

# OUT OF THE DEPTHS: GOD'S FORGIVENESS OF SIN

## Study Five

### FORGIVENESS AND THE RESURRECTION

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#### RAISED FOR OUR JUSTIFICATION

We have seen the absolute necessity and centrality of the cross of Christ for God's forgiveness of sin. Paul the apostle says that it is of first importance 'that Christ died for our sins' (1 Cor. 15:3). Forgiveness comes through Jesus' death on the cross: 'we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses' (Eph. 1:7). What happened on the cross has universal implications: 'God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross' (Col. 1:20). The apostle Peter said that it is through what happened on the cross that we are changed: 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed' (1 Pet. 2:24). Admission into the presence of God comes through what Christ suffered: 'For Christ also suffered [or *died*] for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God' (1 Pet. 3:18).

Paul also stresses no less the central importance of Christ's resurrection for the forgiveness of sin. It stands to reason that if Jesus had stayed dead in the grave, sin and death would have had the last word, and we would be in no better a position:

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins (1 Cor. 15:17).

Peter also says that it is the resurrection of Jesus that brings us into this transformed state: 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead' (1 Pet. 1:3). The clear conscience we have as a result of the forgiveness of our sins comes in connection with our baptism in association with Christ's resurrection:

And baptism . . . now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him (1 Pet. 3:21–22).

No way do we want to play Christ's death and his resurrection off against each other, nor should we apportion to one or the other the effectual outcome of the forgiveness of sins. Paul speaks of both together:

Jesus our Lord . . . was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification (Rom. 4:24–25).

Interestingly, he associates our justification here with Jesus' being raised. Paul clearly believed that there could be no forgiveness of sins without the resurrection of Jesus. Any understanding and experience of the forgiveness of sins must be on the basis that Jesus was raised from death. The resurrection, then, tells us something of the reality and character of the forgiveness of sins that we could not know otherwise.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

- *What could be the result of associating our forgiveness only with the death of Jesus?*
- *What new dimension might be added by seeing our forgiveness also in the light of Jesus' resurrection?*

## **THE VINDICATION OF JESUS**

Why was Jesus raised from death? It has to do with his righteousness, and his being without sin (as testified to by the apostle John in 1 John 2:29; 3:5, 7—see below). Our death, as we have seen, is a consequence of our sin in Adam:

sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned (Rom. 5:12).

Christ's death was not necessitated by any sin of his own, but by the will of the Father in His love for us. Jesus said at the time of his arrest:

Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way? (Matt. 26:53–54).

Jesus' death—in his case alone—was a matter of voluntary obedience to the Father, and so also was his resurrection:

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father (John 10:17–18).

Jesus' resurrection, then, was because there was nothing in him that could hold him down in death. Not only did he have no sin of his own, but also he had perfectly carried through the Father's will in the bearing of the sin of the world out to destruction in his death. Peter is able to say therefore:

God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power (Acts 2:24).

Jesus' resurrection is God's vindication of him as 'the Holy and Righteous One' and 'the Author of life':

The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses (Acts 3:13–15).

Jesus' resurrection is the Father's declaration that this one is the Son of God who has fully carried through the victory of God's grace over all opposition:

declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 1:4).

God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified (Acts 2:36).

For Paul this is a keystone of the great 'mystery of our religion':

He was revealed in flesh,  
vindicated in spirit (1 Tim. 3:16).

Peter has a parallel expression:

He was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit (1 Pet. 3:18).

The words 'vindicated in spirit' could equally be translated 'justified by the Spirit'.<sup>1</sup> This links his resurrection with our justification or forgiveness of sin. Our justification is a participation in the vindication as righteous (the 'justification') that Jesus received in his resurrection.

Hence it was in the context of his proclamation of Jesus' resurrection that Paul announced our forgiveness and justification:

And we bring you the good news that what God promised to our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second psalm,

'You are my Son;  
today I have begotten you' . . .

he whom God raised up experienced no corruption. Let it be known to you therefore, my brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you; by this Jesus everyone who believes is set free<sup>2</sup> from all those sins from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses (Acts 13:32–33, 37–39).

