

Are we forgiven,
..... like a clean airplane?



Of Course We Are

By a Presbyterian Fighter Pilot

Compiled and printed in 2020 by a Presbyterian fighter pilot

Single quotation marks are used to identify the many paraphrases of Bible verses and other sources.

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Like A Clean Airplane

One of the greatest verses in the Bible, Isaiah 43:25, says God has “blotted out our sins and remembers them no more for his own sake.” He does not want to remember them, and it follows that God wants us not to remember them. I hope you can do that, but I am in the group that tends to hang on to the sins and guilt, and it sometimes makes me wish I was like a good fighter airplane.

If you fly fighters long enough, there will come a time when you want to get rid of everything hanging onto that airplane; every fuel tank, every bomb, bomb rack, rocket pod, everything. And you can do so with a single push of a big red jettison button. When you push that red jettison button, everything hanging onto the airplane is instantaneously jettisoned. The airplane becomes like a new and different airplane; it actually jumps up in altitude; it accelerates; becomes much more maneuverable, and flies much better. It is called a “clean” airplane, clean of everything that was hanging onto it. It still has the internal gun and it is a spectacular airplane.

Apparently, God wants us to be like a clean airplane. In our case, he has already pushed our red jettison buttons; he has jettisoned our sins and guilt, and he does not want us trying to hang onto them. He wants us to let them go. He wants us to be new and different, like clean airplanes, like the spectacular people he designed and created. As far as God is concerned, our old sins are gone forever. Because of that, and because Jesus died for our sins, we are forgiven.

Charlotte Elliott

Charlotte Elliott (1789-1871) was born in England and became famous as a carefree, beautiful, popular writer and singer --- the equivalent of a “rock star” 200 years ago. She was on top of the world. But when she was 32 years old, she became physically disabled, which left her irritable and depressed with no interest in God. Some years later, a minister visiting her father’s house asked her ‘if she was really a Christian’. She resented the question and said, ‘I don’t even want to talk about it’. A few days later, she called on the minister and apologized, telling him she was miserable. She said she ‘wanted to be forgiven, wanted to come to Jesus, but did not know how’. In a gentle tone, the minister said, ‘why not come to him just as you are’. She meditated on those words for days and at age 46, she wrote the great hymn “Just as I Am, Without One Plea” while becoming rejuvenated and saved. One hundred years later, 16 year-old Billy Graham heard that hymn in a revival meeting in Charlotte and said he was saved that very day. He later used the hymn in almost every one of his crusades, a hymn which historian Kenneth Osbeck said, “probably has touched more people for Christ than any other song ever written”. And it all came from God, through the salvation of a miserable, depressed, and useless feeling invalid, who lived for 36 more productive years and wrote about 150 other inspirational hymns, including “Thy Will be Done”.

We may never know what God can do through us, but he loves every one of us ‘just as we are’, just as much as he loves Charlotte Elliott. Because of that and because of what Jesus did for us that afternoon 2,000 years ago, we ARE forgiven.

Simon Peter

The books Matthew and John show that Simon Peter, when he was a young disciple, was an impulsive guy. He was very outspoken and apparently enjoyed being the center of attention much more than most people. He was also in the habit of listening to the Jewish Elders preach, and he heard them say that 'forgiving someone 3 times was sufficient'. So one day, in Matthew 18:21, when Jesus was teaching the disciples and the subject of forgiveness came up, Peter may have thought he was ready to pitch in and help Jesus out with that lesson. He said, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me; up to 7 times; that's the limit'? Peter very likely thought he was being magnanimous and hoping for a smile and a head nod from Jesus; maybe even a hug and a pat on the back.

But how did Jesus answer Peter's leading question about 7 times being the limit for forgiveness? Jesus said, 'not even close, Peter, not even close; try 70 times 7' (Matthew 18:22). Using that huge number was how Jesus explained to the disciples and to us, that there is no limit on how many times we should forgive others, just as God has no limit on how many times he forgives us. God does not count the times, and he wants us to not count the times.

God loves every one of us and he forgives us again and again as long as we live. There is nothing we do or can do that makes God love us; it is pure grace. Because of all that, and because of Jesus, we ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

Clara Barton

Clara Barton (1821-1912), the woman who founded the American Red Cross in 1881, was visiting with a friend one day, who reminded her of a terrible thing that someone else had done to Ms. Barton a few years before. But Ms. Barton acted like she did not remember the event. Her friend was absolutely astonished, and said, “You remember that; of course you remember that”! Ms. Barton said, “No, I distinctly remember forgetting that.” Ms. Barton most likely could have remembered, but as far as she was concerned, that entire episode (the terrible act, the pain, the forgiveness, and the letting go) would never be recalled; she would not bring it up again; she would not remind herself of it. Whether she knew it or not, Ms. Barton was practicing the very model of God’s forgiveness, as promised in the new covenant, in Hebrews (8:12), where it says ‘God has forgiven our sins and remembers them no more’. The Hebrew and Greek words for “remember” also can mean “to intentionally recall”, so maybe a better understanding of that verse is that ‘God will not recall our old sins’; he will not bring them up again; he will not remind us of those old sins. The devil may try to remind us; we know he will, but God and Clara Barton will not.

On some day yet to come, maybe even today, each one of us may be treated in some terrible way, thereby giving us the chance to practice forgiveness like Clara Barton practiced forgiveness; like God practices forgiveness.

Deuteronomy 32:10 says, God ‘takes care of us, and protects us as the pupil of his eye’. Because of that, and because of Jesus, God will not throw our old sins back into our faces. We ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

General Robert E. Lee

A couple of years after the Civil War, General Robert E. Lee was in Kentucky, visiting people he had not seen in many years. In one home, he found that the lady of the house was still very bitter about the war, and had a lot of hard feelings. She made a big point of taking the general outside and showing him the tall skeleton of what had been a huge beautiful tree in her front yard, before the dreaded Yankee artillery guns had killed it. She expected some moral support from General Lee, and some shared bitterness against the Yankees. But the general was silent for a few moments. He may have been thinking of words in the New Testament, like verse 3 in Ephesians 4, which says ‘get rid of all bitterness and anger,’ or verse 25 in Mark 11, which says ‘if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them,’ or verse 15 in Matthew 6, which says ‘if we do not forgive others, God will not forgive us’. Then, the general seemingly summarized all those verses into a short one-liner, and spoke to the woman. He said, "Cut it down, Mam, let it go; cut it down, let it go".

If we have even a sprout of anger, or hard feelings against someone else, God wants us to cut it down, let it go, and ask for their forgiveness.

The Lord loves every one of us just as much as he loves General Lee. Because of that, and because of what Jesus did that afternoon 2,000 years ago, we ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

Marghanita Laski

The “official” Oxford English Dictionary is not the average dictionary, and I have never even seen one. It contains not only the definitions, but also the history, and many examples of usage for the entire English language. The hard copy version is made up of 20 large volumes, plus 3 volumes of updates; it takes up almost 5 feet of shelf space and weighs about 170 pounds. It was compiled and edited by many people, but the top contributor to that huge dictionary was a British woman with the beautiful name of Marghanita Laski, who made about 250,000 inputs to it. She also wrote over 2 dozen popular novels, and many plays and short stories. Along with her life-time of reading and writing millions and millions of words, she was an avowed atheist. But not long before she died in 1988, in a televised interview, Ms. Laski said, “What I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness.” And then she said, “I have nobody to forgive me.” What a mystery, that Ms. Laski had an understanding of God’s forgiveness, but did not believe in it.

In 1 Timothy 2:2,4, God urges us to pray for all people, and he wants all people to be saved. Realizing we know nothing about Marghanita Laski’s last living moments, and believing that God considers our prayers about past events when we know nothing of the outcomes, we can pray for the soul of Marghanita Laski, that she found her faith in God and was saved before she died.

Gratefully, we ‘do have somebody to forgive us’. God loves us more than we love our parents, spouses and our children, all put together. Because of that, and because Jesus died on the cross for our sins, we ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

Karl Menninger

In the early 1900's, most people thought mental illness was incurable. In those days, if you had a mental problem and ended up in a doctor's office, you could expect two options. You could "snap out of it" or "be admitted" to an insane asylum. If you went into an asylum and behaved, you could spend most of your days on the porch in a rocking chair. If you did not behave, your standard of care included whippings, physical constraints, and lots of medication. But then along came Dr. Karl Menninger. He was the man who convinced the American public and the thousands of psychiatrists he trained that mental illness could be humanely treated and cured. One of his primary beliefs was that the mentally ill are only slightly different from the healthy.

