

A STUDY OF FORGIVENESS

God's requirement to forgive others

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INTRODUCTION

Forgiveness is not a difficult biblical topic to understand. However, because humans are creatures of emotion forgiveness becomes more complex in its application. It plays out in many angles and levels and groupings: there is the need to forgive others, forgive ourselves and even forgive God. In seeking resolution to even a modest offence, it can involve the offender, the offended, God (if the parties are believers), and third parties – families, friends, pastors, the church, mediators, attorneys, and even the police.

We are also all error prone:

“For we all make many mistakes.” (James 3:2)

Yes, we frequently offend and are offended almost on a daily basis. So, to protect our mental health, this requires that we be forgiving every day!

One thing is sure; God makes it perfectly clear in His Word His requirement that we be forgivers. Most importantly, we will see in this study that a lack of forgiveness on our part can keep us out of the Kingdom of Messiah. And we do not want that to happen, right?

So, where do we start?

THE GREEK AND HEBREW WORD MEANINGS

It is always good to look at the meaning of words in the Hebrew and the Greek language as a segue into a study of a biblical topic.

The Greek word for “to forgive” is APOLUO - Strong's #630. Strong says it means: to free fully, to relieve, to release, to dismiss, to send away. It shares the same root as the Greek word APOLOGIA – Strong's #627 which is the root of our English word “apology”. Another very close Greek word is APOLOUO - Strong's #629 which means: to wash off or wash away. And we find that word being used in connection with Ananias call to Paul to be baptized in Acts 22:

“And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away (apolouo) your sins.” (Acts 22:16)

Another Greek word for forgiveness is APHESIS – Strong's #859. It means deliverance as in pardon, forgiveness, freedom. Strong says that as a noun it denotes a release from bondage, imprisonment and in Luke chapter 4 it is used of “liberation” from captivity:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty (aphesis) those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” (Luke 4:18-19)

These words give us some idea of the New Testament perspective on forgiveness. Do we see the overtone of relief and washing away, of setting free of captives that Godly forgiveness brings? It can be easily deducted from these words that the Word of God is telling us that when we refuse to forgive someone we are holding them captive and denying them the freedom that God grants to everyone when he forgives. In the words of Yahshua recorded in Luke chapter 4 above, he is quoting from the prophet Isaiah. This Scripture is about God's Jubilee when all debts are forgiven! The Scripture on jubilee has much greater application spiritually with regard to sin than it ever has with financial debts being wiped out and property being restored. Let it be said right here that from a moral perspective God cannot extend His forgiveness to someone who refuses to forgive a fellow brother or sister! Our God is a moral God. It is impossible that un-forgivers will rule with Messiah in His glorious Kingdom! Being willing to forgive is serious spiritual business and we will see that Messiah made forgiving others a requirement to having our own sins forgiven by God!

In Hebrew the verb for forgive is CALACH pronounced "saw-lakh". It is Strong's #5545. Dr. Strong comments: "CALACH is reserved especially to mark the pardon extended to the sinner by God. It is never used to denote the inferior kind and measure of forgiveness that is exercised by one man towards another. It is the Divine restoration of an offender into favor, whether through his own repentance or the intercession of another. Though not identical with atonement, the two are closely related. In fact, the covering of the sin and the forgiveness of the sinner can only be understood as two aspects of one truth; for both found their fullness in God's provision of mercy through Christ (cf. Heb 9:22).

"Indeed, under the Law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness (aphesis) of sins." (Heb 9:22)

Also note Messiah's own words in Matthew chapter 26:

"For this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness (aphesis) of sins." (Matt 26:28)

Strong continues: No other Old Testament verb means "to forgive" although several verbs include forgiveness in their range of meanings given a particular context. The first biblical occurrence is in Moses prayer of intercession on behalf of the Israelites in Exodus chapter 34: **"And he said, "If now I have found favor in thy sight, O Lord, let the Lord, I pray thee, go in the midst of us, although it is a stiff-necked people; and pardon (calach) our iniquity and our sin, and take us for thy inheritance." (Ex 34:9)**