How, then, are Jesus' resurrection and our forgiveness linked?

### **Questions for Discussion:**

- *In what sense is Jesus' resurrection his justification by God?*
- *How might that connect with our own justification and forgiveness?*

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<sup>1</sup> See *NRSV* footnote. The word is ἐδικαιώθη, *edikaiōsthē*.

<sup>2</sup> The word for 'set free' and 'freed' is literally 'justified' (δικαιωθῆναι, *dikaiōthēnai* and δικαιούται, *dikaioutai*).

## GOD RAISED US UP WITH HIM

Paul speaks of ‘the forgiveness of our trespasses’ (Eph. 1:7) in terms of being raised up from death:

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived . . . But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:1–2, 4–6).

How is this so? It has to do with Christ’s identification of himself with us and of us with him. God has sent His Son ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh’ (Rom. 8:3)—not as sinful himself, but as one who is able ‘to sympathize with our weaknesses’ and ‘one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin’ (Heb. 4:15). The focus of his identification with us was when he did not draw back from the cross but allowed himself to be abandoned up to death there for us all (as in Rom. 8:32). There, where he was ‘lifted up’ to die, he drew all people to himself (John 12:31–33) in a massive and unprecedented embrace of divine love, such that somehow his death was the death and judgement of all of us: ‘one has died for all; therefore all have died’ (2 Cor. 5:14). That is how each of us can now say by faith, ‘I have been crucified with Christ’, and that he ‘loved me and gave himself for me’ (Gal. 2:19, 20). Nor does the identification end there. Jesus said, ‘I go to prepare a place for you . . . I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also’ (John 14:2, 3). Hence, ‘If we have died with him, we will also live with him’ (2 Tim. 2:11). This union with Christ is experienced now by faith:

Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God (1 Pet. 1:21).

Our life, then, is now ‘hidden with Christ in God’ (Col. 3:3).

What are the implications of this for the forgiveness of our sin? Paul speaks of our present state:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God (Rom. 5:1–2).

The matter of the forgiveness of our sin is now settled once and for all. It need no longer be questioned, and should not be constantly revisited:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1).

We are now ‘clothed’ with Christ (Gal. 3:27)—as Isaiah said, ‘he has covered me with the robe of righteousness’ (Isa. 61:10). We are ‘found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith’ (Phil. 3:9). This righteousness from God leaves for dead any ‘righteousness’ that we may call our own. We are now out of a realm where sin is reckoned—‘blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin’ (Rom. 4:8; quoting Ps. 32:2)—and into the realm where the righteousness of the righteous one prevails:

If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who does right has been born of him . . . You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides

in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous . . . as he is, so are we in this world (1 John 2:29, 3:5–7; 4:17).

**Question for Discussion:**

- *How is forgiveness of sin related to our union with the Righteous One?*

## THE HOPE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

We note the future reference in the passages cited in the previous section. When God ‘raised us up’ with Christ ‘and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus’ (Eph. 2:6), it was ‘so that *in the ages to come* he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus’ (Eph. 2:7). Once ‘we are justified by faith . . . we boast in our *hope* of sharing the glory of God’ (Rom. 5:1–2). This hope, Paul says, ‘does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’ (Rom. 5:5). What is the significance of this future reference, and what more does this tell us about the forgiveness of sin?

In the New Testament, the gospel is proclaimed with the final day of judgement firmly in view:

While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:30–31).

The time of forbearance, of overlooking people’s sins (see Rom. 3:25), will then be over. This will be ‘the day of wrath, when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed’ (Rom. 2:5), ‘the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all’ (Rom. 2:16). With this fixed day in view, the gospel goes out with the announcement of a universal amnesty made possible by what God has done in the Messiah Jesus and a call to repentance through faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins (as in Acts 2:38, 40; compare Gal. 1:3–4; Acts 13:40–41; 24:24–25), whereby it is possible to ‘flee from the wrath to come’ and ‘Bear fruits worthy of repentance’ (Luke 3:7–8). All now hinges, not on what we have or have not done, but on how we now relate to what God has done in Jesus:

Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels (Mark 8:38).

