

APRIL-JUNE

Q
2003

“As
We

Forgive...”

A Devotional Bible-Study Guide
for Young Adults



www.cq.youthpages.org



Staff

Editor: Gary B. Swanson
Editorial Assistant: Shirlee J. Ingram

Reading Committee

| | | |
|--------------------|-------------------|---------------|
| Kathy Beagles | Pat Habada | Ken Rogers |
| James Black | Jonathan Kuntaraf | Jim Zackrison |
| Lyndelle Chiomenti | Tim Poirier | |

CQ is written by Seventh-day Adventist young adults and their friends around the world.

Editorial Office: Sabbath School/Personal Ministries Department, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904, U.S.A.

Place orders with: Pacific Press® Pub. Assn., P.O. Box 5353, Nampa, ID 83653-5353, U.S.A.

Other than the King James Version, Scripture versions used in this Bible study guide are as follows:

NASB. From the *New American Standard Bible*, copyright © the Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977. Used by permission.

NIV. Texts credited to the NIV are from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

NKJV. Text credited to NKJV are from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

TEV. From the *Good News Bible*, the Bible in Today's English Version, Old Testament, copyright © American Bible Society, 1976, 1992; New Testament copyright © American Bible Society, 1966, 1971, 1976, 1992. Used by permission.

CQ (ISSN 0744-2939). Volume 26, No. 2. Published quarterly by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1350 North Kings Road, Nampa, ID 83687-3193, U.S.A., and printed by Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 1350 North Kings Road, Nampa, ID 83687-3193, U.S.A. Place orders with Pacific Press® Pub. Assn., P.O. Box 5353, Nampa, ID 83653-5353, U.S.A.

One-year subscription in U.S.A., \$15.40; single copy, \$6.29. One-year subscription in countries outside U.S.A., \$18.40; single copy, \$6.29. All prices at U.S.A. exchange. Periodicals postage paid at Nampa, ID 83687.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *CQ*, P.O. Box 5353, Nampa, ID 83653-5353, U.S.A. Send editorial inquiries to *CQ*, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904, U.S.A. Send circulation inquiries to Pacific Press® Publishing Association, P.O. Box 5353, Nampa, ID 83653-5353, U.S.A. When a change of address is desired, please send both old and new addresses.

Copyright © 2003 by the Sabbath School/Personal Ministries Department, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

Printed in the U.S.A.



"As We Forgive ...!"

1. Complete pardon 10

Willard Cooper, Jacque Hammonds, Sonia Huenergardt, Henry R. Moncur, Hamfreth Rahming, Peggy Christine Sands

2. The Secret of Forgiveness 19

Sarita Arora, Surachet Insom, Boonmee Ngotngamwong, Samuel Paul, Nithat Sirichotiratana, Soontharee Tantrarungroj

3. Undeserved and Unasked for 28

Grenville Kent, Daniel Livingston, Melissa McKenzie, Nina Miranda, Brad Townend, Steven Wawrzonek

4. How Jesus forgave 37

Rich Carlson, Gina Dawn Jacob, Alicia Johnston, Athena Merana, April Nielsen, Justin Okimi, John Cal Rivera

5. Forgiveness and guilt 46

Scott Cushman, Jason Donovan, Kyle Martsching, Miguel Nunez, Jennifer Proctor, Amanda Sauder

6. A forgiving Church? 55

Audrey Andersson, Emilie Cartwright, Christian Farias, Serah Nyabiage Mesesi, Lynn Mfuru, H. S. Winton

7. For the Love of God 64

Stephen Chavez, Oliver Fichtberger, Alena Janushkova, João Carlos Martins, Kathie Morgan, Corina Ana Tuzla

8. Where are your Loyalties? 73

Leandro Bizama, Lane Campbell, Caleb Cross, Jennifer Goley,
Orethia Grant, Tara J. Vinyard

9. Exhibiting Reverence.....82

Vijay Daniel, Cecilia David, Prema Gaikwad, Ranjith Kingstone
Glandston, Mullah James, Tamar Paul

10. Why Forgive?.....91

Denise Heath, Henrik K. Jorgensen, Stuart Joseph, Joann
Kristensen, Geert Tap, Robert Williams

11. Out of the Heart 100

Dave Allen, Natasha L. Kohlhoff, Burkhard Olschewski, Tim Poirier,
Clarinda Wang, Ruth Williams

12. Selfless Service 109

Peter Kimaiga Aganyo, Mark Castellino, Noelle Hadley, Sanjo Angella
Jeffrey, Kevan Lim, Ewan St. James

13. Living the life of Faith 118

Karen Abdool, Gureny Lukwaro, Andrew Perry, Mary Qualls, Heidi
Tompkins, Patti Hansen Tompkins

Welcome to *CQ's* World



The following pages represent the creative energy of a truly international group of Adventist young adults. The map above indicates the locations of the writers who have participated in *CQ's* writing program for this quarter.

In producing this unique Sabbath School Bible study guide, four hundred individuals contribute to *CQ* each year. The wide variety and occasional repetition of the content reflects the great diversity of its contributors around the world as they respond individually to the subject under study.

Worldwide circulation of *CQ* is about 70,000. It is published in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Indonesian, Hungarian, and Finnish.

Get Interactive

Ever think about writing for *CQ*?

Why not! Each year 400 young adults from around the world participate in the *CQ* writing program. It gives Seventh-day Adventist young people aged 18 to 35 a unique opportunity to grow spiritually, to share the benefits of their Bible study, to exchange ideas, and to contribute to the mission of the Church.

You are the most important ingredient in our *CQ* formula because you can be the answer to our greatest need—the need for caring, committed, contributing authors. If you think you'd like to participate in the writing of a lesson, write us today:

CQ
12501 Old Columbia Pike
Silver Spring, MD 20904 U.S.A.

Fax: 301-680-6155
Email: cq@gc.adventist.org



Got Questions?

Sabbath School University has answers!

Sabbath School University is a 28-minute discussion of *CQ* and the *Adult Bible Study Guide*. SSU discusses the lesson content and strategies to enrich your Sabbath School with fellowship, outreach, Bible study, and missions. Sabbath School leaders, don't miss this weekly broadcast on the Adventist Television Network.



<http://Adventist.TV>
broadcast and program information

**SABBATH SCHOOL
TEACHER PREPARATION
IN MINUTES . . .**

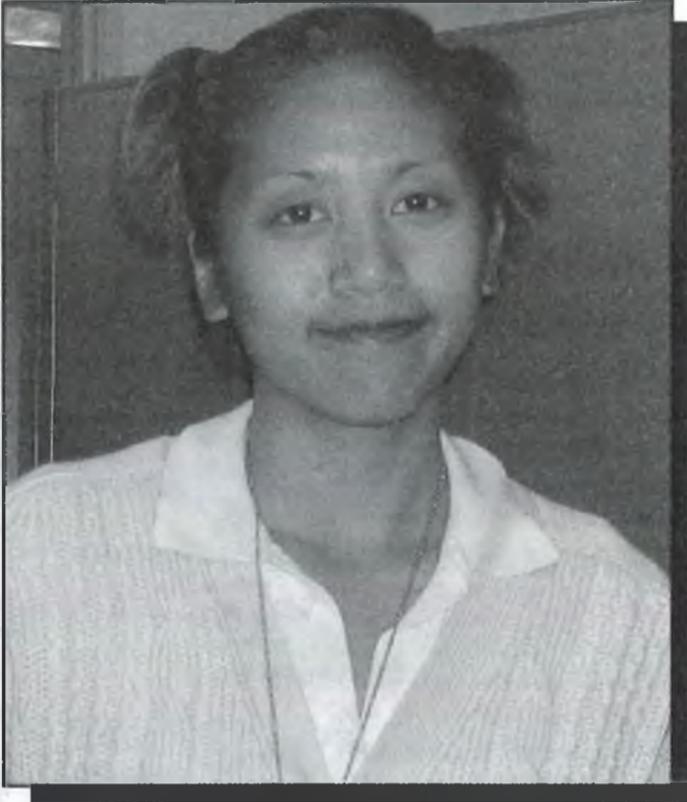


www.cq.youthpages.org



JUST CLICK AND SERVE!

This Quarter's Illustrator



Frulwinn Reyes was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where she lived the first seven years of her life. Since then, she says, her family has moved to various places in the United States. Currently she lives in the Washington, D.C., area, where she works for Home Study International and will complete a bachelor of fine arts at the Corcoran College of Art and Design this spring.

Getting the Most Out of CQ

FACTS YOU SHOULD KNOW

CQ is based on the conviction that the Word of God offers transforming power and that group study is one important way to tap into that power. CQ's purpose is to provide Seventh-day Adventist young adults with a resource for devotional study on mutual topics, which can then be discussed each week in Sabbath School. Many who use the Adult Bible Study Guide find that because CQ deals with the same topics, it enriches lesson study and discussion as a supplemental aid.

Four hundred Adventist young adults contribute to CQ each year. The wide variety and occasional repetition of the content reflects the great diversity of its contributors around the world as they respond creatively and individually to the subject.

Circulation of CQ is about 70,000.

POINTERS FOR STUDY

1. Through prayer, open your mind to the Holy Spirit's guidance as you study.

2. The Bible passages on which each week's lesson are based appear in bold type in the "Logos" portion of the lesson. Read these entire passages.

3. The Bible passages for the week are usually divided into sections on the "Logos" pages. When studying these sections, carefully reread the Bible passages indicated in bold headings before reading the comments beneath the headings.

4. Read the other sections for the week with the perspective you have gained from your own study of the biblical passages.

5. Keep in mind the purposes of each section of the Bible study guide:

"**Introduction**" is designed to stimulate your interest and focus your thinking on the week's theme.

"**Logos**" is a guide for direct study of the Bible passages for the week.

"**Testimony**" presents Ellen White's perspective on the lesson theme.

"**Evidence**" approaches issues raised by the lesson from a historical, scientific, philosophical, or theological perspective.

"**How-To**" discusses what the abstractions in the lesson mean for day-to-day living.

"**Opinion**" is a personal viewpoint on the lesson meant to encourage further thought and discussion.

"**Exploration**" provides the reader with a variety of open-ended, creative ways to explore the topic of the week's lesson.

CQ AND THE CHURCH

CQ is the General Conference-approved Bible study guide for the young-adult age group. It upholds the beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. *However, its contents should not be regarded as official pronouncements of the Church.*

Complete pardon



“God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8, NKJV).

Great Expectations

INTRODUCTION

1 John 1:9

The speeding red sports car in front of Mark Baxter wouldn't go fast enough for him. He couldn't wait to see his daughter. Leslie lived only a short 10 miles from the airport, and his rental car needed turbine engines to get to her apartment any faster. Her heavy-hearted phone calls were fresh in his mind, calls that went far beyond the shallow, sappy phone conversations between fathers and daughters in long-distance commercials. Her cares were desperate, debilitating, and beyond her control. Her ability to live and function was hindered by a large debt she owed. It defined her existence.

Leslie's condition began through years of single living and low-salary incomes—of credit card purchases and high interest payments, of college loans and medical bills. She could never pay off what she owed. Mark felt pretty good about stepping in a few years before. She was, of course, his daughter. In his attempt to help her, he loaned her enough money to cover the thousands of dollars that totaled her debt, and asked her to pay him back as soon as she could. She agreed, and for a while Leslie kept up her end of the deal. But one thing led to another: a broken down car and new expenses piled on top of her father's loan she was already responsible for. They had spoken of possible solutions, things that Leslie could try to work out her worsening situation. But there seemed to be nothing she could do herself to survive the financial landslide she was caught in. And again, Mark wanted to reach out to his daughter.

Her heavy-hearted phone calls were fresh in his mind.

With his attention directed toward his daughter's dilemma, Mark edged the gas pedal and sped ahead along the cross-town interstate. He had a proposition for her. He had an answer.

What if I pardoned the whole debt? Forgave the whole thing. Wiped the slate clean. Would she accept his offer? I know her Mark thought. She'll want to do something to pay me back. She might feel like a failure. Her pride won't let me help her this way. Will my love for her be enough of a reason for my action?

