

LIBERATE

50 meditations on faith, freedom, and forgiveness

KORY M. CAPPS

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and forgiveness*

Kory M. Capps

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Dedicated to my wife, Elizabeth.
Your willingness to forgive and love has taught
me more about the heart of God
than words ever could.

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Introduction

*For freedom Christ has set us free.
(Galatians 5:1)*

Freedom. We ache for it, strive for it, and yet, so often, it eludes us. There's a deep tension in our souls, captured perfectly by Paul: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do" (Rom 7:15). We are, so often, our own greatest obstacle to freedom. This isn't a modern dilemma; it's the universal human condition. Sin entangles us, fear imprisons us, and shame holds us captive.

We need rescue. Not the fleeting kind that merely rearranges our circumstances, but the eternal kind that transforms our very souls. The good news is that we have a Savior who came to do just that. Jesus—the bleeding God—entered the brokenness of our world to liberate us from sin, condemnation, and the oppressive power of evil. As Paul reminds us, Jesus "died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Cor 5:15). He came to free us not only from the external chains that bind us but from the deepest entanglements of our own hearts.

This is the essence of the gospel: freedom. Freedom to walk in forgiveness, to live without the crushing weight of guilt, and to embrace all that Jesus offers. But this freedom is not just for us. It's meant to flow through us. Free people, free people. Those who have been released from the grip of sin and shame are called to extend that same forgiveness and grace to others. C.S. Lewis put it plainly: "To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you."

Forgiveness, then, becomes both the evidence and the outworking of the freedom we've been given. It is a radical, countercultural act that points back to the cross—the ultimate act of forgiveness and liberation. And yet, forgiveness is messy and hard. It demands humility, courage, and a continual return to the One who forgave us first.

This book is an invitation. Across these 50 meditations, we will explore the many facets of forgiveness: the freedom it brings, the demands it presents, and the hope it provides. Together, we'll wrestle with what it means to forgive as we have been forgiven, to live as people set free, and to embody the grace of the God who has liberated us.

The journey of forgiveness is not linear, and it's rarely simple. But it is worth it. Because at its heart, forgiveness is not just about us—it's about Jesus. It's about his work in us and through us. It's about proclaiming, in every act of grace we extend, that the cross is enough.

As you read these meditations, may you be reminded that your freedom has already been won. May you be drawn deeper into the beauty of the gospel and inspired to walk in the freedom and forgiveness that Christ has purchased for you. And may you become, by his grace, a conduit of that freedom to others.

The God Who Writes Your Story

Comparison. It's a thief that robs us of joy and clouds the unique purpose God has for each of us. It sneaks in quietly when we look at someone else's life—at their success, their gifts, their story—and wonder, What about me?

Peter had a moment like this with Jesus. After the resurrection, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus restored Peter's calling with three simple words: "Follow me" (Jn 21:19). It was a crucial moment—Jesus reaffirming Peter's role after his devastating denial. But Peter, like us, was prone to distraction. Turning, he saw John following behind and asked, "Lord, what about this man?" (Jn 21:21).

Jesus' response was both firm and freeing: "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!" (Jn 21:22). Jesus' words cut through Peter's comparison and reoriented his focus. Peter wanted to know God's plan for John, but Jesus reminded him that John's path was not Peter's concern. God had a specific, planned, and purposed path for Peter—one that required his undivided trust and obedience.

We live in a world that constantly invites us to measure our lives against others. We scroll through highlights and wonder why their story seems easier, more successful, or more significant than ours. Like Peter, we find ourselves asking, What about them? Why is their journey different? Why do I have this pain? Why did this happen to me? Why do they have what I lack?

But God's answer remains the same: "What is that to you? You follow me." God's purpose for your life is not a generic, one-size-fits-all plan. It is specific. It is intentional. It is crafted with care by the One who knows you better than you know yourself Paul writes, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph 2:10). Your path—the one God has prepared for you—does not depend on someone else's calling. It is uniquely yours.

When comparison whispers, "What about them?" let God's voice be louder: "What is that to you? I am leading you." He is the God who writes your story—one that is specific, planned, and purposed for his glory and your good.

The Liberating God

In 2010, the world held its breath as 33 Chilean miners were trapped 2,300 feet underground for 69 grueling days. Their rescue was nothing short of miraculous. When the capsule carrying the first miner emerged into the light, the eruption of cheers echoed far beyond that mine in Chile—it was a moment of collective hope and triumph. One miner, Mario Sepúlveda, reflected on the ordeal, saying, “I was with God and I was with the devil. They fought over me, and God won.”

The rescue mission was an extraordinary feat of human determination, but it also reflected a greater reality—the gospel of the Liberating God, who penetrates our deepest darkness to bring us into true freedom.

From the first pages of Scripture, God’s heart for liberation is unmistakable. He is the one who hears the cries of his people and acts decisively to set them free. The psalmist reflects, “Out of my distress I called on the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me free” (Ps 118:5). Again, in Psalm 146:7, we are reminded that “The LORD sets the prisoners free.” The God of the Bible delights in freedom. He loves to step into the broken places, into the oppression, and bring liberty to his people.

One of the clearest demonstrations of God’s liberating love is found in the Exodus. When the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, groaning under the weight of Pharaoh’s tyranny, God heard their

cries. He spoke through Moses, declaring, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people... and I have come down to deliver them” (Ex 3:7-8).

The story of the Exodus is more than history—it’s a paradigm for understanding God’s liberating work. Walter Brueggemann describes the Exodus as “a narrative of emancipation,” showcasing God’s relentless commitment to freedom. For Israel, the journey from slavery to freedom was not just physical but spiritual. They were called to worship and serve God, liberated for a life of covenantal relationship.

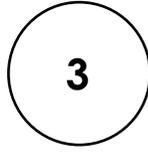
This paradigm of liberation culminates in Jesus. At the start of his ministry, he stood in the synagogue and read from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives... to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Lk 4:18-19). Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection are the ultimate expression of God’s liberating love. On the cross, he carried the weight of sin and death, shattering the chains that bound us. In his resurrection, he secured the freedom to live as God intended.

Liberation is not simply an act but a process, a reorientation from bondage to freedom. The Israelites didn’t merely leave Egypt—they learned to live as a free people under God’s rule. Likewise, our liberation in Christ is both instantaneous and ongoing. “For freedom Christ has set us free,” Paul writes (Gal 5:1). Yet, we are also called to “not use freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Gal 5:13). True freedom, then, is not self-serving; it is sacrificial and outward-facing.

Isaiah builds on this theme, linking God’s liberating power with the call to service: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?” (Is 58:6). God’s heart for liberation is inseparable from his call for his people to participate in his work. To know the God who liberates is to be drawn into his mission of setting

others free—whether from physical oppression, spiritual bondage, or societal injustice.

Friends, God’s commitment to freedom is good news for us. It means there’s always hope in the darkest places, always the possibility of forgiveness, and always a better future on the horizon. It calls us to step into the broken places of our world, knowing that the God who loves to liberate goes before us. And it compels us to live as people set free—not for ourselves, but for the sake of others. The God who brought Israel out of Egypt and raised Jesus from the dead is still at work, bringing freedom to captives and inviting us to join him in his liberating love.



The Role of Forgiveness in Human Flourishing

Studies reveal that 62% of Americans recognize a need for more forgiveness in their lives, highlighting the widespread challenge of releasing hurts and offering grace. Strikingly, over 90% agree that forgiveness is vital for healthy relationships, underscoring its central role in building connection and community. Beyond its relational importance, forgiveness also impacts physical and mental health.

Research from Johns Hopkins University shows that practicing forgiveness can lower blood pressure, improve heart health, reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, and enhance sleep quality. Those who forgive also experience reduced stress, illustrating how forgiveness heals both the body and soul. This growing body of evidence confirms an essential truth: forgiveness is not just a moral ideal—it is vital for flourishing in all of life.

Forgiveness is first and foremost about our relationship with God. All these benefits—emotional, physical, and relational—ultimately flow from being right with him. It is only when we experience his forgiveness that we are truly able to forgive others and live in peace with them. Forgiveness transforms us at every level, beginning with God and radiating outward to others. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus places forgiveness alongside daily bread, underscoring its vital daily role in our spiritual nourishment and overall health (Matt 6:11-12).

Martin Luther understood the centrality of forgiveness when he translated the Bible into German. He placed only one phrase in capital letters: "forgiveness of sins" in Romans 3:25. He called it the "chief point" and the "center point of this epistle and of the entire Scripture, also of the Old Testament." This is the heartbeat of the gospel, the thread that weaves through the whole of God's Word.

Forgiveness is not optional or peripheral—it is a recurring theme in Scripture and a foundational aspect of following God. In many ways, much of life is about forgiveness—we are either in need of it ourselves or called to extend it to others. The significance of forgiveness cannot be overstated. Consider these ten biblical reasons why it merits close and careful reflection:

1. Forgiveness lies at the very heart of the gospel message.
2. Forgiveness reveals significant truths about God's character.
3. Forgiveness meets one of our deepest and most urgent needs.
4. Forgiveness carries eternal consequences, determining life or death.
5. Forgiveness is meant to be the consistent posture of every Christian.
6. Forgiveness is intended to be the defining ethos of God's people.
7. Forgiveness is among the most demanding commands for us to practice.
8. Forgiveness holds immense power to inspire and transform our lives.
9. Forgiveness is often misunderstood, requiring clarity and careful thought.
10. Forgiveness shapes the most significant relationships in our lives.

In many of the chapters to follow, we will unpack the theme of forgiveness, reflecting on concrete ways that it transforms how we relate to God and one another.

The Trinitarian Shape of Forgiveness

In 2006, tragedy struck the Amish community of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, when a gunman entered a small schoolhouse and took the lives of five young girls before ending his own. The world was stunned not only by the atrocity but by the community's unexpected response. Within hours, members of the victims' families reached out to the gunman's widow and offered their forgiveness. They attended his funeral, embraced his family, and even raised funds to support her and her children.

This radical act of forgiveness wasn't rooted in denial or weakness—it was an expression of faith. In this community's system, forgiveness is inseparable from their understanding of God. They believe that just as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work together to accomplish divine forgiveness, they are called to reflect that same unity in forgiving others.

In the gospel, forgiveness is never a random or isolated act but is inseparably tied to the very nature of God. The unity of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—provides the framework for understanding the depth and power of forgiveness. As the Father sends, the Son sacrifices, and the Spirit empowers, divine forgiveness reveals the fullness of God's love, justice, and mercy.

The Father

Forgiveness begins with the Father, who is often described as the source of forgiveness. Jesus himself directs our prayers for pardon to the Father, teaching us to pray, “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us” (Lk 11:4). The Father is portrayed as the benevolent King who cancels our debts (Matt 18:21-35) and refuses to hold our sin against us, burying it out of sight (Rom 4:7-8).

What motivates this forgiveness? Paul writes in Ephesians, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace” (Eph 1:7). The Father’s forgiveness flows from his grace and is accomplished for his name’s sake. This unshakable foundation of forgiveness assures us that it is not rooted in our worthiness but in God’s character.

The Son

The Son, Jesus Christ, is central to the work of forgiveness. He proves his divine identity through his authority to forgive sins, as seen when he heals a paralyzed man and declares, “Your sins are forgiven” (Mk 2:5). Jesus not only proclaims forgiveness but also accomplishes it through his death and resurrection. The cross is the place where forgiveness is secured, as Jesus sheds his blood for the remission of sins (Matt 26:28). Even on the cross, in his final moments, Jesus extends forgiveness, praying, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34).

The New Testament makes it clear that forgiveness is found exclusively in Christ. Paul reminds us in Colossians, “He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:13-14). The Son’s sacrificial work forms the heart of forgiveness, demonstrating both the cost and the depth of God’s love.

The Holy Spirit

The Spirit’s role in forgiveness is less visible but no less essential. The Spirit brings the blessings of forgiveness into our lives, pressing them

into our conscience and empowering us to live out their reality. At Pentecost, Peter preached “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

The Spirit also enables the church to carry forward the mission of forgiveness. In the gospel of John, Jesus breathes the Spirit onto his disciples and commissions them, saying, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them” (Jn 20:23). This divine empowerment allows believers to extend forgiveness in a way that reflects the grace and unity of the Trinity. The Spirit also guards this sacred work, as Jesus warns that blaspheming the Spirit—equating him with evil—is the one sin considered beyond forgiveness (Mk 3:29).

Living Forgiveness: Experiencing and Reflecting the Trinity

Forgiveness is a deeply Trinitarian act, reflecting the unity and diversity of God’s nature. The Father sends, the Son sacrifices, and the Spirit empowers. These roles cannot be separated, and together they reveal the beauty of God’s forgiving work. As Paul writes in Ephesians, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children” (Eph 4:32-5:1).

The cross provides the contours of forgiveness, showing us that grace is costly, requiring sacrifice and death. To forgive others, we must first die to our bitterness, wrath, and desire for revenge. This requires trust in the Father, the power of the Spirit, and the pattern of Christ. It also requires the forgiveness of God that we are seeking to extend. As we forgive, we act as conduits of the same grace that we have received, participating in the mission of the Triune God.

What We Need Most Is What We Forget Most

Have you ever noticed how the most important things in life are often the easiest to forget? We set reminders for anniversaries, birthdays, or even daily tasks because we know our minds are prone to wander. But what about the most essential truth of all—the gospel? Martin Luther once said, “We need to hear the gospel every day because we forget it every day.” Nowhere is this more evident than in our struggle to live in light of what Christ has done for us.

Martin Luther emphasized this repeatedly in his work as a pastor: “The article of justification must be sounded in our ears incessantly because the frailty of our flesh will not permit us to take hold of it perfectly and to believe it with all our heart.” His words reflect what we experience daily—our desperate need to hear the gospel of justification again and again. Though God has declared us righteous in Christ, removed our guilt, and clothed us in innocence, we struggle to live in light of this reality.

Our experience often clashes with our position before God. Though we are justified, we still sin. Though declared guiltless, we feel the weight of guilt. Though called pure, we see our impurity. These contradictions reveal the frailty of our human condition and underscore the necessity of anchoring ourselves in the doctrine of justification.

Luther describes justification as an “alien righteousness.” He explains, “This is the righteousness of another, instilled from without. This is the righteousness of Christ by which he justifies through faith, and it is outside of us.” Our righteousness is not our own; it is located in heaven, where Christ sits at the right hand of God, securing our justification forever. This truth liberates us from the exhausting effort of trying to achieve righteousness and compels us to rest in the sufficiency of Christ’s work.

John Calvin echoes this when he writes, “As long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value to us.” Justification means that our righteousness is in him alone, and it is only through our union with him that we receive the benefits of his life, death, and resurrection.

This promise of justification is unshakable because it rests entirely on God’s faithfulness, not our performance. As Paul reminds us, “Faith looks not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen” (2 Cor. 4:18). The gospel calls us to look beyond our fluctuating emotions and failures to the certainty of Christ’s finished work.

Hearing the promise of justification daily is not redundant; it is essential. It reminds us that our righteousness is not found in ourselves but in Christ, who intercedes for us, sustains us, and reigns on our behalf. The gospel of justification anchors us in freedom and compels us to love God and neighbor, unburdened by fear or shame. It is the daily reminder that today we have a clean slate: we are forgiven and free from condemnation—now and forever.

Even There: The Persistent Presence of God

“Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” -Psalm 139:7

There are moments in life when we feel as if we are lost—places, both physical and emotional, that seem to be too distant for anyone to reach, too dark for anyone to see. But the psalmist challenges this, urging us to recognize that even in the most hidden, remote, or desolate spaces of life, God’s presence does not falter.

When we are in the highest places of joy, or standing on the mountaintops of our achievements, God is there. “If I go up to the heavens, you are there...” (Ps 139:8). God is present in our triumphs, in our moments of clarity, when the world feels right, and our hearts are full. In the moments when we feel the wind at our backs and the light of his favor shining down, God’s presence is a constant companion.

Yet the psalmist doesn’t just speak of the heights. He continues: “If I make my bed in the depths, you are there” (Ps 139:8). There are places so low, so dark, so seemingly unreachable that they seem to swallow us whole. The depths might refer to the seas, but they also refer to our deepest pains, our lowest moments. Maybe it’s the pain of loss, the crushing weight of grief, or the sense of abandonment we have all known. Maybe it’s the isolation of depression or the despair

of our wayward souls. But this is precisely the point of the Psalm—even there, God’s presence is constant, his hand is near, and his heart is full of mercy.