Jesus has said how this can be avoided:

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life (John 5:24).

So the call is:

And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming (1 John 2:28).

Our present justification is a guarantee in anticipation of the assured outcome on that day of judgement:

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life (Rom. 5:8–10).

Knowing that the outcome is assured, we can live in love with boldness and confidence:

Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us (1 John 4:17–19).

There is a sense, then, in which our forgiveness will not be complete until that day. Our present forgiveness is known by a present faith-relationship with our Lord Jesus, in anticipation of the verdict ‘Not Guilty’ and ‘Well Done, Good and Faithful Servant’ that will be pronounced on that day for all who abide in him. So we are urged:

Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed (1 Pet. 1:13).

‘For’, says Paul, ‘through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness’ (Gal.5:5). The words ‘the hope of righteousness’ could be equally translated ‘the hope of justification’<sup>3</sup>—that will be pronounced on that day.

### **Question for Discussion:**

- *What is the relationship between forgiveness of sins, the final day of judgement, and our present stance in life?*

## **THE COMING WORLD**

The coming of Christ on the day of judgement is not just the end of this age. It is even more the beginning of the age to come. Everything in this age, including the forgiveness of our sins, is with a view to what will be in that age. What is the nature of that age, and how is the forgiveness of sins related to that age?

The writer to the Hebrews tells us that ‘the coming world’ will be subjected to human beings. This is something that we still do not see in this age. But we do already see a human being—the man Jesus—ruling over all things in this age and the age to come by virtue of the great deliverance that has been wrought through him in his suffering and death (Heb. 2:5–15; compare Eph. 1:20–23).

Accordingly, the coming world will be ‘new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home’ (2 Pet. 3:13). Paul says, in anticipation of this, that our present suffering ‘is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure’ (2 Cor. 4:17). Could it be that our present forgiveness of sins—our justification (or ‘righteous-ification’)—is simply God’s fitting us for the good things He has prepared for those who love Him: the new heavens and earth where righteousness dwells? Peter writes accordingly to ‘us who are being saved’ (1 Cor. 1:18):

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<sup>3</sup> Greek ἐλπίδα δικαιοσύνης, *elpida dikaiosunēs*.

In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls (1 Pet. 1:6–9).

Little wonder that Paul says of these things that are coming, ‘we walk by faith, not by sight’ (2 Cor. 5:7).

### **Questions for Discussion:**

- *What difference does it make to see the forgiveness of our sins not just as a present relief from guilt but as the fitting of us for eternal existence in the righteousness of the world to come?*
- *What difference would this make to the way we behave?*

## **POWER NOT TO SIN**

In the light of this, our present behaviour is markedly affected. Peter exhorts us:

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation (2 Pet. 3:11–15).

The words ‘hastening the coming of the day of God’ are better translated ‘earnestly desiring the coming of the day of God’. If God has fixed that day (as in Acts 17:31), known only to the Father who sets the times and periods (Mark 13:32; Acts 1:7), nothing we try to do will bring it a moment nearer, and any such notion could set us on a self-propelled course. But knowing that this day is surely coming, and living towards it with eager desiring, will make us want to match everything we do now to how things will be then—and already are in Christ the Righteous One. John writes:

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin (1 John 2:1).

Such is the power of the things of the gospel: that it renders us capable of not sinning! This comes through having all our hope fixed in Christ:

Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure (1 John 3:2–3).

Forgiveness of sin, then, is not just removal of guilt, but that which bonds us to righteous living in Christ:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with

him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification (Rom. 6:3–19).

This is forgiveness of sins truly operating in the dynamic of Christ's resurrection!