Quoting Strong: "Most occurrences of CALACH are found in the sacrificial laws of Leviticus and Numbers. In the typology of the Old Testament, sacrifices foreshadowed the accomplished work of Jesus Christ and the Old Testament believer was assured of forgiveness based on sacrifice:

'And the priest shall make atonement' (Num 15:25,28)

'And it shall be forgiven him' (Lev 4:26)

So we see in this little examination of a few of the Hebrew and Greek words for forgiveness from Strong's concordance how central the theme of forgiveness is to the Scriptures. It is one of God's great attributes that He requires us all to have in our lives.

Part 2

THE THEOLOGY OF FORGIVENESS

YAHSHUA'S TEACHINGS ON THE SUBJECT

Yahshua's life was bathed in forgiveness. He lived forgiveness. He taught forgiveness. He even died that humanity might have forgiveness for all our sins. So let us work through some examples from His words and life. We will quickly see that if one proposes to be a follower of Him – there is no other option but to be a forgiver!

Let us start with his great "Sermon on the Mount":

23. So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24. leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."(Matt 5:23-24)

Today we have no Temple or Altar in Jerusalem. Instead we mostly offer our gifts with our prayers. Notice how even back in his time Hosea the prophet supported this concept:

"Take with you words, and return unto Jehovah: say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and accept that which is good: so will we render (as) bullocks (the offering of) our lips. (Hosea 14:2)ASV

Yahshua is saying that our first priority is to go and be reconciled to a brother or sister we are having an issue with and then get on our knees and make our prayer offering with our lips. Without forgiveness and reconciliation as first priority – our prayers ring hollow with God!

Let's go to Luke's gospel for the next point. Here Yahshua gives us a terrific summary:

27. "But I say to you that hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28. bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 29. To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from him who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. 30. Give to every one who begs from you; and of him who takes away your goods do not ask them again. 31. And as you wish that men would do to you, do so to them. 32. "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. 35. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful

and the selfish. 36. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. 37. "Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; 38. give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back." (Luke 6:27-38)

This section of Scripture covers a lot of key principles that if kept in mind and practiced would greatly reduce the splintering and animosity that affects some in the body of Messiah. Yes, it's easy to love those who love you but what reward can one expect for doing that when the rewards are meted out at Yahshua's "bema" judgment seat. Yahshua says that even sinners love those who love them! Notice the reciprocity that Yahshua will use in His judging. A) Judge not severely and you will not be judged severely! B) FORGIVE AND YOU WILL BE FORGIVEN! – Those who will not forgive cannot rule with Messiah in His kingdom. He will deal with them at the great light throne judgment at the end of His Millennial reign! C) The measure you give will be the measure you get. Yahshua will be generous with those who are generous here and now. Can we see that, for the most part, we are all writing our own judgment ticket! We have a biblical precedent for that found in the narrative of the life of King David. It's a familiar and gruesome story found in the second Book of Samuel, chapter 12. YHVH sent Nathan the prophet to confront David about his murder of Uriah. Nathan setup David with a parable of gross injustice. The parable evoked anger in David and he told Nathan:

“As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.”(2 Sam 12:5-6)

Now because God had yet a purpose for David He did not die for his self pronounced judgment. Instead God took the baby he had with Bathsheba, Uriah's wife and pronounced on David one of the most severe judgments found in the Tanak. Do I need to say that we had all better be extremely merciful and forgiving in how we treat others especially those of the household of faith? Observing the way ministers and ministries in the church of God movement treat each other in their hostilities over the years makes one wonder! So lest we forget, let us look at the second witness He gives to us on this crucial biblical teaching in Matthew chapter 6:

“12. And forgive us our debts, As we also have forgiven our debtors; 13. And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil. 14. For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; 15. but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Matt 6:12-15)

Here Yahshua tells us to pray to God to forgive us our debts AS we confess to Him that we have forgiven our debtors! This model prayer actually ends with verse 13. But to emphasize the importance of what He just told us, lest we have any doubt, He switches from the word “debts” to “trespasses” to make sure that we understand that He is including all types of offenses.

