

THE EXTENT GOD'S FORGIVENESS—

CORPORATE AND INDIVIDUAL

By Paul E. Penno

The accusation that Lucifer has charged God with in the great conflict of the ages is that He is basically selfish.¹ His motivations for serving sinful, rebellious human beings; and showering so many blessings upon them, is in order to make Himself look good before the rational, thoughtful, intelligent beings of the universe. So that in the end when He has to destroy the wicked and finally impenitent; His actions will be viewed as loving them to the end and giving them up to their own choice; when in reality He is just serving His own ends which is that He is vindictive, harsh, and demanding obedience to Himself that is impossible for a sinner to render.

Is God's love truly unselfish in its motivation? Is the plan of salvation, God's eternal purpose to save sinners, free from serving His own self-interests? Or is God coolly calculating, putting up a good front, saying that He loves sinners, but all the while just lying in wait for the day when He can get His enemies?

We can look at these questions from the perspective of God's justification of the ungodly. God loves His enemies—the entire class of sinners. The apostle Paul expressed this in these words, “Therefore as by the offence of one [Adam] judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift [Jesus Christ] came upon all men unto justification of life” (Rom. 5:18). “Justification of life” has come upon all. By dying upon His cross Jesus undertook an action on behalf of the whole class of sinners. God had put the entire human race into Jesus when He died on the cross. He lifted their condemnation inherited from Adam. He gave them one temporary, probationary lifetime during which He does not impute to them their sins, but He justifies them by the righteousness of Christ.

¹ “Unselfishness, the principle of God's kingdom is the principle that Satan hates, it's very existence he denies.” Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 154.

Now that certainly seems unselfish on God's part. It certainly seems uncommonly generous, and void of self-interest for Him to temporarily pardon His enemies as a class and treat them as innocent in Christ while they make up their minds whether or not they will choose this gift of life and make it personal to themselves.

But along comes the notion that God doesn't pardon the individual sinner. He does not forgive the godless person who has no appreciation for the gift of "justification of life." God only forgives a person who *believes* in Him. God has forgiven the ungodly as a class who were corporately in Christ Jesus when He died upon His cross, but He does not forgive them individually until they believe in Christ.

We can just see Satan making great use of this in his accusations against the character of God. You say that you love sinners as a group and have justified them—given them life—but you don't really forgive them as individuals in your heart until they believe in you. You see, you really aren't unselfishly motivated. You appear to be very generous-hearted to all the universe in that you have forgiven everybody, but when it comes down to it, you can't find it in your heart to forgive individual sinners. You are just like everybody else in the universe. At rock bottom you are in it for what you can get out of it.

Let us look at some cases in the Bible of individuals and see whether or not God forgave them of their sins *before* they believed in Him.

"Then Judas, which betrayed him, answered and said, Master, is it I? He said unto him, Thou hast said. And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and *gave it to the disciples*, and said, Take, eat; this is my body. And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and *gave it to them*, saying, Drink ye all of it; for this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matt. 26:25-28). Jesus remitted the sins of Judas on that night of the Passover, along with the sins of all of His disciples.² Judas professed to be a follower of Christ, but at that very moment he had already committed himself to treason and betrayal against his Lord. Nevertheless, Jesus forgave him by giving His body and blood to Judas.

² "Judas the betrayer was present at the sacramental service. He received from Jesus the emblems of His broken body and His spilled blood." Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 653.

When Jesus was upon His cross, the malefactors were crucified one on His left and another on His right. The rulers were at the foot of the cross deriding Him, "He saved others, let Him save Himself" (Luke 23:35). The soldiers who had nailed Him to the cross mocked Him. In the midst of this virulent hatred, our Saviour uttered these words to His tormentors, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).³ It was certainly a profligate gift which fell upon unappreciative ears, but one person caught their significance and responded to this unconditional gift. "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom" (Luke 23:42). This thief on the cross received justification by faith full and complete.