Even there, God’s love reaches us. Even in the farthest, most dismal places, where we may feel unworthy or unlovable, God’s presence does not waver. He does not turn his face away from our suffering. If anything, his presence is most keenly felt in our darkest hours. His light shines brightest in the places where we are most tempted to believe that darkness has overtaken us.

“If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast” (Ps 139:9-10). The wings of dawn speak to the expanse of time and space. The far side of the sea points to the furthest, most distant corners of the earth. No matter how far we go—physically or emotionally—there is no place beyond God’s reach.

It is remarkable, isn’t it? That God’s hand is as near in our joy as it is in our sorrow. His presence does not change based on our circumstances. In the light, he is with us; in the shadow, he remains by our side.

The psalmist continues, “If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’ even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you” (Ps 139:11-12). Darkness, in its deepest sense, is the place where we fear we may disappear, where our pain may overwhelm us beyond recognition, and where we are convinced that no one can see us—not even God. But the psalmist assures us that even in our deepest darkness, God sees us clearly. The night does not hide us from him. Even there, in the blackest night, in the most overwhelming sense of despair, God remains.

Without exception, no matter where you are today—even there, God is with you.

Forgiveness: Anyone and Anything

“And whenever you stand praying, forgive if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.” -Mark 11:25

That pretty much covers it. Forgiveness is to be extended to anyone regarding anything. In my mind and heart, I can justify a million reasons why certain things should not be forgiven. I can list all the reasons why forgiveness is not the right response to a given situation. Yet Scripture leaves no room for exceptions.

In my work within the corrections environment, I regularly encountered horrific and “unforgivable” situations. Does “anything” really fraud that wipes out a family’s life savings or a reckless act that destroys lives in an instant? Should we really forgive those who manipulate, deceive, or inflict deep emotional wounds? And what of systemic injustice, betrayal of those we trusted, or the cruelty of words meant to break someone’s spirit? The list of offenses that feel unforgivable could go on and on.

In my mind, I want there to be exceptions. I wrestle with this text. It pins me to the floor with its lack of qualification. There is nothing outside the purview of this command—nothing. It is an all-encompassing imperative. Any wrong that can be done is a wrong that can and must be forgiven. Does that seem impossible to you? It does to me. Probably because it is.

Forgiveness is not a natural work—it is a divine work of the Holy Spirit within a person, enabling them to extend grace and mercy in the most impossible situations. Anyone who has suffered the pain of forgiveness will likely say, “I really can’t take credit for that. It’s not in me. God has done the work in and through me.”

The command seems even more impossible when you read the word “anyone.” Not just anything, but “anyone.” Every one of us can likely bring a face to mind—a person we believe should be placed outside the realm of forgiveness. Maybe it’s the person who betrayed you, or perhaps it’s a public figure whose atrocities are etched into history—a Hitler, a Dahmer, or a Manson. Surely, they don’t qualify for forgiveness, do they?

This is where the text gets personal. The gospel scandalizes us because it confronts our desire for exceptions. I will be the first to admit that this scandal makes me uncomfortable. I want exceptions. I want to decide who should be forgiven and who shouldn’t. I want to take this “anyone” and turn it into “anyone I deem worthy.” But the Word of God will not allow it. Again, we are pinned to the ground by the breathtaking nature of unqualified forgiveness. “Anyone” truly means “anyone.”

This lavish forgiveness reflects God’s engagement with me, the sinner. He looks at my “anything” and wipes it clean on the basis of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. He refuses to hold anything against me when I trust in Christ. He looks at this “anyone”—the undeserving, the guilty—and releases me from all my debt by becoming my ransom. There is nothing and no one he is unwilling to forgive—there are no exceptions. His grace is non-discriminatory, unrelenting, and immeasurable. What kind of grace is this? God, help us to grasp this and extend it to others. Teach us to forgive as you have forgiven us.

The Cross is Empty if the Tomb is Not

What if the resurrection of Jesus wasn't just the triumphant finale to his story, but the very glue that holds the gospel together? Paul's words in Romans 4:25—"He was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification"—challenge us to see the cross and resurrection as two inseparable pillars of salvation. While the cross stands at the center of redemption, Paul highlights that the resurrection is no mere epilogue to the story of salvation. It is essential to the doctrine of justification. Without the resurrection, the cross would be incomplete, leaving us still in our sins and without hope (1 Cor. 15:17).

The resurrection does more than affirm Jesus as Messiah or validate his atoning sacrifice. It is a saving event in its own right. I. Howard Marshall explains this vital connection: "In raising Christ from death after he has taken upon himself the sins of the world and died, God is...bringing him back from the dead as the One who is now just and experiencing the new life that God grants those whose sin has been taken away."

This act is not merely about vindicating Christ's work but about Christ's representative role for all who are united to him. The resurrection marks Jesus as the first to step into the new life of justification, securing that same life for his followers. It is God's declaration that sin's penalty has been fully absorbed and removed. Through the resurrection, justification becomes ours.

The resurrection is an indispensable element of our salvation. In the cross, we see God's judgment against sin. In the resurrection, we witness the fulfillment of his promise to justify and bring new life to those united with Christ. Without the empty tomb, the cross's saving work would remain incomplete. Together, the cross and the resurrection form a single, inseparable act of redemption, offering us not only forgiveness but also the assurance of new life in Christ.

Thank God for the resurrection! Without it, as Paul reminds us, we would be without the hope of being made right with God. Justification, at its core, means being able to stand before God both now and on the final day—and the resurrection guarantees both.

A Fatherless World

“The history of the world is the story of humanity without a Father.” -Helmut Thielicke

Relational brokenness defines human history. This fracture isn't just social or psychological; it's theological at its core. From the very beginning, we were created in relationship with God, our Father, but the fall of Adam and Eve marked the beginning of humanity's estrangement. Our rebellion shattered the bond of trust and love, leaving us disconnected from the life and belonging we were meant to experience. As a result, the world became spiritually fatherless, longing for the love, security, and peace that only God can provide.

If this is the world's greatest tragedy, it also highlights its deepest need: reconciliation with God. The concept of reconciliation is at the heart of his redemptive plan. It speaks not only of forgiveness but of restoring a relationship. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:18-19, “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation... in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” Reconciliation, then, is not a mere theoretical idea; it's the gracious action of God to bring back the orphaned into the family fold.

Through the cross and resurrection of Jesus, reconciliation is accomplished, but it's more than just a legal transaction. It's a

relational restoration where we are adopted into God's family. As Paul writes in Romans 8:15, "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" The gospel isn't just about being pardoned from sin; it's about becoming God's beloved children, able to call him "Abba," a term of intimate affection and trust.

The doctrine of adoption reveals the depth of God's relational love for us. It's not simply about a change in status but about a transformation of relationship. As John Owen says, "The Father's love is free, it is infinite, it is unconditional, and it is the love that forms the heart of the gospel." God's fatherly love is not distant or impersonal but affectionate, giving us a sense of belonging and security that nothing else in the world can provide.

Reconciliation and adoption reflect God's relentless pursuit of the lost, the orphaned, and the broken. In Christ, estrangement ends, restoration is certain, and the amazing promise of Jesus stands: "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (Jn 14:18).

The Humility Forgiveness Requires

The Pharisee stood tall, his voice echoing through the temple as he recited a list of his virtues. But at a distance, a tax collector trembled, head bowed, unable to lift his eyes to heaven. His only words were a desperate cry: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Lk 18:13). In a culture that prizes self-sufficiency and polished appearances, this parable strikes a different chord.

It reminds us that God is not drawn to the impressive or the accomplished—he is drawn to the broken, to the humble heart that knows its need. In fact, he concludes this parable with the statement, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (Lk 18:14). And in that humility, we find not only the key to approaching God but also the strength to release the grip of unforgiveness.

Humility begins with a clear view of ourselves in the light of God’s character. It’s not a posture we naturally adopt. We are quick to defend ourselves, compare ourselves to others, and justify our actions. But humility doesn’t measure goodness against someone else’s flaws. It doesn’t tally up deeds or demand recognition. Instead, it stands exposed before God, fully aware of sin, fully reliant on grace. This is the kind of heart God does not despise (Ps 34:18). He is drawn to the contrite, to those who admit their need, because his mercy flows toward those who recognize they cannot save themselves.

This kind of humility not only transforms our relationship with God—it reshapes how we relate to others. Forgiveness is impossible without humility. Pride clings to the offense, insists on repayment, and holds tightly to the hurt. But humility remembers how much we have been forgiven. It levels the playing field, reminding us that we stand on equal ground before the cross.

Humility is not only the key to forgiveness—it is the doorway to freedom. The tax collector's simple, broken prayer was a release. He made no excuses, offered no justifications. Instead, he entrusted himself entirely to God's mercy. Forgiveness follows the same pattern. To forgive someone is to release them from the debt they owe us and to entrust justice to God, the only one who judges rightly.

God's heart is tender toward the humble. He is not drawn to our polished prayers or our impressive resumes. He moves toward the one who bows low, who beats their chest in honest confession, and who cries out for mercy. And when we adopt this posture—when we lower ourselves before him—it transforms how we deal with the pain others have caused us. The humility that brings us to the cross also compels us to extend grace to others.

Rethinking New Testament Commands

The New York Philharmonic, one of the oldest and most celebrated orchestras in the United States, is known for its breathtaking performances. But the beauty of its music doesn't come from a single musician or instrument—it's the result of a collective effort. Each musician must master their part, yet they also listen, adapt, and follow the conductor to create harmony. Without teamwork, the music would be chaos.

The people of God are no different. Obedience, faith, and growth are communal endeavors, where each member contributes to the flourishing of the whole. In fact, being part of a community often requires us to set aside our individuality for the sake of something greater—a shared purpose that could never be achieved alone.

There are only five books in the New Testament explicitly addressed to individuals (Luke, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon). The remaining 22 documents are written to communities, with the pronoun "you" often in the plural. This highlights an important fact: the New Testament envisions faith, growth, and obedience as corporate pursuits. These documents aim to exalt the crucified and risen Christ, foster the faith of the church, and secure the loyal obedience of his chosen people.

This communal vision is central to Ephesians 4:11–16. Paul writes that God has given apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up

the body of Christ." The goal is not just individual growth but collective maturity—"until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." Growth happens when "each part is working properly," allowing the body to "build itself up in love."

The critical question becomes not only "Am I obedient?" but "Are we obedient?" The New Testament makes it clear that faith is not a solo performance. It is lived out in community, where we are equipped, encouraged, and challenged by one another. Just as the New York Philharmonic must align their individual skills to create a masterpiece, the body of Christ must align its diverse gifts and callings to reflect him.

In a culture that often emphasizes individual achievement and personal faith, it can be easy to over-individualize obedience. Yet the New Testament consistently calls us to a collective understanding of what it means to follow Christ. Obedience is not merely a private endeavor but a shared pursuit—a journey we undertake together as the body of Christ.

When the church functions as God intended, the result is breathtaking harmony—a community that grows in love, unity, and obedience to Christ. Obedience is not a solitary pursuit; it is a shared calling. And just as the symphony's beauty points beyond itself to the brilliance of its composer, so too does the obedience of the church point to the glory of its Savior.

The Peacemaking Mission of the Son

The relationship between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams is one of the most fascinating stories of friendship, betrayal, and reconciliation in U.S. history. Once close allies during the American Revolution, their friendship unraveled during their presidential rivalry, marked by political attacks and personal grievances. For years, their relationship was defined by bitterness and estrangement. But late in life, after decades of silence, a mutual friend helped them reconnect. Through letters, they rebuilt their friendship, which lasted until they died on the same day—July 4, 1826. Their story reminds us of the power of reconciliation to restore what was broken and mend even the deepest divides.

Sin destroys relationships. This is the fundamental conviction of reconciliation. From the beginning, humanity was designed for community. In the creation narrative, God declared all things good, except for two: eating the forbidden fruit and being alone (Gen 2:16-18).

Sin shattered this design. In their disobedience, Adam and Eve turned away from God and each other, retreating into self-centeredness. Concern for one another gave way to self-preservation. Naked transparency was replaced with shame and attempts to hide. Outside the garden, life became a struggle. The curse brought confusion to their roles, hostility to their interactions, and disharmony to their relationship. This dysfunction—rooted in sin—

has since seeped into every human relationship, forming the foundation of all relational brokenness. Without God's intervention, restoration is impossible.

But God did intervene. As Paul writes in Ephesians, “Now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph 2:13-14). This reconciliation applies not only to our relationship with God but also to our relationships with each other. At the cross, Christ broke down the barriers of hostility that divide us. Jew and Gentile, once alienated and hostile, were brought together and made one new people in him. Strangers became family; enemies became brothers and sisters. The cross is a violent assault on the hostility that sin creates (Eph 2:15-17).

Through the cross, God creates peace. The work of reconciliation is nothing less than a peacemaking mission. There is no barrier that the battering rams of grace cannot demolish. There is no hostility too great for the gospel to destroy. There is no distance that Christ cannot bridge. By enduring the hostility of the Father's wrath, Christ accomplished both vertical peace with God and made possible horizontal peace with one another. He is the ultimate peacemaker.

This is the hope of the gospel: fractured and seemingly hopeless relationships can be restored through the power of the cross. The cross alone is the hope for a world longing for peace. Christ alone is our hope for the ruptures in our relationships.

Battling Bitterness

It has been said that “bitterness is like setting yourself on fire and hoping the smoke will bother someone else.” The image is painfully accurate. Bitterness feels justified—it tells us we’re protecting ourselves, holding others accountable for their wrongs. Yet in reality, bitterness only damages us, while those who wronged us often walk away unaffected.

Bitterness is subtle, often creeping into the cracks of our hearts unnoticed. It usually begins as a small seed—a harsh word, a betrayal, or a disappointment that lingers longer than it should. Left unchecked, it takes root, wrapping its tendrils around our thoughts and actions until it hardens into a state of the soul. It’s the cold response, the rehearsed grudge, the quiet withdrawal.

The writer of Hebrews issues a stern warning: “See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled” (Heb. 12:15). Bitterness defiles—not just the one who harbors it, but everyone it touches. It distorts relationships, poisons community, and clouds our view of God. In its essence, bitterness says, “I am owed,” and it demands repayment. But that debt rarely gets paid, and so the bitterness festers, feeding on itself.

The Causes of Bitterness

Bitterness often grows out of legitimate pain. Someone wronged you. You were hurt deeply. A dream crumbled, or life took an unexpected turn. The psalmist understood this struggle: “For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked” (Ps. 73:3). Asaph’s bitterness stemmed from a sense of injustice. The wicked were thriving while he, a faithful servant of God, felt abandoned.

Similarly, bitterness can arise from unmet expectations—when life doesn’t turn out the way we hoped or prayed for. The Israelites in the wilderness, bitter over the lack of water, cried out, “What shall we drink?” (Ex. 15:24). Their bitterness turned into grumbling, and their grumbling revealed their disbelief in God’s care.

But at its root, bitterness is often a form of unbelief. We believe the lie that God isn’t good, that he’s holding out on us, or that he’s overlooked the injustice we’ve endured. Bitterness whispers, “God can’t be trusted with this pain.”

The Dangers of Bitterness

Bitterness is dangerous because it doesn’t stay confined to one part of our hearts. It spreads. It reshapes how we see people, how we pray, and how we relate to God. As one famous maxim goes, “Bitterness does more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to the object on which it is poured.” Though we may feel justified in holding onto bitterness, it is our own soul that bears the burden.

Even more frightening, bitterness grieves the Spirit of God. Paul reminds us in Ephesians 4:31 to “put away all bitterness and wrath and anger.” These are not neutral emotions; they are corrosive. When bitterness is harbored, it blocks our ability to hear God clearly and respond to his grace.

Perhaps one of the greatest dangers of bitterness is its ability to blind us to our own sin. Jesus’ parable in Matthew 18 tells of the unmerciful servant who, after being forgiven an unpayable debt, refuses to extend forgiveness to someone who owes him far less. This

is the tragedy of bitterness—it blinds us to the enormity of God’s grace while magnifying the offenses of others.