Dr. Menninger also came to believe that the one mistake most common to all mankind is "feeling guilty." He said 'feeling guilty is not a disease; it's a mistake'! He claimed that if all the patients in our psychiatric hospitals were convinced that God had forgiven them, 75% of them could walk out and go home the very next day, and they would be entirely different people. And apparently, in a similar vein, if all we mentally healthy people were convinced that God had forgiven us, about 75% of us could leave behind a lot of our guilt, our doubt, our dread and gloom. And we too would be entirely different people. Then, we could start living like the top 25% of other Christians.

God loves us, and Ephesians 3:20 says, "God is able to do far more than we would ever dare ask or even dream of. Because of that and because of what Jesus did, we ARE forgiven.

Mother Teresa

In Matthew 25:40, Jesus says "if you did it for the least of these, you did it for me". If anyone ever epitomized living that phrase day-in and day-out, it probably would be Mother Teresa, now Saint Teresa. She spent almost 50 years caring for the unwanted and the unclaimed, the very "least of these", in the huge slums of Calcutta and around the world. She loved to believe that each person she helped was "Jesus in disguise" and that she and her sisters were with Jesus 24 hours every day. But even Mother Teresa had her critics; a man once suggested that she would be more helpful if she taught people how to fish rather than giving them fish. Mother Teresa then explained things to him in very clear terms, saying, "the people I serve are helpless; they cannot stand; they cannot hold a fishing pole. I will give them the food, and if they are ever able to hold a fishing pole, I will then send them to you, so you can teach them how to fish". And today, all around us, there are poor, elderly, handicapped, and disabled people who cannot 'hold their own fishing poles'.

Mother Teresa also had a belief on forgiveness, saying "if people are selfish and self-centered, forgive them anyway, for in the end, it is between you and God; it was never between you and them". When she said that, she very well may have been thinking of those lines in Matthew 6:14, where Jesus tells us, "if we forgive other people, God will forgive us", and in Luke 23:34, "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*".

God loves every one of us just as much as he loves Saint Teresa, and Jesus has already paid for our many sins. Because of that, we are forgiven.

Hand Washing Our Souls

In Europe, about 200 years ago and more, it was safer for a mother to give birth in the street, or a field, or in an ox cart than in a clinic. In the large clinics, it was standard practice for the doctors to move back and forth from the autopsy room to the delivery room, and make all their daily rounds from patient to patient without ever washing their hands. In those days, a disease called “child-bed fever” was very common. The disease was like a continuous epidemic, and the mortality rate for mothers in the clinics would sometimes be over 30%. But then along came Dr. Ignaz Semmelweis (1818-1865), a Hungarian obstetrician. He discovered that a very strict 'cleansing of the hands' of each doctor, before seeing each patient, put an end to child-bed fever and increased the mothers' survival rates to almost 99%. Hand-washing, washing away the germs, made all the difference.

In a similar way, Jesus made all the difference in us. First John 1:7 says, ‘the blood Jesus shed washed away our sins, and cleanses us from all sin’. He has washed our souls, and that makes all the difference.

In Romans 8:26, Paul tells us ‘we do not know how to pray, or what to pray for, but the Holy Spirit knows, and intercedes on our behalf; he prays for us and that includes praying for forgiveness’. Because of that and because of what Jesus did for us, we are forgiven. All thanks be to God.

Charles Macintosh

Charles Henry Mackintosh (1820-1896) was a famous preacher in Ireland who wrote and spoke a lot about God's forgiveness. One of his biggest pet peeves was other Christians, especially preachers, who thought it was completely OK to have doubts about God's forgiveness. If you were one of those people who confessed to have such doubts, you could expect him to ask you, 'what other parts of the Bible do you not believe', and, 'which parts do you believe'? Then he would say, 'God has spoken, but YOU cannot be sure'? He claimed there should be absolutely no doubt about God's forgiveness. Another of his peeves was when Christians would say, 'well, I may be forgiven for now, but what about my future sins'? He would then point out that all the sins of every believer were in the future when Jesus was crucified, and that scripture does not use the human term of "future". He said that what we call 'past sins' and 'future sins' are all in the same pile.

Here are the words Reverend Mackintosh wrote for us Christians: "We should be able to proclaim with clearness and decision, without reserve, misgiving, or hesitation, the same thing Isaiah claimed, 'God has cast all of our sins behind his back' (Isaiah 38:17)".

God loves every one of us just as much as he loves the Reverend Mackintosh, and Isaiah 54:10 says, 'The mountains and hills may crumble, but God's love for us will never end'. Because of that, and because of what Jesus did that day 2,000 years ago, we ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

God and Crazy People

Do you ever have doubts about your faith and God's forgiveness? If so, do not feel like the Lone Ranger, and 'do not let your heart be troubled' (John 14). Even Moses, who 'spoke to God in person' (Exodus 34), 'had doubts about God' (Numbers 11). -- The great theologian, Martin Luther, said 'only God and certain crazy people have no doubts. -- John Calvin, one of our Presbyterian forefathers, said, 'doubting your faith is something to expect; it is a part of the faith experience, unbelief is in all men'. -- Charles Spurgeon, considered one of the greatest preachers of all-time, confessed that 'at times I have doubted my Savior's blood, and my Father's love'. -- Mother Teresa, in writings printed after her death, recorded what she called her personal hypocrisy and doubts about her faith, she said the place of God in her soul was blank and that she frequently lost the will to pray. -- Even John the Baptist, the one who baptized Jesus, had doubts.

But how do we minimize our doubts about our faith and God's forgiveness? The Apostle Paul said 'the best way is to listen to the message (and read it), which comes from the Word of the Lord' (Romans 10:17). Later, Reverend Spurgeon's advice was, 'cast the burden of the present, the sins of the past, and the fears of the future on God, and God will restore you'. And fortunately for us, Jesus said 'faith as little as a mustard seed will be enough' (Matthew 17:20).

Part of God's amazing news is that he loves us on our good days as much as he loves us on our bad days, and "the Lord's faithful love never ends" (Lamentations 3:22). Because of that and because of what Jesus did for us on the cross, we ARE forgiven.

Like A Mother's Kiss

Can you remember when we were little children, and we fell and skinned a knee or an elbow, and our mothers would kiss it and make it well so we could go back to playing? You mothers have kissed the pain away from such scrapes and scratches many times, and made your children well.

The Reverend Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887), maybe the most famous preacher in America almost 200 years ago, said that is exactly how God goes about forgiving us. When we fall into sin, he said, 'God kisses our sin away; we are forgiven'; we are made well, and we can go back to living. Like us, Reverend Beecher was well acquainted with sin; he was a known womanizer and, according to historian Barry Werth, "it was standard gossip that Beecher preached to seven or eight of his mistresses at every Sunday worship service".

God loves every one of us. He loves us more than we love our mothers, and even more than our mothers love us, no matter how many times we fall down. His grace is greater than any of our falls, and we are grateful that 'he has kissed our sins into everlasting forgiveness'. Because of that, and because of what Jesus did about 3 o'clock that afternoon 2,000 years ago, we ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

Email from God

There is a rumor going around that some of us are in the terrible habit of ignoring God's forgiveness, and I have been investigating that rumor. I have hacked into some of your email accounts, and I am going to show a couple. I will use the name Joe, to avoid embarrassing anyone. Here is a copy of an email from God: 'Dear Joe, this is to remind you again that I have forgiven your sins of 12 June 1988, 3 March 2004, and 5 May 2014. I no longer recall the exact sins, but I threw two of them away as far as it is from the east to the west, and I threw the other one into the bottom of the ocean. As far as I am concerned, those sins are gone forever. Take care and drive safe. I love you, God'.

And here is Joe's response: 'Dear God, thank you for the email, and I promise to think about it. But those 3 sins you mentioned were much worse than average, and at least one of them may be completely unforgivable. I still feel guilty and I don't think I deserve being forgiven right now. I think about those sins a lot, and am working on some new ways to punish myself more often. Plus, I've been doing some volunteer work, and I increased my financial pledge to the church this year, so I think I'm doing a better job at making up for those old sins. Also, I found an online class about self-esteem that seems to be helping. And, I'm about half way through a new self-help book that may get me completely squared away. I'm grateful for all you do, but you know the pride I take in being self-sufficient and working these things out for myself. Your friend, Joe'.