How would she respond? It didn't matter. He knew he was going to offer this personal sacrifice anyway, whether she decided to take it or not. His mind was made up. His car sped on.

Sunday
March 30

Amazing Forgiveness, How Sweet the Sound!

LOGOS

Matt. 18:21, 22; Luke 5:18-20; Rom. 3:26; 5:20; 1 John 1:9

The Purpose of the Sacrifice (Rom. 3:26; 5:20)

From Genesis we understand that when Adam and Eve sinned they fell out of a right relationship with each other and with God. Banished from the Garden, they lost their place with God. The most disturbing aspect to sin is that we become out of step with God. The further our steps take us from God, the more our lives turn upside down. The great question in life is: How can we get in a right relationship with God? How can we regain peace of mind? How can we lose the feeling of being estranged? How can we move out of our spiraling downward condition?

Interestingly enough there are many answers, but the apostle Paul offers the only true solution. Paul notes that Christ's sacrifice on the cross justifies us all.

Many times we say that
three times is the limit.

Amazing! It does not sound so? Consider this: If you go before a judge and you're innocent, then the judge acquits you. If you are guilty, then you're sent to prison.

Yet Paul says that God's sacrifice takes the ungodly, and in spite of their guilt, treats them as the godly individual, and moves to bring them back into a right relationship. This is amazing because many times we expect the sinful to do some penance for their sins. We want them to suffer. To ostracize them. Then when we are ready, we will forgive them.

But God does not see it that way. God, who has been offended, took the initiative—before we were even thinking about Him, while we were still in sin doing our own thing—to justify and reestablish us in right relationship. Why? Because He loves us with a love that was before we were born (Jer. 31:3, 4), love that was before the Cross (John 3:16).

We were raised in sin, but Jesus stepped in and redeemed us. With all the times we stray from God, when we think it hopeless the Bible says there's good news. For where sin did abound, grace did much more abound (Rom. 5:20). Paul notes that when we sin, forgiveness is available. As bad as you may have messed up, you don't have to stay down. Look up! Get up! Stand up! Recognize that where sin abounds in your life, God is there offering more in forgiveness—not because we are worthy, but because He loves us.

How Forgiveness Is Obtained (Luke 5:18-20; 1 John 1:9)

The danger of human nature, however, is that we tend to look down on gifts. Yet God's gift requires us to accept it if it's to make a difference in our lives. Too

often human nature deceives us into believing that we're too good for the gift. The danger of sin is that it tells us that we have need of nothing. Yet John insists that if someone sins, self-justification and excuses bring no benefits. The only thing that can bring satisfaction is to humble our hearts and in a spirit of contrition seek God's forgiveness. That forgiveness, John says, is something we can depend on in a world where people let you down. John says that we can depend on God's Word. "If we confess our sins, *He is faithful* and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9, NKJV, emphasis supplied).

The essence of the life of the Christian is first to realize the sin and then earnestly to seek God, no matter the obstacles (Luke 5:19), for confession and forgiveness of sins. And that earnest seeker will find that God will keep His word and forgive us, wiping out our past guilt (verse 20).

The Limits of Forgiveness (Matt. 18:21, 22)

Peter came to Christ with a question: How often should I forgive my brother if he sins against me? Then with his spirit of boldness he answers his own question. Seven times?

For Peter this was generous as the Jews, according to Rabbi Jose ben Hamina, believed that a person ought not to forgive more than three times.* Often when the wrongdoer goes through the continuous cycle of committing wrongs and repeatedly asking for forgiveness, the offended one thinks that there must be some limit to forgiveness. Think about it. Many times we say that three times is the limit. Some even say, "If you hurt me once, I'll forgive you. But do it again and that's the end of our relationship."

Yet Jesus' response teaches a life-changing truth. Jesus says that the correct number is not seven times but 70 times seven. He is telling us that there is no limit to forgiveness. It is unlikely you will be keeping a record after passing the fiftieth time. When it comes to forgiveness, Jesus is telling us that there is not a time when we can say we've satisfied the maximum requirements for forgiveness, so we can stop forgiving with a good conscience. If God has gone above and beyond to forgive us, then we should be more than willing to forgive others, lest we find ourselves in the same situations (Gal. 6:1).

Forgiveness, however, does not lessen the need for obedience to God. Rather, it urges us to give our all to serving Him because of His immense love for us. The grounds of forgiveness are God's unmerited love to us. We show the impact of that love on our lives by how we forgive others.

REACT

In what situations is it appropriate for us to forgive someone repeatedly? In all situations regardless? In what situations might it be harmful, if ever?

*William Barclay, *The Daily Bible Study Series, The Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), vol. 2, p. 193.

Does It Pay to Forgive?

TESTIMONY

Matt. 18:21, 22; Luke 17; Rom. 3:26; 5:20; 1 John 1:9

Forgiveness is the obligation of the forgiven and we are the forgiven. But what about those who never ask for our forgiveness? Should we be required to give it?

Mary and her family moved to a new settlement. She and her husband were understandably concerned about their children being able to establish new friendships. Mary did all she could do to make friends with other mothers.

One day Mary learned that several of these people whom she called friends organized a party and invited most of the neighborhood and didn't invite her or her family. She was hurt but soon the hurt turned to anger. How could people whom she considered friends do that to her and her family? She considered whether to confront the others and risk being ostracized, or let it go. Could she honestly forgive these women without first hearing the word "sorry"?

Jesus didn't teach unconditional forgiveness in Luke 17. He said, "If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him'" (verses 3, 4, NKJV). To repent means "to change one's mind." Such repentance is essential to Christ's pattern of forgiveness. He makes it clear that those who sin against us must be brought to the place that their failure to love is admitted.

Our forgiveness should be modeled after God's forgiveness (Eph. 4:32). It must be conditional. Forgiveness by God rests on clear, unmistakable conditions. Paul and the apostles turned away from those who refused to meet the conditions, just as John and Jesus did earlier when the scribes and the Pharisees would not repent.

Jesus didn't teach unconditional forgiveness.

These are powerful arguments for demanding repentance before granting forgiveness.

Many Christians do not understand how confession works. Once we confess our sins, God

forgives us no matter what. True confession involves a commitment not to continue to sin.

Let us remember, however, that we are not saved by our repentance but by God's grace. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; . . . not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Eph. 2:8, 9, NASB). Repentance plays a vital role in the forgiving process.

"God cannot forgive sins at the expense of His justice, His holiness, and His truth. But He does forgive sins and that fully. There are no sins He will not forgive in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the sinner's only hope, and if he rests here in sincere faith, he is sure of pardon and that full and free."^{*}

^{*}The SDA Bible Commentary, vol. 7, pp. 912, 913.

God's Most Effective Weapon

EVIDENCE

Rom. 5:8

The key text for this week shows how God has given evidence of His unfathomable love for fallen humanity. The word "commendeth" is translated from the Greek word *sunistao*, which means to place together, to set with another by way of presenting or introducing him, to be composed of, to consist.*

God didn't just send us His feeling of goodwill and benevolence. He didn't limit the expression of His love to ministry of the angels. He Himself comprised His love and came to this world to die for us. Jesus was the divine embodiment of infinite love. In the most favorable way possible, God presented His love to us in that while we were still His enemies He gave Christ to die for us.

Love is the only power that can change enemies into being true friends. God made this costly display of love for the purpose of changing sinners from enemies to friends. Certainly it has worked. Saints are the evidence that God's love as expressed in Jesus Christ changes enemies to allies. Lives are changed from rebellion, hatred, and immorality to submission, love, and purity.

Even secular history illustrates the efficacy of the principle of showing kindness to enemies. After World War II the nations of Europe and Japan were devastated. The specter of Communism taking over Europe as fascism had done after World War I became a real threat. To meet this threat the United States instituted the Marshall Plan, which pumped over \$13 billion in aid, machinery, and equipment into these countries to rebuild their economies. Among the recipients of this aid were countries who had fought against the United States in the war. This aid made it possible for these countries to build strong economies and strong democracies, which have contributed to world peace. Not only so, but these countries have become leading donors of aid to developing nations around the world.

**Love is the only power that
can change enemies into
being true friends.**

God, the Author of this love-your-enemy principle, is working on a grander scale than the United States. He is using the awesome power of this principle in the death of Jesus not only to change sinners but also to confirm the heavenly intelligences in their love for Him. In Jesus, God is not only ensuring that the time will come when there will be peace on earth but that there will be eternal universal peace.

*PC Study Bible, *Thayer's Definition.d*

Wednesday
April 2

Love's Insurmountable Gift

HOW-TO

Matt. 18:21, 22; Rom. 5:20

"How often," Peter asked, "shall I forgive my brother?"

Christ replied, "Until seventy times seven."

What is the real issue Jesus wants Peter to focus on? Are there deeper issues at stake here? Why should God be willing to forgive us "seventy times seven"? God's great heart of love is insurmountable no matter what we've done.

I should be willing to forgive someone who hurts me over and over again. Mary was known in Bethany, not for anything good that she had done, but because she had taken what didn't belong to her. Wives and children had been hurt by Mary's loose ways. Did Mary deserve the forgiveness of God? Seven times Jesus worked on her behalf. It

**Terrible things take place
in all our lives.**

wasn't until she recognized that if we look at our sins, we'll become more like them, but if we look at Christ, we'll become more like Him.

Terrible things take place in all our lives, but we have a loving

heavenly Father who does not let us go and who is present in the midst of our pain and sadness, in our cries that go unheeded by others. How often we think we must feel as if we're forgiven in order to know that we can be loved by God. Most of us are guilt ridden; we feel there is no place in God's arms for us.

What does it mean to be forgiven by God? Sadly most of us do not understand the answer to this because we still believe that we must do something good in order to earn that forgiveness which is entirely by faith in Jesus alone, and is a gift not given through any merit of our own.

"Every soul may say: [wrote Ellen White] 'By His [Christ's] perfect obedience He has satisfied the claims of the law, and my only hope is found in looking to Him as my substitute and surety, who obeyed the law perfectly for me. By faith in His merits I am free from the condemnation of the law. He clothes me with His righteousness, which answers all the demands of the law. I am complete in Him who brings in everlasting righteousness. He presents me to God in the spotless garment of which no thread was woven by any human agent.'"^{*} The forgiveness of God is so vast that it is able to take in the sins of everyone and throw them into oblivion.

REACT

Why is forgiveness of sins linked so closely to peace of mind?

^{*}*Selected Messages*, bk. 1, p. 396.

Canceling Debts

OPINION

Matt. 6:12

The idea of forgiveness hasn't seemed to satisfy the part of me that demands justice. Are Christians just called to be walked on by others, forgiving and forgetting?

I found the answer in Matthew 6:12, " 'Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors'" (NKJV). You see, when someone wrongs me, I feel they owe me something. My offended soul demands restitution, an admission of wrong, suffering a few consequences, or changing. At least being sorry! When I forgive, I cancel a debt.

Forgiveness is not saying that the wrong done to me was OK. In fact, the idea of canceling a debt acknowledges a debt was incurred. I've been robbed of something a godly relationship would have given me. I'm not ignoring that I've been hurt. It doesn't mean I can't take steps to deal with repetitive problems. If a crime has been committed, forgiveness doesn't cancel a civil debt. I cancel their emotional debt to me. When I forgive, their sin against God or government is not canceled. But their debt to me is canceled. Forgiveness is giving God your right to revenge.

**I'm not ignoring that
I've been hurt.**

Canceling a debt means I am not waiting for the person to do something to make it up to me. My heart may gradually turn bitter if I feel they have to make a move before I am willing to forgive. Nursing resentment can stunt emotional and spiritual growth.

Releasing someone of their debt to me, whether I verbalize it to them or not, also releases me. It frees me to relate to my offender and deal with the issue without anger, bitterness, or revenge. It keeps me from becoming critical or judgmental. It protects me from emotional scar tissue that can leave me cynical or unreachable in other relationships. It allows me to rejoice when God works in their life, even when He blesses them.

Forgiveness is not necessarily easy. Deep hurts summon strong emotions, and I may need to weep with God and struggle through my feelings with Him. Through forgiving and healing, though, I can come to the point that feelings of pain and anger do not accompany the memory.