The Remedy for Bitterness

The remedy for bitterness isn’t found in denial or self-reliance—it’s found at the cross. There, we see the full measure of God’s justice and mercy. Christ carried the weight of every sin—yours, mine, and those committed against us. At the cross, the debt is dealt with, not ignored. Paul reminds us in Colossians 3:13, “As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”

But forgiveness is only one part of the remedy. Gratitude must accompany it. Gratitude shifts our gaze from what we lack or have lost to what we’ve received. The psalmist, once embittered, found clarity when he entered the sanctuary of God (Ps 73:17). Worship reoriented his perspective, reminding him that God himself was his portion. Gratitude does the same. It recalibrates our hearts to see God’s faithfulness and provision, even in the midst of pain.

Bitterness also loses its grip when we bring our struggles into the light. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community.” Bitterness thrives in isolation. Confessing our bitterness to a trusted friend not only weakens its power but invites others to speak truth and grace into our lives.

Finally, battling bitterness requires trust—trust that God is just and that he will set all things right in his time. Proverbs 20:22 urges us, “Do not say, ‘I will repay evil’; wait for the Lord, and he will deliver you.” Trusting in God’s justice frees us from the need to seek revenge, allowing us to release our grievances into his capable hands.

Hope Beyond Bitterness

There is hope beyond bitterness. The cross speaks a better word, one of justice satisfied and mercy extended. It reminds us that we are forgiven of an unpayable debt and calls us to release the debts owed to us.

Gratitude redirects our hearts, lifting our eyes from the wounds of the past to the faithfulness of God in the present. Community draws us out of the isolating grip of bitterness, reminding us we are not alone. Trust in God's justice frees us from the need to seek revenge, anchoring us in the assurance that he will make all things right.

Bitterness isolates us in our pain, but the gospel moves us out of that lonely place. Jesus, who was “despised and rejected by men” (Isa. 53:3), knows the weight of betrayal and injustice. He drank the cup of bitterness so that we wouldn't have to. He invites us to cast our burdens on him, promising rest for our weary souls (Matt 11:28-30). He is faithful to meet you where you are, to bear the burden you cannot, and to lead you into the freedom of forgiveness.

Nothing Escapes the Work of the Cross

"The work of Christ is cosmic in scope. It renews the whole world, and its power extends to the farthest corners of the universe." -Herman Bavinck

Reconciliation begins with the individual and extends to the community. But the reach of reconciliation does not stop there; it breaks every boundary and encompasses the entire universe. God's peacemaking mission is not confined to personal salvation or societal restoration—it is global, cosmic, and universal.

Paul captures this breathtaking truth in Colossians when he writes, "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Col 1:19). The scope of this reconciliation is staggering. The Creator took on flesh to bring peace—not only to humanity but to all of creation, which also bears the deep fractures of sin's impact. Just as only the Creator could create the cosmos, only the Creator can recreate it. The work of reconciliation is nothing less than the mending of every fracture in the whole created order.

Through his cross, Christ accomplished peace and reconciliation with all things. Every groan of creation, every disharmony, every instance of decay is answered in the cross. Paul continues, "And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has

now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him” (Col 1:21-22). The work of Christ is personal, yes—but it is also universal. The cross does not merely change lives; it transforms the entire cosmos.

James Dunn captures this truth well when he writes, “The vision is vast. The claim is mind-blowing. It says much for the faith of these first Christians that they should see in Christ’s death and resurrection quite literally the key to resolving the disharmonies of nature and the inhumanities of humankind.” The cross encapsulates God’s concern for every corner of the universe, making it the foundation of creation’s ultimate renewal.

The implications of this cosmic reconciliation are both humbling and hopeful. The cross reminds us that no fracture—whether in our personal lives, our communities, or the vast expanse of creation—is beyond the reach of God’s redemptive work. It assures us that the groaning of creation will not go unanswered and that the decay we witness in the world will not have the final word. Christ’s blood, shed on the cross, not only reconciles us to God but also lays the foundation for the restoration of everything broken by sin.

The work of Christ transforms not only individuals but the entire cosmos. It proclaims that the God who made all things is the same God who will restore all things. This is the staggering, hope-filled vision of reconciliation: that one day, every fracture will be mended, every wound will be healed, and all creation will declare the glory of the King who made peace by the blood of his cross.

Grace in the Darkness: How God Redeems our Despair

What do we make of despair in the life of a believer? Does it have a place, or is it something we should avoid at all costs? Does it serve any redeeming purpose, or is it purely destructive? These are hard questions, especially in a culture that prizes positivity and often struggles to make space for emotions that feel too dark or out of control. Yet Scripture doesn't shy away from despair. In fact, the apostle Paul speaks openly about it in 2 Corinthians 1:8-9:

“We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.”

These are honest words. Paul, the great apostle, confesses that he reached a point where he despaired of life itself. This is not the sanitized version of faith we often project. It's raw, vulnerable, and transparent. Paul's despair was not a sign of weak faith but a necessary precursor to deeper trust in God. As he explains, his despair served a purpose: “that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.” Even despair, it seems, is pressed into the service of hope.

This paradox is both comforting and challenging. Despair feels like a vicious lion, untamable and consuming, not something we can

control or manage with precision. Yet Paul shows us that despair, as wild as it may feel, can be a tool in God's hands. It strips us of our self-reliance and drives us to the God who alone can deliver. Death becomes the stage upon which resurrection is displayed, and despair becomes the soil in which hope takes root.

The word translated "despair" in 2 Corinthians 1:8 only appears one other time in the New Testament, in 2 Corinthians 4:8, where Paul writes, "We are perplexed, but not in despair." At first glance, this seems like a contradiction. How can Paul both despair and not despair? The answer lies in the tension that defines the Christian life. Despair is real, but for the believer, it is never ultimate. It serves a purpose, but it does not have the final word. Even as we are pressed to the point of despair, we are upheld by the hope of resurrection.

Interestingly, the same Greek word for despair is used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) in Psalm 88:15: "Afflicted and close to death from my youth up, I suffer your terrors; I am helpless." Psalm 88 is one of the darkest laments in all of Scripture. Unlike most psalms, it begins in darkness and ends in darkness, offering no resolution or light. It is a stark reminder that the people of God have long wrestled with despair. The lament psalms, Job, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes—these books give voice to the raw, unfiltered cries of the faithful in the midst of suffering. They remind us that despair is not foreign to faith but can be an expression of it.

This raises a critical question: are these expressions of despair sinful? Or are they acts of faith? I believe they are the latter. To lament is to bring our pain before God, to wrestle with him in the darkness. Faith is not the absence of struggle but the decision to struggle in God's direction. The psalmists, Job, and Jeremiah lament because they believe God hears them. Their despair is real, but it is directed toward the one who can redeem it.

Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 1:8-9 point us to the ultimate resolution of despair: the resurrection. He writes, "But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead."

Despair is drained of its power when viewed in light of resurrection. At Calvary, Jesus bore the full weight of sin, death, and despair. Wave after wave of judgment fell upon him, and yet from the depths of that darkness, hope emerged. The resurrection transformed the cross—the ultimate symbol of despair—into the ultimate symbol of hope.

For the believer, despair is not an end but a means. It is the slave of hope. It pushes us to the end of ourselves and into the gospel. It reminds us of the brokenness of the world and our need for a Savior. And it teaches us to long for the day when despair will be no more, when God will wipe away every tear, and death itself will be swallowed up in victory.

So, does despair have a place in the life of a believer? Yes, but only as a servant of hope. It is not our master; Christ is. And in him, even our darkest moments can be redeemed.

Forgetting Forgiveness

Studies estimate that humans forget up to 70% of what they learn within 24 hours and as much as 90% within a week if it's not reinforced. Imagine applying those numbers to the gospel—the truth that shapes our identity and hope. What happens when the most important thing in our lives slips to the back of our minds, buried beneath the noise of daily routines, endless notifications, and mounting stress?

In his second letter, Peter connects the dots between forgetfulness and fruitlessness: “For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins” (2 Pet 1:9). Forgetting the gospel, Peter tells us, isn't a small oversight; it's the root cause of stalled spiritual growth. But the solution is simple and powerful: remembering.

When Peter calls believers “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4), he reminds us of an astonishing truth: through union with Christ, his very character begins to take shape in us. Regeneration and rebirth have made us new creations, and the Holy Spirit empowers us to walk in obedience to God, compelling every act of goodness and love. These gifts flow directly from the gospel—the death and resurrection of Christ—yet they are not meant to remain static. Transformation is an ongoing process.

Peter calls us to cultivate a rich array of character qualities: virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection,

and love (2 Pet 1:5–7). These qualities are not optional; they are the natural outgrowth of a life centered on Christ. When they are absent or stagnant, Peter’s diagnosis is clear: the gospel has been forgotten. Forgetfulness blinds us to the truth of our forgiveness and the power of the gospel to continue changing us.

Yet the good news is that remembering the gospel restores what forgetfulness steals. The same message that brought us salvation fuels our ongoing transformation. As we rehearse the gospel daily—reflecting on Christ’s cleansing work and the grace that sustains us—we are renewed. The exhortation to “remember” is not merely a call to recall facts; it’s an invitation to anchor our hearts in the gospel and allow its truth to shape every facet of our lives. In many ways, the essence of walking with Christ is found in remembering—remembering who he is, what he has done, and who we are in him.

Orientation, Disorientation, Reorientation

“The Psalms are an anatomy of all the parts of the soul; for there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror.” -John Calvin

Life is rarely a straight path. We all know the highs and lows, the moments of clarity and stability followed by seasons of chaos and uncertainty. One day, everything feels aligned and makes sense; the next, it feels as though the bottom has fallen out. And yet, there are also moments when we emerge from the darkness with renewed strength and gratitude. These rhythms are universal, shaping each of our individual experiences.

Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann’s framework of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation offers an insightful way to understand and navigate these rhythms. He identifies three distinct "places" in which we find ourselves:

1. *Orientation*, where life feels stable, ordered, and meaningful.
2. *Disorientation*, where we feel lost, broken, and overwhelmed by life’s challenges.
3. *Reorientation*, where we experience renewal and joy, recognizing God’s hand in lifting us from the pit.

Brueggemann connects these movements to the Psalms, showing how they correspond to the realities of our spiritual and emotional

lives. By recognizing where we are in this cycle, the Psalms provide a language and framework to engage with God in every circumstance.

Psalms of Orientation: Stable and Secure (Ps 8, 24, 33, 104)

In times of orientation, life feels grounded, and we sense the goodness of God's design. These psalms celebrate the stability and order of creation, the wisdom of living according to God's law, and the security of trusting him. They reflect a season when the world makes sense, and our place in it feels secure.

- *Creation Psalms*, where we marvel at the beauty and order of God's world.
- *Torah Psalms*, which reflect on the life-giving wisdom of God's law.
- *Wisdom Psalms*, offering guidance for living well in alignment with God's purposes.
- *Psalms of Trust*, expressing confidence in God's care and protection.

These psalms anchor us in the truth of God's goodness, preparing us for the inevitable challenges ahead.

Psalms of Disorientation: Lost and Shaken (Ps 13, 51, 74, 88)

When life unravels, we find ourselves in a place of disorientation. These psalms give voice to the pain, confusion, and frustration of feeling abandoned by God or overwhelmed by circumstances. They provide a framework for lament, allowing us to bring our raw emotions before God without fear or shame.

- *Laments*, both individual and communal, crying out in anguish and questioning God's absence.
- *Penitential Psalms*, expressing sorrow for sin and pleading for God's mercy.

These psalms remind us that disorientation is a natural part of life and faith. They invite us to be honest with God, trusting that he hears us even in the pit of despair.

Psalms of Reorientation: Restored and Helped (Ps 29, 47, 93, 97)

Emerging from the pit, we step into a place of new orientation. These psalms celebrate God's deliverance and faithfulness, offering gratitude and praise for his transformative help in our lives. They remind us that God not only restores but creates something new out of the brokenness.

- *Thanksgiving Psalms*, where we express gratitude for God's deliverance.
- *Hymns of Praise*, declaring God's greatness and character.
- *Covenant Renewal Psalms*, recommitting ourselves to a relationship with God.

These psalms reflect the joy of renewal and the deeper trust that comes from experiencing God's rescue firsthand.

A Resource for Every Season

This framework of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation captures the rhythm of life. The Psalms serve as companions for every stage of the journey, giving us words to express our hopes, fears, gratitude, and praise. They remind us that God is present in every season—whether we are standing on solid ground, sinking into the pit, or emerging into the light of a new day.

This rhythm mirrors the heart of the gospel: the death and resurrection of Christ. Just as he moved from death to life, we too experience cycles of loss, redemption, and renewal. The Psalms invite us to bring the full range of our experiences to God, knowing that he meets us in every place with grace, strength, and hope.

The Liberating Force of Forgiveness

In 2017, Sarah Williams embarked on a solo thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail, covering over 2,190 miles from Georgia to Maine. Each day, she carried a 25-pound backpack filled with essential gear and supplies. The weight was a constant reminder of the challenges she faced—physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Upon reaching Mount Katahdin, the trail's endpoint, Sarah described the overwhelming relief of finally removing her pack. She said it felt like she was shedding not just her gear but the burdens she had carried throughout the long hike. This act of release mirrors the spiritual freedom found in forgiveness—a lifting of the weight of guilt and sin, replaced by the lightness of grace and liberation.

Forgiveness, like Sarah's unburdening at the end of the trail, is about release. The New Testament paints forgiveness as a kind of spiritual liberation—a breaking of chains, a setting free of captives. In Acts 13:38–39, Paul says, "Through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him, everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses." Here, forgiveness is directly tied to freedom. Christ's forgiveness liberates us from the weight of condemnation, guilt, and the demands of the law.

This liberation is not merely symbolic; it is a transition from spiritual darkness to light, from oppression to freedom. In Acts 26:17–18, Paul recounts how Jesus sent him to "open their eyes, so

that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins." Forgiveness is a movement—a turning from the oppressive grip of sin and evil into the freedom and light of God's presence. It is like emerging from a dense, shadowed forest into an open clearing where the light finally breaks through.

Jesus himself spoke of this liberation in Luke 4:18–19, saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...to proclaim liberty to the captives...to set at liberty those who are oppressed." The term "liberty" here can also be understood as "forgiveness." The context of this passage connects forgiveness with the Old Testament year of Jubilee, when debts were canceled and captives were set free. Forgiveness, then, is not just a legal act—it is a transformative freedom that restores and renews.

Through Christ's grace, forgiveness releases us from the burden of sin, condemnation, and the power of the evil one. As Paul writes in Galatians 5:1, "For freedom Christ has set us free." Freedom is at the heart of the gospel, yet this freedom is not just for our own benefit—it compels us to forgive others. Free people free people. When we grasp the magnitude of the debt from which we've been released, we are empowered to forgive the comparatively minor debts others owe us.

This liberation through forgiveness has a dual effect—it sets both the offender and the offended free. For the offender, forgiveness means their wrongdoing is no longer held against them. For the offended, forgiveness lifts the burden of resentment and bitterness, allowing them to move forward unencumbered. This dual release fosters reconciliation, healing of wounds, and breaking the cycle of hurt and retaliation. We are gifted freedom and called to live in it. God, help us to be people of your freedom.

The Tension Between Repentance and Forgiveness

Can we truly forgive someone who has never asked for forgiveness? Does God require repentance before he forgives us, and if so, should our forgiveness reflect that pattern? These questions force us to wrestle with the nature of forgiveness—what it means biblically and how it plays out in our relationships. Is forgiveness something we offer freely, or is it tied to the repentance of the one who has wronged us? How do we faithfully mirror God’s heart in this tension?

Scripture delineates between a heart ready to forgive and the restoration of a relationship. As followers of Christ, we are called to release bitterness and reflect God’s grace, even if repentance never comes. Jesus exemplified this when he prayed from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34). His mercy was extended freely even before his executioners owned up to their wrongdoing. Likewise, Romans 12:18 instructs us, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live at peace with all.” This implies that while we can extend forgiveness from the heart, full reconciliation may not always be within our control.

Yet the Bible also shows that reconciliation often requires repentance. Luke 17:3-4 states, “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.” This highlights that while we are always called to forgive, true restoration of a relationship is dependent on the offender’s willingness to repent. Even in God’s economy,

reconciliation with him requires repentance: “Repent, therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out” (Acts 3:19).

This tension reminds us that while we must always release resentment, we are not always obligated to restore a relationship when repentance is absent. Forgiveness does not mean enabling harm, nor does it erase the need for justice or boundaries. Instead, it reflects the heart of the gospel: God’s grace always moves toward us first (Rom 5:8), but reconciliation with him comes when we turn to him in repentance.