Whether Joe knows it or not, we ARE forgiven.

We Deserve Hanging

Reverend R.C. Sproul (1939-2017) was an American Presbyterian and a theologian. Someone once asked him, ‘why do bad things happen to good people’? He said, “I don’t know; I don’t know any good people”. In the same vein, an anonymous Englishman wrote, ‘there is no man alive who would not deserve hanging a dozen times every day if all his thoughts were acted upon’. When the Reverend Ray Pritchard heard that quote, he said ‘only a dozen times? I would think it would be much more than that’. And the Bible makes us sound just as bad or even worse. Romans 7:18 reminds us that 'nothing good dwells in any of us', and Psalm 130 verse 3, in the ERV, says, "Lord, if you punished people for all their sins, no one would be left alive". But fortunately for us, God does not treat us as we may deserve. Romans 3:24 assures us that “God treats us much better than we deserve”, and in Romans 5:20, the Bible says, ‘if our sins abound up to our necks, God’s grace abounds even higher’.

God loves every one of us, and there is no sin too big for him to forgive. In Isaiah 43:25, God says, “I am the God who forgives your sins, and I do this because of who I am. I will not hold your sins against you”. Because of that, and because of Jesus, we ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

The Lawyer

I am a gullible person and have believed many incorrect things. But I sometimes struggle trying to believe that God has forgiven all my sins. ---- Suppose some of us are way overdue in paying large debts to a lawyer; then we receive signed letters from him, telling us that in the spirit of Christianity, he has canceled our debts; all of them; they are forgiven. I would celebrate big-time! Sometime later, we are reading 1 John 1:9 and it says, 'if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins'. I have no difficulty confessing my sins to God, but the news that He has forgiven all of them sometimes sounds too good to be true, and I fret.

But why in the world would I be so quick to believe good news from a human, especially from a lawyer, and be reluctant to doubt the Good News in the Bible? A Presbyterian theologian, R.C. Sproul, said, 'it's likely that my doubt is because of my lack of belief'. That's exactly what I thought, but how do I get more belief? That's what I want. Well, the Apostle Paul tells us; in the Phillips Translation of Romans 10:17, he says, 'Belief can only come from hearing the message, and the message is the Word of Christ'. --- In Paul's time, there was no option of "reading" the message, but in our time, we can read the message, and Paul would likely approve of us reading and hearing God's Word in order to gain more belief. Some of that Word, from 2 Corinthians 5:21, says 'God put our sin on Christ, and we are made right with God because of what Christ has done for us'. Because of that, we ARE forgiven.

President Lincoln

In mid-1865, soon after the Civil War was over, someone asked President Lincoln how he would treat the Southerners. He said, “I will treat them as if they had never been away”. The Rebels would be forgiven, and there would be no mention of the law or punishment for what they had done. The President’s declaration sounded much like God’s declaration that we are forgiven, as if we had never been away, and that God will not mention the law, our sins, or punishment for what we have done.

In Romans 3:21:24, Paul explains that forgiveness part of God’s work, saying, ‘God’s way of making people right has nothing to do with the law. God makes people right through their faith in Jesus. He does this for all who believe in Jesus. Everyone is the same. We have compiled a long and sorry record as sinners, utterly incapable of living the lives God wills us to live. But out of sheer generosity, he has put us in right standing with himself. It is a pure gift; God’s grace. He got us out of the mess we are in, and He did it by means of Jesus Christ’.

God loves every one of us even more than President Lincoln loved the United States, and the book of Joel (2:13) says ‘God is always ready to forgive and not punish us’. Because of that, and because of what Jesus did for us, we ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

Pastor John

Pastor John lived in a house right next to a river. One day he was home alone when the river flooded much faster than forecast, and he found himself outside in the water, hanging onto the roof of his house. A neighbor came by in a small power boat to help him ashore. But the pastor waved him off, saying ‘God will take care of me’. A bit later, an Army helicopter came along and hovered directly over him; a para-rescueman went down and motioned for the pastor to get into the harness, but the pastor shook his head and waved him off. A bit later, a large boat came by; a man on board swung a line with a life-preserver on it to the pastor, but the pastor pushed it away, and said, “I’ll be alright; my trust is in the Lord”. Awhile later, the pastor lost his grip on the roof; was swept down the river and drowned. He went straight to Heaven. After he got checked in, with absolutely nothing to unpack, the first thing he did was go to God and start asking why God did not take care of him during the flood. God looked at him, and said, ‘Good heavens, John; I sent you two motorboats and a helicopter’.

God had been trying to make it clear to Pastor John that he had gifts he could use to save himself, much like 1 Timothy 4:14 where Paul wrote, ‘do not neglect your gifts and you will save both yourself and others’. Isaiah 30:18 tells us, ‘the Lord longs to be gracious to us’, and he sent Jesus to earth, in the flesh, with a mission to forgive us. And because Jesus completed that mission and gave us the gift when he died on the cross, we ARE forgiven.

In the Bottom of the Ocean

Some of the best news in First John (1:9) says, "if we confess our sins and forgive other people, our heavenly father will forgive us, and purify us from all unrighteousness." It is also a comfort to know, from Isaiah (1:18), "though our sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow."

How can that be? Well, Micah 7:19 says it is because 'God has forgiven our wickedness, and thrown our sins into the depths of the sea'. He did not throw our sins into Lake Michigan; we could fill up Lake Michigan in a week or two. But God does not throw them there. He has thrown them into the bottom of the ocean, and parts of the ocean are almost a mile and a half deeper than Mount Everest is tall. So, all of our confessed sins, and the guilt that went with them, are down there on the bottom, never to be fished out.

God loves us and he will remember us when we come into his kingdom, just as clearly as he remembers the thief on the cross. Because of that and what Jesus did on that cross, we ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

A Clean Conscience

Hebrews 8:12 says, ‘God remembers our sins no more.’ Hebrews 9:14 summarizes that forgiveness in a short one-liner, telling us that ‘God has cleansed our conscience’. As far as God is concerned, we have a clean conscience. But after we confess our sins, we tend to hang on to all the guilt and remorse that God has already forgotten about. So, God lets us make the choice about having a clean conscience; if we do not have a clean conscience, that is our choice.

If we do not have a clean conscience, it may be because we have not truly confessed our sins; those sins may be too enjoyable or too profitable to confess. It is also possible we have not forgiven others; ‘if we forgive others when they sin against us, God will forgive us. But if we do not forgive others, God will not forgive us’ (Matthew 6:14-15). And, if we do not have a clean conscience, it could be because we have not forgiven ourselves. But since God “forgives all our wickedness” (Hebrews 8:12), it follows that he wants us to forgive our wickedness. A clean conscience; that’s what God wants for us.

Ephesians 2:8-9 says ‘it is by God’s grace that we have been saved through faith; it is a gift’, and God loves every one of us. Because of that, and because of what Jesus did for us, we ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

John Wesley

In the mid-18th century, a man was meeting with Reverend John Wesley (1703–1791), the great Methodist who preached over 40,000 sermons, and telling Wesley about how another man had treated him very, very sinfully. The man ended the story by saying 'I will never forgive him. Never!' Reverend Wesley looked at the man for a few seconds, and said “well, I hope you never commit a sin.” The Bible references Rev. Wesley most likely was using when he responded to the man were a couple of verses in Matthew (6:14-15), when Jesus was teaching the disciples. These are words of Jesus, speaking to his disciples and to us: "If you forgive other people when they sin against you, God will forgive you. But if you do not forgive other people their sins, God will not forgive your sins." Those verses are very straight forward, and establish a sequence; after we forgive others, God will forgive us. So, God expects us to forgive others before we go to him with our sins.

Psalm 103:12 says “God has removed our transgressions from us as far as the east is from the west.” That is a distance of infinite light years in one direction to infinite light years in the opposite direction. No one in the world can calculate or imagine how far that is. Because of Jesus, and God’s love, God considers our sins gone forever. We ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

John Bunyan

Do you ever feel like John Bunyan (1628-1688) on one of his bad days? John Bunyan was a great Baptist preacher in England. He preached for decades and wrote dozens of books. He was the man who wrote Pilgrim's Progress, one of the most popular Christian books of all time; over 250 million copies of it have been printed, and it is still in print. We might think a man like that would always have had an "A+" type of spiritual life, but Bunyan went through many terrible days. On his bad days, he thought he was absolutely unforgiveable; he thought he was an atheist, and possessed by the devil. To better understand John Bunyan, here are a few lines of his personal testimony: 'Sin and corruption would bubble out of my heart as water would bubble out of a fountain. As a young man, I had few equals for cursing, lying and blaspheming God. No one but the devil himself could equal me for wickedness, and I was the ringleader in all manners of vice and ungodliness. I grew more and more rebellious against God, and thought it would take a second crucifixion of Jesus to save just me alone'.