When I forgive, I am set free. The restitution my offended soul demands is annulled. I will cancel a debt. God will see to it that justice is served, but I will show mercy. After all, I, too, am a debtor.

REACT

Does my forgiveness mean the person no longer has to pay their debt to society (e.g., serve prison term, pay fine, lose license, etc.)?

Sonia Huenergardt, Burtonsville, Maryland

Faces of Forgiveness

EXPLORATION

Psalm 51; Luke 7:36-50; Eph. 4:32

CONCLUDE

Forgiveness is a cornerstone of Christian life, and like any cornerstone, it extends in two directions. God forgives us freely, no matter what we've done, because of Jesus' sacrifice on Calvary and His own immense love for us. We, in turn, are called to offer the same generous, grace-filled forgiveness to others—no matter what they've done to us. God even shows us that there's a clear relationship between our ability to extend forgiveness to others and our ability to accept the forgiveness He offers. A truly forgiving spirit is one of His gifts.

CONSIDER

- Creating a "forgiveness collage" from images, phrases, and headlines cut out of newspapers and magazines. As you do so, think about what situations in our world today cry out most for the saving grace of forgiveness.
- Writing a letter to someone whose forgiveness you need to ask, or someone you need to forgive. The dynamics of the relationship will determine whether the letter is better sent or kept to yourself. Either way, the process of writing it will help you work through what forgiveness means in this relationship.
- Working with a small group of friends to dramatize the story in Luke 7 about the woman who anointed Jesus' feet, and performing it as part of a program about forgiveness.
- Composing music for David's prayer for forgiveness in Psalm 51 and singing it as your own prayer to God.
- Telling a friend a story about a time when you felt freely forgiven for something wrong you had done.
- Posting a question about forgiveness in an online discussion forum of religious issues or current events. Find out how people view the role of forgiveness in such conflict areas as Northern Ireland, the Middle East, America's war on terrorism, etc. Discuss this question: Is forgiveness an impossible ideal or a real solution to human problems?

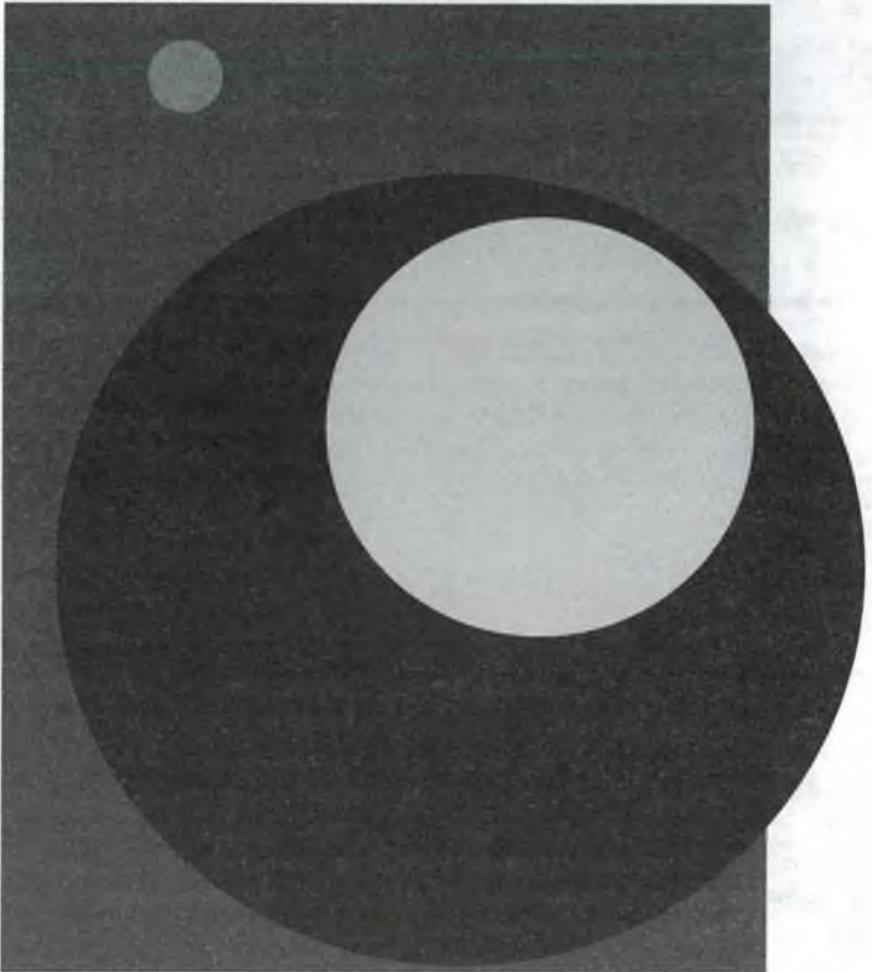
CONNECT

Steps to Christ, "Repentance" and "Confession."

Corrie ten Boom, *Tramp for the Lord*, "Love Your Enemy."

Campaign for Forgiveness Research: www.forgiving.org

The **Secret** of **Forgiveness**



“The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin’ ”

(Exod. 34:6, 7, NKJV).

Forgive and Forget?

INTRODUCTION

Exod. 32:32

In the film *The Mission*, Robert De Niro portrayed a slave-trader Spaniard who had a change of heart because of the forgiving spirit of the South American Indians whom he had persecuted. They were being captured and shipped to Spain to be sold as slaves because they were heathen and ignorant. Yet these heathens had a forgiving spirit powerful enough to change even the Spaniard who thought he was closer to God than others.

It is difficult for human beings to forgive someone they do not care for. On the

This shows us that God truly loves us even though we have been unfaithful to Him.

contrary, it is quite easy to forgive someone you love. God showed us a peculiar way to forgive. In the book of Hosea, it is strange for God to ask someone to take a prostitute as a wife and

willingly forgive all the hurtful and embarrassing sins she has committed. This shows us that God truly loves us even though we have been unfaithful to Him.

When Moses pleaded with God to forgive the sins of the Israelites or remove his name from the book of life, it showed that Moses was really becoming more like God—patient, understanding, and full of compassion. Moses walked and talked with God as a good Friend. That's why he dared to negotiate with Him even though his eternal life was at stake.

In his poem, Edwin Markham wrote:

“He drew a circle that shut me out,
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout,
But love and I had a wit to win,
We drew a circle which took him in.”

The secret of forgiveness is love. God loves us enough to forgive us again and again. How can we be forgiving to our fellow humanity as God has been freely forgiving us? If our God is the God of love, do we reflect His love through our act of forgiving, even our enemies?

Turning Away God's Wrath

EVIDENCE

Neh. 9:17; Jer. 36:3; Ps. 86:5; 130:4

God's forgiving nature was manifest centuries before Jesus came in the flesh. He revealed Himself to Israel as the God of mercy and grace in some of the books of Hebrew Scripture. God on Sinai gave His most majestic revelation to Moses. He put Moses in a cleft in a rock so Moses could see the Lord's majestic glory as He passed by. "Theophany" is a word defined as an incident when God made striking and temporary appearances in the earthly realm to a select individual or group for the purpose of communicating a message or revealing God's nature and character (1 Kings 19:11). We should associate Sinai not only with the proclamation of the law, but also with the revelation of God's character.

The Old Testament often speaks about the wrath, or anger, of God. This wrath of God is a terrible reality. His wrath is not some temporary passionate emotion. It is the Lord's permanent unchangeable revulsion against sin.

Sin is the opposite of God's holiness and His benevolent purposes for His creation. It is an ever-present reality that enslaves the human race and has corrupted God's created order. It is ultimately against God, God's laws, God's creation, God's covenant, and God's purposes. It is the basic corrupting agent in the entire universe.

God's opposition to sin, especially bold and defiant sin, is expressed in strong language in the Bible. God cannot in justice leave sin unpunished. Sin must receive its righteous condemnation and punishment, which is ultimate death and complete destruction.

The Bible shows that God's wrath can be turned away! From the biblical perspective, humanity is subjected to the created order and accountable to the Creator for violations of this order. The condition would be hopeless if the Creator were not mercifully disposed toward His creatures. God is eager to pardon (Neh. 9:17; Jer. 36:3; Ps. 86:5; 130:4), to find humility and repentance (2 Chron. 7:14; Ps. 86:5), and the will to change (Deuteronomy 30; Num. 14:18). Amazingly, He provides atonement for sin (Ps. 64:1-3; 79:9; 85:1-3). The emphasis is not on humanity propitiating God, but on God providing the propitiation. The provision for forgiveness as atonement/expiation has been made by God Himself to remedy the condition of sinners. For God is a God of mercy who forgives sin (Exod. 32:11-14; 34:6, 7). He delights in mercy (John 3:5-10; Ps. 103:6-14). He desires to forgive human sins and to renew the relationship between Himself and sinners. What a God! What a Savior!

**God's wrath can be
turned away!**

Monday
April 7

Forgiveness in the Hebrew Bible

LOGOS

Exod. 32:1-14, 32; Ps. 25:18; 32:1; 78:38; Hosea 1-3

God created the world with His love. We see throughout the Bible His love for the world. He loved Lucifer too! Before humankind fell into sin, the plan of salvation was laid. From the first chapter of the Old Testament to the last, we witness God's love, mercy, and forgiveness for humankind.

After their sin, Adam and Eve received immediate forgiveness from God. He promised them the Deliverer; the skin coat given them portrayed His forgiveness. If humanity follows God's plan of salvation, they will again receive eternal life. The first book of the Old Testament begins with life and death; the last book promises the Sun of Righteousness—Christ the Redeemer, who will bring the fullness of life to all humankind.

The great plan of salvation is to be accomplished. For the love of humanity, God worked through the children of Israel to bring good news to the world. The Savior was promised. But while God worked to accomplish His promise, Satan

God loved Lucifer too!

was also working to overthrow the plan. He used all means to contort it. By the hands of the Egyptians, Satan all but demolished the knowledge of the true God from the

minds of His people. It is interesting that Satan was succeeding in using the people who claimed to be God's followers to distort God's plan.

On their trip to the Promised Land, the Israelites proved their disobedient spirit. God also proved His merciful love for them. The Israelites knew the importance of the Day of Atonement, that through the work of the high priest, the nation's sins are forgiven.

The beauty of God's forgiveness in the Old Testament is the same as in the New Testament. For sinners, there is always a second chance. "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past" (Isa. 43:18, NIV). God told the Israelites not only to forget the sins they had committed, but that they will see greater miraculous events that He will perform for them. "See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland" (verse 19, NIV).

Throughout the Old Testament are events showing God's love and mercy toward the people of Israel. The story of the idol worship at Sinai demonstrated God's love for His people. The whole nation was saved through Moses' intercession (Exod. 32:1-14). God also illustrated His love through the prophet Hosea and his unfaithful wife demonstrating God's everlasting love. Hosea's love, which redeemed his wife,

was to be a lesson to unfaithful Israel as to how God will redeem them (Hos. 2; 3).

“To our merciful God the act of punishment is a strange act.”¹ The Bible describes this act as a “strange work” (Isa. 28:21), for it is contrary to His nature.

The strange act God had performed at Sinai was full of mercy to stop the apostasy and greater sin. “Unless punishment had been speedily visited upon transgression, the same results would again have been seen. The earth would have become as corrupt as in the days of Noah. Had these transgressors been spared, evil would have followed, greater than resulted from sparing the life of Cain. It was the mercy of God that thousands should suffer, to prevent the necessity of visiting judgments upon millions. In order to save the many, He must punish the few.”²

Forgiveness and the Second Chance

For those who repent there is always a second chance. King David recognized God’s mercy toward him. After David committed his sin against Bathsheba and Uriah, he felt deeply the grievous crime. Yet he praised the Lord’s mercies: “The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children’s children, to such as keep His covenant, and to those who remember His commandments to do them” (Ps. 103:17, 18, NKJV).

