

DOES GOD FORGIVE SINS BEFORE WE COMMIT THEM?

**By Paul Penno Jr.
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Natural disasters are on the rise. A number of years ago the United States experienced a natural disaster in the form of a volcano, Mt. St. Helens, in Washington State. Research of the area after the volcanic eruption sent shock waves through the scientific community, due to some drastic changes that resulted from the blast of the north face of Mt. St. Helens.

One surprising find was that the bark from the devastated trees that was left floating on Spirit Lake had in a short period of time settled to the bottom of the lake, forming peat beds that are precursors to the formation of coal beds. This rapid change had been thought for years to be something that could only occur after thousands and perhaps millions of years. A number of geologic phenomena that scientists have discovered after the Mt. St. Helens blast have caused the scientific community to come face to face with the realization that the results of a cataclysmic event of a worldwide flood is not as impossible as many have thought.

But the realization of a natural disaster such as the worldwide flood can give us hope. How? There is a promise, a covenant, that God made with the earth, the animals, the birds, and yes, with all flesh. "I will remember My covenant which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy

all flesh. . . . And the rainbow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth" (see Gen. 9:8-17). This covenant is not a mutual agreement like we often think of a covenant. Notice that God made it "with the birds, cattle and beasts of the field" (v. 10). There is no record of them making any promise to God in return, but He has kept His promise!

That is the Everlasting Covenant. God's promise to us, we believe, we enter by faith in His ability to keep us safe! So as we see natural disasters on the rise we can trust in God's faithfulness to keep us safe.

God's promise is His Everlasting Covenant, that He made to the birds, animals of the field, and every creature of the earth (Gen. 9:8-17). God promised He would never send another flood to cover the whole earth. We still enjoy the benefits of His promise. God's promises are never contracts, they are one-way or unilateral promises on His part backed by His solemn oath to keep them.

The Everlasting Covenant was originally made to Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:15). God promised to "put enmity" where there would be no desire for good and right if God did not put it in the heart of everyone to some degree. When God made the promise to Adam and Eve it was Christ who was "slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8). Christ became surety for the entire human race. He put Himself on the line to bring about all that He promised to Adam and Eve. God did not require

from Adam and Eve a promise to obey Him, there is no record of any such transaction. All their power was gone. Adam, with his eyes wide open, in full knowledge, knew that eating the forbidden fruit would be sin. "For to him that knows to do good, and does it not, to him it is sin" (James 4:17). In unbelief he stepped out on forbidden ground. His very nature was changed by his willful choice. At that moment he was no longer capable of doing good. He was condemned to Eternal death. Adam had sold out to Satan.

Satan was fully aware that Adam had given over his right of dominion to him. In the temptations of Christ, Satan reminded Jesus that all the "power and grandeur" of the world was his by Adam's choice, "for it has been made over to me. . ." (Luke 4:6, Moffat translation). It was an impossibility for Adam to right himself again because sin had entered the world. "By the offense of one, judgment came upon all men," resulting in condemnation to an Eternal grave (Rom. 5: 12, 18). No hope of life, no hope of even one bite of food, or a breath of air, or a glass of cold water. Not one single thing was ours by Adam's one choice.

But thank God that "by the righteousness of One," the Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world, who became surety for a lost race, "by His one righteous act, the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life." Because of Jesus Christ's one righteous act we can eat food today, breath the air, and drink the water. "Today if you hear His voice, harden not your hearts" (Heb. 4: 7). If we do not refuse this gift of life we already enjoy, we will

live forever in Eternal Life. We will be ever thankful that He saved us from the Eternal grave that was ours by Adam's disobedience. He did it all by His own Promise. He asks simply: "do not harden your hearts."

Romans tells some news so profoundly good that we humans can hardly take it in. Even theologians stumble over it, like the builders stumbled over the great stone that was quarried to be the headstone of Solomon's Temple (Matt. 21:42; Ps. 118:22). The problem is what Paul says: Christ became the "last" or Second Adam, reversing the condemnation that the first Adam brought on the entire human race. For "all men" He turned Adam's condemnation into justification, or a legal acquittal. "That News is too Good to be true," some objectors say.

Well, here's what Paul says: "God's act of grace is out of all proportion to Adam's wrongdoing. For if the wrongdoing of that one man brought death upon so many [Greek, all], its effect is vastly exceeded by the grace of God and the gift that came to so many [Greek, all] by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ. And again, the gift of God is not to be compared in its effect with that one man's sin; for the judicial action, following upon the one offence, issued in a verdict of condemnation, but the act of grace . . . issued in a verdict of acquittal. . . . As the issue of one misdeed was condemnation for all men, so the issue of one just act is acquittal and life for all men" (5:15-18, NEB). The KJV says, "the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life."

Someone asks, "We need 'justification by faith,' but isn't this 'justification by birth'?" No more than

Adam's condemnation comes upon us all "by birth"! Jesus took it all upon Himself, so that His title is, "Saviour of the world" (John 4:42). The same "all [who] have sinned" are "being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:23, 24). This is why He sends His rain and sunshine on the just and the unjust alike. It's why we live.