Bunyan never claimed to hear voices, but he did believe he received many clear messages from the devil, and from God. One message in particular, and one of the most meaningful, that he received from God made all the difference, and helped end Bunyan's relationship with the devil. God's message said, "I loved you before your sinning; I loved you while you were sinning; I love you still; and I will love you forever."

God loves us just as much as he loves John Bunyan, even when we feel unforgivable. And he will love us forever. Because of that, and because of Jesus, we are forgiven.

Bad News and Good News

Life is not fair. We do not get what we deserve. Thank you, Lord; we know we do not deserve to have our sins forgiven. Psalm 130:3 (ERV) tells us, “Lord, if you punished people for all their sins, no one would be left alive.” That is the bad news.

But we also know that the good news far outweighs the bad. First of all, in Romans 3:24, Paul tells us that ‘God treats us much better than we deserve’. Plus, 1 Peter 2:24 says, ‘Jesus has died and paid for our sins’. And in Acts (13:39), ‘everyone who believes in him is declared right with God’. That’s God, Jesus, and us the Bible is talking about.

The news can hardly get any better. Jesus has already paid for our sins. And all of us, who believe in him, receive forgiveness.

In John 15:9, Jesus tells us he ‘loves us just as much as God the Father loves him’, and Romans 8:37-39 reminds us that ‘nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from that love’. It is God’s grace; it is a gift, and the Bible tells us so, in Ephesians 2:8. Because of that, and because of what Jesus did about 3 o’clock that afternoon 2,000 years ago, we ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

There Is No List

Some of the best news in the Bible is Isaiah 43:25, 'God has forgiven our sins, and remembers them no more'. Ephesians 4:32 ties into that and says, 'God's forgiveness should encourage us to be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as God has forgiven us'. Apparently, we are supposed to pay it forward, forgive our parents, forgive our siblings, forgive our spouse, forgive our children, and forgive each other.

That's 5 lists we could make of those we might need to forgive from time to time. But let's throw them all into one list; how many people are on your list to forgive? Like most of you, I hope, I do not have anyone on my list. That number might change tonight, but right now, I have zero people on my list.

However, Ephesians did not mention forgiving our own selves. That was not on the list. If we made a list of all our sins we would like to remember no more, it would be a long list. It sounds like that is the list we need to work on. But let us go back to Isaiah and that wonderful line that says 'God remembers our sins no more'. That sounds like if God looks at our private, secret lists, he sees a blank page. And apparently, that's the way he wants it; God does not want to recall, remember, or remind us of our sins, and he does not want us wasting time to remember them.

We may have a secret list numbered from 1 to a 100, but because of Jesus, God has deleted everything on that list. Maybe that explains why Ephesians does not mention a list; God does not want a list. There is no list. Because of that, and because of what Jesus did, we are forgiven.

Martin Luther

As a young man, Martin Luther (1483-1546) was a sinful, “spiritually depressed”, guilty feeling person. However, he could have bought indulgences from the Catholic Church, pieces of paper, which would have pardoned him of his sins. But the idea of the church selling forgiveness did not sound truthful to him. So he came up with his own techniques. He kept a written list of his sins and went to confession several times every day. At night, he would whip himself until he bled, and sometimes skip supper and sleep outdoors in the snow to show God how serious he was about being forgiven. But those techniques did not work.

Then, in the year 1515, Romans 1:17, “The righteous shall live by faith”, got his full attention. He knew he was not righteous, but he came to realize that with the gift of God's declared righteousness, all he needed was faith. Two years later, in October 1517, he and that verse started the Protestant Reformation. However, his days of depression were not over. At times, he very much doubted his faith and thought God had turned his back on him; he thought he would die soon and go straight to Hell. In trying to climb out of that pit, he tried things all across the spectrum, from meditation to getting very, very drunk. Then, in his 45th year, thinking he had no faith at all, he wrote that great hymn of faith, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”. He later gave credit to the singing of that hymn and others, plus the practice of studying God's Word and helping his neighbors, for helping him out of the pit and to fully believe that God had forgiven him. – It worked for Luther, and it should work for us. We ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

Fix Your Thoughts

It sounds sensible that we would like to reduce the number of sins we need to confess when we go one-on-one with God, but that is a problem. To re-state the problem, here is a short story from various verses in Romans and Ephesians: ‘We love God’s law with all our hearts. But there is another power within us that is at war with our minds. This power makes us a slave to the sin in us. When we want to do good, evil is right there with us’ (Romans 7:21-23). ‘When our sinful nature controls our minds, we should let the Spirit change our way of thinking’ (Romans 8:6, Ephesians 4:23). But how do we change our way of thinking, and replace our sinful, self-destructive thoughts with healthy, spiritual thoughts?

At some alcohol and drug rehab centers, it is against policy for the students to discuss old war stories of their wild, addicted and sinful days; ‘do not bring them up; do not let your minds dwell on those sinful times’. The Biblical base for that policy is Proverbs 4:23, which says “Be careful how you think; your life is shaped by your thoughts.” Apparently, the principle of replacement, replacing unhealthy or sinful thoughts with wholesome and spiritual thoughts, is the key. And Philippians 4:8 gives us the procedure; it says, ‘Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise’. That is the procedure.

God loves every one of us, and he too must not like to think of our sinful ways, because in Isaiah 43:25, he says, ‘I will blot out your sins for my own sake and will never think of them again’. Because of that, and because of Jesus, we ARE forgiven.

Man's Greatest Need

First Corinthians (15:3) and First Peter (3:18) say that the Bible has 'passed on to us what is most important, that Christ died for our sins'; it says, 'Jesus suffered for all of us, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God'. The Reverend Billy Graham paraphrased those verses and wrote that 'forgiveness is #1 on the list of man's greatest needs'. Someone else once wrote a quote that agrees with Reverend Graham, and if you research the quote on the Internet, you can find the names of at least 4 people who have been given credit for writing it. So, I do not know who wrote it but the quote helps explain our greatest need:

*If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator.
If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist.
If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist.
If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer.
But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior, Jesus.
(Unknown)*

Romans 3:10 tells us that 'not even one of us is righteous', but Galatians 1:4 tells us that 'Jesus gave his life for our sins, just as God planned, in order to rescue us from this evil world'. Because of that, we are forgiven. All thanks be to God.

The Chief of Sinners

We are not the only people to sometimes think we are unforgiveable. John Bunyan (1628-1688), the great Baptist preacher in England who wrote Pilgrim's Progress, sometimes believed he was absolutely unforgivable. At times, he considered himself one of the most notorious of sinners; he thought he was an atheist, and possessed by the devil.

One day, Reverend Bunyan came across 1 Timothy 1:15, where the Apostle Paul claimed to be the "chief of sinners". Bunyan thought he was a worse sinner than Paul, so he claimed that title of "chief sinner" for himself. On another day, he read Romans 5:20, 'where sin abounds, grace abounds even more'. Then, after coming to believe that he could not out-sin God's grace, he wrote about his experiences, in Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners and other chronicles. He claimed that 'the riches of Divine grace and mercy had been given to the greatest of the world's sinners', even those whose conduct enabled them to be called 'Satan's colonels and captains, the leaders of the devil's people'. Rev. Bunyan also warned us, 'tis a sin to despair before one sets foot into hell; only fools despair for cornbread in a land full of corn; only fools despair for mercy from our God who is full of mercy'.

God loves every one of us just as much as he loves his disciple John Bunyan, and Bunyan reminds us that 'God never gives up on us. Even if our sins abound up to our neck, God's grace abounds even higher'. Because of that, we ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

Judgment Day

Do you ever wonder what Judgment Day will be like? Apparently not everyone will be there, but Romans 14:10 and 2nd Corinthians 5:10 tell us that we believers will be there. We do not know what it will be like, but we believe we know what it will not be like. Compared to a day of grammar school, it will not be like a scary visit to the principal's office. There will be no questions about our misdeeds and sins, no punishment for our sins, and no mention of our sins. God will already have forgiven those sins, and Hebrews 8:12 says he will never bring them up again. Plus, Matthew 16:27 says Jesus 'will reward us, according to our works'.