So, can forgiveness exist apart from repentance? In one sense, yes—forgiveness is a heart posture that refuses to hold onto the wrong done to us. But the restoration of a relationship is a different matter and often requires repentance. In all cases, forgiveness is a call to embody the gospel: to live as those freed by grace and to extend that freedom to others.

The God Who Holds Us Safe

Safety is a rare gift—especially the kind that goes beyond locked doors and security systems. We ache for more than just physical protection; we crave the kind of safety that lets us exhale, that assures us we won't be abandoned, rejected, or harmed when we are most vulnerable. But we have all felt the sting of broken trust and the wounds of betrayal, making this kind of safety seem too good to be true. And yet, this is precisely what the gospel promises—the good news of the safest place we could ever know.

The psalmist highlights divine safety, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Ps 46:1). Notice the language: God is present. Not distant, not conditional, but right here with us. He doesn't stand at a distance and shout directions on how to be safe. He enters the storm. He sits in the boat. He holds us fast.

In Jesus, this promise of safety takes on flesh. Think of the disciples on the Sea of Galilee, fear etched on their faces as the wind howled and waves threatened to capsize their boat. In the terror, Jesus slept (Mk 4:35-41). To a frantic world, this may seem careless. But his sleep was not neglect—it was peace. The Prince of Peace was present with them, even before the storm was calmed. When the disciples woke him, Jesus didn't chastise their fear. He simply spoke: “Peace! Be still!” And the waters obeyed. Safety was never in the absence of the storm; it was in the presence of the One who commands it.

This is the kind of safety we find in Jesus. It is not always the removal of the storm, the healing of the sickness, or the absence of uncertainty. It is his presence with us in the midst of it all.

Consider Jesus' words in John 10:28: "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand." This is not conditional safety. It is not based on our ability to cling to him. Instead, it rests on his firm grasp on us. The good news is this: we are held in the hands of the One who defeated death itself.

And this safety is not just for eternity; it is for the here and now. Jesus showed this time and again as he walked with those in peril. He touched the untouchable leper (Mk 1:40-42), sat with sinners rejected by society (Lk 19:1-10), and healed a woman who trembled in fear (Lk 8:43-48). The safety he offered was robust—it embraced body, mind, and soul. It broke through cultural barriers, personal shame, and genuine fear.

This is the safety of God—not immunity from trouble, but intimacy in the midst of it. We may not always know how the story will unfold, but we know the One who holds the pen. And in his hands, we are truly safe.

White as Snow: Forgiveness and Cleansing

A diamond's brilliance is not just in its sparkle but in the way its many facets reflect light. Scientifically, this phenomenon is known as refraction—light enters the diamond, bounces off its precisely cut internal surfaces, and exits in a dazzling display. But this beauty is not accidental. A master craftsman carefully cuts and polishes each facet at precise angles to maximize its fire and brilliance. Without this shaping, the raw diamond would remain dull and unremarkable.

This multifaceted beauty mirrors the way Scripture reveals God's saving work in Christ. God's redemptive work is so expansive that it requires many overlapping images to even begin to grasp it. For example, Scripture uses imagery from the courtroom, the battlefield, the marketplace, and the family to describe his work. Each image—like a facet on a diamond—reflects a different aspect of God's grace. Together, they create a fuller and richer understanding of his salvation. Among these are the themes of forgiveness and cleansing, which are deeply connected—each shedding light on the beauty of God's transformative work.

Consider 1 John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Here, forgiveness and cleansing are presented not as separate acts but as two dimensions of the same reality. When God forgives us, he also cleanses us, wiping away our sin and purifying us completely.

This connection is further emphasized in Hebrews 9:22: “Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.” The Old Testament sacrificial system tied forgiveness and purification together through the shedding of blood. This imagery culminates in the work of Christ, whose blood not only forgives but purifies us from sin, offering complete renewal.

The prophet Isaiah captures this blending of themes in Isaiah 1:18: “Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.” The scarlet stain of sin is not just forgiven—it is transformed into the purity of snow. Forgiveness and cleansing work together to accomplish this total renewal, revealing the thoroughness of God’s grace.

These truths carry practical impact. We learn that forgiveness and cleansing have a definitive aspect. At the moment of conversion, we are forgiven and cleansed once for all, standing justified before God because of Christ’s atoning work. Yet forgiveness and cleansing also have an ongoing element. Though we are positionally clean before God, we still need daily repentance as we navigate life in a fallen world. Like Jesus’ teaching in the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Mat 6:12), we are reminded of our continual need for God’s grace.

This dual reality—being clean yet needing ongoing cleansing—creates a tension that defines life here and now. It humbles us, keeping us dependent on God’s mercy and reminding us that purity is not something we earn but something we receive. Before we can pursue a life of holiness, we must first be cleansed by God’s work of forgiveness and purification. What incredibly good news it is that we can be made completely clean before God through Christ—and even when we get messy again, his promise remains to continue making us pure.

When Love Defies Logic: The Reckless Heart of God

Reckless. It's not a word we often associate with God. Recklessness seems careless, impulsive, even foolish. Yet when it comes to describing the love of God, human language strains to find the right word. And so, we borrow "reckless"—not because God is careless, but because his love defies logic, shatters expectations, and looks foolish to the watching world.

Jesus told a parable to explain this kind of love: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?" (Lk 15:4).

The math doesn't add up. Ninety-nine safe sheep, and one foolish wanderer. From a practical standpoint, it seems irresponsible to leave the majority behind for the sake of one. But this is not practical love—it is relentless love. It is the love of a Shepherd who refuses to accept loss, who pursues the lost sheep with singular focus, and who rejoices more over its return than over the ninety-nine that never strayed.

This is the reckless love of God. It is love that leaves safety to step into danger. It is love that spends itself extravagantly without stopping to count the cost. It is love that looks like madness to those who don't understand it.

Consider Jesus at a Pharisee's dinner table in Luke 7:36-50. A woman, known only by her sin, enters the house. Uninvited. Unwanted. She kneels before Jesus, weeping, and pours out a jar of expensive perfume to anoint his feet. With every tear she sheds, she wipes his feet with her hair. The Pharisees recoil in judgment, thinking, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is."

But Jesus knows. He knows her past, her shame, and her reputation. And he does not recoil. Instead, he receives her offering as an act of love and forgives her sin. Reckless love sees what others reject. It embraces the outcast, the sinner, and the unworthy without hesitation.

And at the cross, the reckless love of God finds its fullest expression. Paul writes, "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). While we were still sinners. Not when we were cleaned up, deserving, or ready. God's love moved toward us when we were at our worst. He didn't wait for us to come home; he pursued us to the farthest places.

What kind of love is this? Who would sacrifice everything for those who rejected him? Who would endure the agony of the cross for the sake of the unfaithful? Only a love that is unrelenting. Only a love that holds nothing back.

The reckless love of God doesn't calculate risk; it lavishes grace. It doesn't ask whether you are worthy; it declares that you are loved. It doesn't stop halfway; it goes all the way to a rugged cross and an empty tomb.

And this love is for you. No matter how far you have wandered or how unworthy you feel, the Shepherd pursues you. The Father runs to meet you. The Savior stretches out his scarred hands that shout: "I love you."

Costly Grace: Forgiveness and Redemption

In the film *Schindler's List*, we experience the true story of Oskar Schindler, a German businessman who saved over 1,000 Jews during the Holocaust. As the movie unfolds, we see Schindler using his wealth, influence, and ingenuity to bribe Nazi officials, falsify documents, and create a haven in his factory for those marked for death. His efforts left him financially ruined, yet his actions secured the lives of so many.

The film's final scenes are especially moving as Schindler laments that he could have done even more, despite the monumental cost he had already paid. Schindler's story is a striking picture of redemption—a costly act of rescuing others from destruction and a tale that reflects the greatest story ever told.

Redemption is a biblical theme that focuses on the great cost required to rescue and forgive us. Notably, in the New Testament, the themes of redemption and forgiveness are inseparable—you can't have one without the other.

For example, consider Ephesians 1:7: "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace." Here, redemption is described as coming "through his blood," highlighting the immense price of Christ's sacrifice. Forgiveness is the outworking of this redemptive

act, the cleansing of our sin and the restoration of our relationship with God.

In Colossians 1:13–14, Paul adds: “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” Redemption is not just a release from captivity; it is a transfer to a new kingdom, the kingdom of God’s beloved Son. Forgiveness is the key that unlocks the door to this freedom.

The concept of redemption in the New Testament is tied to the idea of rescue and ransom. Just as Schindler paid a steep price to save the lives of those under Nazi oppression, God’s redemption came at the cost of Christ’s life. Without forgiveness, the chains of sin remain unbroken, and the deliverance we so desperately need cannot be achieved.

Redemption and forgiveness, therefore, are two sides of the same coin. Redemption tells the story of God’s rescue, while forgiveness reveals the means by which that rescue is applied to our lives. Together, they speak to the depths of God’s love and the lengths he went to in order to secure our freedom.

Oskar Schindler’s words, “He who saves a single soul, saves the world entire,” reflect the value of a single life. His sacrificial efforts give us a glimpse of the far greater work of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer who saves the world. He paid the ultimate price, not just for one soul but for all who call on his name.

When Pain Has Purpose

Pain. It's not a word we often associate with purpose. Pain feels cruel, senseless, and unnecessary—a reality we would rather avoid. And yet, when it comes to God's work in our lives, suffering becomes a tool in his hands, a chisel shaping us into the image of his Son.

The apostle Paul understood this truth when he wrote, “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (Rom 5:3-4). Rejoice in suffering? It sounds impossible. But Paul wasn't blind to pain. He was well acquainted with it—shipwrecked, beaten, imprisoned, and betrayed. Still, he saw what we so often miss: God doesn't waste our suffering. He works through it.

God's goal is not our comfort; it is our transformation. Like a potter working clay, he shapes and molds us. And sometimes, the shaping is painful. The hard things in life—the losses we grieve, the disappointments we carry, the battles we fight—are the very tools he uses to form his character in us.

Consider the story of Joseph. Betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery, falsely accused, and thrown into prison—his life was marked by suffering. And yet, years later, Joseph looked back and declared to his brothers, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Gen 50:20). Joseph's trials were not meaningless. Through every hardship, God was preparing him for something greater—growing him into a man of integrity, wisdom, and faith.

The same is true for us. When life feels unfair and the weight of pain seems too much to bear, God is still working. He is not absent in the hardship; He is present in the process. He is shaping perseverance in place of weariness, faith in place of doubt, and hope in place of despair.

Jesus himself walked this path. He knew what it was to suffer, to weep, to cry out in anguish. Isaiah called him “a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief” (Is 53:3). On the night before the cross, he fell to the ground and prayed, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done” (Lk 22:42). In his pain, Jesus surrendered to the Father’s will, and through his suffering, salvation came to the world.

This is the God who shapes us—one who does not stand aloof from our pain but enters into it. He is the God who uses what the enemy means for harm and turns it into good. He does not waste a tear, a trial, or a tragedy. But what happens when we can’t see the good? When the shaping feels more like breaking? When the story God is writing feels too heavy to carry?

The answer is trust. Trust in the character of the One holding the chisel. Trust in the Potter who knows exactly what he’s doing. Trust in his promise that, “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion” (Phil 1:6).

God is not after shallow growth or quick fixes. He is after depth—roots that can withstand the storms, faith that doesn’t crumble under pressure, and character that reflects Christ.

And when the shaping is done, when we look back on the trials that seemed too hard to endure, we will see his fingerprints on every moment. We will say with Joseph, “God meant it for good” (Gen 50:20).

What Forgiveness Is Not

In medicine, distinctions can mean the difference between life and death. A patient experiencing chest pain must be properly diagnosed—are they suffering from indigestion, or is it a heart attack? Treating one as though it were the other could lead to disastrous consequences. Similarly, in theology and relationships, distinctions clarify truths that guard against misunderstandings and misapplications. When it comes to forgiveness, making these distinctions is essential to living out the gospel faithfully. Misunderstanding what forgiveness is not can lead to unnecessary guilt, enable abuse, or distort God's grace.

It's Not Reconciliation

Forgiveness and reconciliation are related but distinct. Forgiveness is a unilateral act—you extend it regardless of the offender's response (Matt 18:21-22). Reconciliation, on the other hand, is conditional and requires repentance and effort on both sides (Lk 17:3). As biblical counselor Ken Sande explains, "Forgiveness may be granted by one, but reconciliation requires the work of two." This distinction frees us to forgive even when reconciliation isn't possible, as was the case with Stephen, who forgave his murderers while they stoned him (Acts 7:60).

It's Not Trust

Trust and forgiveness operate on different timelines. Forgiveness is immediate, while trust must be rebuilt through consistent behavior.

In this vein, Proverbs 25:19 warns, “Confidence in an unfaithful man in time of trouble is like a broken tooth or a foot out of joint.” Trust is earned through consistent, trustworthy behavior, not given automatically because of forgiveness. Biblical commentator Matthew Henry adds, “Forgiveness may remove the bitterness of resentment but does not imply we must expose ourselves again to harm.”

It’s Not Condoning Wrong

Forgiveness does not mean excusing sin. To forgive is not to diminish the severity of an offense. Jesus’ death on the cross underscores that sin is so grievous it required the ultimate sacrifice (Rom 3:25-26). When we forgive, we are not minimizing the offense but entrusting it to God’s justice, as Paul reminds us: “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord” (Rom 12:19).

It’s Not a Feeling

Forgiveness is an act of the will, not an emotion. Consider Jesus’ prayer on the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34). His statement was not driven by feelings of warmth toward his executioners but by obedience to his Father’s will. The Puritan John Owen observed, “the greatest forgiveness ever given was purchased through agony, not ease.” He further stated that in our lives, “forgiveness is the fruit of the Spirit, not the fruit of our fleeting emotions.”

It’s Not One and Done

Forgiveness is often a journey rather than a single act. Peter’s question to Jesus in Matthew 18:21-22—“How many times shall I forgive my brother?”—and Jesus’ response to forgive “seventy times seven” highlight the ongoing nature of forgiveness. Bitterness can creep back, requiring us to reaffirm our decision to forgive daily.

It’s Not Denying Your Anger

Anger is often a natural response to being wronged. Scripture acknowledges righteous anger, as seen in Jesus’ cleansing of the

temple (Matt 21:12-13). Forgiveness doesn't mean suppressing anger, but directing it toward healing and surrendering it to God. Ephesians 4:26 encourages us to "be angry and do not sin," reminding us that anger must not lead to bitterness or vengeance.

It Doesn't Mean Hurt Is Gone

Forgiving someone doesn't erase emotional pain. The psalmists often cried out to God with raw hurt even as they clung to his promises (Ps 42:9-11). In fact, Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers didn't erase the deep wounds they caused him, but it allowed him to say, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen 50:20). Healing is often a process that takes time and prayer, but forgiveness opens the door for that journey to begin.

It Doesn't Mean It Won't Happen Again

Forgiveness is no guarantee that someone won't sin against you again. Jesus' teaching in Luke 17:3-4 acknowledges this reality: "If your brother sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times returns to you saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." This highlights the repetitive nature of human sinfulness but also the call to mirror God's unending mercy (Lam 3:22-23).

It Doesn't Mean You're Weak

Forgiveness is one of the strongest acts a person can undertake. Paul reminds us in Romans 12:19-21 to "overcome evil with good" by refusing vengeance and extending grace. As theologian Miroslav Volf suggests "Forgiveness requires courage because it resists both vengeance and passivity."

It Doesn't Mean the Offender Gets Off the Hook

Forgiveness releases the offender from our personal vengeance, but not from accountability. Romans 14:12 reminds us that "each of us will give an account of himself to God." Forgiving someone doesn't mean pretending they didn't sin—it means surrendering their judgment to God's hands, which are far more just and capable than ours.

It Doesn't Mean You Are a Doormat

Forgiveness doesn't equate to allowing mistreatment. Jesus forgave sinners but also rebuked sin (Jn 8:11). Setting boundaries, as Paul did when avoiding harmful situations (Acts 9:23-25), is consistent with a forgiving heart. Boundaries protect us while maintaining the dignity of forgiveness.

It's Not Forgetting

The phrase “forgive and forget” oversimplifies the complex work of forgiveness. While God promises to “remember our sins no more” (Jer 31:34), this doesn't mean he erases them from his memory. Instead, it signifies that he no longer holds those sins against us. In the same way, when we forgive, it doesn't mean forgetting the pain or pretending the offense never happened. Instead, it calls us to choose not to let those memories fuel resentment or retaliation.