During the 1960s and ’70s the Communist insurgency was rampant in Southeast Asia. Following the revolution in China, Communism reached into neighboring countries. Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia experienced civil wars between democratic and Communist supporters. Thailand was not free from this insurgency. Communism was propagated and accepted by many students, farmers, and civilians in the country. The injustice in society stirred them to change for better government. In 1971 the military regime suppressed these people. Hundreds were killed and thousands fled into the jungle to join the Red Army.

The king of Thailand, his advisors, and the newly elected government granted amnesty to all who were misled and forgave their wrongdoing. There was a great change in the country. Thousands of Communist followers left jungles and returned home, students returned to school, and the war ceased.

Today three ministers in the present government are former participants of the Communist army. Many of these misled students are now professors teaching politics in government universities, and many are civil officers. The king and the people forgave them and gave them a second chance to become faithful servants to the king and the country. The Thai word used for the amnesty law for forgiveness means the person is “pardoned as though he has never committed sin before.”

If an earthly king can forgive and forget the sin of his subjects, how much more can the King of the universe grant us His unlimited mercy? In the books of the Old Testament readers will always find words of warning, rebuke, reproof—and words of hope and inspiration.

1. *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 628.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 325.

Tuesday
April 8

The Forever Loving and Merciful God

TESTIMONY

Ezek. 33:11

"In the word, God is spoken of as 'the everlasting God.' This name embraces past, present, and future. God is from everlasting to everlasting. He is the Eternal One."¹

"God is approached through Jesus Christ, the Mediator, the only way through which He forgives sins. God cannot forgive sins at the expense of His justice, His holiness, and His truth. But He does forgive sins and that fully. There are no sins He will not forgive in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the sinner's only hope, and if he rests here in sincere faith, he is sure of pardon and that full and free. There is only one channel and that is accessible to all, and through that channel a rich and abundant forgiveness awaits the penitent, contrite soul and the darkest sins are forgiven."²

"These lessons were taught to the chosen people of God thousands of years ago, and repeated in various symbols and figures, that the work of truth might be riveted in every heart, that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins. The great lesson embodied in the sacrifice of every bleeding victim, impressed in every

**"There are no sins He will
not forgive."**

ceremony, inculcated by God Himself, was that through the blood of Christ alone is forgiveness of sins; yet how many carry the galling yoke and how few feel the force of this truth and act upon it personally, and derive the blessings they might receive through a perfect faith in the blood of the Lamb of God."³

"Whoever under the reproof of God will humble the soul with confession and repentance, as did David, may be sure that there is hope for him. Whoever will in faith accept God's promises, will find pardon. The Lord will never cast away one truly repentant soul. He has given this promise: 'Let him take hold of My strength, that he may make peace with Me; and he shall make peace with Me.' Isaiah 27:5. 'Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.' Isaiah 55:7."⁴

1. *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, p. 270.

2. *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, pp. 912, 913.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 913.

4. *Patriarch and Prophets*, p. 726.

A Real-Life Drama

HOW-TO

Hos. 1:2

All the warning and rebukes have been given to the Israelites to no avail. When everything else failed, God resorted to an acted drama to point His people to the extent of their iniquity. Hosea, instructed by God to marry a prostitute named Gomer, finds his domestic life to be an accurate and tragic dramatization of the unfaithfulness of God's people. God abhors the sins of His people; judgment is certain; but God's loyal love stands firm.

Hosea was instructed to go and take himself a wife of harlotry and children of harlotry to show to the people how far they had committed a great adultery against God by their alliance and worshiping of the surrounding nations' idols and gods. How does this demonstrate God's forgiving spirit? If it were in your case, how long or how many times would you extend your forgiveness? Why?

How many times
would you extend
your forgiveness?

In our materialistic world, we are busy seeking money, fame, degrees, amusements, etc., instead of the idolatry of the ancient times. Does God regard this in the same way as being idolatrous? How do we guard ourselves from falling into the same pit as of old?

1. Have a right perspective. Abraham "waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10, NKJV). This world is not our home. We are just passing through.

2. Feed your spiritual body. Fill your spiritual mind and soul with the Word of God, prayer, and witnessing.

3. Starve the flesh. Avoid feeding the fleshly lust with commercials, movies, novels, and the things of this world.

REACT

1. In what form(s), if any, does God use acted drama to rebuke us today?
2. Why is sin a permanent, unchangeable revulsion to God?
3. Why does God respond to repentant sinners?
4. How does God reveal His unchangeable wrath against sin and His loving mercy and forgiveness to sinners?
5. How can we help friends and neighbors to appreciate the wonderful mercy awaiting those who will come to God with repentant hearts? Be specific.

OPINION

Matt. 18:22

What she had done was terrible. All her friends refused to talk to her. Her teachers looked at her and said, "What a shame! She could have been somebody." Everyone hated her. Strangers passed her by and pitied the sad and lonesome look in her eyes. The question she needed an answer for was "Could anyone forgive me?"

How many times have we seen this happen to someone? How many times have we just passed them by and said nothing to them? It's time someone told them that God loves them, that He can forgive them, that it's not too late.

Abraham took matters into his own hands and got into trouble. The children of Israel were the people of never-ending complaints. They forsook God and went their own ways. How many times did God then extend His arm of love to help them get out of the consequences of their sin? David was

**It's time people were told
about the true God
of the Bible.**

a man of war. He killed so many people, did so many stupid things, and was a proud man. Solomon, the wisest man in history, succumbed to pride too.

How many times did God forgive these people? If you ask me, I don't know. I don't even want to count. But I'm sure that it was more than "seventy times seven" (Matt. 18:22, KJV). In spite of all the complaining, adultery, and basically every sin that the children of Israel committed, God continued to bless them. He helped them when they least wanted His help. He protected them when they forgot about Him. But most importantly, when they came to Him in repentance, He always forgave.

Abraham was called the friend of God and was the father of the nation of Israel. Israel became known as God's people. David was called a man after God's own heart and Jesus the Son of God was born of David's line. Solomon became known as the wisest man in the world and wrote beautiful poetry. If God can forgive them, He can forgive anyone, even the worst sinner on the earth.

It's time people were told about the true God of the Bible, the God of forgiveness—the One who sent His Son to die for us, so that we might live. It's time people heard of the One who is ever ready to come to our aid when we need help, the One who always forgives, no matter what we do. It's time someone told them.

REACT

1. H. M. S. Richards once said that some churches are so cold you could skate down the center aisle. What might that have to do with a spirit of forgiveness?
2. In the last seven days, how many people have you expected to be perfect and they failed you? How many perfect people have you met?

Forgiveness: Double-Edged Healing

EXPLORATION

Isa. 43:18, 19

CONCLUDE

Throughout the Old Testament there is a special word used to describe God. The word is *chesed*, and it is usually translated as “loving-kindness.” It reveals an essential element and characteristic of Divinity. The word also reveals an element we are to mirror in our lives. Loving-kindness calls on us to be kind enough either to overlook or not to respond in kind to slights and hurts. The loving part of *chesed* reflects a willingness to look honestly at any situation and then to look beyond it to see positive potential in people and relationships. It is the *chesed* of forgiveness that brings healing to all parties involved in difficult situations.

CONSIDER

- Using a piece of coarse rope, a thin ruler, or a belt, pull against a friend by each of you holding the object tightly in one hand. After a few moments of struggle, discuss: (1) how uncomfortable it is to hang on to a negative force; (2) what it feels like to experience tension and stress; (3) what it is like to let go (release and relax); (4) how forgiveness, or lack of it, is like this experience.
- Drawing a picture representing anger, resentment, and hate. Drawing a picture of forgiveness. Contrast the two pictures.
- Paraphrasing Isaiah 43:18, 19, using a current news headline or story of conflict in which forgiveness could or would make a difference in the outcomes of the story.
- Taking your pulse rate while visualizing open, warm, loving forgiveness and then by visualizing an unforgiving emphasis on past hurts, slights, or wounds.
- Reading Isaiah 43:18, 19 and contemplating this statement:
God is the One who comes to us
Out of the future
Picks up the broken pieces of the past
In order to give us a meaningful present.
- Spending some time in prayer and allowing God to reveal to you the ways in which you are—or have been—unforgiving.

CONNECT

The Desire of Ages, chap. 85.

Undeserved and Unasked for



“Do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?” (Rom. 2:4, NKJV).

Forgiveness May Not Help You

INTRODUCTION

2 Cor. 5:18-20

My wife's grandmother didn't come surfing last summer.

Not surprising? At 79, she still shoots serious waves lying on a board, foam 'round her neck, and much younger men staring. She also surfs the Internet, presents a community radio program, and travels—that's our Nan!

But last year Nan was mugged. A 15-year-old grabbed her bag with \$500 in it, but she wouldn't let go. He tried

to wrench it away and only succeeded in pulling her over.

Nan hit the pavement and broke her right arm, tearing muscles

and ligaments. He kept pulling, dragging her two meters across concrete. Eventually he quit. (She said, "I would have let go, but the strap had caught my wrist!") So the tough old ex-Pacific Islands missionary got up and walked herself to the hospital. She also gave police a great description—and a gang of eight are off the street.

Nan asked to speak to him in his cell. Police said he was so hardened and remorseless it would probably be counterproductive.

"What would you have told him?" I asked.

"That he was forgiven—even though his actions hurt me a lot," she said. "He might not have had much kindness or grace in his life."

That young punk is forgiven! He doesn't deserve it and hasn't asked for it, but he is. But forgiveness may never do him any good. He may stay selfish and violent rather than admit his fault and change. He will probably never have any relationship with Nan, who has so much fun and love and wise mentoring to offer.

Forgiving him has done Nan good. She won't let hate embitter her spirit or revenge waste her emotional energy. Yet this forgiveness is not weak—it still allows justice.

The Bible says God has forgiven us. Jesus died for all—He even bore the guilt and pain of people who would never repent. God has done His best and the universe knows it.

But will that do you any good? Only if you admit your selfish actions have hurt other people and that you need to change. Only if you start a relationship with God. *Then* forgiveness helps you.

The Bible's good news is that God is reconciled to you (2 Cor. 5:18; Rom. 5:10). Already—undeserved, unasked.

The Bible's good advice is "Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20, NKJV).

This summer Nan came swimming. Surfing next year?

Last year Nan was mugged.

Repentance: a Work and a Gift

LOGOS

Matt. 9:13; Acts 5:31; Rom. 2:4; 2 Cor. 7:9, 10; 2 Tim. 2:25, 26; 2 Pet. 3:9

The Importance of Repentance (2 Pet. 3:9)

“Repent!” was the first word of Peter’s response on the Day of Pentecost to the people’s question of “What shall we do?” (Acts 2:37, NKJV). “Repent!” was also the first and key word of the preaching of John the Baptist as he prepared the way for the earthly ministry of Jesus (Matt. 3:2). Paul identifies repentance as foundational (Heb. 6:1). In five of the messages to the seven churches of Revelation there are calls to repentance.

Why is repentance so foundational, so important? From even a casual reading

Why is repentance so foundational, so important?

of the Bible, it soon becomes apparent that God’s favor is shown to those who repent, while those who refuse to repent eventually meet God’s destructive anger. This is true

both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, where the last reference to repentance in the Bible is in Revelation 16:11, in which God’s wrath is poured out on those who do not repent. God’s favor, on the other hand, is linked with those who *do* repent. In Acts 11:18, for example, repentance is associated with life.

So since those who repent have life, and those who don’t have death (Luke 13:3, 5), repentance must be important. Is it necessary for everyone though? Acts 17:30 makes it plain that God “commands all men everywhere to repent” (NKJV). It is plain enough that every human being needs repentance, i.e., needs to repent, because “all have sinned” (Rom. 3:23, KJV).

Though God Himself has no need of repentance (Num. 23:19), the concept of repentance is still very important to Him. It is such an earnest desire of His that every human being repent, that He may even appear to be “slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9, NKJV). Further, the repentance of sinners makes all heaven rejoice (Luke 15:7).