Next, we notice in Matthew chapter 18 the Master giving us some additional insights into forgiveness and reconciliation:

“15. If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” (Matt 18:15-18)

When misunderstandings happen in the Body of Messiah this is to be our approach to finding a resolution. It takes the Holy Spirit to be working in both parties for this to work well. It also takes courage and skill and love and patience and forgiveness. Sometimes when we do not have the courage to go sit down one on one with a brother, we take the route of badmouthing the brother to others for whatever reason. Then the brother gets wind of this and any hope for a good resolution is greatly diminished. But those gifted at peacemaking can often pull victory out of the jaws of defeat if both parties have a Godly attitude and are willing to forgive!

A second piece of insight is found in the apostle Peter's great question for Yahshua:

“ 21. Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" 22. Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. 23. "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. 24. When he began the reckoning, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents; 25. and as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. 26. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27. And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. 28. But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat he said, 'Pay what you owe.' 29. So his fellow servant fell down and besought him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30. He refused and went and put him in prison till he should pay the debt. 31. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; 33. and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' 34. And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt. 35. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." (Matt 18:21-35)

Observe that seventy times seven is 490 which translated into years is ten Jubilees of forgiveness! This amounts to telling Peter that there is no limit in the amount of times we are required to forgive! Peter could also have gotten to this answer by asking Yahshua how many times God will forgive before He says enough is enough.

So here is this example of the wicked servant we find the same lesson of required forgiveness. The point is that none of us has forgiven even a tiny fraction of what God has forgiven all of us.

So again we see that we have no choice but to forgive. Else we will be delivered to the jailers! Also observe here the command "from the heart". Sad to say, not all forgivers forgive from the heart. This can be sometimes seen in marital discord. It reminds me of a line from a Garth Brooks song: "bury the hatchet with the handle sticking out"! Also we have all heard people say: "I will forgive but I will not forget." Nobody is fooling God with these attitudes. He reads the heart! But it must be said that some offenses are so horrendous, that they will not be forgotten in this age. However the requirement to forgive stands.

THE ULTIMATE FORGIVENESS

We have observed that God links forgiveness to his judgments of us. We have to admit that forgiveness is not always easy. Many difficult examples come to mind: marital infidelities, molestations, murders, drunken driver manslaughters, massacres, genocides, rapes, gross negligence, and so on. I marvel at the people I see on TV from time to time showing their beautiful forgiving attitudes for a son or daughter lost to a murder. No amount of restitution can bring back a dead person. I believe the best thing we can do if a victim of any of the above type examples is to look to Yahshua, and his example and turn our burden over to him:

"Cast all your anxieties on Him for He cares about you." (1Peter5:7)

The apostle Peter waxes eloquently on this heavy issue:

"19. For one is approved if, mindful of God, he endures pain while suffering unjustly. 20. For what credit is it, if when you do wrong and are beaten for it you take it patiently? But if when you do right and suffer for it you take it patiently, you have God's approval. 21. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 22. He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. 23. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. 24. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed." (1Peter 2:19-24)

The last thing that we should allow into our mind is the seeking of revenge for an offense. God tells us in a double witness that that is his domain:

"Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written,

"Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." (Rom 12:19)

"For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." (Heb 10:30)

Nothing should inspire a troubled soul to move to forgive than Golgotha:

"7. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. 8. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? 9. And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death,

although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.” (Isaiah 53:7-9)

He hung in agony for six hours and yet some of the last few words he uttered were words of forgiveness:

“Father forgive them; for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34)

A BONDSLAVE OF YAHSHUA HAS SURRENDERED HIS WILL TO HIS MASTER

I have dealt at length with the concept and implications of being a bond slave of Yahshua Messiah in another study paper. It is sufficient to say here that as his part of his redemption agreement, the bond slave gives up all his “freedoms” to his Redeemer. He is self compelled to do his Master's will. We have seen clearly that it is Yahshua's will that we be unconditional forgivers. If we are true to our bond slave commitment, we have no choice but to forgive. If we are not forgivers, He will not elevate us to Sonship and make us priest / kings in positions of rulership in His Kingdom. A lot is at stake for the first fruit Christian!