Tell the woman taken in adultery that Jesus forgives the sins of the whole class of adulterers, but He doesn't justify individual fornicators. Having been cast at the feet of Jesus by the religious and accused Jesus wrote their sins on the ground and they all went away. Before she asked for forgiveness Jesus justified her. "When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more" (John 8:10, 11).

It would indeed be strange for Jesus to teach His disciples to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matt. 6:12), and then not forgive individual sinners. Of what use would His example be to us if He held against certain ones their debts? Surely He wouldn't ask us to pray for that which He is unwilling to do Himself.

Notice the willingness of the Lord to forgive in His response to Peter's question: "Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven" (Matt. 18:21, 22). It is to be remarked that Peter didn't ask how often he should forgive "my brother" when "my brother" asks me for forgiveness. And Jesus was not setting up a standard for us which was in any way different from that which the Lord Himself follows in dealing with us. In fact His instruction

³ "While the soldiers were doing their fearful work, Jesus prayed for His enemies, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." His mind passed from His own suffering to the sin of His persecutors, and the terrible retribution that would be theirs. No curses were called down upon the soldiers who were handling Him so roughly. . . . He breathed only a plea for their forgiveness. . . ." Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 744.

to Peter grew out of His own spirit of compassion, for He was “full of grace,” and in this respect He was simply revealing the character of God, who is “merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Ex. 34:6, 7).

Our attention is called to the Bible’s teaching about predestination. We read that “whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom. 8:29). Our Calvinist friends understand God’s predestination to mean that before the creation of intelligent beings on this earth, God chose to favor certain ones with salvation and others He chose for eternal hell fire. There is no Seventh-day Adventist who would follow such an interpretation of God’s predestination.

Nevertheless, we find that some understand the following words to pertain to believers only:⁴ “Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified” (Rom. 8:30). If God’s predestination here pertains only to believers and not to unbelievers, then God has singled out only those who respond by faith to His offer of salvation as eligible for justification and glorification.

But the Father, without whose knowledge not even a sparrow falls to the ground, knew from ancient times every son and daughter of Adam who would ever live upon His earth. And “whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom. 8:29). Who did God foreknow before the creation of the world? Surely He foreknew everyone who would be born into the human family. So instead of predestinating only those who would believe to be justified, God predestinated to be called, justified and glorified every one who was to be born into the human family.⁵

Paul says, “whom He did predestinate.”⁶ This is completed action. This predestination is in Christ. “In Christ we have already been blessed with all

⁴ Quoting Romans 8:30, “These are the steps God takes with His followers. First He calls them to accept His Son. Then He justifies those whom He foreknew would accept His Son. . . . Ultimately He will glorify them.” Jack Sequeira, *Romans: “The Clearest Gospel of All,”* Vineyard Ministries: Salem, OR, 2005, p. 154.

⁵ W. T. B., “The Election of Grace,” *The Present Truth* 17, 9 (February 28, 1901), p 132.

⁶ “He did not merely in His premundane decree, acquit them of sin, but also *clothe them with glory*: the aorist *edozaren* being used, as the other aorists, to imply the completion in the divine counsel of all these, which are to us, in the state of time, so many

spiritual blessings.”⁷ God has decreed that everyone born into the human family are the objects of His predestination.

Paul says, “them He also called.” “All men are called to that which God has prepared for them.”⁸ God’s gift to every one who has been born would not be well-meant unless His call was particular to each individual. Calling involves conviction of sin by the Holy Spirit.⁹ The Holy Spirit does not scatter His conviction of sin in a general manner to the whole class of sinners. Conviction of sin must be a personal matter between the Holy Spirit and the individual sinner. Surely the Lord leaves no one who has ever been born out of this important step of conversion. “The call of God is addressed to every man individually.”¹⁰ “I have called thee by thy name; thou art Mine” (Isa. 43:1).

God has personally called every individual who has ever been born and “them He also justified.” This is past action on God’s part. Every one has been given the gift of justification of life. God has forgiven every individual—believer or unbeliever—whom He has called. This is temporary universal justification or forgiveness of sins given to saint or sinner.