One very wise writer says, "The sinner may resist this love, may refuse, . . . but if he does not resist he will be drawn to Jesus, . . . to the foot of the cross in repentance."

One controversy that has stirred good Christian people for 400 years is between Calvinism and Arminianism. The problem is what the Bible means when it says so clearly that "Christ died for the world," is "the Savior of the world," "gave Himself a ransom for all men," "tasted death for every man," is "the propitiation for the sins of the whole world," "all are being justified freely by His grace," "the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life," etc. Calvinists have always said those texts mean that Christ has accomplished salvation for some people—that is, only those whom God has predestinated to be saved. Arminians say those texts mean that "all men" have a potential for being saved, it's possible for them to be saved, but it is only IF; Christ didn't actually accomplish salvation for anyone UNLESS . . . And between these two views a great gulf is fixed.

The story of Esau resolves this controversy of 400 years. It was an accomplished fact that he HAD the "birthright." It was his by birth, no one could take it

from him, not even God, for it was his by the oath of God to the firstborn among Abraham's descendants.

But Esau "despised" what was HIS and what had been GIVEN him, and then he "sold" it. And "Esau" is the name of every person who will finally be lost. Christ GAVE salvation to him but he wouldn't have it. He refused to receive the atonement that would have reconciled his alienated heart to God and to God's holy law. He has unfitted himself for heaven. Don't be Esau!

Jesus is not merely your "wanna-be" Savior; *He is*. Stop resisting Him.

"Does God forgive sins before we commit them?" Sounds like a crazy question to ask. The very idea sounds like it comes from some nut. Can your State Police give you a "Not guilty" verdict before you even get a ticket for speeding? Is God handing out what amounts to advance permission for all kinds of sin ahead of time? (Like the famous Tetzels "Indulgences" in the time of Luther?) Of course, the answer is no.

But there may be solid truth that is getting denied here in this discussion. And thoughtful followers of Jesus do not want to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

(a) We know Christ died for the world, not just for the good people in it (of whom there are none; John 3:16; 6:51).

(b) We know that He died the second death that is due to "every man" (Heb. 2:9).

(c) Thus He has paid the penalty that the law demands for every sin (Rom. 6:23).

(d) We know the Father has adopted the human race in Christ (Eph. 1:3-6).

(e) We know Christ has reversed the “condemnation” that “all men” receive from Adam with “justification unto life” for the same “all men” (Rom. 5:15-18; the New English Bible translates it as “a judicial verdict of acquittal” for “all men”).

(f) This is why He can send His rain on both the just and the unjust and can treat “all men” as though they had never sinned when in fact they have (Matt. 5:45).

(g) We know that grace is unmerited favor, and that God has “freely” justified “all” by that grace (Rom. 3:23, 24).

This is “the baby.” Don’t throw it out. It’s the atonement.

The “bathwater” is the wild idea that this amounts to breaking down the law. Paul says, No: “Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law” (vs. 31). The realization that the Son of God has died your second death, has paid the full price for your soul’s eternal salvation, has even gone to hell for you in “emptying Himself” (Phil. 2:5-8), captures your heart forever; and the new covenant promise is therein fulfilled because God’s holy law is forever written in your heart. Death before disobedience is your forever choice!

TABLE MEDITATION

Who do you think you are? Are you one of the 99 sheep that never went astray? You had good parents, went to church all your life, never robbed a bank, never been in prison, you’ve been a good

person all your life? And like the Pharisee in the parable in Luke 18:10-14, you are humble enough, grateful enough, good enough, decent enough, upright enough, to thank God that you are not like other people who do get lost, especially like the down and outs who have done all sorts of bad things and been alienated from God all or most of their lives?

How about another parable, the lost son, the prodigal son? Who are you? Are you the dutiful son who never wasted your life, never had to feed the pigs, never left home?

Now don’t misunderstand. This is not a recommendation that you do all these bad things. But my question is this: do you know how to sympathize, to empathize is a better word, with the people who have done all these bad things, who have wasted their lives, lost the joy of fellowship with God and with the saints, and have wandered in darkness in the dark world? Jesus has special sympathy for people who have wasted their lives and whose hearts are filled with remorse. They are the special objects of His compassion. In fact, they are the ones He came to save. The poor publican who beat upon his breast and wouldn’t even lift his eyes to heaven, who prayed, “God be merciful to me a sinner!” he is the one who went home justified. Straightened out, put right with God.

Why does Jesus have such special sympathy for such people? There is only one possible answer: because He repented on their behalf; He took their nature; He was tempted like they are tempted; He is their High Priest. Hebrews 2:14-18. And now He

invites you to share His love and sympathy for all the sinners in the world, for all the prodigal sons feeding the pigs, for all the publicans who cry out for mercy. And when you begin to share His compassion, the joy of your own life has only begun.