Dr. Stephen Jones makes an interesting observation when he states that the first requirement to be considered an overcomer is to be a forgiver! You see, we can overcome our addictions, our anger, our profanities, our gossiping etc., but if we have unresolved forgiveness issues with a brother or sister in Messiah, all else is mostly in vain. Forgiveness of others is what God requires of us so He can forgive us our sins / transgressions against Him. Let us not let any offences committed against us keep us out of the Kingdom of Messiah!

FORGIVENESS IN THE TANAK

We will start in the Torah

THE MERCY SEAT

The Mercy Seat was a slab of solid gold that formed the cover of the Ark of the Covenant. It was the most precious item in the entire Tabernacle in the Wilderness. And rightly so, for it was symbolic of Yahshua Messiah and His work of forgiveness of sins. The Seat was God's dwelling place in the camp of Israel. (2Kings:19:5) (Psalm 80:1) (Psalm 99:1)

It was here that the people of Israel found forgiveness for their sins once a year on the Day of Atonement when the High Priest sprinkled the sacrificial blood on the seat seven times.

(Leviticus 16) Thus God's requirement for Israel's transgressions was satisfied here at the mercy seat. In reality, His requirement was truly satisfied and fulfilled much later in the sacrifice of Yahshua at Golgotha:

“whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed.”(Rom 3:25)

At God's Mercy Seat all people find forgiveness for their transgressions against their God. His

simple requirements are that people accept Yahshua's sacrifice in faith as covering for their sins along with His requirement that we forgive others their offenses against us – as Yahshua taught us.

The Israelites experienced God's forgiveness in the wilderness and in the Promised Land. As long as the Tabernacle and the Temple stood, sacrificial atonement continued. When Israel went into captivity and God stripped them of the Temple, ever forgiving, He sent the prophetic word that he would restore Israel and forgive their iniquity:

'And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, `Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.' (Jer. 31:34)

In the Psalms, notice David praising God for the assurance of forgiveness of sins but especially with his magnificent Psalm 103. This Psalm should inspire us all to be forgivers as David reminds us here of YHVH's love and mercy and forgiveness for us! I believe that this Psalm is a great meditation for anyone struggling with forgiveness issues:

1. **Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless his holy name!**
2. **Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits,**
3. **who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,**
4. **who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,**
5. **who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.**
6. **The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.**
7. **He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.**
8. **The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.**
9. **He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger for ever.**
10. **He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities.**
11. **For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;**
12. **as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.**
13. **As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him.**
14. **For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.**
15. **As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field;**
16. **for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.**
17. **But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children,**
18. **to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.**
19. **The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.**
20. **Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, hearkening to the voice of his word!**
21. **Bless the Lord, all his hosts, his ministers that do his will!**

22. Bless the Lord, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the Lord, O my soul!" (Psalm 103)

If anyone you know is struggling with forgiveness, tell them to read this Psalm several times a day for 40 days! It can melt a "heart of stone"!

For a second witness and additional inspiration we can go to Micah chapter 7:

"18 Who is a God like thee, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever because he delights in steadfast love. 19. He will again have compassion upon us, he will tread our iniquities under foot. Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea." (Micah 7:18-19)

THE REQUIREMENT FOR RESTITUTION

An important point in forgiveness is frequently the issue of justice and restitution. The Book of Exodus tells us:

1. "If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, he shall pay five oxen for the ox and four sheep for the sheep. 2. "If the thief is caught while breaking in, and is struck so that he dies, there will be no blood guiltiness on his account. 3. "[But] if the sun has risen on him, there will be blood guiltiness on his account. He shall surely make restitution; if he owns nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft. 4. "If what he stole is actually found alive in his possession, whether an ox or a donkey or a sheep, he shall pay double. 5. "If a man lets a field or vineyard be grazed [bare] and lets his animal loose so that it grazes in another man's field, he shall make restitution from the best of his own field and the best of his own vineyard. 6. "If a fire breaks out and spreads to thorn bushes, so that stacked grain or the standing grain or the field [itself] is consumed, he who started the fire shall surely make restitution." (Exodus 22:1-6) NAS.