Why We Need to Know This

Forgiveness is often misunderstood, it is essential to define not only what it is, but also what it isn't. These distinctions provide clarity and protection, ensuring that forgiveness remains grounded in scriptural truth rather than distorted by misconceptions. Misunderstandings—like equating forgiveness with reconciliation or trust—can lead to unnecessary guilt, enable toxic relationships, or undermine justice. By delineating what forgiveness is not, we guard against these pitfalls and create space for forgiveness to flourish in its truest form. This understanding frees us to embrace forgiveness as a courageous, ongoing act of grace, reflecting the forgiveness we have received from God and extending it faithfully to others.

Freedom for Service

A paradox is a riddle wrapped in truth. It stretches our minds, forcing us to hold together two ideas that seem to contradict but, in the end, reveal something deeper. Paradoxes are not meant to be solved; they are meant to be embraced. Faith is full of such paradoxes: strength is found in weakness, the first are last, and life is gained by losing it. But here, we will focus on the paradox of freedom found in servanthood.

A bird is free precisely because it submits to the laws of aerodynamics. Without the discipline of its wings and the resistance of the air, it cannot soar. In the same way, true freedom in Christ is not the absence of restraint but the joyful choice to become a servant. This is the paradox Peter describes when he writes, "Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for what is evil, but living as servants of God" (1 Pet 2:16). Freedom and servanthood—two ideas seemingly at odds—are bound together in the gospel.

Through the gospel, we are set free—completely liberated by the work of Christ. Yet, the paradox of this freedom is that those who are truly free use their liberty for the good of our neighbor. The word for "servant" in 1 Peter literally means "slave." The gospel liberates us, but not for self-indulgence. Instead, it frees us for joyful service to others.

Martin Luther explores this paradox in his book, *The Freedom of the Christian*. His opening thesis captures it perfectly: "A Christian is

a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."

At first glance, these statements seem contradictory. Yet Luther demonstrates how they converge in Paul's writings: "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all" (1 Cor 9:19) and "Owe no one anything, except to love one another" (Rom 13:8). True freedom in Christ leads to love, and love, by its very nature, is ready to serve the one who is loved.

Christ himself embodies this paradox. Though he is the Lord of all, he willingly became a servant. As Paul describes, "though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" (Phil 2:6-7). Christ's freedom, as the sovereign King of the universe, led him to humble himself and serve humanity—even to the point of death on a cross.

This paradox calls us to live in the same way. We are freed by the gospel not to elevate ourselves but to serve others. True freedom finds its fullest expression in love-driven servanthood, mirroring the life and humility of Christ.

Friday, Saturday, Sunday: Rethinking Weekends

When God inhabited the world through Christ, everything changed—even the calendar. His presence not only redefined how history is marked but also forever transformed the weekend. The greatest act of God unfolded across three days we now call Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday. Significantly, these are far more than dates on the Christian calendar; they are stages that shape the rhythm of Christian faith, and in their interplay, we find a model for our own suffering, waiting, and eventual triumph.

Good Friday: The Day of Sacrifice

Good Friday is the day of sacrifice—the day when Jesus carried the weight of humanity’s sin and paid the price we could not. This is the day when the world seemed to fall into darkness, as the sinless Lamb of God was nailed to the cross. Jesus’ final words, “It is finished” (Jn 19:30), were not just the conclusion of his earthly suffering but the triumphant fulfillment of his mission to defeat sin and death.

Our own lives are often marked by seasons of darkness, pain, and loss. This is neither strange nor abnormal but entirely common for anyone who desires to follow Jesus. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” This death is not always physical but a consistent dying to self, a surrender of our

will, and a willingness to endure suffering in obedience to God. The cross and all it entails is normative for the follower of Christ.

Ironically, the darkness of Good Friday reminds us that our suffering is not meaningless. In that moment of abandonment, there was also a strange and profound intimacy. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46) unites the deep sense of belonging with the agony of forsakenness. It is the personal pronoun in this lament that makes the cry so painful. Yet, through this darkness, the light still shines as God’s surprising redemptive work is brought to completion.

Holy Saturday: The Day of Waiting

Good Friday cannot be fully understood without Holy Saturday, the day of waiting. This is the day when the disciples sat in silence, unsure of what was happening. It is the day between grief and hope, between death and resurrection. In this space of waiting, the disciples did not know what would come next; they simply grieved and waited.

Holy Saturday in our own lives represents those seasons of uncertainty and confusion. It is a day—or a period of life—where we exist in the space between our disappointments and our redemption. It’s comforting to know that, along with suffering, feelings of disillusionment, confusion, and being turned upside down are all normal facets of faith. In this place of powerlessness, waiting can often feel like nothing more than sitting on our hands.

However, Dietrich Bonhoeffer challenges this notion, stating, “Waiting is an active thing, not a passive thing. It is the place where hope is born.” The waiting may feel passive, but it is in this tension between suffering and glory that we learn the most. In the waiting God does his quiet, transformative work. C.S. Lewis captures this well when he writes, “The great thing, if one can, is to stop regarding all the unpleasant things as interruptions of one’s ‘real life.’ The truth is that this is real life—real waiting, real hope, real transformation.”

Easter Sunday: The Day of Triumph

Resurrection Sunday is the day of victory—the day when Christ triumphed over death and sin. This is the day when the stone was rolled away, the tomb was empty, and the promise of eternal life was sealed. The resurrection is the “yes” to every promise God has made. “He is not here, for he has risen, as he said” (Matt 28:6). It is the day of new life, where the final victory over sin and death is declared.

This day represents the triumph of God’s grace in our darkest hours. In moments of despair, when everything seems lost, the power of resurrection bursts forth, bringing hope and new life. As N.T. Wright explains, “The resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of God’s new world, the world of life after death, and we are already participants in that world.” The empty tomb signals that hope is always possible, that light will always overcome darkness, and that life will always win over death.

This means that when we encounter moments of death—whether the death of family, dreams, relationships, or health—the resurrection gives us certainty that death does not have the final say. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:55, “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The resurrection is the answer to life’s greatest fears, the solace for our deepest sorrows, and the roadmap to our promised future.

3 Inseparable Days

Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday form an inseparable rhythm, each day following the other in a divine cadence. These three days reflect the normal rhythms of the Christian life, and the order in which they unfold is important. The reality is that Friday and Saturday always precede Sunday. We cannot skip through the sorrow and waiting of Good Friday and Holy Saturday as we move toward Resurrection Sunday. The gospel itself is ordered this way: suffering comes before glory, waiting comes before victory.

In our lives, we are often called to walk through each of these days—sometimes with sorrow, sometimes with uncertainty, but

always with the anticipation of the invincible hope that Easter Sunday brings. There are times when life feels like Good Friday—filled with suffering, loss, and grief. There are seasons where it feels like Holy Saturday—silent, full of tension, and seemingly without answers. Then, Easter Sunday comes, just as it always does. Friday and Saturday always give way to Sunday. It may not come in the exact moment we expect, but it always comes. And when it does, it brings with it the hope that even death cannot touch.

These are not abnormal stages; they are a natural part of following after God. The victory of Resurrection Sunday doesn't negate the pain of Good Friday or the uncertainty of Holy Saturday; it redeems them. It makes all things—our losses, our struggles, our waiting—part of the story that God is telling, a story that ends in triumph. Easter Sunday is coming—always coming.

The Gospel and Debt Cancellation

In the ancient world, the act of running away as a slave was considered one of the most severe offenses. A runaway slave was seen not only as property lost but as someone who had inflicted financial damage and insult upon their master. Craig Keener notes, “The lost time of an escaped slave was lost money and was legally viewed as stolen property,” and recapture often resulted in brutal punishment, sometimes even death.

Paul’s letter to Philemon flows out of this context and gives us a glimpse into the gospel in action. Onesimus, a runaway slave, somehow finds himself in Rome, where he encounters Paul. Through Paul’s witness, Onesimus comes to faith in Christ, and this radically changes his trajectory. Paul writes to Philemon the owner of Onesimus, not only to inform him of Onesimus’s conversion but also to appeal for him to receive Onesimus back—not as a slave but as a brother in Christ.

What stands out in this letter is Paul’s willingness to take on the debt of Onesimus. Paul writes, “If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it” (Philem 18-19). In this statement, Paul assumes the responsibility for Onesimus. He places himself in the position of the debtor, binding himself to repay what Onesimus could not.

Paul's actions reflect the heart of the gospel. His willingness to absorb the debt and punishment owed by Onesimus mirrors the work of Christ. Jesus takes our debt—our sin, our guilt, our condemnation—and pays it in full with his life. Just as Paul offered to pay for Onesimus's wrongdoing so that he could go free, Christ offers himself in our place, canceling the debt we could never repay and giving us grace and freedom in return.

This theme of debt cancellation is a central image of forgiveness in the New Testament. In Colossians 2:13-14, Paul writes, "And you, who were dead in your trespasses...God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross." The cross becomes the ultimate account ledger where our debt is marked "paid in full."

The story of Onesimus reminds us that we are all debtors before God. Like Onesimus, we have nothing to offer to repay the debt of sin we owe. But in Christ, we find a Redeemer who willingly takes our debt upon himself. He pays it in full, not with silver or gold, but with his precious blood. Through his sacrifice, we are not only forgiven but also set free, welcomed into the family of God as beloved children.

As Paul appeals to Philemon to forgive and embrace Onesimus, we are reminded of the call to extend the same grace to others. Just as Christ has forgiven us, we are called to forgive those who wrong us, releasing them from the debt they owe. Forgiveness, then, becomes not just an act of grace but a reflection of the gospel itself—a living parable of the freedom and redemption we have received in Christ.

Pack Light, Carry Heavy: A Call to Spiritual Agility

Packing is a skillset in the military, as the job requires readiness and mobility. Most of us pride ourselves on how much we can smash into a backpack or a roller bag. A couple years back I was in an exercise that required six days of gear. The recommendation was a roller bag with multiple uniforms, linens, pillows, etc. I packed light, disregarded much of the packing list, and got everything into one mid-size backpack. My motivation was simple: I hate dragging around a bunch of heavy bags—at this point in my career, all the non-essentials must go. A light pack is invaluable; comfort is not.

On this exercise, many of my fellow Airmen were required to bring extra gear pertinent to their jobs. Some had up to three large rollers. Unplanned and all of a sudden, my two empty hands became assets. While unintentional, my light packing enabled some heavy lifting for my guys. As we transitioned our gear multiple times, I reflected on the utility of packing light for myself and others, the satisfaction of being a help to my Airmen, and the need to be more intentional about this type of posture.

While we cannot alter how much we are required to carry, we can determine what we will carry. By minimizing our load, we save strength for our neighbor. The nimble warrior is most prepared to shoulder the weight of those next to him. This principle stretches beyond the physical domain. Listen to the author of Hebrews: “Since

we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Heb 12:1).

The author commends spiritual agility as he calls his hearers to strip off everything that would hinder them. Notably, he identifies two separate categories: weight and sin. Sin entangles and burdens us, leaving us ineffective. Nothing new here—we know this. However, it is worth reflecting on the second- and third-order effects of our sin, primarily how it impacts those we are called to serve. Sins of commission cannot be separated from those of omission; one naturally leads to the other—they are two sides of the same coin.

The second category of “weight” is instructive. It shows us that there are plenty of amoral things that make us slow and unhelpful. Anything that impedes speed, endurance, and competitive edge is a weight. One commentator states, “We would have to list all the possessions that could tempt them to avoid the sort of suffering that following in the path of Jesus involves, including property, safety, and honor.” Lifestyle patterns, including eating, sleeping, exercising, technology usage, time management, and financial concerns, should be added to the list. Neutral things in life can become deadweight that weakens us and robs us of our potential to serve those around us.

Identifying our entangling sin equips us for a life of repentance, and recognizing our impeding weights readies us to offload them; both are essential for a nimble lifestyle. Maturity, in part, is about maximizing our capacity for serving our neighbor, and agility is one critical way we move in that direction.

Paul understood this principle. He framed it this way: “For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them” (1 Cor 9:19). He then provides a litany of concrete examples and sums up his activity by stating, “I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel” (1 Cor 9:23).

“All things for the sake of the gospel”—that was his battle cry and his true north. It dictated all his decisions and drove his philosophy of ministry. Though free, he made himself a servant to all and surrendered his own rights and desires for their sake. In other words, he left his hands open and allowed his neighbor to determine what he shouldered.

My friends, pack light so you can carry heavy.

The God Who Covers our Impossible Debt

Very few of us are unfamiliar with debt. It is a pervasive reality in the United States. In 2024, total household debt reached a record \$17.94 trillion, with the average American household carrying approximately \$104,215 in debt. This encompasses mortgages, credit cards, auto loans, and student loans. Notably, 83% of U.S. households carry some form of debt, with credit card debt (60%) and mortgage debt (57%) being the most common. The weight of this debt is more than just a financial statistic; it translates into significant stress and anxiety for many individuals. Over half of Americans express concerns about the long-term impacts of their debt on their financial well-being and life plans.

The shared experience of indebtedness offers a tangible analogy for understanding the concept of forgiveness. By recognizing the burden and helplessness that debt creates, we are better prepared to grasp the debt we owe to God—a debt we cannot repay—and the incredible gift of forgiveness he offers.

In the New Testament, the image of cancelling out debt is a powerful way to explain and understand forgiveness. Jesus often used financial language to convey spiritual realities, and two familiar passages bring this imagery to life in helpful ways.

In Matthew 18:21-35, Jesus tells the parable of a king settling accounts with his servants where the language of debt and forgiveness

dominate the story. One servant owes an unpayable debt—ten thousand talents, a sum so astronomical that repayment is impossible. In desperation, he pleads for mercy, and the king responds not by extending more time, but by canceling the debt entirely. Yet, this forgiven servant then turns around and refuses to forgive a fellow servant who owes him a much smaller amount. When the king learns of this, he revokes his mercy and holds the first servant accountable for his actions. The parable confronts us with three key truths about forgiveness.

First, in God’s kingdom, debt—whether financial or spiritual—is inescapable. Sin incurs a debt that we cannot pay, no matter how much effort we expend. The parable paints a stark picture of the impossibility of settling our own account before a holy God.

Second, the parable draws attention to the incredible mercy of God. The king releases the servant from his enormous debt, not because of anything the servant can offer, but simply out of compassion. This act of mercy comes at great cost to the king, who absorbs the loss himself. Similarly, God’s forgiveness is a costly act, made possible through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.

Third, this forgiveness is meant to shape our interactions with others. The king expects the forgiven servant to extend the same mercy to those who owe him. The servant’s refusal reveals the absurdity of receiving such grace while withholding it from others. Jesus warns that those who refuse to forgive exclude themselves from the life of grace and mercy that God offers.

The theme of debt cancellation is also woven into the Lord’s Prayer in Luke 11:2-4, where Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, “Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.” This prayer places forgiveness at the center of the believer’s daily life, alongside the request for daily bread. It reminds us that we stand before God as debtors and that our plea for forgiveness is grounded in our willingness to forgive others. In essence, we ask God to interact with us as we interact with those who sin against us.

These passages challenge us to reflect on the staggering debt of sin that Christ has canceled on our behalf. His forgiveness is complete and undeserved, a gift of grace that calls us to imitate him by forgiving those who have wronged us. To withhold forgiveness is to misunderstand the mercy we've received. The life of a believer is marked by both being forgiven and extending forgiveness—a rhythm of grace that mirrors the heart of God.

The True Definition of Freedom

Freedom is often defined as the absence of constraints, the power to choose, or the autonomy to live as one pleases. But the Bible offers a radically different perspective—true freedom is found in justification: being declared righteous before God, freed from condemnation, and reconciled to him. Justification is the true definition of freedom. Jesus captures this reality when he says, “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (Jn 8:36).

This freedom is not earned but is a gift of grace. Paul writes, “The free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man’s trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many” (Rom 5:15). Through Christ’s death and resurrection, we are no longer under the crushing weight of sin’s judgment. The righteousness of Jesus is credited to us, and we stand before God not as condemned sinners but as his beloved children. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1).

