

Feb 12th 2012: "Forgiveness—O.T. Style" Genesis 3

Some years ago Keith Robins ran a course here on forgiveness which turned out to be really popular, and the reason for its popularity I felt, was the struggle so many have with the practical ramifications of forgiving and being forgiven.

Consequently I have often thought about preaching through a series of messages about forgiveness, and with Easter fast approaching, now seemed the appropriate time. So this morning I want to begin by looking at 'Forgiveness—Old Testament Style. How the need for God to forgive human beings arose, and what the Old Testament reveals about God's forgiveness and the cost of its availability.

If you have your Bible with you, turn with me to Genesis chapter 3. This is definitely one of the pinnacle chapters in the Bible and may well be the pinnacle chapter in the O.T. as it gives us the reason for the major story that the Bible goes on to present. The story of our rescue from the powers of evil and the pollution of sin through the love and mercy of an all powerful and holy God.

By the time we get to Genesis chapter 3 we have already discovered that God as Creator has provided mankind with a beautiful and perfect world, and indeed, man was also created perfect, sharing the absolute purity of God.

Genesis 1:26 tells us that the Triune God had chosen to make man different to the animals by creating human beings separate to them and in His own image. He breathed into man His own eternal spirit, and to human kind was given, amongst other things, the gift of choice and the responsibility that went with that.

Unfortunately, as Gen 3 reveals, that gift was wrongly used to disobey God. To cross the boundaries He had set, and although the blame was passed from one to another like a dinner plate too hot to hold on to, the end result was never in doubt. Exclusion from the presence and purity of God and the continuous and continuing polluting of this world by the evil they had chosen above their relationship of trust and fellowship with a holy God.

Yet before this chapter, that closes with the story of such terrible separation ends, there's a verse in the midst of it that mustn't be missed and it's v15. Speaking to the serpent God says:-

***15 And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel.”***

Here we see a clue to a vital battle against the powers of evil which at that time was still to come. A victory that was preordained for the power of light. For the seed of the woman who will crush forever the might of darkness.

This is a prophecy about the coming of a Saviour into the world. The coming of the Messiah—the Christ. And it thrills my heart to think that in this chapter in which we see God in His holiness casting humanity from His presence, He outlines His rescue plan.... What He is prepared to do out of His unconditional love to make the forgiveness possible that will give us back the paradise that is lost. Bring us once again into His presence, but as His children and not just His creation.

And immediately the OT gives us an insight into what God’s forgiveness isn’t.

It is not an easy remedy that simply ignores the severity of the crime. God’s forgiveness was not automatically available at that point on the basis of a person saying I’m sorry, or being remorseful.

If that had been the case then God would have surely sought to reverse the ruling that saw those first humans banished from the garden. All it would have taken would have been a simple question to Adam and Eve. “Are you sorry for your disobedience...for believing the lies of the evil one....for your subterfugefor seeking to shift the blame? Are you really remorseful? Well ok, welcome home.”

But that just didn’t happen, because an immense price had to be paid before this amazing forgiveness of God could be offered. And it is this fact that the OT scriptures go on to emphasize through three separate Hebrew words that they continually use to explain or define forgiveness.

The first word links forgiveness with atonement. Forgiveness can justly be offered by God because the wrong or evil committed has been atoned for. Satisfaction for the wrong committed has been given. A price has been put on the act, thought, deed, and that price has somehow been paid.

So in Psalm 78 the Psalmist is talking about the Children of Israel in the wilderness wanderings, and how they continually sinned against God and then repented of their sin, and in v38 he says:

***38 Yet he was merciful;
he forgave their iniquities
and did not destroy them.
Time after time he restrained his anger
and did not stir up his full wrath.***

The word for forgiveness is the word cover, or to make an atonement. By the offering of a spotless and pure lamb or goat as prescribed by God they could receive forgiveness. Their wrong doing was atoned for but it was only until they sinned again.

But already with this one word we can see that God's forgiveness can only be given when the wrong has been covered...And for that a sacrifice was required. As the author of the book of Hebrews in the NT says in 9:22

In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

He was quoting from Leviticus 17:11 that uses this first Hebrew word and says:

11 For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.

So in the OT you don't gain God's temporary forgiveness just by saying "I'm sorry". You have to offer God the price He has set to cover your wrongdoing. That's the cost of forgiveness.

The Second Hebrew word links forgiveness with bearing away the guilt of having sinned against God. It is used in Psalm 32:5

***Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, "I will confess
my transgressions to the LORD"—***

***and you forgave
the guilt of my sin.***

I'm aware in my life that at times I have wronged someone, usually without malice, but it has caused them some hardship and pain. I've apologized and they have forgiven me, but they can't take away the guilt I feel inside. It remains there, and if a third party makes reference to the incident then I feel that guilt light up inside me like a beacon.

When God forgives it means that the guilt and shame have been lifted from us. In the OT it was borne away by the sacrifice. The guilt offering. And this was possible because the sacrifice pointed forward to the sacrifice of Jesus who would bear our guilt and sins upon the cross.

That's the glorious extent of God's forgiveness. It takes away all sin and shame.

The third word links forgiveness with pardon. It is only ever used in the OT of God's pardon. So it connects God's forgiveness with His holiness.

The Bible proclaims that God is completely without sin or wrong. He is pure and there is no impurity within Him. When we disobey Him, fail to acknowledge Him, or break His commandments, then we offend the character of Almighty God.

Recently our Prime Minister was treated in such a way by a group of protestors that she and others feared for her safety. And ever since there have been many who have openly voiced their alarm at such an occurrence. And they did so because of her position as Prime minister and have demanded high penalties because this high office has been treated with disrespect.

Yet too few think of the penalty due to us when we ignore, disobey, disrespect, despised Almighty God. I always think of Isaiah when I think of the holiness of God. How when he saw that vision of God in the Temple he reaction was of fear because he saw himself in comparison to the holiness of God. And this godly and righteous man cried out in utter fear:

Isaiah 6:5: ***"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."***

This word promises us that God's forgiveness will include His pardon for the way we have behaved towards Him. For the lack of understanding we have had of His holiness. That those who are so forgiven will not cringe in terror before Him, but be as pure and as holy as he is.

This is the word that Solomon used in his prayer to Almighty God in 2 Chron 6:21

Hear the supplications of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place; and when you hear, forgive.

When you hear, pardon:

That's the Majesty of God's forgiveness. It makes us perfect, and pardoned, and holy before Him.

All this is ours since Christ Jesus and it means that when we are in Him we need not fear the holiness of God, but gaze into it with thankfulness, with awe, and with worship.