Good Repentance—and Bad Repentance? (2 Cor. 7:9, 10)

Two disciples of Jesus demonstrate the opposing types of repentance alluded to in the above verse. Peter wept bitterly after the realization that he had denied Christ was brought home to him. Judas repented (Matt. 27:3) after he realized that he had betrayed innocent blood. Both had done similar things in betraying or denying their Lord. However, one was sorry because of the cost to himself, the other, at

least eventually, because of the cost to his Master. One demonstrated that worldly sorrow leads to death—by hanging himself. The other happily served his Master to the end, a leading apostle in the early church.

Repentance From Sin—and Repentance From Righteousness? (Matt. 9:13)

Examine the context of Matthew 9:13. The Pharisees claimed to be righteous, and accused Jesus of evil because He ate with sinners. Jesus' reply is really a gentle rebuke to the Pharisees, who were the ones in real need of repentance. There is great danger for those who claim to have spiritual insight to lose sight of their own need of repentance, and of a Savior. In Hebrews 6:1 Paul makes a similar point by saying that “dead works” (NKJV), i.e., false or self-righteousness, require repentance.

Repentance: Performing a Gift (Acts 5:31)

How can humans, who are naturally filled with “enmity against God” (Rom. 8:7, NKJV) of themselves turn away from sin and toward God (i.e., repent)? The answer is that we cannot (Jer. 13:23).

This poses a problem. To avoid perishing, we must do something that we cannot do. But the answer is that just as faith, forgiveness, salvation, victory, and righteousness are all gifts from God, so also is repentance. Notice how Acts 5:31; 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25, 26, each portray repentance as a gift from God.

So what is there for us to do? Why does God tell us to repent when repentance is something that He gives us? The reason is that God cannot force repentance on us. It is up to us to accept that gift. He does all He can to persuade us to receive the gift. But it is up to us to choose it. Hence this week's key text explains the process of humans choosing to repent, because of “the goodness of God” (Rom. 2:4, KJV).

When Job saw God's goodness, it caused him to realize his sinfulness and to “repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6, NKJV). Likewise as we contemplate the love of God as demonstrated at Calvary, we will be drawn to repentance—if we choose to accept it.

REACT

1. Explain in your own words the paradox of making sure we perform true repentance while realizing that repentance is a gift from God that we must accept and not perform in order to receive salvation.

2. From Acts 5:31, what can you say about the relationship between forgiveness and repentance? Does God wait for us to repent before He forgives us, or does He simultaneously give us both repentance and forgiveness? Or is the truth somewhere between these two pictures? Explain your answer.

Monday
April 14

Why Repentance Is Not About Us

TESTIMONY

2 Cor. 7:10

Christians have become quite accustomed to explaining the process of divine forgiveness. The whole process is often explained with only two words: "sin" and "repentance." There is a natural tendency for humans to view repentance as something that we feel and express in response to a sin that has caused us suffering.

"We often sorrow because our evil deeds bring unpleasant consequences to ourselves; but this is not repentance. Real sorrow for sin is the result of the working of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit reveals the ingratitude of the heart that has slighted and grieved the Saviour, and brings us in contrition to the foot of the cross."*

In reality, sin primarily hurts God. Sin by its nature is a selfish action and a statement to God that we think He does not know what is best for us. Obviously it is wrong and hurtful, given that He has made us, as well as every particle

**In reality, sin primarily
hurts God.**

in the universe. Therefore, our response to sin and repentance should primarily focus upon expressing sorrow for hurting God.

It is also clear that the Holy Spirit motivates real sorrow for sin. The Bible calls this godly sorrow (2 Cor. 7:10). Not only is godly sorrow a reflection of reality, it also enables us to escape the slide toward guilt or denial that is associated with feeling sorry for ourselves. Christians should live life with no regret because the pain they are causing is not permanent and God grants them forgiveness. Moreover, they live in hope of a time and place where there will be no more pain or sorrow.

In contrast, people engaged in worldly sorrow are faced with endless and confusing regret. They are faced with the impossible task of forgiving themselves, when they don't know why they cannot do the things that they feel that they should. They think that causing pain to themselves or other humans is the problem when it isn't. God is like a parent who is more hurt when their child is hurt than if they had been hurt. Ultimately, repentance is about dealing with pain caused to God.

REACT

How can one know when someone's repentance is genuine, that it isn't based on sorrow for one's own pain?

**The Desire of Ages*, p. 300.

Forgiveness: Beyond the Black Hole

EVIDENCE

Matt. 6:14

The only unique aspect of Christianity is that forgiveness is the central mechanism for humans to attain immortality. However, forgiveness can appear simplistic, a copout, and illogical in comparison to other religious logic that emphasizes the ability of humans to achieve immortality through sincere diligent effort: kindness to fellow humans, sacrificial behavior, traveling to special places of worship, and participation in rituals aimed at communication or honor.

Christian forgiveness, however, is not a simple copout or illogical. It is clear that in order to be the receivers of forgiveness from the supernatural, humans must be the givers of forgiveness to other humans: " 'If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you' " (Matt. 6:14, NIV).

**We want black to be a
little blacker.**

This aspect of forgiveness has special, logical force if it is remembered that people who sin against us will usually be our enemies not friends. Though it is easy to think we have been asked to do the impossible, to love someone we hate, the Christian solution is to hate the action but not the person. If this seems an unattainable distinction, it is critical to remember that there is one person that we have been doing this to all our lives—ourselves. We have hated our own actions but not the person that we are. It is only because we love ourselves that we are sorry for the horrible things that we do. Christianity requires us to hate the actions of our enemies in the same way we hate our own bad behavior—being sorry that the person did such a thing, and hoping that somehow, sometime, somewhere, he can be restored.

What level of forgiveness do we have? After learning about a horrible atrocity committed by religious fanatics where thousands of people are killed, and then, at a later date, someone suggests that not all followers of that religion are that bad, what is our reaction to the second story? If our reaction is determination to cling to the first story with the pleasure of thinking your enemies are as bad as possible, then we have taken one step toward becoming demons. We want black to be a little blacker—maybe even gray to be black. If we keep going, one day we will say that white is black, and insist that everything—God, friends, even ourselves—is bad. We will have entered into the black hole of the soul, falling at light speed toward a universe of pure hatred.

HOW-TO

Matt. 9:13; Rom. 2:4; 2 Cor. 7:9, 10

Forgiveness is tough. How many times have you found yourself gulping deeply with resentment as you “lovingly” forgave someone who has wronged you? I don’t know about you, but such a reluctance to forgive is all too common in my life. So how can we become better forgivers? How can we love our neighbors more? I think these are the wrong questions to ask.

Christians have been asking these questions of themselves for much too long a time without getting any closer to finding a theoretical or practical solution. Better

How can we become better forgivers?

questions might be: How can we love God more? How can we appreciate our own need for forgiveness more? Before we can truly love and forgive others, we need to have come to terms

with the essence of how much God has loved and forgiven each of us. A wise statement I once heard that seems to disclose the key to successful Christianity goes like this (and please forgive me for not knowing who it was who said it!): “You can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving!”

This says that the order in which we approach the way we live our lives is important. Giving people love and forgiveness for the sake of it is hard work—a task we all fail at every day! But by developing an appreciation for God and a relationship with Him, the Giver and Source of love, we have a divine motivation and a spiritual potency that can empower us to be the kind of Christians we all want to be.

Here are some suggestions that might help us better embrace and comprehend what God has done for us:

1. Read about it. The nature of God’s grace and forgiveness is abundant in both the Old and the New Testament. The life of Jesus is guaranteed to give you great insight into what it means to forgive. Believing that we “have it together” is a fallacy and prevents us from truly accepting the forgiveness God has for us. By looking at Jesus our shortcomings are vividly highlighted.

2. Pray about it. Ask the Holy Spirit to convict you of your need for Christ. Then you will appreciate more the magnitude of what He has done for you.

3. Let God do the motivating. Only He can give us the strength we need to live the Christian life.

4. Don’t look back. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9, NKJV, emphasis supplied). Harboring the guilt associated with sin is destructive. If you are forgiven, praise God you are free! In fact more than that, let the elation that freedom has given you empower you to forgive those around you.

“Live and Let Live” Versus “Live and Let Die”

OPINION

2 Cor. 7:9, 10

I got off the phone and sat there fuming. *How dare she criticize me?* I raged. *After all that time and effort I put into that project, how could she think I did anything wrong?* I immediately wanted to quit the project. I sat back and breathed deeply, exhaling slowly. *Find calm*, I thought. *Breathe*.

As I slowly let go of my hurt and anger, I found myself thinking about that key word—forgiveness. As a Christian, I’m professing to emulate Christ, right? He forgave; so must I. I wrestled with that thought and felt the surge of anger again. *Why must it always be me making the effort?*

Trying to regain control, I looked at myself; I didn’t like what I saw. How quick I was to judge and kill off someone in my heart. Have you ever noticed that no matter how small an incident, we find ways to justify ourselves and easily move into self-righteousness? I felt like such a fraud! How could I profess to be a Christian when I secretly had nothing Christlike in my heart?

I shared my experience with a friend and found the angry feelings welling up again. She kindly understood and said, “You are a religious and a spiritual person, Nina. You have to dig down deep to find love and forgiveness for this person. People

He forgave; so must I.

who usually react this way have low self-esteem.” I don’t know if it was her tone of voice or the words she said, but I was struck to the core. You see, here she was a professed atheist referring to how to treat someone else. I was struck by the irony and ashamed at my reaction. It was *I* who was being uncharitable. In that moment of recognition, I silently prayed, realizing my error, my sin, asking God to forgive me. My contrite heart repented.

I called my “criticizer” up and although she was not available, I left a message saying I was sorry that she was upset and asking her if we could go to lunch to talk about the future of the project. When I hung up, I felt my heart lift.

Paul once said, “Godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation” (2 Cor. 7:10, NKJV). Although this lesson was painful, I feel changed and renewed and I praise God for the difference!

REACT

What part, if any, does fear play in holding grudges, nursing hurts, and feeling anger at those who sin against us?

Forgiveness and Repentance

EXPLORATION

Rom. 2:4

CONCLUDE

Forgiveness of others is necessary but not sufficient for salvation. Although freely given by Christ, it must be accepted and actuated. Forgiveness must be based on universal applications, not just personal, limited, and selfish. The motive for appropriate forgiveness is godly sorrow, not guilt and/or denial, nor even a kind of reprisal. Forgiveness is more important than many religious acts because the latter can be hypocrisy. Forgiveness should focus on the bad behavior of others, but not the individual, and should also include our own bad behavior. A faith that God forgave us is needed in the act of forgiveness.

CONSIDER

- Discussing with friends why it may be easier to forgive yourself than to forgive others, or vice versa.
- Making a list of metaphors for forgiveness, such as blotting out, purging, washing, etc. Decide which metaphor best describes forgiveness for you.
- Discussing with friends why you agree or disagree with Augustine that the only sin against the Holy Spirit that cannot be forgiven is despair.
- Interviewing a non-Christian about the ideas of (a) asking for forgiveness from their supreme being(s), and (b) if there is provision for their getting forgiveness from their god(s).
- Developing a nonverbal apology to another driver for an inconvenience that you caused. Use this method next time it is warranted.
- Viewing the film *Les Misérables* and analyzing the role of forgiveness—and lack of it—in Jean Valjean's experience.
- Listing the people you know who have left the church, perhaps by drifting away or because of some action on the part of the church or a church member. Ask God to show you how you might effectively invite them to return and fellowship with you and the church again.

CONNECT

Leviticus 5:5, 17; 6:4; Psalm 51:1-4; Jeremiah 31:34; Luke 11:4.

Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus*, pp. 30, 37-48.

How **Jesus** forgave



“Jesus said to her, ‘Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more’ ” (John 8:11, NKJV).

INTRODUCTION

John 12:27

Growing up in Hawaii is hard when you're white. It's not an easy thing to be a minority. Imagine coming from a life in West Virginia, where everyone is one color, to a world filled with nationalities from all over the Pacific. I reminded her every day where she was from, what she was, that she didn't belong.

My freshman year in high school was when I first officially met Jessica Williams.

**I don't remember ever
being so mean to someone.**

I must have made her cry at least once a week. I made jokes about her parents and how pale they were, and how she probably was going to end up marrying her cousin, being from

the South. I slapped her more than once, for no particular reason either. I just did it because I could, because she was white.