This truth transforms everything. We are freed not only from the penalty of sin but also from the impossible task of earning God’s favor. Martin Luther wrote, “The freedom of a Christian is this: our conscience is free and joyful because it no longer fears the wrath of God. Faith secures righteousness in Christ and overcomes all condemnation.” John Calvin echoed this, saying, “Justification is the hinge on which true religion turns. For as long as we are uncertain of

our standing before God, we will always be in bondage, trembling under the weight of judgment.”

The joy of justification is that it is entirely God’s work. Our freedom does not rest on our ability to measure up but on Christ’s perfect righteousness, which is given to us by faith. This means we can live with confidence, knowing that we are fully accepted by God and that nothing can separate us from his love.

True freedom is not found in autonomy but in the assurance that we are right with God. Justification declares that our sins are forgiven, our debts are paid, and we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ. This is the freedom the gospel offers: a standing before God that is secure, joyful, and eternally free from condemnation.

The Demise of Death

In 1891, a young wrestler named Martin "Farmer" Burns rose to fame not only for his strength but for his strategy in the ring. Burns was known for taking on opponents twice his size, not by overpowering them but by using their strength against them. He would let his opponents unleash their most powerful moves, tire themselves out, and then, with precision, deliver the finishing hold. Burns became a wrestling legend, showing that true victory often comes not through avoiding a fight but by stepping into it and using the very weapons of the opponent to win.

Athanasius, the great theologian of the early church, offers a strikingly similar vision of Christ in his work *On the Incarnation of the Word*. Christ didn't avoid death or try to escape its grasp. Instead, he willingly entered the ultimate battle, facing death on its own terms—a brutal Roman cross. Athanasius describes Christ as a wrestler, fearless and mighty, who accepts the opponent chosen for him. He didn't arrange the manner of his death, lest it appear that he feared some forms of death more than others. Instead, he bore a death inflicted by his enemies, one designed to shame and destroy him. Yet, Christ used the very weapon of his opponents to secure the ultimate victory.

"It was not consonant with himself that he should avoid the death inflicted by others," Athanasius writes. "Rather, he pursued it to the uttermost, and in pursuance of his nature neither laid aside his body of his own accord nor escaped those plotting against him. For he both waited for death in order to make an end of it and hastened to

accomplish it as an offering on behalf of all.” Christ entered the battle fully aware of what lay ahead, not shrinking back but embracing it for the sake of humanity (Col 2:13-15).

Athanasius continues, “A generous wrestler, virile and strong, does not himself choose his antagonists...rather, he lets the spectators choose them, and that all the more if these are hostile, so that he may overthrow whomsoever they match against him and thus vindicate his superior strength. Even so was it with Christ. He, the Life of all, our Lord and Savior, did not arrange the manner of his own death lest he should seem to be afraid of some other kind.”

Christ’s death wasn’t accidental or incidental—it was deliberate and decisive. He faced it willingly, transforming it into the means of destroying death itself.

This paradox is at the heart of the gospel: the author of life submits to death, and in doing so, he conquers it. Athanasius describes it as a “marvelous and mighty paradox,” where what seemed to be defeat became the ultimate triumph. “The death which they thought to inflict on him as dishonor and disgrace has become the glorious monument to death’s defeat.” Just as Farmer Burns turned his opponents’ strength into their downfall, Christ turned death itself into the instrument of its own undoing.

The image of Christ as a wrestler is powerful. Like a masterful champion, he faced the greatest enemy, endured its full strength, and emerged victorious. And this victory wasn’t just for himself but for all of humanity. By enduring the cross, Christ transformed the weapon of death into the path to life, securing salvation for all who trust in him.

In the paradoxical victory of the cross, we see the heart of the Christian faith. Christ’s death wasn’t the end—it was the beginning of new life. Through his sacrifice, he destroyed death and opened the way to eternal life. Athanasius’s words remind us that Christ’s strength is revealed not in avoiding the battle but in entering it fully and triumphing over it. The cross stands as the symbol of his victory, the death of death in the death of Jesus.

Forgiveness as the Foundation of Love

"There is no love without forgiveness, and there is no forgiveness without love." -Bryant H. McGill

In Luke 7:36-50, Jesus tells a parable about two debtors. One owes a small debt, the other an enormous one. Neither can repay, so the moneylender forgives both. Jesus asks, "Which of them will love him more?" Simon the Pharisee answers correctly: the one with the larger debt canceled. Jesus then shifts focus to a woman whose actions speak louder than words. Her tears wash his feet, her hair dries them, and her perfume anoints him—all acts of love flowing from her awareness of being forgiven. "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much," Jesus explains. Her extravagant love flows from her deep awareness of the immense debt that has been canceled. The corollary is equally clear, as Jesus adds: "Whoever has been forgiven little loves little."

This story illustrates an important truth: forgiveness is the foundation for love. When we grasp the depth of our sin and the lavish grace of God in canceling our debt, it transforms us. Gratitude fuels love, and love propels us into the life of obedience to God's greatest commandment—to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Paul expands on this imagery in Colossians 2:13-14, where he explains that through Christ's sacrifice, the record of debt that stood

against us has been canceled. This record wasn't a mere list of wrongs but a legally binding condemnation under God's law. At the cross, Christ took that record, nailed it there, and exhausted its demands. The debt is gone—forever canceled—and we are made alive in him.

The connection is clear: understanding the weight of our debt and the cost of its cancellation changes everything. Those who see their immense need for grace respond with immense love. But when we see our sin as small or God's forgiveness as routine, our love grows cold. Jesus's parable and Paul's words remind us to marvel at the cross daily, where our spiritual bankruptcy met God's extravagant grace.

True forgiveness doesn't just erase a record; it changes the heart. It motivates love that overflows in gratitude and devotion. The woman in Luke 7 didn't love to earn forgiveness—she loved because she was forgiven. In the same way, we love because Christ first loved us, paying the unpayable debt and setting us free to live as those who know his generosity.

Freedom that Finds Us

Freedom is woven into the very fabric of the gospel, and it is through the presence and work of the Holy Spirit that this freedom becomes real to us. Paul declares, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor 3:17). This freedom is not abstract or distant—it is the Spirit’s personal presence in our lives that ushers in liberation. The Holy Spirit is God with us and in us, applying the redeeming work of Christ and walking alongside us every step of the way. Which means that freedom finds us, not the other way around.

Graham Cole writes, “The Spirit makes the cross of Christ real to us, not only in opening our eyes to the beauty of forgiveness but in enabling us to live in the freedom Christ has secured.” The Spirit’s work begins with applying Christ’s finished work to us. Through his presence, the justification achieved on the cross is not merely a theological concept but a transformative reality. As Paul writes, “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death” (Rom 8:2). The Spirit declares us free from the guilt and condemnation of sin, ushering us into a new standing before God—one of peace, righteousness, and belonging.

But the Spirit’s work doesn’t end with our justification. His indwelling presence continues as a source of freedom in our daily lives. He not only applies Christ’s work to us but also empowers us to live in its light. Cole explains, “The Spirit takes what Christ has done for us and works it into the fabric of who we are, freeing us from

sin's power and renewing us in the image of God." This is the freedom of sanctification—the Spirit liberates us from the dominion of sin and enables us to walk in obedience and joy. He is our Comforter, who gently convicts us, leads us, and strengthens us to live as children of God.

The ongoing indwelling of the Spirit is a testimony to God's faithfulness. The Spirit is not merely a temporary helper but a permanent presence. Jesus promised, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever" (Jn 14:16). His presence is a seal of our adoption, a guarantee of our inheritance, and a constant reminder of our freedom in Christ. Even in the darkest moments, when freedom feels distant, the Spirit is there, bearing witness to our status as God's beloved children (Rom 8:15-16).

The Spirit's freedom also points us forward to the ultimate liberation to come. As Cole observes, "The Spirit is the down payment of the future—a foretaste of the full freedom we will one day enjoy when Christ returns." Now, we taste freedom in part; then, we will experience it in full. Paul puts it beautifully: "The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:21). The Spirit not only assures us of this future but also prepares us for it, transforming us into the likeness of Christ as we await the day when sin, death, and pain will be no more.

The presence of the Spirit is the presence of freedom—freedom from condemnation, from sin's power, and from hopelessness. His work of applying Christ's redemption is the foundation of our liberation, and his ongoing care ensures that we are never alone in the journey. The Spirit's indwelling presence is not only a sign of our freedom but also the means by which we live it out daily. As we yield to his guidance and rest in his presence, we come to know the fullness of the freedom he gives—a freedom that is ours now and forever in Christ.

Dying to Forgive

In the final hours of his life, a thief hung next to Jesus on the cross. He had nothing to offer—no good works to his name, no second chances to make amends. Yet, when he cried out, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,” Jesus responded with a promise of forgiveness: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:42-43). This remarkable moment captures the heart of the gospel: forgiveness, freely given, rooted in the heart of God, and secured through the cross of Christ.

Hebrews contains one of the clearest statements on the link between the cross of Christ and our forgiveness: “Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Heb 9:22). The sacrificial system pointed to the only possible means of forgiveness: substitution and sacrifice. In God’s economy, where there is no blood, there is no forgiveness.

The author of Hebrews presses this thought home elsewhere: “I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more. Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin” (Heb 10:17-18). The presence of forgiveness is proof that a satisfactory sacrifice has been made.

This is a wonderful truth. It declares that the cross of Christ was the definitive sin offering. The Father is completely satisfied with the

Son's death. Nothing—absolutely nothing—can be added to it, and nothing further is required to secure his favor. It is finished.

When Jesus celebrated the Passover and initiated the Lord's Supper, he pointed to the connection between forgiveness and his death. "And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'" (Matt 26:27-29). Central to the new covenant is the forgiveness of sin. The new covenant was inaugurated through the shed blood of Christ. All these passages confirm that forgiveness is rooted in and flows out of the cross of Christ.

Consider one of the most striking examples of forgiveness at the crucifixion: "Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'" (Lk 23:34). From the cross, Jesus articulates the very reason he is there! What does this reveal about the heart of God and forgiveness? He extends forgiveness toward sinful acts committed directly against him—acts that are ongoing, not yet completed. This is an aggressive extension of liberating grace—a gift he died to give. Thank God for the work of Jesus. Without the cross, we would never know forgiveness.

Counterfeit Freedom

Imagine a prisoner who has lived their entire life in a cell. One day, the door is flung open, and they are told they are free to leave. Yet instead of stepping out, they remain inside, convinced that true freedom lies within the walls that confine them. They mistake the familiarity of captivity for the liberty they've been promised. In the same way, humanity often misunderstands freedom, believing it to be the autonomy to do whatever we desire. But is that truly freedom, or is it another form of bondage?

True freedom is not the autonomy to act on every whim or desire. As Luther argues in *The Bondage of the Will*, human autonomy, apart from God, inevitably leads to destruction. Romans 6 paints this reality vividly: “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?” (Rom 6:16). Paul reminds us that sin is not freedom—it is slavery. What feels like liberty when we pursue sin is, in reality, a sprint toward destruction, bound by chains we cannot see. It is a counterfeit freedom.

The problem is deeper than just actions—it's about mastery. Romans 6:20-21 states, “When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death.” The illusion of freedom in sin comes crashing

down when we see its fruit: shame and death. Sin enslaves us, deceives us, and leads us to believe that fulfilling every desire is the ultimate freedom, even as it pulls us further into bondage.

True freedom, by contrast, is not found in autonomy but in alignment with our Creator. Jonathan Edwards observed, “The liberty of the soul consists in its love of righteousness. The truly free soul is the one that delights in God and finds joy in his will.” This echoes Paul’s teaching in Romans 6:22: “But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.” True freedom is found in being who we were created to be—worshipers of God and lovers of our neighbors. It is not about doing whatever we want but about doing what we were designed to do.

C.S. Lewis put it beautifully: “Obedience to God is the road to freedom. To walk away from him is to walk into bondage.” This is the paradox of the gospel: we find freedom in surrender and gain life by losing it (Matt 10:39). When we are redeemed by Christ, we are liberated from sin’s mastery and set free to pursue righteousness. This is not a freedom of self-indulgence but of joyful obedience—a freedom to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mk 12:30-31).

Since the fall, true freedom has been absent from humanity. Redemption through Christ restores this freedom by breaking the chains of sin and enabling us to live in obedience to God. Reflecting on this, it becomes clear that the world’s version of freedom is a counterfeit. The autonomy to chase every desire might feel liberating, but it is an enslavement to self and sin. This is the freedom of the gospel—a freedom that transforms bondage into beauty, sin into sanctification, and death into life.

The Grave-Conquering King and our Forgiveness

“Jesus’s resurrection is the ground of our assurance; it is the amen of heaven to his ‘it is finished.’” -B.B. Warfield.

Forgiveness is secured through the resurrection of Christ. Without the resurrection, the cross would remain incomplete, and forgiveness would be an unfulfilled promise. But because Christ rose, forgiveness is assured. The apostle Paul captures this connection in Acts:

“For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption, but he whom God raised up did not see corruption. Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you” (Acts 13:36-38).

The word “therefore” in this passage is a hinge, linking forgiveness to the resurrection. Paul explains that forgiveness is now possible because the tomb is empty. Jesus carried the weight of the world’s sin into the grave, absorbing the wrath we deserved. But when he rose, he left that sin behind, buried forever. As a living Savior, he now extends forgiveness for the sin he has thoroughly handled.

This truth is taken even further in another passage from Acts: “The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior,

to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:30-31). Here, we see the cross, resurrection, and ascension woven together.

The resurrection assures us of forgiveness, but the ascension reveals the scope of Jesus’s authority to grant it. Christ’s exaltation to God’s right hand was not merely a return to glory but a deliberate move for a specific purpose: to grant repentance and forgiveness. He is the risen and reigning Savior who holds all authority to extend mercy.

From his seat at the right hand of God, Jesus continues his work. With power and compassion, he stands ready to pour out liberating grace to all who would receive it. It’s as though he is on the edge of his seat, eagerly waiting for every opportunity to extend the forgiveness he so earnestly secured.

The resurrection and ascension of Jesus are not just historical facts; they are the foundation of our hope. Because he lives, forgiveness is proclaimed, and because he reigns, it is freely given. It’s the living, breathing, grave-conquering King who grants us our forgiveness.

The Roots of Sin

The mesquite tree, known for its remarkable resilience, has one of the deepest root systems of any tree. Its taproot can stretch as deep as 60 feet into the earth, allowing it to draw up vital moisture from beneath the surface where many other plants cannot reach. Around this central root, a network of lateral roots extends over 100 feet, further anchoring the tree and ensuring its survival, even in the harshest of environments.

In the same way, sin is not merely what we see on the surface. Augustine observed that the first sin did not spring from a single root but from many intertwined ones. To truly understand sin, we must dig beneath its visible manifestations and expose its complex, deep-seated origins. Only then can we grasp the enormity of what Christ has redeemed us from. Though sin's stubborn roots run deep, God's grace penetrates even further.

This question of sin's origins and roots is as old as humanity itself. Many throughout church history have pondered what motivated Adam and Eve to make that first fateful choice. Was there a singular cause? Is there a foundational transgression that gave birth to all others?

Augustine, the early church father, provides one of the most significant reflections on this topic in his book *Faith, Hope, and Love*. He argues that sin does not stem from a single root but from an interconnected root system. For Augustine, the first sin—a seemingly

singular act—actually reveals a plurality of sins when carefully examined. Here’s how he explains it.

“Still, even in that one sin—which ‘entered into the world by one man and so spread to all men’... one can recognize a plurality of sins, if that single sin is divided, so to say, into its separate elements. For there is pride in it, since man preferred to be under his own rule rather than the rule of God; and sacrilege too, for man did not acknowledge God; and murder, since he cast himself down to death; and spiritual fornication, for the integrity of the human mind was corrupted by the seduction of the serpent; and theft, since the forbidden fruit was snatched; and avarice, since he hungered for more than should have sufficed for him—and whatever other sins that could be discovered in the diligent analysis of that one sin.”

From this analysis, Augustine identifies six distinct “elements” within Adam and Eve’s act of rebellion:

- *Pride* – Man preferred to rule himself rather than submit to God.
- *Irreverence* – Man failed to acknowledge God.
- *Murder* – Man cast himself into death through disobedience.
- *Spiritual infidelity* – Man’s mind was corrupted by the serpent’s seduction.
- *Theft* – Man snatched the forbidden fruit.
- *Avarice* – Man craved more than was necessary or fitting.

