

ALIVE TO GOD: CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST

Study Eight

SIN AND OTHERS—1

If we see that, once we have been crucified with Christ, sin—now forgiven, cleansed and disempowered—is still an issue for us, then we will need to have ways of dealing with it not only in ourselves but also in others. This is something that we are not always good at. If we prefer to avoid the issue of ongoing and indwelling sin in ourselves, we will do so as well with others. This may leave a trail of great harm. The Scriptures give us good and realistic guidance about what to do with regard to sin when we find it in ourselves and in others.

FORGIVENESS WHATEVER

We are aware of the use and abuse of indulgences by which the pope of Rome granted remission of penalty due to sins, and Luther's response in 1517, which precipitated the Reformation. R. W. Southern relates an early example of the exercise of this power:

One day in 1150 Pope Eugenius III was sitting in his court hearing a divorce case, in which the count of Molise sought a divorce from his wife on the grounds of consanguinity. After a time the pope could bear it no longer. He burst into tears, rose from his throne, and threw himself at the feet of the count with such violence that his mitre rolled in the dust. When the bishops and cardinals had set him on his feet and retrieved his mitre, he begged the count to take back his wife, adding these words:

To make you more ready and willing to do this, I, the successor of Peter and vicar of Christ, to whom the keys of the kingdom have been delivered, will give your wife an inestimable dowry: provided that you are faithful to her, she will bring you immunity (from punishment) for all the sins you have so far committed, and I shall be responsible for them on the Day of Judgement.¹

Although the later pronouncements of medieval popes on the subject of indulgences are seldom as attractive as this, we see here the deeply felt personal responsibility which is never far from the best of them. The later history of indulgences, disastrous though in the end it became, is simply a development of what we see on a small scale in this incident: the power and desire of the popes to extend more and more widely the immunity which Eugenius III begged the count of Molise to receive.²

We know that remission of sins comes directly from God, by virtue of our Lord Jesus Christ bearing our sins and their dreadful penalty in his death on the cross, and cannot be handed out or bartered with in this way by any of us. We know that it is imparted through the speaking of the word of the gospel, and is received by faith and repentance on the part of those who hear. So we cannot commend this action on the part of Pope Eugenius III, even if we may have some appreciation of what appear to be his motives—to heal a broken marriage and bring a man into the great forgiveness of sins. But, for those of us who declare the forgiveness of sins through the gospel, may we not also be subject to the temptation that

¹ *Historia Pontificalis*, ed. R. L. Poole, 1927, n.p., p. 84.

² R. W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1970, pp. 136f.

Eugenius fell prey to? We see the terrible ravages of sin in people's lives. We know we have the answer in Christ and his gospel of grace. We know the wonderful release and blessing that God's forgiveness has been to us. We long to see others come into that blessing through our ministry. We may be tempted to proffer the great forgiveness of sins as a panacea or cure-all for every pastoral problem, and be eager for it to be taken up with alacrity. Questions of readiness or appropriateness may be summarily swept aside. Our dispensing of this boon may prove to be no less papal in its manner and effects than the action of Eugenius and his successors. Only afterwards may we find that this precipitate and ill-advised approach has left some damage in its train, or some leeway that still needs to be made up.

Question for Reflection

- *What experience have we had of persons coming to 'forgiveness', where it became evident later that more still needed to happen?*

WISE AS SERPENTS AND INNOCENT AS DOVES

Jesus warned against being unduly gung-ho with the gospel of forgiveness:

Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you (Matt. 7:6).

One practical instance of this may have been Paul's experience in Ephesus, after the silver-smith Demetrius had warned his fellow artisans of the loss of trade and the dishonour to the goddess Artemis that could result from Paul's preaching:

When they heard this, they were enraged and shouted, 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!' The city was filled with the confusion; and people rushed together to the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's travel companions. Paul wished to go into the crowd, but the disciples would not let him; even some officials of the province of Asia, who were friendly to him, sent him a message urging him not to venture into the theater. Meanwhile, some were shouting one thing, some another; for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together (Acts 19:28–32).

Eager as Paul was to preach the gospel to those who had not heard it, this was neither the time nor the place. While there were times when Paul preached in public to a less than sympathetic audience (as in Acts 17:16–34 and 21:27–22:22), Paul's usual practice was to go first to a synagogue or a place of prayer (as in Acts 13:5; 16:13).