So instead of Judgment Day being like a scary trip to the principal's office, it may be like a magical last day of grammar school, when our moms picked us up early, and after seeing our report cards that showed we had been promoted, they took us to the circus to celebrate. Everyone with good grades in conduct got snow cones; those with good conduct and straight A's, got snow cones and cotton candy. Those with good conduct, straight A's and perfect attendance, and who had helped the teacher more than most, got snow cones, cotton candy, candy apples and some great toys. We also saw a lot of our favorite cousins, friends and many others who had finished grammar school before us. It was like a big reunion; it was a perfect day, and Judgment Day may be even better.

Psalm 23:6 says 'goodness and mercy shall follow us, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever'. He and Jesus have already dealt with our sins, and we ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

Fill In The Blank

Imagine that you are with 2 or 3 of your all-time closest friends, people you would share almost any thought with, and you're in the process of getting to know each other even better. It is your turn to complete a sentence by filling in the blank space at the end. The sentence is, 'I could forgive my spouse or anyone of anything, except for "(fill in the blank)". How would we fill in the blank; what would we be tempted to put in it? Maybe the '10 Commandments', maybe just some of the 10, maybe 1 or 2 of the worst sins we can imagine? There may be some terrible sins we want to put in that blank, but if we put any of them in the blank, Jesus says we are disqualifying ourselves from God's forgiveness.

In Matthew 6:15, Jesus says, "if you do not forgive others, God will not forgive you". And in Mark 11, "if we hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that God may also forgive us." And in the Lord's Prayer, we pray for 'God to forgive us in the same way we have forgiven others'.

Have you ever ordered something online, and then got an email back, saying that the item is on back-order and not available right now? Similarly, it sounds like Jesus is telling us that God's forgiveness is on back-order if we have not forgiven others. --- CS Lewis summarized what we try to remind each other of; he said, "Being a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God forgives the inexcusable in us."

John 17:23 tells us that 'God loves us in the same way he loves Jesus'. Because of that, and because of what Jesus did, and because we Christians have forgiving hearts, we ARE forgiven.

Bad Company

I grew up on a farm in Sampson County, NC and my mother's name was Isabell. One day when I was a little boy, she walked down the road to another farm to visit and console a friend whose son had just been sent to jail for some offense I do not remember. Trying to make the woman feel better, momma said her son 'probably was just running around with bad company'. But the woman said, 'Isabell, you know as good as I do, he's in bad company when he's by himself'.

A few years later, when I started high school, there were certain people my parents told me not to associate with because they were bad company. Assuming my parents' judgment was accurate, there is Biblical justification for what they told me; 1 Corinthians 15:33 says, 'Do not be misled; bad company corrupts good character'. But even if my parents' judgment was accurate, Romans 2:1 says 'there is no excuse for passing judgment on others', and the books of Matthew and Luke clearly say, "do not judge others". On top of all that, Romans 7:18 tells us that 'nothing good dwells in any of us'. So, like that farm-boy who lived down the road, each of us is also in bad company when we are by ourselves.

But what should we do about bad company? Galatians 6:1 gives us some help; it says 'If someone in your group goes wrong, you who are spiritual must forgivingly and gently help him, saving your critical comments for yourself; but be careful, so that you are not tempted to do wrong also'.

God knows we are bad company, but he 'is patient and kind to us because he loves us with a love that will last forever' (Isaiah 43:24). Because of that and because of Jesus, we ARE forgiven.

The Forgiver

Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) said, “our first sin was preferring our will to the will of God, so all sin, at its root, is against God”. Scripture explains to us how to go about gaining God’s forgiveness through faith. However, if we have faith, Aquinas wrote, ‘no explanation of forgiveness is necessary; but to one without faith, no explanation is possible’. With similar thoughts, Rev. Billy Graham said, ‘there are things in the Bible I do not understand, but I believe it’. Apparently, we’re supposed to be like Rev. Graham and have the faith to believe the following without further instructions or commentary: Jesus said, ‘I have not come to call those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners and need to repent’ (Luke 5:32). ‘And I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’ (Luke 5:24). ‘Jesus is the one whom God exalted to his right hand, to grant forgiveness of our sins’ (Acts 5:31), and ‘the sins of us who are God’s children have been forgiven through Jesus, and everyone who believes in him is declared right with God’ (Luke 13:38-39). ‘This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus’ (Romans 3:22), and ‘we have forgiveness of sins because of God’s grace’ (Ephesians 1:7).

Jesus knows ours sins are synonymous with evil, but Ephesians 3:19 says ‘the love of Jesus surpasses all human knowledge’, and we sinful children of God ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

A Wretch Like Me

“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!” But why would God save a wretch like me? John Newton, the man who wrote that great hymn, certainly may have asked that question. He spent many years believing he was a wretch. He started going to sea when he was 11 years old; he was forced into the Royal Navy as a teenager, where he behaved very poorly, became depressed, and considered suicide. Even the Navy gave up on him; he was discharged to a slave ship, and served in the slave trade for several years.

He recorded some of his experiences, writing ‘I was an infidel; I made it my study to tempt and seduce others; I was corrupt, and immoral, and thought my sins were too great to be forgiven’. But God saved him; he became a priest, and wrote almost 300 Christian hymns. But why would God save a wretch like John Newton, and wretches like us?

A Christian writer named Sarah Limardo uses Isaiah 43:25 and Ephesians 2:8-9 to answer that question: ‘God’s saving us is not about us, or how wretched we are; it is about God; it is about God’s unconditional love. He does it for his own sake. He does it because he wants us near to him. It was by grace we were saved. It was a pure gift of God’.

Homer, the Greek poet, had us figured out 3,000 years ago when he said “We men are wretched things”. God knows how wretched we are, but he loves us so much ‘he sent his only Son into this world to save us’ (John 3:16). Because of that, and because of what Jesus did for us that afternoon 2,000 years ago, we ARE forgiven. All thanks, be to God.

Karl Barth

Dr. Karl Barth (1886-1968) was a German, and considered by many as the greatest Protestant theologian of the 20th Century. In 1934, in the city of Barmen, he was the main author of the Barmen Declaration, which reaffirmed the sovereignty of God, and rejected the NAZI influence on German Christianity. The NAZIs had made the church subservient to the state, and were using NAZI ideology in the church. When the declaration was finished, Dr. Barth mailed it straight to Hitler. It may have had little effect upon Hitler, but the declaration has far out-lived him, and is now in the Presbyterian Book of Confessions, the things which we in PC(USA) confess to believe and support.

Another of Dr. Barth's famous works was Church Dogmatics, 13 volumes about Christian theology and doctrine. It was over 6 million words long, about 8 times as many words as in the King James Bible. After he finished that enormous work, someone asked him, 'what is the greatest thought you ever had?' Dr. Barth then boiled down millions of words into 12 short words, and said, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so". Regarding God's forgiveness, Dr. Barth said, "as true God, Jesus was the Judge who was judged in our place, taking our sin and destroying it, so that we are now forgiven".

God loves every one of us just as much as he loves Dr. Karl Barth, and Acts 10:43 says "Everyone who believes in Jesus will have their sins forgiven in his name." All thanks be to God.

St Augustine

Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430) was a Roman and a Christian theologian in North Africa. Many Protestants, including Presbyterians, consider him to be one of the fathers of the Protestant Reformation because of his teachings on salvation and grace, which helped the early Christians better understand God's forgiveness. On many lists, including Martin Luther's, Augustine is the third-most important man in Christianity, right after the Apostle Paul and Jesus.

In St. Augustine's early days, baptism was seen by many Christians as a sacrament that gave God's forgiveness for only those sins up to that point in time. If you sinned after Baptism, you were considered to be in deep trouble. So, it was common to delay baptism as long as possible, and to believe that the ideal time and place to be baptized was on your death bed, your final day, your final hour, when you would have very few sins left over to worry about. That would be a hard day to schedule. But St. Augustine helped change attitudes by preaching that baptism was provided "for the sake of all sins." He said 'delaying baptism was like letting a very sick man get sicker and sicker before calling for help'.

God loves every one of us as much as he loves St. Augustine, and Colossians 2:13 tells us, 'God gave us new life together with Christ and forgave all our sins', past, present and future. All thanks be to God.