Augustine even leaves the list open-ended, suggesting further analysis might uncover additional facets of that first sin. Other theologians have expanded on Augustine’s insights. Martin Luther, for example, emphasized that unbelief and distrust in God’s word were foundational to the first sin. John Calvin highlighted unfaithfulness, and elsewhere, Augustine himself suggested disobedience was central. Taken together, these reflections reveal the

multifaceted nature of sin—an act that involves layers of rebellion, disordered desires, and distorted trust.

Meditating on the roots of sin is beneficial for two reasons. First, it highlights the interwoven nature of rebellion. In any sinful act, multiple motivations—such as pride, fear, greed, and unbelief—may be at play simultaneously. Recognizing this complexity deepens our understanding of depravity and leads to more thoughtful, intentional repentance. Second, this reflection pushes us toward Jesus. The multiplicity of sin’s roots points us to the glory of God’s salvation, which addresses every facet of our rebellion.

Where pride taints our hearts, Christ’s humility restores us; where irreverence takes hold, salvation revives a proper fear of God; where spiritual infidelity undermines our trust, the Holy Spirit instills loyalty; and where theft fractures our lives, God’s generosity transforms us and makes us co-heirs with Christ. In every instance, the remedy for sin is found in the person and work of Jesus.

Such great sin requires a great Savior. The good news is only truly good when we grasp the gravity of God’s rescuing work. The more we recognize the depths of our rebellion, the more we can marvel at the heights of God’s mercy. Thank God for the gospel that gives us the real hope of forgiveness and rescue from the sin that plagues us.

The Contours of Forgiveness

“To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.” -C.S. Lewis

For the Christ-follower, forgiveness is not a choice. Forgiveness is a command. Yet it is not a cold obligation or mere duty; it is a calling both lived and modeled by Jesus himself and the natural overflow of grasping his forgiveness toward us. The New Testament presents forgiveness as both an imperative to obey and a model to imitate, inviting us to reflect deeply on how forgiveness flows from God’s heart to ours.

Jesus speaks with clarity and authority about the necessity of forgiveness: “And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses” (Mk 11:25). Similarly, he says, “Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven” (Lk 6:37).

In these passages, the term “forgive” is in the imperative mood. Forgiveness is not optional or situational; it is a divine command issued without exception to the people of God. To forgive is to step into obedience, reflecting the character of our forgiving Father. It is a responsibility we carry as those who belong to him, a non-negotiable aspect of life in his kingdom.

The command to forgive does not stand alone; it is accompanied by a model. Jesus not only tells us to forgive but shows us how. Paul captures this beautifully in his letters: “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 4:32–5:2).

Similarly, Paul writes, “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Col 3:12-13). The repeated phrase “as God in Christ forgave you” points to the mold of forgiveness into which we are to conform. The hinge word “as” makes it clear that the forgiveness we extend to others must mirror the forgiveness we have received. Forgiveness is not abstract or undefined—it takes its shape from the sacrificial love of Christ.

Forgiveness is not formless. It has the contours of a ragged, splintered cross. It is forgiveness that costs and bleeds, a forgiveness that is not cheap but freely given. At the cross, we see the full weight of what forgiveness entails: the willingness to absorb pain, release debt, and extend grace to the undeserving. As we meditate on the grace of the cross, we are better equipped to forgive those who have wronged us. The more we understand the depth of God’s forgiveness toward us, the more we are compelled to extend that same forgiveness to others. It is not easy, but it is necessary. And in doing so, we imitate the God who forgave us at the greatest cost.

The Holy Spirit's Role at the Cross

When we discuss the cross, our focus often centers on the roles of the Father and the Son in the great work of redemption. The Father plans and sends; the Son sacrifices and accomplishes. Yet, the Holy Spirit's role is often overlooked. Where was the Spirit on that fateful day? Did he play a part in the sacrifice of Christ?

Hebrews 9:13-14 provides the answer: "For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God."

This verse explains that Christ offered himself "through the eternal Spirit." The Spirit was not a passive observer at the cross but an active participant. He empowered, upheld, and enabled the Son to offer himself without blemish to the Father. This fact emphasizes the unity of the Trinity in the work of atonement: the Father's plan, the Son's obedience, and the Spirit's sustaining power.

It was the Holy Spirit who anointed Jesus for every aspect of his ministry. It was his empowering presence that continued to sustain him even at the cross. From his baptism to his final breath, the Spirit's presence enabled Christ to fulfill his mission.

The Spirit's role extends beyond empowerment. Some theologians argued that the Spirit was the bond of love that held the

Trinity together in the moment of ultimate suffering. Despite the abandonment Jesus experienced on the cross, the Spirit maintained the unity of the Godhead. This unity points to the Spirit's active role in transforming the forsakenness of the cross into an incredible expression of divine unity, making salvation possible.

Without the Spirit's sustaining presence, some theologians argue that the human nature of Jesus might have faltered under the weight of divine wrath. The Spirit enabled Christ to endure the unimaginable suffering of the cross and to triumph faithfully, offering his life as a perfect sacrifice.

The Spirit's involvement in the atonement deepens our understanding of the cross. It was not merely a transaction between the Father and the Son but a Trinitarian act of love and unity. The Spirit's empowering and sustaining role ensured that the Son's offering was complete and sufficient for all time.

With Augustine, we can deeply appreciate the Spirit's unifying work as we reflect on the grace of the cross: "O Holy Spirit, you who are the bond of love between the Father and the Son, descend upon us and sanctify our hearts by the remembrance of the cross of our Savior."

Finding Forgiveness Together

As a pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer resisted the rise of Hitler and the Nazi regime, even joining a conspiracy to overthrow it—a decision that ultimately cost him his life. Yet Bonhoeffer’s resistance was not only political; it was deeply spiritual. He believed that true Christian discipleship required living in authentic community, where forgiveness, confession, and reconciliation were practiced as tangible expressions of the gospel.

For Bonhoeffer, forgiveness wasn’t an abstract idea; it was a sacred act that could only happen in the presence of others. His conviction about the importance of community was so central that he founded an underground seminary where students lived and learned together under constant threat of discovery. Through this dangerous and intentional practice of community, Bonhoeffer believed that forgiveness and grace not only could flourish in the darkest times but that they must.

Forgiveness is a deeply one-another” practice. In Bonhoeffer’s book, *Life Together*, he discusses the two passages that should inform corporate practices of forgiveness. First, he referenced Jesus’ commission to his disciples in John 20:21-23: “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.’”

This passage reminds us that forgiveness is not an individual endeavor but a divine calling entrusted to the people of God. In Christ, people are free to acknowledge their sin because only then can they receive help. Bonhoeffer explains further, “All sham was ended in the presence of Christ. The misery of the sinner and the mercy of God—this was the truth of the gospel in Jesus Christ. Therefore, he gave his followers the authority to hear the confession of sin and to forgive sin in his name.”

The foundation of community is the recognition that we are all sinners, forgiven by the same grace and empowered to extend that forgiveness to one another. As Bonhoeffer explains, “Christ made the church, and in it our brother, a blessing to us. Now our brother stands in Christ’s stead. Before him alone in the whole world I dare to be the sinner that I am; here the truth of Jesus Christ and his mercy rules.”

The second text mentioned by Bonhoeffer in his discussion on community and the exchange of forgiveness is James 5:13-16: “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”

James points to the healing power of confession and prayer within the community of faith. Again, we see that forgiveness is not something we work out alone; we need one another. The act of confessing sins to a fellow believer and receiving forgiveness reminds us of our shared dependence on Christ’s grace. Bonhoeffer writes, “Christ became our brother in order to help us. Through him, our brother has become Christ for us in the power and authority of the commission Christ has given to him.” In forgiving and being forgiven

by one another, we reflect the forgiveness of God and participate in the healing work of his Spirit.

In the vulnerable act of confessing sins and extending mercy, Christians becomes conduits to one another of Christ's mercy. Forgiveness is not simply about letting go of offenses; it is about entering into the messiness of one another's lives with the grace of Christ as our guide. As Bonhoeffer's life and writings demonstrate, this is not an easy calling, but it is a beautiful one—a calling to embody the truth that we are all sinners, yet forgiven and loved beyond measure.

The Unsurprising Incarnation

In the Babylonian Talmud, a wise rabbi said, “Be pliable like a reed, not rigid like a cedar.” The reed, though humble and lowly, bends with the wind and survives the storm. The cedar, proud and unyielding, breaks under its force. The moral of the story is that humility—though it may appear unassuming—possesses a strangely resilient strength. In the great story of redemption, it is humility that saves the world. It is the resilient strength of the God who bends low to meet his creation that leads to our only hope.

Nowhere is divine humility more evident than in the incarnation, where God the Son stooped to take on human flesh, forever binding himself to humanity. The incarnation, far from being an exception, is the natural expression of the humility that defines God’s very nature.

God persistently comes low to engage us. Whether he is walking in the garden with Adam and Eve (Gen 3:8), wrestling with Jacob in human form (Gen 32:22-32), or having a conversation with Moses face to face (Ex 33:11-16), God’s ways with us are marked by condescension.

This is not surprising as humility is fundamental to the life of the Triune community. God the Father, Son, and Spirit are equally humble in their engagement with one another. Every exchange among the three persons is executed with a posture of humility. God’s life is a dance of three persons striving to outdo one another in

honor. When the Triune God engages the world, we would expect to see the same thing, and we do.

The way God reveals himself in the Old Testament prepares the reader for a humble Christ. The larger storyline of Scripture leads us to read the incarnation as “normative” divine activity. In many ways, the incarnation is the logical next step in the Triune God's self-disclosure. Don't misunderstand me, the incarnation is astonishing and overwhelming. My point is that incarnation should not be considered "abnormal" activity for the humble Creator. It is consistent with who God is and how he has revealed himself throughout redemptive history.

The incarnation serves to reinforce and deepen our understanding of the humility of God. It serves as a link to the Old Testament and yet is a clear and drastic move forward in what God shows us about himself. God the Son permanently takes to himself humanity. The life of God can never be the same! The more we come to understand God's humility and his willingness to stoop low to rescue us, the more are hearts will be kindled with gratitude and worship.

Messy Families and the Mercy of God

70% of adults report experiencing significant dysfunction in their family of origin. Studies reveal that unresolved conflict, sibling rivalry, favoritism, and emotional neglect are far more common than harmony and peace. Research from the Pew Research Center highlights that family conflict is one of the top sources of stress in modern life. Whether it's unmet expectations, miscommunication, or long-standing wounds, family dysfunction is not the exception—it's the norm.

When we turn to Scripture, we find that family dysfunction is not a modern invention. In fact, the Bible offers a brutally honest portrayal of families riddled with pain, sin, and conflict. It's nearly impossible to find an example of a harmonious, healthy family in its pages. Instead, we see messy, broken relationships that mirror our own.

Genesis alone provides a vivid picture. The first husband and wife disobey God, introducing sin into the world (Gen 3). Their firstborn son murders his brother in a jealous rage (Gen 4). Sarah's grief over infertility leads her to give her servant Hagar to Abraham, resulting in abuse and bitterness (Gen 16). Lot's daughters manipulate him into drunken incest (Gen 19). Isaac and Rebekah play favorites with their sons, Jacob and Esau, fostering resentment and estrangement (Gen 25). Jacob deceives Esau out of his birthright, leading to a 20-year grudge (Gen 27). And then there's Joseph—betrayed and sold

into slavery by his own brothers, who lie to their father for over two decades (Gen 37). And that's just one book of the Bible.

It doesn't end there. The stories of broken families ripple through the rest of Scripture: Aaron's sons disobey God and face judgment (Lev 10). Eli and Samuel both raise sons described as "worthless" (1 Sam 2, 8). David's family is riddled with betrayal, murder, and rebellion (2 Sam 11–18). Even Solomon, known for his wisdom, falls prey to folly as his many marriages lead him away from God (1 Kgs 11). The list goes on, a parade of flawed people whose sins reverberate through generations.

Why does the Bible focus so much on dysfunctional families rather than harmonious ones? Perhaps because this is the universal human experience. We are broken, and nowhere is that brokenness more evident than in our families, where sinners live in closest proximity. But this raw honesty also serves a greater purpose: it highlights God's redemptive work in the midst of human failure.

David Garland, in *Flawed Families of the Bible*, observes that these stories emphasize God's grace and mercy. The family becomes a crucible where sin is exposed, forgiveness is practiced, and grace is displayed. As Garland states, "we often fail to remember is that the mess is usually required for these things to occur." The Bible's focus is not on ideal families, but on God's work to redeem them. This is the hope reinforced throughout Scripture: God does not abandon broken families. No, he does not leave us. Instead, he enters into our mess and transforms us.

Consider the themes that emerge from these stories: husbands and wives struggling to communicate and love each other, parents failing to discipline or playing favorites, siblings consumed by rivalry, and fathers neglecting to protect or honor their children. These dynamics are painfully familiar. We see them in our own families, in our arguments, in our silences, in our regrets. And yet, God's purposes are not thwarted by the mess.

The truth is, our families are often where God's grace becomes most visible. They're the place where we are forced to confront our own sin and selfishness, where we are called to extend forgiveness even when it's undeserved. As much as we long for harmony, it is often the mess that God uses to shape us. The tensions and trials of family life become opportunities for the gospel to be understood and applied. As David Garland notes, "the messes become mercies."

The Bible's honesty about dysfunctional families reminds us that we're not alone. More importantly, it reminds us that God specializes in redeeming brokenness. He took Joseph's betrayal and turned it into a story of forgiveness and salvation. He took David's failures and used them to write psalms that continue to comfort and convict. He took the lineage of flawed families and brought forth the Messiah, who came to redeem us all.

So, if your family feels like anything but a "Hallmark moment," remember this: God works through messy families. He meets us in the chaos, redeems our brokenness, and uses our cracks to display the beauty of his grace. Pray hard, love deeply, and trust that God's mercy is sufficient for your family, just as it has been for generations of broken families before you.

The Author of Pleasure

Pleasure is not a human invention. The very concept of enjoyment, the ability to delight in the beauty of creation, is rooted in God's character. Paul reminds us in 1 Timothy 6:17 that God is the one "who richly provides us with everything to enjoy." This truth expands our understanding of who God is—not only our Creator but also the designer of joy. Every sunset, every shared laugh, every bite of satisfying food, and every moment of deep connection is evidence of his intention for us to experience delight.

C.S. Lewis captures this reality brilliantly in *The Screwtape Letters*, his imagined correspondence between a senior demon, Screwtape, and his apprentice, Wormwood, on their mission to lead astray their targeted human. Speaking to the nature of pleasure, Screwtape provides this warning to his protégé.

"Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the enemy's ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is his invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which he has forbidden. Hence, we always try to work away from the natural condition of any pleasure to that in which it is least natural, least redolent of its Maker, and least pleasurable."

Lewis's insight reflects an important theological truth: pleasure, in its purest form, is a reflection of God's goodness. The problem arises when pleasure is distorted. Screwtape's strategy highlights how the enemy seeks to twist God's good gifts—encouraging humans to misuse them, pursue them selfishly, or overindulge to their detriment. However, the perversion of pleasure does not negate its divine origin.

What does this mean for followers of Christ? It means that pleasure, rightly ordered, is a pathway to worship. When we savor a cup of coffee, marvel at a breathtaking view, or delight in the company of a friend, we are invited to see these moments as reflections of God's generosity. Gratitude transforms mere enjoyment into an act of worship.

A Guide to Forgiving When You Can't

Forgiveness. Even the word can feel heavy when you're hurting. We experience real tension around it: the desire to obey Christ and let go, alongside an equally powerful urge to hold on to the pain. We know forgiveness is the right path, but how do we walk it when our hearts just aren't there?

This is the reality of forgiveness. It's not clean, quick, or easy. It's work. And if you're finding it hard to forgive, you're not alone. The Bible doesn't shy away from the difficulty of forgiveness—and neither should we. Jesus didn't merely preach forgiveness; he embodied it. His life—marked by tears, sweat, and blood—proves just how difficult it is to truly forgive. Often, forgiveness feels out of reach. So where do we begin when we find ourselves in that place?

Start with the Gospel

The gospel begins with the staggering truth that we've been forgiven far more than we could ever imagine. We were enemies of God, and yet he moved toward us in love. Romans 5:8 reminds us, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." This isn't meant to guilt us into forgiving others—it's meant to free us. When we feel the weight of God's mercy toward us, it softens our hearts toward those who've wronged us.