It is also clear that the one who is in charge of the propagation of the gospel is the Lord himself. This may mean that certain places and occasions that we might feel drawn to are closed off to us, in favour of others:

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them (Acts 16:6–10).

Jesus himself, no doubt under the Father's direct prompting by the Holy Spirit, followed a similar course:

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.' And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons (Mark 1:35–39).

Asahel Nettleton (1783–1843) had an approach to evangelising different from much that prevails today. When his proclamation of the sovereign holiness and grace of God in the action of the cross gave rise to anxiety or distress in his hearers, he did not give them an immediate means of relief:

He never used public appeals, relying on 'Enquiry Meetings' for those who became 'anxious' or 'distressed'. At these meetings he addressed those under conviction, and then quietly advised each person before sending them home to, without distraction, find peace with God. When this occurred he prepared them for a public profession of faith. As a result, there were few spurious conversions and deep long-term relationships flourished.³

Nettleton believed that 'people will not be converted unless the Holy Spirit acts sovereignly over their will. He rejected the idea that the Holy Spirit works only by moral persuasion (see John 1:12–13).' He also believed that 'much damage is done by hasty spiritual assurances and comforts'.⁴ With this went, no doubt, a sober estimate of fallen human nature.

Earlier, Richard Baxter (1615–1691; author of *The Reformed Pastor*) strongly opposed a position taken up by the 'Antinomians' (those who said it was not essential for Christians to use the law as a rule of conduct for daily life, because they thought that all Old Testament law was abolished in the New Testament):

Baxter had no doubt that the impulse and the theology behind the Antinomian quest for 'comfort' at all costs came from the pit, for its outcome in practice was this; men went to the Antinomians troubled about their sins and all the advice they received was to be troubled about them no longer for Christ had taken them away. Where the Puritan had said, Put sin out of your life, the Antinomian said, Put it out of your mind. Look at the law, consider your guilt, learn to hate sin and fear it and let it go, said the Puritan. Look away from the law and forget your sins and guilt, look away from yourself and stop worrying, said the Antinomian.⁵

While we may not be antinomians, our zeal for the gospel may be mismatched with a less worthy desire for 'comfort' at all costs.

Jesus taught us to expect that the church of God would never have unmixed purity in this age. There would be 'grain' and 'weeds' growing alongside each other until the 'harvest' (see Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43). Within the fellowship of his followers there would be 'false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves' (Matt. 7:15). In sending us out 'like sheep into the midst of wolves', he said we are to 'be wise as serpents and innocent as doves' (Matt. 10:16).

All this needs to be borne in mind as we come across sin in the lives of ourselves and others.

³ Don Priest, 'Asahel Nettleton: Rejoicing in Hope', in *God Sends Revival* (NCTM Summer School 1985), NCPI, Blackwood, 1984, pp. 63–4.

⁴ Don Priest, 'Asahel Nettleton', p. 64.

⁵ James I. Packer, quoted by Joel R. Beeke, 'The Secret of Sanctification: Union with Christ', Introduction to Walter Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, Reformation Heritage Books, Grand Rapids, 1999, pp. vii–viii.

Question for Reflection

- *What did Paul mean in practice when he said, 'I want you to be wise in what is good and guileless in what is evil' (Rom. 16:19: compare Eph. 5:11)?*

SIN: REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING

In an earlier study we looked at Ezekiel 36:31–32, where following God's cleansing and restoration:

Then you shall remember your evil ways, and your dealings that were not good; and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds . . . Be ashamed and dismayed for your ways, O house of Israel.

In connection with the promised 'new covenant' in Jeremiah 31, God says:

I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more (Jer. 31:34).

Some make a point from this: If God does not remember our sins, why should we?⁶ This is to counter the tendency that some have to reactivate their sense of guilt for past forgiven sins, when the guilt has been taken away.⁷

It is important not to mistake the meaning of 'remember' here. When the Bible speaks of God remembering sin, it is generally with a view to bringing punishment to bear:

now he will remember their iniquity
and punish their sins (Jer. 14:10).

The parallelism of Hebrew poetry here equates the remembering with the punishing. A similar equation is made with regard to the impending siege of Jerusalem by the king of Babylon:

he brings their guilt to remembrance, bringing about their capture. Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Because you have brought your guilt to remembrance, in that your transgressions are uncovered, so that in all your deeds your sins appear—because you have come to remembrance, you shall be taken in hand (Ezek. 21:23–24).

