical expenses, we also are unable to travel and minister this month or the month of January; therefore, we have no income for these two months.

I want to ask you a question: "Has Rebecca's ministry and writings been a blessing to you? If so, then now is the time that she needs your help." I am calling on the body of Christ to stand with us during this hour of our need.

I thank you for all your prayers on my own behalf during my illness this year. God has extended His hand of mercy and I am almost completely healed from the major brain surgery, and several resulting strokes. All I can say is Praise God! And thank you all!

Rebecca and I join together to wish all of you and your families a wonderful Christmas and God's richest blessing through this New Year to come.

The Lord told me, Daniel, that 2004 is a "year of restoration." Call to Him, He will hear and answer. Jeremiah 30:17