"Don't try to act like you're from here, Jessica. You don't belong."

"Are you hungry for some grits?"

"Do you have a cousin named Cletus?"

I don't remember ever being so mean to someone. Still, every week she'd ask me the same question, make the same statements.

"Do you want to come to vespers, John? It's going to be really fun! You should come to church with me sometime."

I never could understand how she could turn the other cheek to me, but she did. Even after all my taunting, both physical and mental, she still wanted to share her God with me.

Jessica had something I didn't have. She understood the forgiveness brought on by a relationship with God. If someone so much as looks at me the wrong way, I have something out for them. But the God I serve was able to forgive even the man who drove the nails into His hands. He was able to forgive even Judas. A God so great was able to forgive even a man such as me.

As Christians, we often talk about emulating Christ by giving to the needy or helping the sick. In trying to emulate Christ, however, we often forget what His main goal on earth was. He came to forgive. If Christ's purpose was to forgive the sins of the world and we want to be like Christ, shouldn't our purpose be to forgive those around us, too? Every one of us, if we think about it hard enough and are truly honest with ourselves, will come to the conclusion that we are the last people who should've become Christians. We are the worst sinners. We are the most perverted, the most hateful, and the most prejudiced. Still, we can stand before the Savior with the assurance that we have been pardoned, forgiven, and cleansed by the perfect blood of He who forgives.

Desperate to Forgive

EVIDENCE

John 8:1-11

“In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” (John 8:5, NIV). The question was meant to leave Jesus with no choice. It was as if the accusers asked, “The law says death. What do you say?” What they didn’t realize is that their words echoed the accusation Lucifer made against them. What we sometimes forget is that this is also the cry of justice itself against you and me. Can God be both keeper of the law and Savior to us?

As Jesus beheld this life that had been cast at His feet and into His control, He alone knew the answer, and its cost. He said, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her” (verse 7, NIV). Then He bent down and wrote in the sand. What He wrote were most likely the sins of those very teachers of the law who moments before were heralding the sins of another. One by one they turned and walked away, this time they felt shame.

The scribes may have challenged Jesus’ loyalty to the law, but He does not bend to a hypocrite’s manipulation of the law. Jesus bends only to lift up the hurting. Salvation is His purpose. It is for this alone He bends, and it is for this He was broken on Calvary. At that cost He brings us forgiveness still today, all because Jesus is desperate to forgive. Everything He did in His ministry He did so that He could forgive you and me.

Between the scribes and the woman, many sinners were revealed that day. Only one was forgiven. Only the adulteress. She knew she was a sinner, but she remained with Jesus. For the first time someone knew what she had done and did not condemn her. As she sat at Jesus’ feet, she felt a growing love for the One who had saved her. She had received grace.

Jesus’ last recorded words to her are “Go now and leave your life of sin” (verse 11, NIV). I can imagine that in her love for her Rescuer there was nothing she desired more. In her love she found both desire and strength. This does not mean that she never sinned again, but her loyalty was no longer to herself (and her sin). Now her loyalty was instead to God. She lived by grace.

**Can God be both keeper of
the law and Savior to us?**

Thomas Aquinas once said, “To say that someone has the grace of God is to say that there is something supernatural in the soul, coming forth from God.”* To be forgiven is to have God in your heart. Forgiveness is not only a serious matter to God, it is His greatest passion, and that forgiveness brings to the life of the forgiven a change of loyalty from self to Savior.

**Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 119, a. 1.

Monday
April 21

The Paradox of a Pair of Doctrines

LOGOS

Mark 2:1-11; Luke 5:1-11; 23:34; John 8:1-11

Forgiveness can be so easy to receive but so hard to offer sometimes. I wonder why that is? Jesus is so ready to offer it; but, if we are to be the recipients, we seem to try so many other ways. And if someone else is the one to be delivered from the bondage of sin, we so often think there should be more to it!

Jesus was in Capernaum, on the north end of the Sea of Galilee, preaching the Word to a full house (Mark 2:1-11). The faith of some friends revealed itself in the slight modification of the ceiling and the presentation of a crippled man at the feet of Jesus—and right in the middle of the sermon! I wonder if He was talking about forgiveness or healing? If so, He was the Master of sermon illustrations. They brought the man for healing, Jesus offered forgiveness, and the religious leaders were upset. What is it about forgiveness that keeps us from being excited for the forgiven one?

The same sea, just a different name in this book (Gennesaret is the same as Galilee), another crowd, and Jesus is still preaching the Word (Luke 5:1-11). This time some fishing friends loan Him a boat, maybe so He can be seen and heard better. At the end of His discourse (it must not have been a Sabbath sermon because Jesus sent them off to work right afterwards), He gave the experts in fishing an experience in faith. Everyone knows you don't fish in deep water. The Sea of Galilee was spring-fed, and it was in those shallow, warmer waters that

Without our acceptance, the offer is like no offer at all.

the best fishing took place. But they must have liked the Commander because they obeyed the command, even when (or especially when) it didn't make sense, and the

catch of fish resulted in a cry of fear: " 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord! ' " (verse 8, NKJV). When we come into the presence of the One who can forgive, why is our first reaction too often to try to escape rather than to be thankful for the opportunity?

"Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34, KJV). The ultimate of Jesus' command to turn the other cheek (Matt. 5:39) came on the cross when Jesus, physically and voluntarily, turned the other wrist—and ankle and side. But He turned from an expected response of anger and self-preservation to the unexpected but now famous phrase of forgiveness. Why—or how—can Someone be so unjustly hurt and be willing to offer such unjustified forgiveness? Or maybe the better question: Is there any justified forgiveness?

We know the story of the woman caught in adultery too well. It is built amazingly around the woman not the man. That's bad enough, and then the male spiritual leaders used this opportunity not to offer the woman forgiveness and a new focus for her life, but to use her trauma as the Savior's trap. Why would we sometimes rather see a soul condemned than a Savior convince a sinner by His actions that He actually does love the sinner but hate the sin? You are forgiven; go and sin no more.

In the story of the man let down through the roof, Jesus offered forgiveness and they didn't think He could do that. So He offered healing as proof that He had the power to forgive. The result of "Take up your bed and walk," (Mark 2:9, NKJV) proved the validity of "Your sins are forgiven" (verse 9, NKJV).

In the story of the catch of fish, Jesus offered fish in abundance and the command not to fear His presence and power, but to rejoice in the presence of the Forgiver. He offered in its place a glorious future in a new type of fishing: for people.

In the story of Jesus' forgiveness on the cross, Jesus offered forgiveness to His executioners. No one seems to be exempt from the gift of forgiveness.

In the story of the woman caught in adultery, Jesus offered a *woman* (unheard of in that society) *forgiveness* (apparently unheard of in the sanctuary). Even the unaccepted part of society was not exempt from the offer of forgiveness. "He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9, NIV).

In the first story the command to "Take up your bed" (Mark 2:9, NKJV) resulted in the man taking up his bed. I wonder if he was as quick to respond to "Your sins are forgiven" (verse 9, NKJV).

In the second story Peter's fear of the presence of Jesus was quelled by the Savior's assurance, and the result was Peter's acceptance of the call to be fishers of men.

In the third story those needing forgiveness, except for one thief and one soldier that we know of, missed the gift because they decided to assassinate the Promise Giver rather than accept the promise.

In the fourth story the woman knew she was wrong and expected the worst. But by acknowledging her situation she was able to accept the gift of Jesus: "Neither do I condemn you" (John 8:11, NKJV). "If we confess our sins" (1 John 1:9, NIV).

The provision for forgiveness has been provided. The example of how this works has been extended through the life of One who provides the forgiveness. Now it depends on us. Will we accept the forgiveness offered? Without our acceptance, the offer is like no offer at all. The doctrine of forgiveness is there. The doctrine of acceptance is our choice. We must marry this pair of doctrines.

Tuesday
April 22

Jesus' Amazing Compassion

TESTIMONY

John 8:1-11; Eph. 1:7

The Pharisees and teachers of the law brought a woman “‘caught in the very act of adultery’” (John 8:4, NLT) to Jesus and asked Him what should be done to her. “Giving no sign that He had heard their question, He stooped, and fixing His eyes upon the ground, began to write in the dust.”¹

What was Jesus writing? Was He drawing pictures or what? We are extremely privileged to have Ellen White’s writings to give us special insights and special blessings. She says that as the teachers and Pharisees looked at what Jesus was writing they saw “the guilty secrets of their own lives.”²

“‘If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her’” (John 8:7, NIV). No one threw a stone. Some of them had their sins written on the ground, so they surely wouldn’t dare throw any stones, and the rest of the people knew Jesus was right, so all of them left.

“The woman had stood before Jesus, cowering with fear. His words, ‘He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone,’ had come to her as a death sentence. She dared not lift her eyes to the Saviour’s face, but silently awaited her doom. In astonishment she saw her accusers depart speechless and confounded; then those words of hope fell upon her ear, ‘Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.’ Her heart was melted, and she cast herself at the feet of Jesus, sobbing out her grateful love, and with bitter tears confessing her sins.”³

No one threw a stone.

No one condemned her, and neither did Jesus. He did tell her that she couldn’t keep on with that lifestyle, though. The words from Jesus, “‘leave your life of sin’” (John 8:11, NIV), apply to all of us today. Jesus’ love, compassion, and forgiveness changed that woman’s life. If we let Him, He will change our lives as well. “It is peace that you need—Heaven’s forgiveness and peace and love in the soul. Money cannot buy it, intellect cannot procure it, wisdom cannot attain to it; you can never hope, by your own efforts, to secure it. But God offers it to you as a gift, ‘without money and without price.’ Isaiah 55:1.”⁴

1. *The Desire of Ages*, p. 461.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, p. 462.

4. *Steps to Christ*, p. 49.

Forgive, Forget, Forever

HOW-TO

John 8:11

Rejection. Cruelty. Scorn. Your friends betray you. Your family disowns you. Your life is in shambles.

Maybe you've felt this way; maybe you haven't. Maybe the worst thing someone's done to you is finish off your bag of Oreos. Whatever the crime, it's easy to hold a grudge.

But why not try forgiving?

"Forgiving?" you say, "No way. Not after what they did." True, forgiving is not easy; no one said

It's just like riding a bike.

it was. And although we're reluctant to do it, Jesus provided a good example for us to follow.

1. Get help. It's human nature to hold grudges, which is why we need God's help to forgive. Knowing that He was about to face His greatest trial, Jesus spent the night talking to His Father (John 17). We, too, must face every hurt and harm with God at our side.

2. Do it now. The longer we wait to forgive, the harder it gets; the hurt just becomes that much worse. Dying on the cross, Jesus didn't prolong forgiveness. He cried for the Father to forgive His persecutors while still in the midst of their torture (Luke 23:34).

3. Let go. Don't say "I'll forgive you if . . ." Say it with no stipulations and no conditions. When Jesus forgave Mary, He simply told her, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more" (John 8:11, NKJV). It was not forgiveness "if she made it up" or "if she was good." It was just forgiveness.

4. Practice. Forgiving won't be easy the first time, or even the second or third. It's just like riding a bike, though: the more we do it, the easier it gets. Jesus told us to forgive 490 times (Matt. 18:22). He wasn't kidding. He forgave Mary, Peter, Judas, the Romans, the list goes on; and He's still forgiving today.

REACT

1. In what ways is forgiving someone like riding a bike? In what ways is it not?
2. How does the act of forgiving set the *forgiver* free?
3. What are the personal and social consequences of seeking revenge instead of offering forgiveness?
4. Read John 17. What do you notice about Jesus' prayer that gives insight into how He felt about humanity?
5. Why does the process of forgiveness involve more than just the offended and offending parties?
6. Who in society today could be considered "unaccepted"? Explain your answer.

Thursday
April 24

A Rock in Your Shoe

OPINION

Luke 14:11

Her whole body shows her discomfort. Her normal brisk pace is a painful walk. Her face shows annoyance and frustration. There are no outward signs of difficulty, no injured limbs, heavy burdens, or obstacles in her path. The thing that is slowing her down and ruining her day is a tiny rock in her shoe.