A bereaved widow saw the death of her son as a bringing of her sin to remembrance:

What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son! (1 Kings 17:18).

This is a kind of 'remembrance' that no one wants.

What does it mean, then, for God to say: 'I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more'? It is not to say that He will no longer call them to mind. Jesus' risen body still carried the scars of his crucifixion (see John 20:20–21, 27), and the Lamb in heaven ever stands 'as if it had been slaughtered' (Rev. 5:6). Our sin has left its mark on our Lord and God Himself—that never can nor should be forgotten. But those very scars denote our peace

⁶ Geoffrey Bingham says: 'If then God refuses to remember our sins, why should we choose to remember them?' (*The Cleansing of the Memories*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1987, p. 14). A careful reading on further will show that he means by this not a refusal ever to think of these sins—if such a thing were possible—but a recognition that these sins have been thoroughly stripped of their substance, guilt, power and pollution, leaving the person free of accusation, 'thus settling the memory in the tranquillity of purity' (pp.15–16).

⁷ A similar point is made when Micah 7:19 is cited: 'You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea', and there is added: 'and put up a sign saying "No Fishing"!'.

from God. To say, ‘I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more’, is to say that the entire entail of their punishment is past, never to be brought to bear again (see John 5:24; 1 John 4:17–19).

Question for Reflection

- *What is the difference between trying to evade something by attempting to put it out of mind, and facing it with a shamed and purified conscience?*

JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS

It is instructive to see how Joseph, one of the sons of the patriarch Jacob, dealt with the sin of his brothers against him, when they sold him into slavery and made out to their father Jacob that Joseph had died. The issue came to a head after their father Jacob had died. Fearing Joseph’s revenge, his brothers most likely made up a story, which they hoped would work to their advantage:

Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph’s brothers said, ‘What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?’ So they approached Joseph, saying, ‘Your father gave this instruction before he died, “Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.” Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father’ (Gen. 50:15–17).

Joseph’s immediate reaction is misinterpreted fearfully by his brothers, in a way that leads them to even more desperate measures to curry his favour:

Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, ‘We are here as your slaves’ (Gen. 50:17–18).

It becomes apparent, however, that Joseph’s weeping is not over the wrong done to him, but over their continued refusal to see and accept the goodness of God towards them. The very fact that they are coming to him still in this fearful and self-preserving way, looking for forgiveness from him, shows that they are yet to understand and rejoice in the great forgiveness of God. This he points them to:

But Joseph said to them, ‘Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?’ (Gen. 50:19).

Clearly Joseph himself has come to know the forgiving action of God, in the context of the whole of God’s purpose and action towards having a people for Himself. He wants his brothers to know this too. So sure is Joseph that this is a saving action of God Himself, that can be effected by no other, that he refrains from attempting to mediate or pronounce this forgiveness to them himself—which would be to put himself ‘in the place of God’! Rather, he urges them to see the goodness of God towards them that they are in already, despite their earlier evil intentions:

‘Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.’ In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them (Gen. 50:20–21).

This is what Joseph had been trying to get across to his brothers some time earlier when, after a time of remaining unrecognised by them, he finally disclosed his identity to them:

Then Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Come closer to me.’ And they came closer. He said, ‘I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, “Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty”’ (Gen. 45:4–11).

Clearly, Joseph’s understanding of God’s forgiveness extends beyond a simple pronouncement of pardon, to include all of God’s faithful saving action towards the people He has chosen and bound Himself to in love. Doubtless this came from Joseph’s own experience of God’s presence and blessing, in the midst of unjust hardship and delay, in the house of Potiphar, in gaol, and in Pharaoh’s court (see Gen. 39:1–6; 20–23; 40:23; 41:14–16, 37–45). It extends even to some understanding that God turns the evil actions of human beings to His glory and their good—something we see supremely in the cross of Christ (see Acts 2:23–24). Joseph longs for his brothers also to know God in this way, but he knows that he himself is not in a position to be able to bring them to it. Only God can do that, and they must come to it themselves, directly from God. Joseph testifies to them, both in what he says and the manner in which he says it, of God’s loving kindness towards them, in order that this might be so. At the end of Genesis 50, we are left still not knowing whether they saw and accepted it, or not.