Charles Spurgeon

Reverend Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) was considered a spiritual giant. He was a Baptist in England and ranks as one of the greatest preachers of all time. But he went through some hard years. He had very little schooling; never went to college and never went to seminary. He suffered from poor health and severe depression. He said he would sometimes cry by the hour, like a small child, and many of those times his wife thought he might never preach again. But until he died at age 57, he preached up to 13 times a week for almost 40 years, to an estimated 10 million people. He was the first person ever to preach to over 20,000 at one service.

He was also famous for sticking to the Word of the Bible, for preaching God's forgiveness, and helping people better understand the King James Version. But he had his critics. Another famous preacher at that time criticized him once for still teaching "first century theology". Rev. Spurgeon smiled at that criticism, and said it was the highest compliment he ever received. --- In his later years, an interviewer asked him if he could define his theology. Rev. Spurgeon reacted like he had answered that question many, many times before. He said my theology is, "JESUS DIED -- FOR ME".

1 Peter 3:18 confirms Rev. Spurgeon's theology, 'Christ himself died for us', which means our sins ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

Albert Schweitzer

Dr. Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) once wrote, “do not let Sunday be taken from you; if your soul has no Sunday, it becomes an orphan”. Schweitzer was many things besides physician, missionary, hospital builder, philosopher, and Nobel Prize winner. He was a preacher, prominent organist, WW I POW, and a theologian. As a theologian, he said, ‘it is not necessary to Jesus that we understand all the theory behind his crucifixion and our forgiveness, if we believe in his death.’ He added, ‘if a difficulty arises in regard to Holy Scripture and we cannot solve it, we must just leave it alone. We do not have to completely understand all of that’. So when a trained theologian, with an estimated IQ between 160 and 180, implies he does not understand some of the Bible, we should not be embarrassed when there are parts of the Bible we do not understand.

But, Dr. Schweitzer preached, ‘we should understand the doctrine of Jesus on forgiveness’. He said that doctrine is, “You shall be pardoned if you pardon”, and Jesus recalls it to us every time we pray his prayer, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us” (Matthew 6:12). Schweitzer wrote, ‘If we do not forgive everyone, we will be acting as if we are not guilty in the same ways’, and ‘we must forgive quietly and unostentatiously’. In general, he said ‘we will not succeed in forgiving fully, be if we really try to live by that doctrine of Jesus, it will be a triumph for our soul’.

Proverbs 3:5 tells us, ‘Trust in the Lord with all our heart, and do not rely on our own understanding’. So, it is that trust and faith in the Lord, not our understanding, that convinces us we are forgiven. All thanks be to God.

Richard Hooker

Richard Hooker (1554–1600) was a priest in the Church of England and considered one of the most brilliant theologians of the sixteenth century. He was well educated at Oxford, but humble enough to acknowledge that we on earth know little to nothing concerning things that are done in heaven or how God can bring good out of evil. But overall, he believed that the first will of God is that “all” people should be saved. One of his favorite Bible verses was John 3:17, “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him”. Another of his favorites was 1 Timothy 4:10, ‘we set our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all people’. Hooker said ‘we cannot do anything to earn God’s redemption and forgiveness. We cannot do penance or build up merit to qualify for God’s blessings. Christ did it all.’ Hooker explained that ‘God does not justify the believing man because of his worthy belief, but because of the worthiness in Jesus who is believed’. Hooker thought that Hebrews 9:12 and 10:11-14 made it clear that ‘sacrifices by humans could never take away our sins’, but the one sacrifice by Jesus ‘obtained eternal redemption for every one of us’.

Richard Hooker claimed full belief in the doctrine of justification by faith, but he also said that those who do not understand the doctrine may nevertheless be saved by it. And Ephesians 1:7 assures us, ‘because of God’s rich grace, we have forgiveness of our sins’. All thanks be to God.

Hannah More

Almost 250 years ago, Hannah More (1745-1833) was standing in the back of her church in England. She was 28 years old, waiting to walk down the aisle and be married for the first time. After several very long minutes, she started crying, and her father dismissed the crowd. She had been jilted. She had been jilted for the third time; all three times by the same man. Three times was her limit; she decided she would never marry. She decided she would become a Christian teacher and maybe a writer.

In figuring out where to start her work, Hannah got one of her sisters to help her canvas every house in the farming town of Cheddar. Among the 2,000 people there, they found only one Bible and no clergy; not a single preacher. After meditating and praying about that situation, she became a pioneer in developing Sunday Schools in the country towns of southern England. She spent decades establishing those schools and teaching about God's salvation and forgiveness, along with teaching the poor and ignorant how to read.

She was an enthusiastic teacher, but she believed it was a waste of time to teach people how to read if they were not going to read the Bible. She said, 'We do not need to know how to read if we're not going read the Bible'. That was part of her legacy.

God loves every one of us just as much as he loves the incredible Hannah More. And Jeremiah 31:3 says, 'He loves us with a love that continues forever'. Because of that, and because Jesus has already paid for our sins, we ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

Catherine Booth

The Salvation Army is very much about God's forgiveness, and its specific mission is to bring salvation to the poor. It is a Protestant church; it is one of the greatest charities in all of Scotland and serves in over 120 other countries. The woman known as "The Mother" of that Army was Catherine Booth (1829-1890). By the time she was 12 years old, she had read the entire King James Bible eight times. Later, she married a preacher, and although she was very shy and reserved, she came to believe that God also called her to preach. However, very few women were permitted to preach in her time. She strongly disagreed with the policy of keeping women out of the pulpit and said, 'it is a false interpretation of the Bible, it is a big loss to the church, and a huge dishonor to God'. So, she started preaching, and became a very popular and powerful preacher, all while bearing and raising 8 children.

Mrs. Booth was very straight forward, and could be a bit feisty if need be. One day, after preaching a sermon, she was introduced to an older couple. The husband quickly pointed out to her that 'Paul's first letter to the Corinthians says women should remain silent in the churches'. Mrs. Booth responded by saying, 'yes, it does say that, but I am not a Corinthian'. Then, while looking at the wife and the husband, she said 'that very same epistle, 1st Corinthians, in chapter seven, says, 'it would have been better for you two people not to marry'. So she kept preaching, and brought salvation to thousands of people.

Psalm 18:19, says 'God saves us because he delights in us'. Because of that, and because Jesus died on the cross for us, we ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

Ernest Gordon

Ernest Gordon (1916-2002) was an agnostic and a 25 year-old Scottish soldier when he was captured by the Japanese in WW II. He was thrown into a brutal POW camp and spent 3 years doing slave labor on the Burma railway, a project which cost the lives of 13,000 Allied POWs. He wrote that 'the Japanese treated the POWs like poorly treated animals and the POWs initially reacted like animals, abiding by the law of the jungle, the survival of the fittest, where the weak were trampled upon, where the sick were ignored or resented, and the dead were forgotten'. Then one afternoon at quitting time, during a routine tool inventory, a digging crew was missing a shovel. The Japanese guard in charge went berserk and threatened to kill the entire crew if the guilty man did not step forward. No one doubted that the guard might carry out the threat, but no one moved. After the guard repeated the threat and appeared on the verge of shooting the entire crew, one man stepped forward. Sure enough, the guard beat him to death. The remainder of the crew picked up the dead soldier, and were marched back to camp. Then, prior to entering the compound, a final tool check showed no missing shovels; the first tool check had been a miscount.

Gordon said 'word of the Christ-like sacrifice by that one soldier spread through camp, and the entire camp started a transformation into a cooperative, supportive, caring group'. Even some of the Japanese were affected. The situation became a great example of Romans 8:28, 'that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him'. Gordon himself became a Christian and conducted worship services for the POWs. After the war, he went to seminary, preached in many places, and served 26 years as the Dean of the Chapel at Princeton University. Gordon said, 'when the camp was liberated in late August 1945, the self-sacrifice of that one soldier had helped the many others create a legacy of 'no more hatred; what we need is forgiveness'.

Sam Houston

General Sam Houston (1793-1863) was known as the "the hero of Texas", and was the Texas governor right before the Civil War. He was a rough man, and a heavy drinker. He was not an easy person to be around. He had a terrible temper, and was known to beat people up if they criticized him. Then, for his third marriage, when he was 47 years old, he married a 21 year-old woman named Margaret. Margaret apparently walked the perfect line between nagging him and praising him, and she was a great influence on him. It took 14 years and 6 children together, but she got him to stop drinking and to convert to the Baptist Church. So when he was 61 years old, he was baptized by outdoor immersion at a little place called Rocky Creek. Later that day, the preacher would say, 'General, all your sins have been washed away', and the General said, 'well, may God help those poor little fish in Rocky Creek'. But God did not leave those sins in Rocky Creek. In Micah 7:19 and Hebrews 8:12, the Bible says 'God threw those sins into the bottom of the deepest part of the ocean', and 'he will never bring them back up; he will not even remember them'. -- And God has done the very same thing for us.

