

The Forgiveness of God

Personal Breakthroughs:

1 Chronicles 21:1, 7-17; Luke 7:48-50

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Linda made the evening news. She had camped with a youth group. As she and others followed their youth leader on a dark path, she stepped to the side; but there was no side, just air. She fell 30 feet to rocks below. Her back broke in multiple places. She spent 10 hours on the rocks before she could be evacuated. Three years later, she couldn't shuffle 25 yards without debilitating pain. She abandoned hope of living a normal life, and suicide grew attractive to her. When someone offered to pray for her, she declined. She didn't want her hopes dashed again.

Last week, as we began this series on *Personal Breakthroughs*, we noted how our hearts get injured just as much our bodies. We considered how Jesus addressed such brokenness, announcing his ministry as he read from Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor... (Isaiah 61:1-2, NIV)

According to Luke, Jesus stopped there and commented, but the prophecy continues:

And provide for those who grieve in Zion — to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor. (Isaiah 61:3, NIV)

Although we live in a hard world, we also enjoy the time of God's favor. God wants you to joyfully grow in this soil so that many may see his work in this world through you. God's

desire is for you to be light so that his lost and hurting children will see the way. We saw that with the story of King Asa last week. He fixed his heart on seeking God. He chose to be strong and not give up. God rewarded his work and drew many to join him.

Linda, however, did not wear a crown of beauty as Isaiah prophesied. She considered her life ashes. She did not wear the oil of gladness. She lived in mourning. She did not dress in a garment of praise. She spoke in a spirit of despair. She did not reveal the splendor of God's favor, but demonstrated the harshness of God's enemies. Her heart remained on the rocks.

Personal breakthroughs are possible because of God's favor experienced through the Spirit of Jesus. Critical to that experience is forgiveness. As Linda found a kind and skilled ear from the one who offered to pray, she opened her heart to prayer and healing. When she forgave her youth leader who had neglected to warn the group about the cliff, she felt a peace and love take hold. The next day she walked not 25 yards but 400 yards to a remote place to give thanks. Her body responded to a heart renewed with love and forgiveness.

In recent months God has opened my mind and heart to truths about forgiveness, through the experience of David, when in rebellion and conceit, he took a census of his fighting men.

Perhaps, you don't understand the evil of that action. David's chief commander did. He protested. He knew that Israel's victories and security were not about their achievement, but about God's zeal for his name, so a world may turn to him. When the commander yielded to King David and spent the next 9 months taking the census, he left out two tribes in protest.

However, the people of Israel already had sullied the name of God. In 2 Samuel we read:

Again the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go and take a census of Israel and Judah." (2 Samuel 24:1, NIV)

In 1 Chronicles the same story is told beginning with these words:

Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel. (1 Chronicles 21:1, NIV)

In 2 Samuel the census is attributed to God's anger and judgment. In 1 Chronicles it is a plot and work of Satan. In both texts, the focus of God's anger and Satan's plot is Israel, and the weapon is David, Israel's leader. What do you make of it?

Have you ever read of God's encounters with Satan in the book of Job? In both the first and second chapters of Job, Satan presents himself before God with the other angels. God acts like a proud grandpa with a picture in his wallet:

Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. (Job 1:8, NIV)

Satan accuses Job of superficial devotion and gains permission or authority to attack and test Job. Jesus warned Peter of the same thing when he said:

Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. (Luke 22:31, NIV)

No doubt Satan had a conversation with God in some such way about Israel and David. What kind of conversation happens over us and our president, us and our governor, us and our mayor, you and your pastor? Since Satan can't read your mind or see your heart, although he can sow thoughts into both, what does he say to God about the lilt of your voice, words of your mouth and deeds of your hands that express resentment, anger, envy or judgment?

When the census was done, David was conscience stricken. David prayed:

I have sinned greatly by doing this. Now, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing. (1 Chronicle 21:8, NIV)

Most of us think that this response ends the matter. Does not the Bible promise that "*if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive those sins and cleanse us from all*

unrighteousness”? Doesn’t that mean we are instantly done with them? Doesn’t that mean that we escape judgment for them? Hasn’t Jesus already been judged for them?

Do you know what happened to David? God sent the prophet Gad to him with the message that David could choose his consequence: three years of famine, three months of enemy rule or three days of plague. David chose the plague. That doesn’t sound like forgiveness, does it? Some 70,000 people died in the plague, and God sent his angel to destroy Jerusalem. The Bible says as the angel began the destruction, God saw it, was grieved, relented and commanded the angel to withdraw. At that moment, the angel stood at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. God opened the eyes of David and the elders to see the angel standing between heaven and earth with its sword drawn toward Jerusalem. They were wearing sackcloth in repentance and fell on their faces at the sight. (I wonder if Abraham Lincoln pondered this passage of Scripture as he wrote his second inaugural address. He spoke of the civil war as God’s justice and judgment on the entire nation for slavery.) King David cried out:

Was it not I who ordered the fighting men to be counted? I am the one who has sinned and done wrong. These are but sheep. What have they done? O Lord my God, let your hand fall upon me and my family, but do not let this plague remain on your people. (1 Chronicles 21:17, NIV)

David changed his thinking from saving his skin to saving his people. He was more concerned about the sin’s consequence than the sin’s guilt. He changed his mind about the sin. That is repentance. Repentance in the New Testament is a compound word that means *change of mind*. Until we change our minds about things, we act in thoughts that bring disaster.

When David changed his mind about the census, he was directed to sacrifice an animal at the very site where the angel stood to destroy Jerusalem, the threshing floor of Araunah. That later became the site of God’s temple where sacrifices released Israel continually from its

judgment. Jesus is that sacrificial lamb, and he has been judged for all of our sins. No further sacrifice is required. Now all that is required is the change of mind.

Since sin is hatched through our minds, no matter how many times we pray for forgiveness, it is through the sacrifice of Christ and the change of our minds that sins are removed from us. How then can our minds be changed? It is a work of God. Indeed, Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life."

If Jesus is the way, then we must follow him in his trust of God and God's word. If Jesus is the truth, then we must give attention to his way of thinking and living so that it replaces the deception Satan sows in us. If Jesus is the life, then we must place more confidence in his sacrifice and promise than anything else including our circumstances.

Could we be suffering from individual sins, family sins, congregational sins, community sins, and national sins? Could Satan incite our leaders against us? Does Satan accuse us on all those fronts before God? Do we need to confess our sins, in other words, agree with God about the harm of our actions? Do we need to get his mind about the things we say and do?

Forgiveness has already been purchased. Sacrifice has already been made. The issue is not judgment, but repentance and faith. Like Linda who found healing in forgiveness, will we?