When you're struggling to forgive, go back to the cross. Reflect on the magnitude of God's mercy toward you. Let the depth of his

forgiveness soften your heart. As Paul writes, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph 4:32).

Embrace Your Weakness

It’s critical to admit that we cannot do this on our own. Forgiveness requires more than human strength—it demands divine intervention. Bring your need before God, not as a polished request but as an honest confession: “Father, I can’t forgive. I don’t even want to.”

In doing so, we acknowledge the reality Jesus taught when he said, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). It’s freeing to realize that even if we wanted to muster the strength to forgive, we couldn’t. Yet, when we embrace our weakness, it becomes the perfect occasion for him to demonstrate his strength (2 Cor 12:9).

Lean into Lament

Forgiveness doesn’t ignore pain. It doesn’t sweep hurt under the rug or pretend an offense didn’t happen. God invites us to grieve. In the psalms, we see a blueprint for lament—raw, honest cries to God about the wounds we carry.

Psalm 34:18 assures us, “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.” When you bring your pain to God, you invite him into the forgiveness process. Lamenting isn’t a detour on the road to forgiveness; it’s a crucial part of the journey.

Start with Small Shifts

If forgiveness feels like a mountain you can’t climb, start with small steps. Pray for movement in your heart and will. Ask God to create the desire for forgiveness. Pray for his Spirit to overcome your anger, bitterness, or pain with a willingness to let go. This transformation doesn’t happen overnight, but God honors what Eugene Peterson calls the “long obedience in the same direction.”

Philippians 2:13 reminds us, “It is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Even the desire to forgive is a gift of grace.

Remember the Justice of God

Forgiveness doesn’t mean letting an offender off the hook. It means trusting the ultimate Judge to handle the matter. Romans 12:19 says, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God.”

God’s justice is perfect, and his timing is flawless. When you forgive, you’re not excusing the offense—you’re entrusting it to the one who sees all, knows all, and judges rightly. This frees you from the burden of carrying the offense and allows you to rest in God’s justice.

Don’t Forget Community

Forgiveness isn’t meant to be done alone. The body of Christ is a gift to help us on the path. James 5:16 reminds us, “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”

Lean on those you trust. Be honest when you are failing to forgive and don’t resist their encouragement. Sometimes, hearing someone else’s story of forgiveness can strengthen your resolve. Other times, their prayers can carry you when your own words fail. Community reminds us that we are not alone. God often uses his people to help us do the hard work of forgiving.

Be Realistic About the Journey to Forgiveness

Forgiveness is rarely a one-time event. It’s often a process, a decision you make over and over again. Some days, you might feel like you’ve made progress, only to find the bitterness creeping back the next.

This doesn’t mean you’ve failed. It means you’re human. When Jesus told the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt 18:22-35), he wasn’t just teaching about extending grace—he was revealing how easily we forget the grace we’ve received. Like the servant forgiven of an enormous debt, we often falter in extending the same mercy to

others. But he doesn't ask you to forgive in your own strength. He gave you the Holy Spirit to help you. Keep leaning into his power, trusting that he is working in you, even when it doesn't feel like it.

Return to the Gospel

The journey of forgiveness always leads back to the gospel. When the anger resurfaces, when the pain feels fresh, and when you're tempted to withhold grace, remind yourself of what Jesus has done for you.

The gospel doesn't just call you to forgive—it equips you to forgive. Colossians 3:13 urges us to forgive “as the Lord has forgiven you.” When you reflect on the unpayable debt Jesus canceled for you, it becomes the foundation for extending grace to others.

When Forgiveness Feels Out of Reach

In reality, forgiveness is always out of reach. When we normalize this in our minds and are postured with the appropriate humility, then we are in the right place to begin the long road of gospel obedience that requires dealing with the hurts we have absorbed.

Scripture equips us on how to navigate this path, especially when we recognize our inability. When you can't forgive, start with the gospel. Bring your weakness to God, lean into lament and community, and trust him to work in your heart. Forgiveness is a journey, but you don't walk it alone. The God who forgave you walks beside you, giving you the grace to take the next step—even when it feels impossible.

Freedom and the Future

Freedom is a gift we experience now through the work of Christ and the indwelling Spirit, but the fullness of freedom is still on its way. Scripture directs our eyes forward, to the time when Christ will return and bring the story of redemption to its conclusion. On that day, sin will be entirely removed, our bodies will be restored, and the whole of creation will be renewed. This is the ultimate horizon of freedom, a hope that anchors and fuels the life of every believer.

Paul describes this future freedom in Romans 8:21: “The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” Here, the apostle portrays a world groaning under the weight of sin and decay, longing for liberation. This groaning isn’t passive but anticipatory—it reflects the eager expectation of something better, something sure. The freedom of creation is tied to the rescue of God’s children. As we are made fully free, creation itself will share in that freedom.

This hope of future freedom isn’t abstract or ethereal. It’s rooted in the promises of God and the victory of Christ. When Jesus rose from the grave, he secured not only our justification but also our future resurrection. He is the “firstfruits” of a new creation (1 Cor 15:20-23). His resurrection guarantees ours, and ours will signal the complete renewal of heaven and earth.

The Bible paints a stunning picture of this coming freedom. Revelation 21:1-4 describes a “new heaven and a new earth” where

God dwells with his people. In this place, there is no more death, no mourning, no crying, no pain. The old order of things will pass away, and freedom will no longer be shadowed by sin or suffering. It will be the full and final realization of life as God intended it to be.

Walter Brueggemann captures this forward-looking vision of freedom, noting that "God's promises of a new creation mean that hope is always on the horizon for God's people." The language of freedom isn't just about escaping bondage; it's about being drawn into something far greater—the glory of God revealed in and through a fully redeemed creation.

Knowing that freedom is coming gives us strength in the face of suffering. It allows us to endure the groaning of our bodies and the brokenness of the world, trusting that these are temporary afflictions compared to the eternal weight of glory (2 Cor 4:17). It also shapes our worship, as we anticipate the day when we will stand before the Lamb who was slain and sing, "Worthy is the Lamb" (Rev 5:12).

Finally, the hope of future freedom calls us to live as citizens of that coming kingdom. It invites us to reflect the freedom of Christ in how we love, serve, and persevere. We are called to be people of hope, bearing witness to the freedom that is both ours now and will be fully ours forever.

The Rugged Discipline of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is hard work—research proves it. A 2018 study from the *Journal of Psychology and Health* found that forgiving someone who has deeply hurt us can lead to increased emotional distress in the short term, as it requires confronting pain and vulnerability. Another study from *Social Psychological and Personality Science* showed that while forgiveness reduces stress over time, it demands significant cognitive and emotional effort, often leaving people exhausted in the process.

Forgiveness doesn't just happen—it's a disciplined act that involves constant wrestling with our pain, anger, and pride. Further, it's not a one-time proposition but an ongoing demand. The Lord's Prayer, "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt 6:12), serves as our true north in this regard, emphasizing the daily need for both seeking and extending forgiveness.

It reminds us that the grace we receive and extend today doesn't cover tomorrow; we will need forgiveness, and to offer forgiveness, again tomorrow. It also reflects the reality of the human heart: bitterness and resentment don't simply vanish. Forgiveness is the continual work of uprooting those things from our hearts as we release those who have wronged us.

The daily grind of forgiveness is made explicit in Luke 17:3-4: "Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive

him.” This underscores the demand for forgiveness as a daily exercise, even when someone wrongs us repeatedly.

Matthew pushes these boundaries even further in response to the question, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus’ response was, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Matt 18:21-22). This text envisions a lavish response of grace to repeated offenses and reminds us to anticipate being sinned against regularly and consistently. In other words, we must approach each day with a posture of forgiveness. This demonstrates that forgiveness is more than an emotion; it is an actionable discipline, a commitment, and a continual movement toward resting in God’s forgiveness to us and extending it to those around us.

Let’s not pretend this is easy; often, it is an ugly work. Bitterness and anger rise stubbornly even after we’ve forgiven someone. A fresh trigger or a new offense pulls us back into the ring to wrestle with forgiveness again. Forgiveness is anything but easy—but take heart: if these struggles are coming up as you strive to forgive others, it means you are still in the ring.

Becoming Human Again

We are dust. We must never forget our origins. There's something grounding about the realization that we are creatures, formed from the earth. God's creative, forming, breathing energy infused the dirt as he fashioned a creature to bear his image—simply phenomenal (Gen 2:7-9). This Creator-creature distinction is where life's greatest joys and deepest sorrows converge. It reminds us of both our limitations and the limitless generosity of the One who made us.

It is no mistake that the first line of the Apostle's Creed, a summary of our faith, says, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth." In this simple affirmation, we confess our creatureliness and our Maker's sovereignty. Martin Luther offers insight into this phrase in his *Small Catechism*. He asks the question: what does this mean? His answer:

"I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that he has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still preserves them; that he richly and daily provides me with food and clothing, home and family, property and goods, and all that I need to support this body and life; that he protects me from all danger, guards and keeps me from all evil; and all this purely out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me; for all which I am in duty bound to thank and praise, to serve and obey him. This is most certainly true."

Luther's language is striking. He doesn't just describe creation as an act of power but as an expression of "fatherly, divine goodness and mercy." He ties God's creative work to the same principle that defines justification: grace alone. Creation is not something we earned or deserved. It is sheer gift. Our very existence comes not from our merit but from God's delight. This parallels the way he speaks of salvation: just as we are justified apart from works, we are created apart from merit. Both realities flow from the abundance of God's grace.

Yet, while the creature's posture is meant to be one of open-handed receiving, sin twists that posture into one of grasping. Since the fall of our first parents, we have reached out for what is not ours, grasping for control, autonomy, and even deity itself. Adam and Eve's rebellion was, at its core, a rejection of creatureliness. They sought to transcend their God-given limits, reaching for the forbidden in the belief that it would make them like God.

Justification, then, is God's way of making us human again. It restores the posture we were meant to have—hands open, receiving life as a gift rather than grasping for it as a right. It reminds us that just as we contributed nothing to our creation, we contribute nothing to our salvation. Both are acts of God's grace, unearned and undeserved.

To confess that we are dust is to embrace both humility and wonder. We are finite, fragile, and dependent, yet we are loved by the One who fashioned us. The dust we are made from is not an insult but a reminder of the Creator's infinite care. And the breath that animates us is not our own but his. This is the grace that frames our existence—dust formed and breathed into life.

Serving Others through Forgiveness

In the late 1940s, Corrie ten Boom, a survivor of the Holocaust, faced a moment she never anticipated. After a speech in Germany where she shared her testimony of God's forgiveness, a man approached her—a former Nazi guard from Ravensbrück, the concentration camp where her sister had died. He extended his hand and asked if she could forgive him. Corrie froze. How could she possibly forgive someone who had contributed to such unimaginable suffering? Yet in that moment, she realized forgiveness was not hers to create but to extend as Christ had extended it to her. Reflecting on that moment later, she said, "Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart."

Forgiveness is rarely easy. It demands much from us, especially when the sin against us is profound. But what if forgiveness is more than letting go of resentment? What if it's an invitation to reflect the heart of God himself? Martin Luther, in his *Freedom of the Christian*, explores how justification shapes our approach to forgiveness. He writes:

"The good things we have from God should flow from one to the other and be common to all, so that everyone should 'put on his neighbor' and so conduct himself toward him as if he himself were in the other's place. From Christ the good things have flowed and are flowing into us. He has so 'put us on' and acted for us as if he had been what we are. From us they flow on to those who have need of

them so that I should lay before God my faith and my righteousness that they may cover and intercede for the sins of my neighbor which I take upon myself and so labor and serve in them as if they were my very own. That is what Christ did for us. This is true love and the genuine rule of a Christian life. Love is true and genuine where there is true and genuine faith. Hence the apostle says of love in 1 Corinthians 13:5 that ‘it does not seek its own.’”

Luther’s insight reveals that the ultimate test of Christlikeness lies in how we respond to sin. Our sin became the occasion for Christ’s greatest act of love. He didn’t simply forgive us—he actively interceded on our behalf, pulling our sin into himself and standing before the Father as our Mediator.

Paul captures this in Romans 5:8: “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Jesus didn’t hold our sin against us. Instead, he absorbed it, covered us with his righteousness, and declared us justified. This is love in its truest form—a love that doesn’t seek its own but pursues the good of another, even at great personal cost.

When we view forgiveness through the lens of justification, it transforms our perspective. Sin becomes an opportunity to serve others rather than to condemn them. Forgiveness, modeled after Christ’s, is not about excusing the sin or denying its weight—it’s about stepping in to bear the burden with the offender.

Paul writes in Romans 4:6-8: “Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity.” To forgive as Christ forgave is to see the offender as Christ sees us: covered, redeemed, and righteous. This doesn’t mean the sin doesn’t matter—it means we imitate God by choosing mercy over judgment.

This perspective also sheds light on the danger of withholding forgiveness. When we refuse to forgive—whether out of bitterness or because we feel the offender hasn’t earned it—we fail to reflect the heart of God. In the parable of the prodigal son, the father runs to

his son while he's still far off. He doesn't wait for a perfect apology or full restitution. He pursues his son with love and grace.

Jesus highlights the urgency of reconciliation in Matthew 5:23-24: "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." Forgiveness that reflects God's heart is active, not passive. It pursues the offender, just as God pursued us while we were still sinners.

But, Why Forgive?

In his book *Start with Why*, Simon Sinek explains that people are inspired and driven not by what we do or how we do it, but by why we do it. He argues that starting with why gives clarity, purpose, and meaning to our actions, helping us stay focused on what truly matters. He states, "Start with why, and the rest will fall into place." Without a clear "why," even the most disciplined efforts can feel empty or aimless. This principle isn't just valuable in leadership or business—it applies powerfully to the way we think about forgiveness.

Why forgive? Why does God forgive? Why should we forgive others? These "why" questions drive us to the ground level of forgiveness, anchoring it in something far deeper than obligation or sentiment. They draw us into the heart of God's purposes, revealing that forgiveness is about more than resolving conflict—it's about reflecting God's glory, restoring broken relationships, and resisting the forces that seek to divide us. When we start with why, forgiveness becomes not just a moral duty but a sacred calling, rooted in God's character and extended for the good of others and ourselves.

The Bible gives us a compelling foundation for why forgiveness matters, centering on two key ideas: forgiveness for God's sake and forgiveness for the sake of others. On the first idea, the apostle John writes, "Your sins are forgiven for his name's sake" (1 Jn 2:12). God's

forgiveness of our sins is rooted in something far greater than our worthiness—it is grounded in his commitment to his holy name.

This concept is as old as the prophet Ezekiel's words to rebellious Israel. God declared, "It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name" (Ez 36:22). Forgiveness, cleansing, and renewal were promised to Israel not because they deserved it but because God's name and reputation were at stake. He desired to vindicate the holiness of his name among the nations.

This truth forms the bedrock of our confidence in forgiveness. If forgiveness flows from God's immutable commitment to his own glory, then it is unshakable. We are forgiven not because of anything in us but because of who God is. As Ezekiel reminds us, God's name undergirds his promises, and his promises never fail. In this, we find both assurance and awe—our forgiveness is secure because it rests on the foundation of God's holy character.

But forgiveness is not only about God's glory; it also serves the good of others. In 2 Corinthians, Paul addresses a situation of church discipline. A member of the Corinthian congregation had been removed for immorality but later demonstrated genuine repentance. Paul exhorts the church to forgive and restore the individual.

He writes, "Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan" (2 Cor 2:10-11). Paul emphasizes that forgiveness is not just for the offender but for the health and protection of the whole community. In forgiving, the church would avoid falling prey to Satan's schemes, which thrive on division and bitterness.

This perspective balances the idea of forgiveness for God's sake by showing its relational impact. Forgiveness is for the sake of the forgiven, offering them the chance to be restored and healed. But it is also for the sake of the forgiver, freeing them from resentment and preventing the enemy from gaining a foothold in their heart. Paul

reminds us that forgiveness serves the good of all human parties involved—the offender, the offended, and the community as a whole.

Together, these truths provide a rich theology of forgiveness. Divine forgiveness is ultimately for the glory of God, flowing from his desire to uphold his holy name. At the same time, forgiveness is a profoundly relational act, bringing healing and restoration to human relationships. To forgive is to align ourselves with God’s purposes, reflecting his glory and participating in his reconciling work. It is never easy, but it is always worth it—for his sake, for the sake of the offender, and for the sake of the offended. Friends, continue to press into the rugged discipline of forgiveness.