1. "You shall not bear a false report; do not join your hand with a wicked man to be a malicious witness. 2. "You shall not follow a multitude in doing evil, nor shall you testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after a multitude in order to pervert [justice]; 3. nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his dispute. 4. "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him. 5. "If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying [helpless] under its load, you shall refrain from leaving it to him, you shall surely release [it] with him. 6. "You shall not pervert the justice [due] to your needy [brother] in his dispute. 7. "Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent or the righteous, for I will not acquit the guilty. 8. "And you shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the clear-sighted and subverts the cause of the just. (Exodus 23:1-8)NAS

Here we see that generous restitution is clearly mandated in Torah. Naturally it may be helpful in sweetening difficult forgiveness negotiations when seeking to resolve hostilities

THE ISSUE OF VENGEANCE.

Another issue that sometimes inhibits people from forgiving an offence is their personal desire for vengeance. They want to play God. God tells us clearly in Torah as well as the New

Testament that vengeance is His domain and His prerogative. It does not please Him when we try to do His job for Him!

“Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and their doom comes swiftly. 36. For the Lord will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants, when he sees that their power is gone, and there is none remaining, bond or free. 37. Then he will say, ‘Where are their gods, the rock in which they took refuge, 38. who ate the fat of their sacrifices, and drank the wine of their drink offering? Let them rise up and help you, let them be your protection! 39. ’” See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand. 40. For I lift up my hand to heaven, and swear, As I live for ever, 41. if I whet my glittering sword, and my hand takes hold on judgment, I will take vengeance on my adversaries, and will requite those who hate me. 42. I will make my arrows drunk with blood, and my sword shall devour flesh -- with the blood of the slain and the captives, from the long-haired heads of the enemy.’ 43. ”Praise his people, O you nations; for he avenges the blood of his servants, and takes vengeance on his adversaries, and makes expiation for the land of his people.” 44. Moses came and recited all the words of this song in the hearing of the people, he and Joshua the son of Nun. 45. And when Moses had finished speaking all these words to all Israel, 46. he said to them, ”Lay to heart all the words which I enjoin upon you this day, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law. 47. For it is no trifle for you, but it is your life, and thereby you shall live long in the land which you are going over the Jordan to possess.” (Deut 32:35-47)

The forgiver has no need to worry about playing God and the ensuring recompense. Our God is keeping records. Any vengeance or recompense that is due will be meted out appropriately and justly. It is well to also note that we find a double witness to the issue of vengeance in the New Testament:

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” (Rom 12:19)

“For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” (Heb 10:30)

Understanding that vengeance will be taken care of by God is crucial to peace between nations, peoples and families. Seeking vengeance is at the core of many conflicts that history shows have sometimes stretched out over several centuries with the hatreds being perpetuated generation to generation. Only forgiveness and the act of “turning the other cheek” breaks this awful cycle.

GREAT INSPIRATIONAL BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF FORGIVENESS

MOSES - As a man of much humility, Moses was severely tested by his stubborn followers. Yet he showed them nothing but love and patience, even interceding for them when YHVH was ready to wipe them all out! Let us look at the well known rebellion of Korah and his followers against Moses and Aaron:

"Now Korah the son of Izhar, son of Kohath, son of Levi, and Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, 2. took men; and they rose up before Moses, with a number of the people of Israel, two hundred and fifty leaders of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men; 3. and they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron, and said to them, "You have gone too far! For all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them; why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?" 4. When Moses heard it, he fell on his face; 5. and he said to Korah and all his company, "In the morning the Lord will show who is his, and who is holy, and will cause him to come near to him; him whom he will choose he will cause to come near to him. 6. Do this: take censers, Korah and all his company; 7. put fire in them and put incense upon them before the Lord tomorrow, and the man whom the Lord chooses shall be the holy one. You have gone too far, sons of Levi!" 8. And Moses said to Korah, "Hear now, you sons of Levi: 9. is it too small a thing for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to himself, to do service in the tabernacle of the Lord, and to stand before the congregation to minister to them; 10. and that he has brought you near him, and all your brethren the sons of Levi with you? And would you seek the priesthood also? 11. Therefore it is against the Lord that you and all your company have gathered together; what is Aaron that you murmur against him?" (Num 16:1-11)RSV