This may have bearing on Joseph’s withholding of his identity from his brothers on their earlier visits to Egypt in quest of food. Was Joseph teasing them, or trying to pay them back in some measure? It would appear from this that, rather, Joseph was seeking all along to see his brothers come to this place of repentance and faith toward God, as he had, with regard to what they had done to him. Joseph himself designates this as a testing of them (see Gen. 42:15). When Joseph first saw his brothers, why did he not there and then tell them who he was, and how good God had been to him, and embrace and forgive them, and tell them how glad he was to see them, and be one big happy family? It could be that this would have been premature. Apart from the fact that it may not have come easily to Joseph first up to greet his abusers in this way, it could be that he sensed that something more needed to happen in his brothers before they could enter into it. So instead of that, on the pretext that they were spies, Joseph spoke harshly to them, and gave them a taste of the imprisonment that he had gone through (Gen. 42:6–17). He then gave them the involuntary experience of being deprived of one of their brothers, and laid on them a responsibility for his younger brother that they had failed to exercise towards Joseph. Their response of alarm, fear of punishment, and dissension among themselves caused Joseph to weep—they had not come to it yet. Even Joseph’s generosity in returning their money caused fearfulness and loss of heart among them, rather than relief and thankfulness (Gen. 42:18–28). On the second visit, the brothers, still plagued by guilt, again put the worst construction on Joseph’s invitation into his house for dinner. It was Joseph’s Egyptian steward, who presumably was not a believer in their God, who pointed them to God’s action in the midst of all of this, but they still failed to see it (Gen. 43:15–25). Joseph then gave them an experience of what it was like to be accused of something unjustly, as he had been (Gen. 44:1–13; compare 39:6–20). The testing reached its pitch when Joseph insisted that they should leave Benjamin in slavery with him and go. Would they abandon Benjamin to slavery, as they had done to Joseph? It is when Judah offers to substitute himself for Benjamin, out of love for their father (as Jesus was to do later

for all of us) that Joseph figured that enough of God had come through to them for the testing to come to an end, as with deep emotion he disclosed himself to them and embraced them, exclaiming on the goodness and faithfulness of God to them all. Even so, their first response was one of dismay, before they could be prevailed upon to speak with him; and Joseph still needed to remind them not to quarrel with each other on the way home (Gen. 44:14–45:28). As we have seen, many years later, Joseph’s brothers were still acting more out of guilt than out of the grace that had come to them.

What can we learn from this? Even though we may not use this particular instance as a model for the pastoral treatment of all offenders, we are left with no illusions as to the ease or otherwise with which intransigent sinful human beings come into living fully in the reality of God’s forgiveness and grace.

Questions for Reflection

- *What can we learn from this of the nature of God’s forgiveness?*
- *What can we learn from this about how God’s forgiveness comes to and is received by sinful human beings?*

JACOB AND ESAU

Joseph’s father Jacob had had similar issues with his brother Esau. On account of Jacob’s devious and grasping actions, Esau wanted to kill Jacob, and Jacob fled (Gen. 27:41–45). On his return, Jacob heard that Esau was coming to meet him with four hundred men, and he feared the worst. This drove Jacob to prayer, and to wrestling all night with God. Here Jacob encountered God in a way he had never done before, such that he was able to say at the end of it, ‘I have seen God face to face’ (Gen. 32:6–30). Following that, Jacob’s meeting with Esau was unexpectedly favourable: ‘Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept’ (Gen. 33:4). Esau was even unwilling to accept the gifts that Jacob had sent ahead of him to soften him up. Jacob was effusive in his appreciation: ‘truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor’ (Gen. 33:10)—and Jacob had just come to know what it was to see the face of God. It would appear that reconciliation, both with God and between brothers, was now complete, and of a piece.

We might expect that from then on they would be together again. Indeed, this is what Esau proposed: ‘Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you’ (Gen. 33:12). Jacob made an excuse to remain behind, to catch up later, and declined Esau’s offer of an escort. Jacob never followed Esau to Seir, but continued on in a different direction. Was Esau seeking to exercise some power or control over Jacob? Was Jacob just being cagey? We do not know. They came together for the burial of their father Isaac (Gen. 35:29), and no doubt there was a measure of understanding and togetherness between them on that occasion, but apart from that they went their separate ways. Maybe they just needed space from each other. The Proverbs advise us not to live in our neighbour’s pocket (Prov. 25:17), and not to press too hard on our family when in trouble (Prov. 27:10).