It is the annoyance of forgiveness that slows us down, haunts our dreams, and hurts our souls. Like a rock's slight rubbing we feel the sin, fresh in our memory. We know that we should forgive, or let another person forgive us, but pride often keeps us

Forgiveness is peace.

from solving the problem. Like refusing to bend down in the middle of a crowded walkway to remove a troublesome rock from our shoe, we cannot bring ourselves to bend down in front of another and confess our sin.

Ever had a splinter? Often times it is hard, if not impossible, to pull the splinter out alone. We need the help of someone else. On our own we are stuck with a small sliver of wood that makes doing everything a problem. This is the feeling of needing forgiveness from someone else. You cannot make someone forgive you. When it is you that needs to be forgiven, it doubles the problem. In our selfishness and pride we often forget about how it feels to be forgiven. We focus on the annoyance of the "I should . . ." complex. We know that we should forgive, but we cannot make ourselves do it. This annoyance seems petty compared with the feeling of being forgiven. It is like receiving help with the splinter. With the splinter gone, you are free to do the normal tasks of life and all it took was a little help from someone else.

The results of both forgiving and being forgiven seem like sappy sentiments until you experience them. It takes the personal experience for you to remember how amazing forgiveness is. Forgiveness is a release from chains and a wild freedom that makes you believe that you can do anything. Forgiveness is peace.

Forgiving is one of the hardest things to do, but with the best results. Jesus proved this on the cross when He forgave. Through the thorns that gnawed at His skin and the sweaty blood that clouded His eyes, Jesus was humble enough to be strong. Forgiving is not being weak. In the act of being humble the greatest characters are formed. The freedom you will experience when you stop to remove the rock from your shoe or help another take out a splinter is fantastic and is truly unequalled.

“Seventy Times Seven” —But Who’s Counting?

EXPLORATION

Matt. 18:21, 22

CONCLUDE

“Forgive and forget” is easier said than done. Forgiving one who has wronged us does not come naturally. Why is it so difficult for us to forgive? Jesus makes it look so natural. Picture Him with the woman caught in adultery, with His executioners, with you, with me. Forgiving comes naturally to Jesus because He is *willing* to forgive. When we accept His gift of forgiveness, what a blessing we’ll be when we, too, can forgive once . . . twice . . . seventy times seven times and more!

Who’s counting? Not Jesus. Not you, if the forgiveness comes from your willing heart as one who has been forgiven.

CONSIDER

- Interviewing a pastor, chaplain, or layperson involved with prison ministry. Does it make a difference how they view the prisoner if the prisoner has sought forgiveness? Ask if they consciously view as forgiven those to whom they minister.
- Thinking about instances when you have been forgiven. Did you find it easier to forgive someone shortly after your forgiving experience? Share examples as a class.
- Collecting news clippings that provide examples of someone who has forgiven another under very trying circumstances.
- Inviting a church member to speak to your class about a forgiving experience.
- Creating a drawing or painting that illustrates forgiveness.
- Role-playing a biblical example of Jesus forgiving a person then discuss how you would have felt had you actually been present when the event took place.
- Finding a fist-sized stone that you may place in your room as a reminder of Jesus’ forgiveness for you as He forgave the woman caught in adultery.

CONNECT

Christ’s Object Lessons, chap. 19; *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 460–462.
Douglas Cooper, *Living God’s Love*.

Lesson 5
April 26–May 3

Forgiveness and guilt



“ ‘Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more’ ”
(John 8:11, NKJV).

Two Views of Guilt

INTRODUCTION

John 8:11

When I was young I didn't remember much, but now as a middle-twenties adult, remembering is a requirement for life. Sometimes I wonder if we are learning a destructive behavior or maybe we really didn't learn how to forget. Having a bad memory is a godly trait. Remember, God said that He would send our sins to the bottom of the sea and forgive us. These things are forgotten, but is there a process to go through to get us to the forgiving part? For God fully to forgive, He must be in contact with us. We cannot be forgiven if we do not meet God to ask forgiveness for our sins.

What brings us to want God to forget and put our sins in the past? Guilt? To me guilt is one of two things: (1) Realization that I have done something that is hurting me or others and I am convicted to stop; (2) I feel unworthy, evil, and must do something about it.

In the first guilt scenario, there is hope that there is something better. The

**The greatest thing that we
can do is forgive ourselves.**

focus turns from us to Christ and what He wants in our lives. We see His greatness, realize our humbleness, and want to be like Him. In the second, there is no hope. We can never be good

enough. The focus is on all the bad things we have done, how depressed we are, and on how to "pull ourselves up by the bootstraps" to get out. We don't give up our problems—we focus on them.

The greatest thing that we can do is forgive ourselves. To forgive ourselves we realize that we need help. If we do not admit this, then we will give in to the lie of false guilt thinking that we could have done something better or tried harder to keep from failing. Realizing that we are out of control at times and that help is needed is very important. It allows us to give up our problems to God and deal with the problems that we have. Asking forgiveness opens up a new intimacy with God in which honesty and truth rule.

Guilt and forgiveness is realizing we need help and giving it to God. Once we do this we can forgive ourselves and practice forgetting our mistakes and remember what God has for us.

Sunday
April 27

The Not-So-Grand Canyon

LOGOS

Rom. 3:9, 19; 5:1; 2 Cor. 5:19; 1 John 4:10

Stuck Together (Rom. 3:9)

Imagine the base of a desert canyon teeming with people who, like you, are riding mules. Looking around, you see every religion and culture represented in dazzling diversity. While some people stay in one place looking around in confusion and others try to make the dry, dusty canyon their permanent home, most of the riders have formed into groups, trying to find their way to the top. As another group passes by yours, they invite you to join them, saying they found the real map. However, you can't help feeling sorry for them. After all, you know that there is only one true map and that is the one held in your hand; your instructions were dictated by Someone outside the canyon. Does that make you better than the others? No. In this allegory of humanity seeking an escape from the canyon of sin, trying to find a path to forgiveness, and following directions communicated by a seemingly distant but loving God, even those with the real map are still stuck in the same canyon. Similarly, Paul "made the charge that Jew and Gentiles alike are all under sin" (Rom. 3:9, NIV).

Immutable Laws (Rom. 3:19)

Einstein became famous for pointing out that, though many things seem to change based upon one's frame of reference, the laws of physics and the speed of light are constant. Paul explained that God's other laws are similarly unchanged with regard to the conscience of an individual. Because our minds and the law are out of sync, God clarified a healthy moral code by giving us the Bible. Rules about honoring parents, resting on the Sabbath, sexual purity, and what to eat have very real consequences that follow naturally without any need for special intervention.

God's biblical law is the code of conduct and morality that results in the least suffering and greatest happiness. In physics, it is through laws that we understand the universe and learn of its vastness. Likewise, "through the law we become conscious of sin" (verse 20, NIV). Without the law, we might never realize that a better way exists; we would settle down and believe that the universe ends at the top of the cliffs we are trapped between.

Returning to the allegory of the canyon, try imagining the situation from the perspective of that Someone on the cliff. He can see the pain of the riders, knows that freedom, love, and peace awaits them at the top of the cliff, and has tried again and again to guide them out, using every method imaginable to show them their need for something better and the path to reach it. However, His shouts too often are ignored or become indistinguishable in the echoing noise from the lost

masses. Every so often He finds someone who has learned to tune out the cacophony and take directions, but it is not enough. Either the people think they know better, decide they have heard enough, or simply cannot understand His simplest instructions because they see only a limited universe—He can never seem to get through to the people below. How would you communicate?

When I am hurt by others and do not know why, I cannot force myself to forgive in any but the most superficial way; however, as soon as I understand my enemies' motives or background, I feel drawn to love them. We talk about needing to walk a mile in another's shoes to understand them; perhaps this is necessary for forgiveness also. God chose to send a part of Himself, His Son, to show the way to forgiveness. Jesus' name, Immanuel, says it all—God with us. He came to earth, ate, walked, talked, and probably even burped just like us. Incarnated as fully God

Without the law, we might never realize that a better way exists.

and human, Jesus' experience and His sacrifice made forgiveness accessible. He translated the perspective of God into the perspective of humanity, and He can now claim to understand the spectrum of human frailty. Christ also offered to carry all who agreed out of sin. The forgiveness God offers us comes from walking a lifetime in our shoes and dying blamelessly to bring us out of the canyon.

Second Corinthians 5:19 commissions Christians to present God's offer of forgiveness to all. This entails accepting forgiveness and extending it to others. If sin is doing anything that separates us from God, guilt is the reminder of that separation and impetus to find forgiveness, and forgiveness reunites, then forgiveness for another person and from another person bridges the three-way disconnection between people and God that actions against another creates.

Second, we must act forgiven. Continually digging up past failures that were laid to rest only increases the separation from God. Finally, we must follow God's example of expressing His loving forgiveness in individualized ways until everyone understands.

Imagine a heaven teeming with a dazzling diversity of people. They no longer need their mules because they have arrived at the top. All understand the ultimate truth because they share God's reference frame. They see now that the way of escaping the canyon was easy all along. Though we are all guilty under the law, Jesus came to show humanity a better way and asked us to convince everyone to join Him and the Father above.

REACT

In what ways does the metaphor of the canyon fail? Think of your own original comparison.

Monday
April 28

“Go and Do Likewise”

TESTIMONY

Rom. 3:9, 19; 5:1; 2 Cor. 5:19; 1 John 4:10

“God’s forgiveness is not merely a judicial act by which He sets us free from condemnation. It is not only forgiveness for sin but reclaiming from sin. It is the outflow of redeeming love that transforms the heart. David had the true conception of forgiveness when he prayed, ‘Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.’ Ps. 51:10.”¹

“A lesson was embodied in every sacrifice, impressed in every ceremony, solemnly preached by the priest in his holy office, and inculcated by God Himself—that through the blood of Christ alone is there forgiveness of sins. How little we as a people feel the force of this great truth! How seldom, by living, acting faith, do we bring into our lives this great truth, that there is forgiveness for the least sin, forgiveness for the greatest sin.”²

Knowing that any sin we commit is drawing us away from Christ, how can we look upon others with disgust, who we feel are committing a sin far greater? “Who can stand before God and plead a faultless character, a blameless life? And how, then, dare any criticize and condemn their brethren? Those who themselves can

“Who can stand before God
and plead a faultless
character?”

hope for salvation only through the merits of Christ, who must seek forgiveness by virtue of His blood, are under the strongest obligation to exercise love, pity, and forgiveness toward their fellow sinners.”³

Praise God He has supplied a way of redemption! With this spirit of freedom, we are to continue to shed this same emotion and action toward our world. In reality, who has the greater loss if forgiveness is denied, the one who seeks forgiveness or the one to forgive? “Christ paid an infinite price to redeem us from ruin and despair, and with hearts filled with gratitude to God, we should manifest toward others the same love, tenderness, and forbearance, that we would have Him exercise toward us as sinful, erring mortals. While we need grace and mercy every moment, and forgiveness daily, how unbecoming for us to be so ready to criticize, censure, and condemn our brethren who are of like passions with ourselves.”⁴

Christ has given us an example, and now He asks us to “go and do likewise.”

1. *The Faith I Live By*, p. 129.

2. *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Sept. 21, 1886.

3. *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 608.

4. *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 15, p. 140.

Sharing Endorphins

EVIDENCE

Isa. 1:18

Every human being has an image in society; some are funny, some are smart, some are humble, some are proud. This image expresses what we are and how we think. The image we see of ourselves is not the ideal image we want to portray. Therefore, in time of trouble we exaggerate this image to a point that we want to change it into something more appealing to our society. One of the hardest things in our image to change is pride. It is hard to summon the courage to admit to others—and to God—that we have made a mistake and that we regret what we have done.

**Forgiving somebody
feels good.**

Forgiving somebody feels good; feeling good by being forgiven lowers our stress level. Lowering our stress level releases endorphins, secreted by our brain for a happier state of being. A happier state of being allows our system to work better; feeling better enhances our style of living and induces forgiveness. God created forgiveness. He was the first One to forgive. He forgave Adam and Eve when they ate the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:20, 21). He forgave Satan when he began the revolution before the Creation of the world as well (Jer. 33:8).