But Paul continued further by saying, “them He also glorified.” In the eternal decree of God He predetermined to glorify every individual whom He called. How can the unbeliever be said to be glorified? In the same sense that Paul said his unbelieving fellow Jews—“kinsmen according to the flesh”—“who are Israelites” pertained “the adoption, and the glory” (Rom. 9:4). God had elected Paul’s racial family and given the gift of adoption and glorification. But they judged themselves unworthy of it, rejecting Christ—the gift.

Glorification is the change that comes when Jesus returns and “this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality” (1 Cor. 15:53), and we are no more subject to temptation. In Christ the eternal decree is that the unbeliever has been justified and

successive steps,—simultaneously and irrevocably.” Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament, Vol. II*, (Rivingtons: London, 1886), p. 599.

⁷ W. T. B., “The Election of Grace,” *The Present Truth* 17, 9 (February 28, 1901), p. 132.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ “Calling is the drawing of the sinner to Christ, and it is a work wrought by the Holy Spirit upon the heart, convicting of sin, and inviting to repentance.” Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 390.

¹⁰ W. T. B., “The Everlasting Mercy,” *The Present Truth* 17, 10 (March 7, 1901), p. 147.

glorified. This does not mean that if the unbeliever persists in rejecting the gift that he will retain his individual gift of forgiveness of sins and future glorification at the coming of the Lord.

If it be said that God loves the whole world as a corporate entity; and He is impartial in giving His gift of predestination in Christ; but He becomes selective when it comes to giving this to a particular individual within the class of the unbelieving; then, God is no better than the person who says that they just love the whole world, but when it comes to their particular enemy or those against whom they have a bias, they do not love them. In this event, God appears to be unselfish in generously predestinating all to be saved corporately in Christ; but He selfishly withholds this gift from the individual sinner within this class. So Satan's argument is sustained that God is motivated from self-concern. He cannot bring Himself to forgive His particular enemies. He is no better than the person who holds a grudge against one who has done him wrong.

And if God doesn't forgive His particular enemies, then we don't have to forgive our specific enemies either, for He is our supreme example.

In many respects we tend to think of Abraham as an other-worldly fellow left untouched by the cultural sins of his day. Indeed, Abraham was a brilliant star of faith in God's promise of the everlasting covenant, but his brilliance was frequently tarnished with unbelief. God continually evangelized him with the Gospel.

It is like those credit card offers you get in the mail—hundreds of them. They figure after constant bombardment through the mail and media someone will respond and make their expenditure of advertising dollars pay off.

Likewise, God knew that He had to constantly bathe Abraham's soul with an understanding of His promise to forgive sin and write His laws in the heart. The blessing was Christ and His cross—the righteousness of God. It took years for it all to sink in with Abraham.

Immediately after reading that "he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness" (Gen. 15:6), we find him entering a polygamist union with Hagar at the suggestion of his unbelieving wife Sarah. She didn't believe that God would give her a child as He had promised for she complained, "the Lord hath restrained me from bearing" (Gen. 16:2), thus betraying her bitterness against the Lord.

But Abraham was no better. Polygamy was the order of the day. It was sin. However, polygamy was not *the* sin of Abraham. "Whatsoever is not of

faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23). He did not believe God’s promise to give him a child through his one flesh union with Sarah, and hence he committed adultery. Unbelief in Christ always “gendereth to bondage” (Gal. 4:24). This was the old covenant to trust in self all the while claiming to believe it is working in harmony with God’s promise.

Abraham was no better than the wicked, unbelieving, heathen of his day. In fact, he was worse, for he knew better; and yet did not walk the talk. Does this mean he fell from grace and God no longer forgave him of his sin? Did Abraham lose God’s gift of justification? No.

Abraham was 86 when Ishmael was born and God was right back at him 13 years later, “I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect [not double-hearted]. I will make my covenant between me and thee” (Gen. 17:1, 2). Abraham is not to be held up as an example for us to follow. He surely doesn’t look very good, but God is certainly long-suffering and merciful toward His erring children. God does not bestow His gift of justification as a cloak for sin, but as an empowerment to overcome by faith.