There is another dynamic operating here, at a deeper level than we may be able to plumb. God had promised the land of Canaan to Jacob (Gen. 28:13) and that is where Jacob remained. Esau had not been included in that promise, and he dwelt outside its boundaries. In subsequent generations there was little love lost between the descendants of Jacob (Israel) and the descendants of Esau (Edom). Israel inflicted grievous devastation on Edom (2 Sam. 8:13–14;

1 Kings 11:14–15; 2 Kings 14:7; 2 Chron. 25:11–12), and Edom heartlessly exploited Israel's misfortune (Ezek. 25:12–14; Obad.). In the end, God took issue with Edom because, unlike God, Edom 'maintained his anger perpetually, and kept his wrath forever' (Amos 1:11), and Edom is singled out as 'the people with whom the LORD is angry forever' (Mal. 1:4). All of this is summed up in God's saying: 'I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau' (Mal. 1:2–3; quoted Rom. 9:13), in the unfathomable mystery of the interplay between human choices and 'God's purpose of election' (Rom. 9:11). In the New Testament we are warned: 'See to it that no one becomes like Esau, an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal' (Heb. 12:16).

What conclusions may we come to from this? We are to make every effort to be in the place where reconciliation happens. And sometimes there is more going on in the purposes of God than we may rightly fathom.

Questions for Reflection

- *What has been our experience of having space in a relationship?*
- *How might an awareness of the operations of God impact our attempts to sort things out?*

DAVID AND BATHSHEBA

When David committed adultery with Bathsheba, and arranged for her husband to be killed in battle (2 Sam. 11), David had already been for some time a man after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13:14), appointed and blessed by God with a kingdom and a glorious revelation and promise (2 Sam. 7). Nevertheless he sinned, and no doubt justified it to himself. It took another revelation from God, in the form of the parable told by Nathan the prophet, to bring David to conviction and confession of his sin (2 Sam. 12:1–13). It is important to realise that Psalms 32 and 51, which relate to David's experience of conviction and confession of sin, are the words of a mature believer, not of one who is coming to repentance and faith for the first time. David's forgiveness and release from the guilt and punishment of his sin was immediate: 'Now the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die' (2 Sam. 12:13);⁸ and David knew himself still to be 'Beloved of the LORD' (the meaning of Jedidiah; 2 Sam. 12:25). So God did not 'remember' David's sin, in the sense of bringing its just punishment to bear on David; but neither did God allow David's sin to be forgotten. God paraded it before Israel (2 Sam. 12:11–12), and caused it to be recorded in Holy Scripture for all the world to know evermore. David and his family from then on had to live with the consequences of David's sin: the child born to the illicit union died, and incestuous rape in David's own family gave rise to hatred, murder and insurrection among his own children (2 Sam. 12:15–19; 13:1–20, 22), in which David was publicly shamed and humiliated (2 Sam. 16:20–22; 20:3).

Thereafter, David could never have any illusions about his desperate need for and absolute dependence on God's forgiving grace with every breath he took. David would always be known to be among the foremost of sinners, as one in whom God had displayed His mercy and grace (compare 1 Tim. 1:12–17). David's newly-humbled and God-honouring attitude is revealing, as shown in his response to the death of the child (2 Sam. 12:20–23), and to the

⁸ According to the law of God, David and Bathsheba should have been stoned to death (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22–24). Did God exempt David because of his high profile? Or was it on account of the one who had already been promised to David in 2 Sam. 7, whom David acknowledged as 'my Lord' (Ps. 110; Mark 12:35–37; Isa. 11:1; Rev. 22:16)?

calumny that came upon him (2 Sam. 16:5–14). It was an attitude of grateful praise that remained with him to his dying day (see 2 Sam. 23:1–7).

Questions for Reflection

- *What does this incident teach us about the remembering or not-remembering of sin?*
- *What is the sense that comes to us from Psalms 32 and 51, and from 'David's newly-humbled and God-honouring attitude'?*

THE COST OF FORGIVENESS

James Denney spoke of those who have a light view of forgiveness:

Another thing that may be said is, that forgiveness can be taken for granted. Of course God forgives. That is what God is for. His name was proclaimed to Moses, 'The Lord, a God merciful and gracious, long suffering and abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.' We can all presume upon that. I am not going to argue against this either. I believe that it is an imperfect and in the last resort an impious way of recognising the truth that salvation is of the Lord. 'Tis from the mercy of our God that all our hopes begin', and they do begin. The initiative in salvation must lie with God, and He actually takes the initiative. We can and do depend upon that. But we must not presume upon it.⁹

