

7. Our Forgiving God (4Q 2019—Ezra and Nehemiah)

Biblical Material: Neh. 9:1–3; Dan. 9:4–19; Neh. 9:4–8; Col. 1:16, 17; Neh. 9:9–38; Rom. 5:6–8; Prov. 28:13.

Quotes

- God will forgive me; that’s his business. *Heinrich Heine*
- If Jesus forgave those who nailed Him to the cross, and if God forgives you and me, how can you withhold your forgiveness from someone else? *Anne Graham Lotz*
- We should never be surprised when God keeps His word to forgive those who confess their sins. *R. C. Sproul*
- The hardest thing in life is to forgive. But hate is self-destructive. If you hate somebody you’re not hurting the person you hate, you’re hurting yourself. Forgiveness is healing. *Louis Zamperini*
- In Christ, we have everything we need for joy - the forgiveness of our sins, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, a purpose worth living for, and the assurance of eternity with God. *Rob Renfro*
- No matter what you’ve done, there is no sin beyond the reach of God’s grace once you have accepted Christ’s offer of forgiveness. *Randy Alcorn*

Questions

Why was it so important for the Israelites to come before God in this way? Is there really such a thing as “corporate repentance”? Is gaining God’s forgiveness the most important thing? What danger is there in presuming we can sin and God will forgive? Is it true that “forgiveness is not enough” in terms of Christian development? What does God look like in this passage?

Bible Summary

Nehemiah 9 records another public Scripture-reading event. The Israelites come as penitents, wearing sackcloth and with dust on their heads. It is a time of confession, a reminder of how God has led them in the past, and a desire to do better which is enshrined in a solemn agreement at the end. Dan. 9:4–19 is a similar prayer of contrition. Col. 1:16, 17 acknowledges the supremacy of God. God’s forgiveness is shown in Rom. 5:6–8 which says that while we were sinners Christ died for us. “People who hide their sins won’t succeed, but those who confess and renounce their sins will be shown kindness.” Prov. 28:13 FBV.

Comment

In this passage from Nehemiah we see God’s people coming before him in repentance, asking for forgiveness. At the same time they have a “history lesson,” which is far more than a recounting of past events. It is a record of who they are and where they have come from, and most of all an account of how God has been with them every step of the way. They acknowledge their mistakes, and recognize that it their own fault that they are “slaves in the land you gave us.” It was not meant to be this way, but because of their wrong-headed ways and rebellious disobedience, God has had to take them through some tough experiences to help them learn.

It definitely does seem that those who returned from exile were determined not to repeat the mistakes of their forefathers that had brought such a disaster upon them. They recognized the spirit of laxness and compromise that had led to apostasy. But now they were in danger of falling

into the ditch on the other side of the road—legalistic observance and religious formalism that made the whole relationship with God a tedious and unpleasant experience.

The truth is that with forgiveness and the desire to change must come a delight in the Lord. God designed us to be happy, and his laws were meant to help to that. It was to safeguard us from ourselves that God set out boundaries, and his primary thought is for our welfare. The pre-exilic Israelites saw their God as a killjoy, and pagan worship as much more “fun.” The post-exilic Israelites saw their God as hard and judgmental, and so added to all the rules and regulations their own laws to keep people from sinning. In the end this led to the situation Jesus found when he came when religious experience was a real burden, and joy was a rare commodity.

So what about forgiveness? How is it obtained? What is the process God uses to effect forgiveness? What happens if forgiveness is not achieved? In most Christian belief systems the stress is on the need for legal forgiveness? Because humanity is conceived of as being criminally guilty, and thus under executive sentence of doom from God—so if a person is not legally forgiven, then that person will suffer the penalty—usually expressed as enduring the torments of Hell inflicted by a vindictive God for all eternity.

Such a stress on penalty explains the great need (especially in the popular mind) to ensure that this penalty is not applied, and that the individual receives legal forgiveness from God (or his representatives).

Our main objective is therefore to be forgiven, to know that legally we are not debarred from salvation. Hence the procedure of granting Absolution, the Last Rites and so on, which attempt to guarantee that the person is rendered legally “Not Guilty” in the eyes of God. Protestant denial of such practices has not eliminated the basic drive—to acquire divine absolution, the “Not Guilty” verdict. While Luther rejected the means by which this divine legal forgiveness was achieved, he still viewed it as being the prime objective. Jesus Christ is therefore viewed as the legal payment for sin, as the substitute in the dock, and only through his blood can the penalty that God imposes be averted.

Such a view of God and his salvation does not find expression in the gospel Christ brought. It was not a question of ensuring you were legally “without fault” before God, like some insurance claim!

Yes, forgiveness is surely important, but not as a guarantee to avoid punishment. Salvation is not a question of making sure you have paid your fire insurance premium! God is not to be viewed as a hostile Judge determined to sentence all the Guilty, and only allowing those who hold “Get Out of Hell” cards (“the forgiven”) to profit from his salvation. This highly-objectivized view of salvation ignores the personality of God and of us, and reduces God’s salvation to a mechanistic kind of contractual process whereby when all the right actions are performed then salvation is automatic.

No. Salvation is healing, and we should embrace the transformation that only God can bring.

Ellen White Comments

God’s forgiveness is not merely a judicial act by which He sets us free from condemnation. It is not only forgiveness for sin but reclaiming from sin. It is the outflow of redeeming love that transforms the heart. David had the true conception of forgiveness when he prayed, “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.” Psalm 51:10.

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