As one fellow asked not long ago, Do we lose our forgiveness of sin from God every time we sin? The answer must be an emphatic no.

When he was ninety-nine Abraham was circumcised as “a token of the covenant” (Gen. 17:11). Circumcision was “a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised” (Rom. 4:11), says Paul. This was a dramatic outward mark reminding him that God removed the sin of adultery from his heart. The law of the Lord would be his delight and spring from a natural inward motivation of love to God—“my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant” (Gen. 17:13).

To be circumcised was to be justified by God. But so was Ishmael circumcised (Gen. 17:25), and thus he was justified by God though the Lord had predicted before his birth that “he will be a wild man; and his hand will be against every man” (Gen. 16:12).

And yet being justified by God, Abraham and Sarah manifested their unbelief in God’s promise of a son by mocking the Lord when he was one hundred years old (Gen. 17:17). And Abraham further pled with the Lord, “O that Ishmael might live before thee! (Gen. 17:18). Abraham wanted the Lord to recognize Ishmael as the son through whom the seed would come.

Ishmael could never be the father of the promised seed for God had said to Abraham, “in Isaac shall thy seed be called” (Gen. 21:12); nevertheless, God promised Ishmael, “I will make him a great nation” (Gen. 21:18). And

God's everlasting covenant states that in Abraham's "seed shall *all* the nations of the earth be *blessed*" (Gen. 22:18). And the blessing is Christ and His cross, the forgiveness of sins and the promise of cleansing for all who believe. God gave Ishmael temporary justification of life with the prospect of being justified by faith should he choose to believe during his brief probationary lifetime.

Esau was a singular example of one whom the Lord justified individually, even though the Lord's foreknowledge predicted "Jacob have I loved, and Esau have I hated" (Rom. 9:13).¹¹

The Lord told Rebekah that "the elder shall serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23). Esau was born with the birthright as the eldest son. The birthright included three things: (1) He was a prince among princes, a leader of the clan both spiritually and socially. (2) He stood to inherit a double portion of his father's property. (3) God's everlasting covenant was his through whom the seed would come.

But Esau had little regard for the things of faith and the future promises of God. He cared only for his immediate needs and self-gratification. "Esau despised his birthright" (Gen. 25:34). He just threw away the gift of God—His covenant—with the words "what profit shall this birthright do to me?" (Gen. 25:31).

Does this mean that he forfeited his individual temporary justification of life given him at birth? He pled for a blessing from father Isaac, "Hast thou but one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father" (Gen. 27:37).

We have often wondered why Isaac upon discovery of his being deceived by Jacob, should not have reversed the blessing and given it to Esau as he was wont to do. The fact of the matter is that it was "by faith Isaac blessed Jacob *and* Esau concerning things to come" (Heb. 11:20).

¹¹ "As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated" (Rom. 9:12, 13), but this was simply because God who 'callesh those things which be not as though they were,' could foresee just what kind of character Esau would develop. God is no respecter of persons, and he does not bestow his favors arbitrarily. Esau was rejected, not simply because he deliberately sold his right to the promised inheritance, but because of the utter lack of faith, which led him to so lightly esteem the promises of God." E. J. Waggoner, "The Commentary. Lesson 15.—Sabbath, April 14," *The Signs of the Times* 14, 13 (March 30, 1888), p. 201. "Esau was just as much predestined to salvation as Jacob was. . . ." W. T. B., "The Everlasting Mercy," *The Present Truth* 17, 10 (March 7, 1901), p. 147.

Isaac spoke as a prophet inspired by God who never lies, and His word cannot be taken back.¹² It will accomplish that which He purposes.

Esau received the same blessing as did his brother Jacob. God promised him the everlasting covenant, justification of life,—the forgiveness of sins. The only difference was that the promised seed would come through Jacob's lineage rather than Esau's. Though Esau threw away his birthright by selling it to Jacob for a mess of pottage, God gave the everlasting covenant aspect of it right back to him through Isaac's prophetic utterance.