Notice how Moses did not strike back. Instead he took their complaint to God. Backing up to the Book of Exodus, look at Moses intervening with YHVH on behalf of the people, seeking forgiveness for them, and even putting his own life on the line!

"30. On the morrow Moses said to the people, "You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." 31. So Moses returned to the Lord and said, "Alas, this people have sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. 32. But now, if thou wilt forgive their sin -- and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written." 33. But the Lord said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book. 34. But now go, lead the people to the place of which I have spoken to you; behold, my angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them." 35. And the Lord sent a plague upon the people, because they made the calf which Aaron made. (Exodus 32:30-35) RSV

Notice verse 34. The NRSV reads: "Nevertheless, when the day comes for punishment, I will punish them for their sin." Again, at the risk of being nauseatingly repetitive, I point this out because it seems to me that some people's need for vengeance and retribution is very great. Everyone needs to learn to trust God's judgment and the appropriateness of His punishments. Justice will be done. That is His business! Our business is to forgive!

JOSEPH The son of Jacob. He is called a fruitful bough. He certainly was a great forgiver as well! His story reads like a novel. He was sold by his jealous brothers to some Median traders for twenty pieces of silver. They took him down to Egypt and resold him to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials. In Pharaoh's court he was falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and cast in prison. The Book of Genesis chapters 37-50 tell the story in detail. Our interest here is the portion on Joseph forgiving his brothers for the gross evil they had done to him in selling him away and lying to their father Jacob about him. We pick up the narrative recorded in chapter 50 **“ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil which we did to him." 16. So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died, 17. `Say to Joseph, Forgive, I pray you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.' And now, we pray you, forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. 18. His brothers also came and fell down before him, and said, "Behold, we are your servants." 19. But Joseph said to them, "Fear not, for am I in the place of God? 20. As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. 21. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he reassured them and comforted them.” (Gen 50:15-21)**

There are some wonderful lessons on forgiveness demonstrated here by Joseph. He saw that the evil committed against him was God's purpose for him and his family. With his wise, kind and forgiving attitude Joseph laid the foundation for the rich biblical history that followed him; the explosion of the Israelite population in Egypt, Moses, Passover, the Exodus, the Tabernacle in the wilderness, the settlement in Canaan, etc., Because of his actions, we got all its priceless spiritual lessons recorded for everyone's edification that we might learn more of the character of the God of the Hebrew Bible. Truly did the apostle Paul tell us in Romans:

“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to [His] purpose.” (Rom 8:28)

Please note the inspired precondition Paul included here: “ to those who love God”. When we love God, things are “going well” when it seems that they are not going so well! A trial, a test of our ability to forgive may be God's purpose for any of his called out ones at any given time to perhaps teach us a lesson, or even change our life to conform to some purpose He has for us. Inasmuch as Joseph was a shadow of Messiah, all followers of Messiah are called to be little Josephs – leading lives of high moral character and always seeking and obeying God's will as best as we can discern it. We have seen already that it is always His will that we forgive in all circumstances. And like Joseph, in doing the right thing, we never know what great long term ripple effects we may have created to honor our God and change lives.