The Law of Moses could not save us, but we believe in Jesus, and Titus 3:5 says 'God saved us (including General Houston) not because of the righteous things we have done, but because of God's mercy'. We ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

Charles Simeon

Charles Simeon (1759-1836) claimed to be a terrible sinner. Around 1780, when he was attending the University of Cambridge, he said he was just as spiritually fit as the Devil himself. He said if he had children, it might be better for them to be dead than to know about all of his sins. Later, he became completely overwhelmed with the miracle of God's grace and forgiveness. He became ordained, and was appointed head pastor at Holy Trinity Church. Holy Trinity was, and still is, a large, prestigious church in Cambridge, almost next door to the University. The congregation had wanted their popular assistant pastor to get the head pastor job, but the Bishop overruled them. So, Rev. Simeon was resented as soon as he walked in the door at Holy Trinity. To make matters worse, the congregation despised the way he preached. They liked entertaining sermons, and his were not very entertaining; they contained 'too much Bible stuff' and were 'too evangelistic' for them. So within just a few weeks, they stopped letting him preach the second service on Sundays, which was the main service. They had the assistant, and a few others, preach the second service, and that crazy situation went on for a little over 10 years. Rev. Simeon preached the first service, but most of the congregation's pew-holders refused to attend the first service, So, when Simeon preached, almost all the pews were empty. It was very humiliating, but humiliation did not seem to bother Rev. Simeon. He said humiliation fit right in with his lifetime purpose to humble the sinner, especially in humbling himself. In accomplishing that purpose, he gradually won the congregation over, and served and preached at Holy Trinity for 54 years. He held seminars for the divinity students at the University, and ended up teaching over 1,000 future pastors how to preach. By the time he lay on his death bed, at age 77, he was one of the most respected and most popular preachers in all of England, and still overwhelmed with the miracle of God's grace and forgiveness.

John Wycliffe

John Wycliffe (1328-1384) was born in England. He grew up to be a theologian at the University of Oxford, and lived about 100 years before the invention of the printing press. In his time, almost every Bible in England was in Latin and that was exactly the way the Catholic Church of England wanted it. Most people could not read Latin, and the Pope thought it would be confusing and dangerous for ordinary people, especially women, to read the Bible. But Rev. Wycliffe believed every Christian should have access to the Bible, so he started work on the first English translation.

Meanwhile, the Church declared it illegal to possess or read an English Bible, and charged Wycliffe with heresy. Rev. Wycliffe finished his translation of the New Testament and then died in his sleep before he could finish the Old Testament, and before he was convicted of heresy.

But, in 1428, over 40 years after Wycliffe died, Pope Martin V convicted him of heresy for the acts of “translating and disseminating the first English Bible”. Then, in a huge ceremony, Wycliffe’s coffin was dug up from inside the Church of St Mary. His body was pulled out and chained to a stake next to the River Swift. A Bishop cursed the body, had the body burned, and threw the ashes into the river. But Wycliffe’s followers and many scribes secretly carried on, and hand-wrote and distributed hundreds of Bibles throughout England.

‘The Lord is on our side’ (Psalm 118:6) and John Wycliffe’s side. Because of that, we can now read for ourselves that ‘Christ made us free by his blood sacrifice, and because of God’s rich grace, we ARE forgiven’. (Ephesians 1:7). All thanks be to God.

George MacDonald

The great English author C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) wrote over 30 books and said he never wrote one in which he did not quote George MacDonald (1824-1905). Lewis considered MacDonald his master and said he hardly knew any other writer who seemed more Christ-like. In his own autobiography, Lewis described how MacDonald's writings prompted Lewis's conversion from skepticism to Christianity.

George MacDonald was born in Scotland and later went to the University of Aberdeen. But he dropped out of Aberdeen, reportedly because he had spent all his money in bars and brothels. He went through some gloom and depression, but he rebounded, decided his calling was the ministry, and graduated from divinity school when he was 26. He especially liked and believed 1 Timothy 4, "we believe in the living God, who is the Savior of all people".

MacDonald took a church in 1851, but the elders took a dislike to his preaching. They barely tolerated him when he preached that "all men and women are children of God simply through being born, not because of any special conversion or personal merit". When MacDonald used 1 Timothy 4 as support to preach that "even heathens would one day be saved", the elders became severely upset and fired him. That made him unemployable, and he was compelled to become a writer to spread the message of "God's eternal love". He said 'our sins put us on a road away from that loving God, but whether we realize it or not, because of God's forgiveness, we all are on a road leading back to him, and the Bible makes up the sign posts along that road'. --- Our main job is to follow the sign posts. And as George MacDonald reminded Christians long ago, eternity has already begun, and we ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

Constantine the Great

The Great Fire of Rome happened in July of 64 AD; it burned for nine days and destroyed two-thirds of the city. Emperor Nero blamed the fire on the Christians, which resulted in intermittent persecutions of the Christians for 250 years. But then, in the year 313, Co-Emperors Constantine the Great (272-337) and Licinius issued the Edict of Milan which established religious toleration and stopped the persecutions. Later, Constantine became the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity, a turning point for Christian history. Part of his personal motto was, “One God, one Lord, one faith, one church”, but he came to realize there were great divisions in the “one church”. So, in 325 AD, to settle the differences, he convened the First Council of Nicaea and told the estimated 300 Christian bishops and deacons they ‘had to come to agreement on what they believed because division in the church was worse than war’. The Council responded by establishing the Nicene Creed, which is a longer and more detailed version of the Apostle’s Creed. Both of are now in the PC(USA) Book of Confessions, affirming our faith and proclaiming what we believe.

However, Constantine himself had issues with Christian baptism and God’s forgiveness. He and many others believed baptism gave God’s forgiveness for only those sins previously committed and that sins committed after baptism would never be forgiven. So, he thought the ideal time to be baptized was on his death bed, when there would be very few sins left over to worry about; his timing was great, and he was baptized as he lay dying. But 100 years later, due to better understanding of Colossians 2:13-14 (‘God nailed our debts to the cross and forgave all our sins’), baptism was considered a Christian sacrament that provided forgiveness for all past, present, and future sins. All thanks be to God.

Napoleon

In France, supposedly in the year 1805, a year after Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) first came to power, a young Frenchman was scheduled to be executed. About that same time, the man's mother happened to read Hebrews 4:16, which says 'boldly approach the throne to find mercy'. Then, she somehow got an audience with Napoleon, and boldly pleaded that her son be pardoned. Napoleon appeared sympathetic, but explained that this was her son's second major offense, and that standard French justice called for the death penalty.

The woman said, 'I am not asking for justice; I am asking for mercy'. Napoleon flared up a bit and said, 'but he does not deserve mercy'. The mother said, 'yes sir, I know; it would not be mercy if he deserved it, and your mercy is all I am asking for'. The woman's logic apparently impressed Napoleon, and he pardoned her son. Napoleon's mercy was a gift.

The Good News for us is that God's mercy works the same way. God's mercy took the justice we deserved and the punishment we deserved completely off the table, and he pardoned our sins. We ARE forgiven. And Ephesians 2:4, 8 sums it up; it says, 'God is full of mercy, and it was a gift from God that we have been forgiven and saved'. A Gift. All thanks be to God.

Saint Olga

Dr. Albert Schweitzer said, “A woman does not have to be an angel in order to be a saint”. A great historical example of that was Princess Olga of Kiev (903-969), the first woman ruler of what is now much of Russia. Olga inherited the throne in the year 945 after a very large tribe of pagans killed her husband. The pagans then proposed that it would be profitable for her and her country if she would marry the pagan ruler. Olga sent word of agreement, and suggested that the pagans send as much of their leadership as possible to meet with her, and serve as her escort to help ensure the full support of her people. The pagans agreed and sent almost all of their many chieftains to her palace estate. When the chieftains arrived, Olga gave them a warm welcome and invited them to refresh and clean up in her large bathhouse. After they entered, she locked the doors from the outside and set fire to the building. Soon thereafter, she led an attack into pagan country, took over their territory, and obliterated their army, whose leaders were back in the bathhouse. Years later, she asked for God’s forgiveness, was saved, baptized, and became the very first Russian ruler to convert to Christianity. She then started spreading Christianity in her country, built churches and cathedrals, and was later canonized as the first Russian saint of the Orthodox Church. She was not an angel, but she was a saint.