Neither one of these twins was very likeable. No one likes to be swindled unknowingly. And that is who Jacob was, a trickster. He recognized it in himself (Gen. 27:12). Nevertheless, God revealed the ladder to him. Christ and the cross are the only bridge between heaven and earth (Matt. 1:51). This became a constant assurance to him throughout the rest of his life. And God evangelized Jacob in the same manner as He had proclaimed the gospel to his grandfather Abraham. "In thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 28:14). Jacob was surely forgiven by the Lord and justified by faith.

But even though his uncle Laban did him one better by constantly deceiving him first: with regard to Rachel and then changing his wages, Jacob still continued his shrewd, deceptive, bargaining ways with his brother Esau. Jacob sought to impress Esau with all his livestock and wealth and buy off his hot anger by giving him bribes (Gen. 32:20). Maybe he thought he could save himself even though the Lord had promised to go with him as he was commanded by the Lord to return to Canaan (Gen. 31:13, 32:1, 2).

Though Jacob was acting wickedly because he did not believe God's promise: he practiced deception, polygamy, adultery, superstition, theft, and bribery; does this mean God could not justify him and forgive his sins? No.

The reason for Jacob's great fear of his brother was because of unbelief. His sins had separated him from God. The hand of the Lord was heavy upon him, and it was indeed the time of Jacob's trouble. This robust shepherd was attacked by night when he so much wanted to make things

¹² "The Holy Spirit of God rested upon him as 'by faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come,' and nothing could alter the blessing that he put upon them." E. J. Waggoner, "The Children. Jacob and Esau: The Blessing," *The Present Truth* 18, 40 (October 2, 1902), p. 634.

right with the Lord. And he still thought that he could do it by his own strength. It wasn't until the Lord put his hip out of joint that this wrestler, this strong man, became weak and clung to the Lord with all the strength that remained in his upper body.

And the Lord tested his faith saying, "Let me go" (Gen. 32:26). "And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." Forgive me of my sins. I need justifying.

"And he said unto him, What is thy name?

And he said, Jacob." Sir, I am the Trickster, the Liar, the Deceiver. That is all that I am and no more.

And the Lord said, "Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed. . . . And he blessed him there" (Gen. 32:28, 29).

The Lord has a way of bringing us over the same ground again and again where we have failed so that faith may be tried and made perfect through complete confidence in His promise of the everlasting covenant.

And so God worked with Abraham. His faith was not made perfect until he was willing to follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth. "Take now . . . thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest . . . and offer him there for a burnt offering" (Gen. 22:2). The greatest test of all was not so much his love for Isaac, nor what he would say to his mother, nor even explaining his murder to his neighbors; but faith in the promise of God to give him a seed through whom the promise was made. But Abraham believed in the resurrection of his seed from the dead, for he had already been told that he would not see God's promise fulfilled to him or his seed until after his death which would necessitate his resurrection. Therefore, Abraham sacrificed Isaac. He carried the knife to the altar and Isaac willing laid himself upon the wood. And the Lord said, "Now I know that thou fearest God" (Gen. 22:12). As Abraham had so prophetically spoken, "God will provide Himself a lamb" (Gen. 22:8).

The great test of the patriarchs was faith in the fulfillment of God's promise regarding the coming of the seed. The test of God's people in these last days is faith in the everlasting covenant which promises the return of the Heir.

God's love manifested in the justification of the ungodly is both general (corporate) and particular (individual). He has given justification of life to the unbeliever as well as the believer both corporately and individually. But to the believer who has made his calling and election sure by faith, God

bestows justification by faith and they are born again to a life of His creating. Unbelievers do not enjoy the blessing of justification by faith—the new birth—because they do not choose to believe His promise. Hence they do not enjoy the blessing of a personal understanding of the forgiveness of their sins by an all-merciful God.

[Sermon presented at the 1888 Message Mini-Conference, Meadow Vista Seventh-day Adventist Church, Meadow Vista, California, on Sabbath morning, December 30, 2006. Paul E. Penno is pastor of the Hayward Seventh-day Adventist Church, Hayward, California.]