Denney gives an illustration of the difference between forgiving ourselves, which we are apt to equate with true forgiveness, and of actually being forgiven by another, who has borne the sin:

Take the case of that relation in which human love is most intense, and at the same time most ethical—most remote from the elemental instinct with which even dumb creatures cling to their young—the relation of husband and wife. A man may sin in this relation—I do not mean at all in the gross way of violating his marriage vow—but in a way that wounds his wife's love. He may do something by which he falls in her opinion, compels her to be ashamed of him instead of proud of him; he may forfeit the confidence she once had in him, and in proportion to the fineness and nobility of her nature hurt her more than he can comprehend. And what then? Possibly what happens in such a case is that there is no reconciliation, but that after a while the offender begins to forgive himself. He has been mortified, ashamed, and humiliated as well as his wife, and it is mainly of himself he thinks. He sees no more that is to be made by indulging such feelings any longer. He assumes that his wife as a reasonable being will at last let bygones be bygones; and in consideration of the fact that he admits that he has behaved badly, he expects her to be willing to begin again, and to go on as if nothing had happened. This is what often takes place in human relations, and unhappily it is often the only analogy which experience supplies for interpreting our relation to God. But sometimes what takes place is quite different, far more wonderful, far more Divine. There is such an experience as a real reconciliation, in which the offender does not forgive himself but is forgiven. And what is the peculiarity of this experience, by which it is differentiated from the other? It is this: the centre of moral interest is transferred at once from the offender to the offended. The centre of the passion by which sin is overcome is seen to be not in the sinner, however deep and pure his repentance may be, but in the purer and diviner spirit which has borne his sin and is forgiving it. If this is a true analogy, can anyone think forgiveness is easy, a thing that needs no explanation, and to which the idea of propitiation is irrelevant or even abhorrent? I can believe that it is possible for love to forgive anything—for the love of a wife to pardon things in her husband that broke her pride, her hope, and her trust in him; but I can believe also, or rather I cannot but believe, that just in proportion to the purity and divineness of her nature, must that forgiveness come out of an agony

⁹ James Denney, 'Propitiation', from *The Way Everlasting*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1911, pp. 294–307. Preached at the annual meeting of the Baptist Missionary Society, April 1911.

in which it would not be amazing if she suddenly fell down dead.¹⁰ There is all this difference between forgiving oneself, which is so easy, so common, and so degrading; and being forgiven by a love which has borne our sins, which is so tragic, so subduing, so regenerating. Real forgiveness, forgiveness by another whom we have wronged, and in whom there is a love, which forgiveness reveals, able at once to bear the wrong and to inspire the penitence through which we can rise above it, is always tragic; and it is tragic on both sides—to him who has borne the sin which he forgives, and to him who stoops with a penitent heart to be forgiven. What the propitiation stands for is the divine side of this tragedy. It is tragic for God to forgive—a solemn and awful experience, if we may put it so, for Him; just as to be forgiven is tragic—a solemn and awful experience for us. This is the truth—and of its truth I have no more doubt than I have of my own existence—which underlies all the New Testament teaching about propitiation. To evade it, or let it fall into the background, is not to drop a Jewish misconception which the Christian spirit has outgrown. It is to pluck the heart out of the Christian religion. It is to stifle praise in the birth, and cut devotion at the root.

The great distinction between the Old Testament and the New, in what they reveal about forgiveness, lies just here: the New Testament has a perception, which was as yet impossible to the Old, of the cost at which forgiveness comes to men. The Old Testament felt that it was wonderful, but the New Testament can say that it is as wonderful as the Passion of Jesus. He died for our sins. In Him we have our redemption through His blood. We are justified freely by God's grace—the Old Testament knew that; but in the New Testament they can add, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation, through faith, in His blood.¹¹

How often, in our experience and understanding of forgiveness, are we ourselves our central concern—how we feel about ourselves, our repentance, our making amends, our self-punishment, even our self-atonement? The revelation of Christ crucified for us brings us to the end of that, to be appalled at the cost to God of that forgiveness, and to marvel at the love that bore that cost for us. Not so we can then have a right doctrine of propitiation, over against those who do not, but so we can be impacted personally, as Denney obviously was. Never again can we say that forgiveness is ever in any way easy, but always 'a solemn and awful experience'.