STEPHEN We first learn of Stephen in Acts chapter 6. This was an amazing time as the Apostles anointed with the Holy Spirit in a very powerful way were speaking out in Jerusalem with great boldness creating a need for additional manpower. Here is the narrative recorded in Acts chapter 6:

“ Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. 2. And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. 3. Therefore, brethren,

pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. 4. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." 5. And what they said pleased the whole multitude, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. 6. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands upon them. 7. And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith. 8. And Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. 9. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, arose and disputed with Stephen. 10. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. 11. Then they secretly instigated men, who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." 12. And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, 13. and set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law; 14. for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place, and will change the customs which Moses delivered to us." 15. And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel." (Acts 6)

Stephen was an amazing man, filled with the Holy Spirit, skilled with the Scriptures and an excellent debater. Through him and the others even "a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith!" But the religions of this world hate Light and Truth and so Stephen get himself arrested. Just like Yahshua before him, they set up liars and false witnesses to falsely accuse him of breaking the Law of Moses. Same old same old! Again, just like Yahshua, when Stephen pointed out their sins to them, he was signing his own death warrant! Acts chapter 7 records for us his tragic and awful murder:

"Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth against him. 55. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; 56. and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God." 57. But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together upon him. 58. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him; and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59. And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60. And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep." (Acts 7:54-60)

What an inestimable example Stephen was to the early Church! It was probable that this record of his martyrdom served as encouragement to the multiple thousands who have been murdered through the centuries for being nothing more than a follower of Yahshua Messiah. His example serves as inspiration to anyone struggling to come to grips with forgiveness. His loud cry to God to blot out the sin of his murderers, even as they killed him is exemplarily in the extreme. We know for sure that God may indeed have answered his prayer in the case of one man present that day and that was a man named Saul who was called by God and became the great apostle Paul. For reasons and conditions not yet clear, a great persecution seems to be prophesied to hammer the Body of Messiah before His second coming. As a final test of their

ability to forgive at a deep level, some may be inspired to utter: "Father, do not hold this sin against them."

Part 3

THE APPLICATION OF FORGIVENESS

RT Kendall is a British church pastor and the author of a best selling book called Total Forgiveness. I like some of his thoughts and in edited form I share what he means by total forgiveness here. His aim is to take forgiveness to a higher spiritual level.

CHOOSE TO KEEP NO RECORD OF WRONGS

Love keeps no record of wrongs (1Cor 13:5). Love is a choice. Total forgiveness is a choice. It is an act of the will. We clearly see and acknowledge the evil that was done to us but we erase it before it becomes lodged in our hearts. We are to learn to do this habitually as a lifestyle. My comment: Sure forgiveness is a choice but the first fruit believer has only one choice – forgive!

REFUSING TO PUNISH

Refusing to punish those who deserve it – giving up the natural desire to see them "get what is coming to them" is the essence of total forgiveness. Our human nature cannot bear the thought that someone who hurt us deeply would get away with what they have done. It seems so unfair. We want vengeance – namely their just punishment. If we harbor the desire to see our enemies punished, we will eventually lose the anointing of the Holy Spirit. But when perfect love, the love of Jesus and the fruit of the Holy Spirit enters, the desire for our enemy to be punished leaves. Vindication is God's prerogative and God's prerogative alone. If punishment is our motive, we are about to grieve the Holy Spirit.

NOT TELLING WHAT THEY DID

There is often a need to talk to someone about how you have been hurt, and this can be therapeutic if it is done with a right heart attitude. But choose your confidant carefully, a person who will not repeat your situation to those it will not concern. Anyone who truly forgives does not gossip about his or her offender.

BEING MERCIFUL

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." (Matt 5:7) The Bible says two things about God: He is merciful. He is just. Carrying out justice belongs to God alone but we are commanded to be merciful: "Be merciful, just as your father is merciful." (Luke 6:36) In the Greek language, mercy is the opposite of wrath or justice. One difference between grace and mercy is that grace is getting what we don't deserve (favor) and mercy is not getting what we do deserve (justice).

There is a fringe benefit for those of us who show mercy: we will also be shown mercy. (Matt 5:7) This again shows that total forgiveness is not devoid of self interest. "The merciful man doeth good to his own soul." (Prov 11:17) KJV

GRACIOUSNESS

True forgiveness shows grace and mercy at the same time. In Greek, the word for graciousness is 'epieikes'. It means forbearance or tolerance. Paul used the word in Philippians chapter 4 in the context of a squabble between two women: "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord" (verse 2) In verse 5 Paul exhorts the group: "Let your graciousness be known to everyone." (Phil 4:5) Graciousness is shown by what you don't say, even if what you could say would be true.