God may have been angry about some of the things Olga did, but Micah 7:18-19 and 1 John 1:9 say, ‘God does not retain his anger, because he delights in mercy; he will have compassion on us; he will forgive us, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness’. Saint Olga was forgiven, and we are forgiven. All thanks be to God.

John Hus

Christian theologians credit Martin Luther (1483-1546) with starting the Protestant Reformation in 1517. However, little-known John Hus (1372-1415), who Luther referred to as his “teacher”, provided many key ideas of the Reformation and paid a terrible price for his efforts.

John Hus was a Czech priest who preached in his native language to 3,000+ congregants at the Bethlehem Chapel in the huge city of Prague an estimated 3,500 times. He was a great preacher, but one reason his services were so popular was because Bethlehem Chapel was the only place in the city where worship services could legally be conducted in the Czech language. All other city-wide worship services were conducted in Latin, which was the way the Pope wanted it, and which ordinary people had little understanding of. Consequently, the Roman Church considered Hus a radical, and even more so when he began preaching against indulgences and attacking the idea that the Pope could pardon sins. Hus claimed that everyone should be permitted to read the Bible in their own language and that the power of the church should be limited to spiritual matters. Eventually, the authorities closed Bethlehem Chapel, excommunicated Hus, indicted him with over 30 articles of heresy, and put him in prison and on trial. He was convicted of the heresy articles, including the “encouragement of congregational singing”, and burned at the stake when he was 43 years old. In his dying words, he said, “in 100 years, God will raise up a man whose calls for reform cannot be suppressed”. Almost exactly 100 years later, Martin Luther fulfilled that prophecy. --- How could John Hus have known?

By preaching the Biblical themes “that salvation comes by faith in Jesus and that God alone can forgive sins”, John Hus and his followers like Martin Luther have helped millions come to believe that we ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

Isacc Watts

Isacc Watts (1674-1748) was born prematurely in England and grew up to be a brilliant preacher and poet. By the time he was 7 years old, he had a habit of speaking in rhyme, which became very annoying to his parents. Until his time, much of the so-called church singing was done by chanting the Psalms straight out of the Bible. Watts disliked the chanting, and took advantage of his poetic talents to become known as the “Father of the English Hymn”. But he was never without health problems. By age 30, he was an invalid, and for the last 45 years of his life, he was sick enough to not do anything. But that was when he did much of his work, preaching countless sermons, teaching other preachers how to preach, writing almost 800 hymns and many Christian books. He had one streak where for 222 weeks, he prepared a new hymn for each Sunday’s worship service. He paraphrased almost all the Psalms into poetic hymns, which were often referred to as “sermons in rhyme”. But his paraphrasing was considered ‘straying from the Word of the Bible’ by many people, and caused a lot of controversy.

In America, 41 years after Rev. Watts died, the Rev. Adam Rankin rode horse-back all the way from his home in Kentucky to Philadelphia to petition the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church to stick with the book of Psalms and not adopt any of the Watts hymns into worship services. Fortunately for us, the General Assembly of 1789 disagreed with Rev. Rankin, and today we have 14 Isacc Watts hymns in our Presbyterian hymnal.

As written in one of the Watts hymns, we are grateful that “Christ, the great redeemer, died for human creatures’ sin”, and we ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

William Tyndale

John Wycliffe (1328-1384) was the first person to translate the Bible into English from Latin. He was followed by William Tyndale (1494-1536), who had the advantage of a printing press, and was the first person to translate and print the Bible into English from its original Greek and Hebrew. But to give ordinary people access to the word of God outraged the church establishment in England. Wycliffe died of natural causes, but 44 years after he died, he was convicted of heresy and his body was dug up and burned at the stake for “translating and disseminating the first English Bible”.

Tyndale was an Oxford-educated ordained priest. In 1523 he went to London and petitioned the Bishop for permission to make an English translation of the Bible. The Bishop refused, reminding Tyndale that the church had declared it “heretical to own or read an English written Bible”. Tyndale’s response was, ‘if God spares my life a few more years, every farm boy in England will know more of the scriptures than the Pope’; he then went into exile in Germany where he accomplished his translation. Later, he smuggled 6,000 copies of the translated New Testament into England, and became a hunted man. He was caught, sent to prison, tried, convicted, executed, and his dead body was burned at the stake for (1) ‘translating the Bible into English’ and (2) ‘for claiming that the mercy offered in the gospel was enough for salvation’. A huge cost it was for helping spread God’s Good News. Today, Tyndale’s original translation makes up ‘90% of the King James Version’.

Because of William Tyndale and many others, we can now read and believe for ourselves that ‘God has swept our sins away like a cloud, and that he will never remind us of them again’ (Isaiah 44:22). We ARE forgiven. All thanks be to God.

Those in Heaven

Colossians 2:13-14 tells us 'we broke God's laws, and we owed a debt, but God in Heaven took that debt, nailed it to the cross, and forgave us of all our sins'. It would be difficult to be more inclusive than that. God in Heaven has forgiven us, but how about the others in heaven; have they forgiven us? Are they even aware of us and the terrible things we've done? --- Part of Hebrews 12:1 says, 'we are surrounded by a huge cloud of witnesses'. Christian theologians say that 'cloud of witnesses' verse refers to those in heaven; they're watching us, and they're pulling for us as we try to live our lives of faith. They have none of our earthly limitations, and they know what we are doing'. So, they are aware of us, and they know exactly what we've been up to. But have they forgiven us?

In late 2012, after my wife Lynn died in the 49th year of our married life, I was doubting and wondering if she had forgiven me for the wicked things I never quite got around to telling her about. Rev. Charles Stanley, the famous Baptist, has said that 'in heaven, even our secret sins vanish'; they disappear. But I needed to hear more than that. --- Then, our pastor at the time assured me that Lynn had forgiven me. The pastor explained that 'heaven would not be heaven if those up there were fretting and resenting the things we've done'. Some of the Biblical support for what he told me comes from James 6:14-15 and Revelations 21:4 which say, 'if they forgive the sins of others, God in heaven will forgive them, and there will be no sorrow, crying, or pain in heaven'. So, by God's Word, and through the process of getting into heaven, those who are there have already forgiven us. And it is a gift, very much like the gift of God's forgiveness. All thanks be to God.

A CHRISTIAN DIED TODAY

A Christian died today, but she was 'not troubled or afraid' (John 14). She knew that the Lord would 'renew her strength, make her steadfast, and let her soar on wings like eagles' (Isaiah 40). She knew she was saved because she 'had confessed that Jesus is Lord and believed in her heart that God raised him from the dead' (Romans 10), 'that he had thrown her sins into the depths of the sea' (Micah 7), and that 'he will remember them no more' (Heb 8). She also knew 'this world was not her permanent home because she is a citizen of heaven' (Philip 3), and that 'God has prepared a permanent home for her in the heavenly city' (Heb 11,13), where Jesus lives. She 'could not imagine what God had prepared for her' (1 Corinth 2), but she knew he would say, 'come, inherit the kingdom I have for you' (Matt 23), 'and you shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever' (Psalm 23).

Soon after the woman died this morning, 'the angels of God came and escorted her spirit to paradise' (Luke 16), and 'she was pleased to be at home with the Lord' (2 Corinth 5). 'Immediately, the Spirit took control of her; she saw a throne with someone sitting on it, and living beings were giving glory, honor and thanks to the one who sits on the throne, the one who lives forever and ever' (Rev 4). 'Then she looked, and saw and heard the voices of many angels around the throne; there were thousands and thousands of angels—10,000 times 10,000' (Rev 5). 'And then, living beings said, "Amen!" (Rev 5:14). All thanks be to God.

Are We Forgiven? – Of Course We Are.

52 Short Stories of Assurance that We Are Forgiven by God



Because of God’s grace, we are like a fighter airplane after the pilot jettisons everything hanging onto it, and it becomes like a new and different airplane. The airplane jumps up in altitude, accelerates, becomes more maneuverable and flies much better because it is a “clean” airplane. In a similar way, God has jettisoned our sins, and he does not want us trying to hang onto them. He wants us to let them go. He wants us to be new and different, like a clean airplane, and to live as the spectacular people he designed and created.