Denney goes on to say that it also brings us to the realisation that if this is for us, it must be for others as well:

Get to the heart of it and its universal scope cannot be missed. The propitiation is so absolute, so divine, that it draws everything within its range. If we feel what it is, we feel that it is not for our sins only, but also for the whole world.¹²

Questions for Reflection

- *In what ways have we made light of forgiveness?*
- *How much of our making light of it is an avoidance of the tragic impact of forgiveness on us, and on God?*

A QUICK FIX?

One way in which the matter of forgiveness is being brought to bear on the churches today is through the disclosing of sexual and other forms of abuse that have been perpetrated in the

¹⁰ It is clear that Denney is not suggesting that the husband is forgiven by virtue of his wife's agony. It is doubtful that any person has the capacity truly to forgive if they do not know the forgiveness of God, for themselves and for the other person (see Eph. 4:32). But neither does knowing God's forgiveness exempt anyone who perseveres in love from participating personally in something of the cost and agony of that forgiveness.

¹¹ James Denney, 'Propitiation'.

¹² James Denney, 'Propitiation'.

churches. A light view of forgiveness has bedevilled the churches' responses to these disclosures, at considerable cost.¹³ It is a fallaciously shallow exercise of 'forgiveness' that has permitted perpetrators, or moved them on, to re-offend and damage yet more lives. While the literature in this area often deals more with the question of person to person forgiveness than with the relation of this to God's forgiveness,¹⁴ nevertheless the experiences of survivors of abuse can teach us much on this matter:

During '94 & '95 I engaged in a process where I conducted interviews with approximately 60 women and 30 ministers. It had become obvious to me that there was a wide disparity between what ministers believed, preached or spoke about in terms of forgiveness and what was useful and relevant for the women who had been abused and were seeking solace. There was clearly a difference that caused women further heartache.

I was curious to learn why a process preached in the name of 'Love' would bring further hurt to women who desperately wanted to feel whole and free from the turmoil that invaded their lives.¹⁵

It seems the primary counsel offered to these women, who had been abused in childhood, was 'to forgive the abuser and God would forgive them':

Many women have tried to comply with what their church counsel advised but have felt like a failure when they still felt the pain of the abuse and could not find resolution in the ways expressed to them. Often they were then told that it was their lack of faith holding them back. The sounds of failure again, continuing the cycle of abuse upon women who want to feel a connection to wholeness. I looked at the model of forgiveness that the women spoke about. It seemed to come from the Old Testament book 2nd Chronicles 7:14. This model says . . .

- Acknowledge the sin
- Confess the wrong doing
- Be repentant (total change)
- Ask for forgiveness
- Be forgiven
- Offer restitution
- Resolution

The difficulty with this model is that it is the perpetrator who needs to go through this process not the victim. Putting this onto the victim means that the victim is asked to take responsibility for the perpetrator's sin.

The practitioner concludes: 'Forgiveness can come at the end of a process if it is important to the women, but never at the beginning'.¹⁶

Another practitioner considered the role of 'forgiveness' in supporting silencing and secrecy—a perpetuation of the dynamics that went with the abuse:

A woman told her mother of her experience of childhood sexual assault. Her mother's first words were 'if you are going to be okay then I can forgive him'. The mother was a caring woman who drew upon her socialisation and Christian upbringing to guide her thinking as she tried to make sense of devastating news. The daughter to date has never spoken to her mother about those issues again.

¹³ Besides the incalculable personal costs to primary and secondary survivors, and perpetrators, of the abuse, are the financially crippling compensation payments due: an estimated \$60 million nationwide for the Anglican Church of Australia alone (*The Weekend Australian*, June 19–20, 2004, p. 5). See further: 'The Unmasking of Sin', a sermon given on Sunday 20th June 2004 by Martin Bleby (copies available from NCPI).

¹⁴ The apostle Paul says: 'be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you' (Eph. 4:32). This must always be our starting point: we forgive because we are forgiven by God. It also goes with this that our willingness rightly to forgive affects our capacity to receive God's forgiveness: see Matt. 6:14–15; Luke 6:32.

¹⁵ Anne Horskins, article 'Forgiveness' in *STATEing Women's Health*, Women's Health Statewide, North Adelaide, September 2003, pp. 14–15, <www.whs.sa.gov.au/pub/September_2003a.pdf>.

¹⁶ Anne Horskins, 'Forgiveness'.