IT IS AN INNER CONDITION

Total forgiveness must take place in the heart or it is worthless, for "out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks." (Matt 12:34) If forgiveness has taken place in our hearts, our words will show it. But when there is still bitterness, it will eventually manifest itself. This is why reconciliation is not essential for total forgiveness. If forgiveness truly takes place in the heart, one does not need to know whether one's enemy will reconcile. If I have forgiven him in my heart of hearts, but he still does not want to speak to me, I can still have the inner victory. The apostle John wrote: "Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God." (1John 3:21) Confidence towards God is ultimately what total forgiveness is all about; He is the One I want to please at the end of the day.

IT IS THE ABSENCE OF BITTERNESS

Bitterness is an inward condition. It is an excessive desire for vengeance that comes from deep resentment. It heads the list of things that grieve the Spirit of God found in Ephesians chapter 4: "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you." (Eph 4:30-32) Bitterness is the most frequent cause of people missing the grace of God: "See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many." (Heb 12:15) Bitterness will manifest itself in many ways – losing your temper, high blood pressure, irritability, sleeplessness, obsession with getting even, depression, isolation, a constant negative perspective, and generally feeling unwell.

We must, therefore, begin to get rid of a bitter and unforgiving spirit; otherwise the attempt to forgive will fail. Relinquishing bitterness is an open invitation for the Holy Spirit to give you inner peace, joy and the knowledge of God's will.

FORGIVING GOD

Much of our bitterness is ultimately traceable to a resentment of God. Why do we feel this way? Because deep in our hearts, we believe that He is the one who allowed bad things to happen on our lives. Since He is all powerful and all knowing, couldn't He have prevented tragedies and offenses from happening? He has allowed us to suffer when we didn't do

anything, or so it seems, to warrant such ill treatment. We may ultimately believe that God is to blame for our hurt. "All things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are called according to His purpose." (Rom 8:28) We need to learn to trust Him and take Him at His Word.

My comment: He is the potter. We are simply his clay. If forgiving God is an issue, pray for understanding and read widely on the topic and seek counsel with those who are skilled in this area. God will provide the answers! Forgiving God is a broader problem for a considerable number of believers, broader than the issue of offenses. Some become disappointed in their expectations of God when He does not answer their prayers for healing, when they have financial difficulties even though they have been generous with their church donations and offerings, when tragedy strikes in the form of a bad car accident, cancer in a loved one, or becoming a victim of serious crime etc., When we have totally turned our will over to Him, these very serious spiritual inhibitors and unrealistic view of who God is can be brought into a more mature perspective.

FORGIVING OURSELVES

Kendall states that one common complaint every church leader hears is this: "I know God forgives me but I just can't seem to forgive myself."

My comment: When we build up a deep relationship with our God, to me, this is less of an issue. My counsel to a few friends on this has simply to tell them: "Get over it!" It is easier said than done.

THE END OF THE MATTER

1. Understanding Godly forgiveness is crucial to the Christian
2. Applying forgiveness is not always easy but we must give it 100% effort and God will do the rest.
3. There is only one option – forgive unconditionally!
4. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciliation – at least not immediately. Some difficult situations take a long time to heal emotionally
5. Being a forgiver does not mean we have to put up with ongoing abuse and make a door mat out of ourselves. Get good counsel on this
6. Take the big picture. This age we live in is only the beginning of things. We are just pilgrims here and now. True justice, true happiness are of the age to come. Turn that problem over to God and let Him fight your battles!
7. You never know what great ripple effect you may have started by being a forgiver every day. Remember Joseph and the ripple he started in Egypt
8. Forgiving is good for your spiritual, emotional, and physical health.
9. All first fruits will be tested, some even severely tested in the area of forgiveness
10. All strugglers with forgiveness need to cry out to God in prayer to pour His Holy Spirit into their body and melt their hardness of heart.