Another woman joined the local church in the hope of finding hope, companionship and acceptance. Eventually she spoke of her childhood experiences. The church community surrounded to support her. Underlying all their messages of care was an expectation that she forgive her abuser. Her own experience remained one of pain and confusion. She understood that if she was a 'good Christian' she would forgive. Rather than feel judged or forgo her friendships within the church congregation she tried to convince herself she had forgiven him. Her true experience was silenced and sacrificed to an expectation of forgiveness.¹⁷

This practitioner asked the pertinent question: 'whose purpose is served by the expectation of forgiveness? The need for a quick fix? . . . My belief is that when an expectation to forgive has a silencing impact, then it is the survivor whose needs are placed in a secondary position.'

We need to be wary of using our understanding of the gospel of forgiveness to serve our own needs for a quick or easy resolution, or to avoid crucial issues:

Another area where these considerations are important involves the issue of ongoing acknowledgement. Sometimes forgiveness is spoken about in ways that make it appear as if it is a magical process. In relation to abuse, some people seem to think that not only will the slate be wiped clean, but the effects of the abuse will also disappear if they are just able to forgive. These are compelling ideas but they do not often come to fruition.

One of the related hazards of these ideas is that they can contribute to situations in which, after a process of forgiveness takes place, there ceases to be any ongoing acknowledgement of the abuse. There are many powerful examples of this in different contexts of conflict and abuse. In circumstances where the perpetrators of abuse have acknowledged the hurtfulness of their actions, have apologised and offered some form of restitution, and have taken actions to ensure that no further harm will take place, the person who was subject to the abuse may decide that they wish to offer their forgiveness for what has occurred in the past. This is often particularly true where there is inevitably going to be an ongoing relationship of some sort. Some years down the track the relationships may be going okay, but where things often come unstuck is when the person who was subject to the abuse wants to talk about certain situations, certain things the person who perpetuated the abuse may do that remind them of the violence, or that make them feel uncomfortable. When the person who was subjected to the abuse tries to talk about these things, it is all too common for the person who perpetrated the violence in the past to say, 'Well that's old hat. Don't dredge up the past. You forgave me for that long ago.' Similar responses are sometimes made by significant others who have not been responsible for abuse, but have perceived that past acts of forgiveness mean that there is no need for ongoing acknowledgement of the past.

This, of course, can be profoundly undermining and minimising of both the history of abuse, and also the history of what it took to forgive, what it took for the person who was subject to abuse to continue with the relationship. I think the idea that forgiveness can 'wipe the slate clean', can be very limiting in terms of ongoing relationships. Where the person who perpetrated the abuse can contribute to ongoing acknowledgement, this can make a significant difference. In situations where the person forgiving is going to be in an ongoing relationship with the person they are forgiving, I think it's pretty crucial to forecast some of these issues and to explore in some detail what forgiveness might mean for all concerned. What it might mean in terms of how the past will be related to, and what it might mean for the future.

In actual relationships, after forgiveness is sought and granted, the relationship does not go back to how it once was. It is not a matter of wiping the slate clean. Sometimes the relationship may be transformed in positive ways through the process of forgiveness, but it never goes back to how it was prior to the wrong being committed.¹⁸

We cite these sources at some length, because they contain material that may be new to some of us, that we need to take into account. If our gospel does not effectively address this

¹⁷ Andrea Gregory, 'Reflections on Forgiveness', *STATEing Women's Health*, September 2003, pp. 16–17.

¹⁸ The church, confession, forgiveness and male sexual abuse', from an interview with Patrick O'Leary, conducted by David Denborough, *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, Dulwich Centre Publications, Adelaide, 2002, no. 1, pp. 11, 10, <www.dulwichcentre.com.au>.

situation—along with all others—then we might as well pack it in and stop pretending. If the church has ministered poorly, with closer attention to its own needs than to the needs of others, then it needs to improve, perhaps by being made to look more closely and learn from its own gospel. We may feel like saying: ‘Surely it can be better than is presented here! If only they knew the great forgiveness of God!’ Indeed—as long as we are not avoiding going to the depths ourselves and doing the hard yards with them, for that point to be reached.

This may have been a disturbing or upending study for some of us, especially if we have got ourselves into a position of being ‘cosy’ with our gospel. Neither the gospel itself, nor the issues we face of ongoing and indwelling sin in ourselves and others, allow us to retain that position.

In the next study we will examine what the Scriptures have to say about the pastoral practice of what has come to be called penitential discipline.

Questions for Reflection

- *Are there relationships or pastoral situations in which we have sought to apply the gospel as a ‘quick fix’, where more might have been required?*
- *What action might we now take with regard to that?*