It is human nature to miss the mark of perfection. It is also human nature to convince ourselves that we really do not have to confess our shortcomings to another. After all, our delicate psyches and our self-esteem might be wounded if we focused on such negative things. Yet, out of the bad news of sin which caused a separation from God emerges the good news of forgiveness and reconciliation (Luke 24:47). God's promise, as recorded in 1 John 1:7-9, offers to those who truly seek forgiveness a complete cleansing of the soul.

REACT

1. Why do you think it is so difficult to accept forgiveness from God?
2. What is the purpose for the existence of forgiveness?
3. If God has forgiven Satan, why does He still plan to destroy him?
4. How is God's forgiveness of Adam and Eve different, or the same, as His forgiveness of Satan?
5. What effect does withholding forgiveness have on those who need forgiveness?
6. God forgives always, but is there a time when God punishes? If so, when? If not, why not?

Wednesday
April 30

Restoration by Association

HOW TO

Rom. 3:9, 19; 5:1; 2 Cor. 5:19; 1 John 4:10

I will not disclose his name, but we will call him Frederick. Frederick is a faithful Adventist person. He does all the right things, has a strong relationship with God, and people always enjoy his presence. Over a small span of two months, Frederick's decision-making process created tension in his relationship with God. Inside his soul an intense pain emerged. Frederick began to feel an extreme guilt. He felt as if God had left his side. God was distant and unattached.

Maybe you cannot fit exactly into the shoes of Frederick, but have you ever felt that God really is not there or maybe the pain inside is so intense that you ever wonder if there is somebody to help relieve you of it? You are not alone.

Guilt: It can cause physical, mental, emotional, and many other disorders that can interrupt our function on a day-to-day basis. Sometimes it can lead one to deep, deep despair, which can lead to the loss of one's life. Can we escape such a tragedy?

Many times we do not identify who we really are.

Here are a few tips from the Word that I found to be helpful:

1. Unceasing Divine Interest. God will never leave us or forsake us (Heb. 13:5). This

is best illustrated in the Garden of Eden. After Adam and Eve sinned, God still came to them. Even though Adam and Eve disobeyed, God still made His presence known (Gen. 3:8, 9).

2. Proper Identification, Please. Many times we do not identify who we really are. The Bible puts me in my place and reminds me of who I am, a sinner. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23, NIV) and the "the wages of sin is death" (6:23, NIV). Admitting this all the time is hard to do but it allows for growth.

3. Growing Admittance. The ability to admit that I am a sinner states that I am in great need of something. Guilt many times grows because we have not admitted a fault or sin that God is trying to correct in our lives. By admitting our shortcomings, we are showing God that we understand the need for a greater power outside of ourselves to make us whole (1 John 1:9). "We confess because our God is faithful and we can trust Him with our innermost secrets. He will never take advantage of our vulnerability, but will always respond with forgiveness and cleansing."*

4. Static Cling. Cling to Jesus, for He is our help. He is our strength to deal with this problem. Jesus has taken the guilt of the world upon the cross. Thus when we come to Him, He will "freely justify us" (Rom. 3:24) and "give us life" (1 John 5:12).

*Steven Mosely, *Deepen My Heart* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1998), p. 30.

While We Are Still Sinners

OPINION

Rom. 5:1, 8

Alex is my “puppy”: a six-year-old Great Pyrenees who stands at my waist, has fluffy white hair, and drools—a lot. My favorite email from home during my first semester at college was entitled “Bad Dog” and described Alex’s latest fiasco.

One night Alex had eaten an entire package of candy corn, half a bag of Lucky Charms, two wrapped popcorn balls, and had finished off his midnight snack with an after-dinner mint. The sugar-coated munchies had turned Alex’s gleaming white coat into a sticky, orange-tinted disaster. This hasn’t been Alex’s only offense. Whenever my mom finds Alex reaching for the popcorn bowl, she scolds him:

“Alex! Get out of the kitchen! You know better than that.” Ashamed, Alex sticks his tail between his legs, cowers low to the

“Alex! Get out of the kitchen!”

ground, and crawls across the house. He pouts—curled up in a corner, refusing to look her in the eye for the next few hours. Then, when he can’t take the rejection any longer, he apologizes by snuggling his large damp nose in Mom’s lap. She strokes his head and asks if he’s sorry. He doesn’t usually reply, but the droop in his big brown eyes says that he’ll try harder. Mom knows she still can’t trust him within sniffing distance of chocolate, but she wraps her arms around his neck anyway. She pats his head and says, “Good boy, Alex. You’re a good dog.” And all is right in his world again.

Alex has taught me a lot about God’s forgiveness. Like Alex, I also make mistakes. And when I do, my gleaming, sin-free coat turns into a sticky, sin-tinted disaster. “I’m sorry, Jesus,” I whimper, “I messed up again.” Cowering in His faultless presence, the reality of my sin hits me—and I am ashamed. But Jesus doesn’t say a word; He just wraps me in His fatherly arms and bathes me. He scrubs away all my filth and carefully brushes out my tangles. He lifts my chin, stares into my teary eyes, and whispers, “My child, My child. You’re clean now, and if you let Me, I will keep you that way. Remember, I love you no matter what.” Jesus, knowing He still can’t trust me with temptation in reach, embraces me anyway. And all is right in my world again.

When does Jesus forgive us? While we are still sinners. How often? Every single time.

REACT

1. Will God continue to forgive us if we continue to make the same mistake(s)?
2. What hope does God’s forgiveness give to the struggling sinner?
3. What is the role of restitution in the process of forgiveness?

Friday
May 2

What We Really Want to Know

EXPLORATION

Heb. 10:17

CONCLUDE

God cannot lie. Therefore, when He says if we accept His forgiveness, we are forgiven—we *are forgiven*. “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us” (Ps. 103:12, NKJV). God wants us to live confidently in this fact and not to be haunted by guilt. “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful” (Heb. 10:23, NKJV).

And God wants us to pass this precious gift of forgiveness on to others. We can never forgive others more than He has forgiven us.

CONSIDER

- Making a poster of your favorite text about forgiveness. Place it where you will see it every day.
- Asking one of your parents or grandparents to tell you a story illustrating forgiveness in their life.
- Searching for a psalm about forgiveness. Read it in several Bible versions. Paraphrase it in your own words.
- Writing a Thank-You letter to God for His gracious gift of forgiveness for one specific sin in your life.
- Researching the physical effects of stress upon the body. Think about how many of these physical reactions could also be produced by lack of forgiveness.
- Listening to and/or reading an old hymn and a contemporary song about forgiveness. How are they similar? How are they different?
- Analyzing the writer's views on forgiveness in the Gospel of Matthew at <<http://www.quodlibet.net/lamerson-forgive.shtml>>.

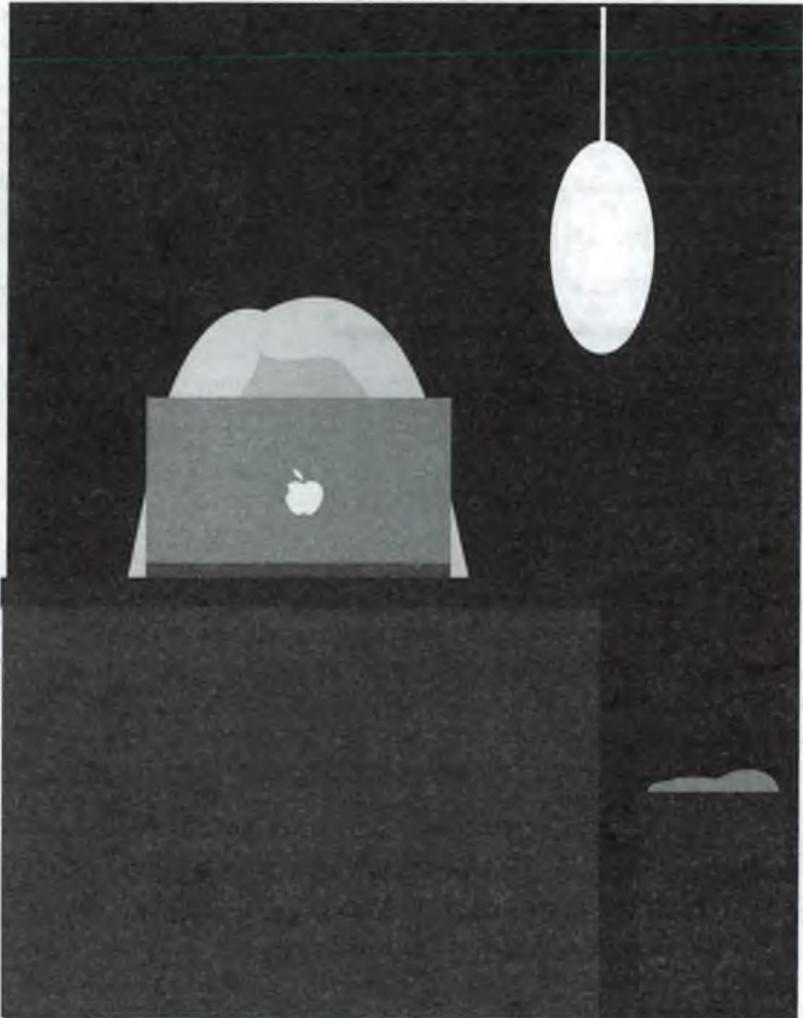
CONNECT

Psalm 51.

The Desire of Ages, chap. 85.

Max Lucado, *In the Grip of Grace*, chap. 16.

A forgiving Church?



“If a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:1, 2, NKJV).

What Would Jesus Do?

INTRODUCTION

2 Cor. 2:5-11

“Hey, Lynn!” the email began . . .

“I chose to come here because I believe it was the only way of relaxing my mind. After being suspended from the university, I found myself ostracized from every corner. The government hated me, the university rejected me, my friends ran from me one after another. All my relatives have broken off contact with me except my family; everywhere I passed people pointed their fingers at me. Our youth organization remained silent; church members failed to understand me. In short, life was very hard.

“I found myself ostracized from every corner.”

“There is nothing I like in this world like singing in a choir, but it was impossible to continue involving myself in such activities as everyone saw me as wrong. I didn’t have any way of letting everybody know how I felt or what I was thinking. Some of the people whom to

some extent I considered as my close friends were not there. In short, I saw that to continue living on campus was like being in hell. I needed a place where I could be alone to reset my life and get another chance with my God.”

What could the church do to help this person? “You ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow” (2 Cor. 2:7, NKJV). This week we will learn about true Christian forgiveness. May the Lord help us to understand how to love the sinner and hate the sin.

A Strange Topic?

EVIDENCE

Gal. 6:1, 2

To me forgiveness is a strange topic when it comes to the church. We talk the talk. We say the right things. But, can the church really forgive? In the early church, Paul taught and fully expected that forgiveness would be an obvious outward expression of the inward love that Christ had placed in His sheep.

"Brothers and sisters, if another Christian is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself. Share each other's troubles and problems, and in this way obey the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:1, 2, NLT).

This clearly is a blueprint for forgiveness. Possibly as a young lad Paul had witnessed Jesus as He wrote the sins of the accusers in the sand as the woman fell to the ground in despair. She felt that there was no forgiveness as the crowd pressed together to see if the Master would fail the test. Or maybe Paul had heard of the man lowered through the roof to receive healing for his crumbled body, only to hear Jesus say, "Man, your sins are forgiven you" (Luke 5:20, NKJV). The Pharisees were accusing Jesus of blasphemy and heresy. They called Jesus crazy. He was even considered demon possessed. All this for showing love through an act of forgiveness. If Jesus can forgive, shouldn't His church—those called *Christians*—do the same?

Can the church really forgive?

The Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual, page 872, states in its mission statement: "Effective ministry becomes possible in an atmosphere of love, acceptance and forgiveness."

But somehow as a young adult you are feeling isolated. The rules are broken. Maybe someone refused to forgive. They are feeling they have been wronged. Now the person is angry or ashamed. They've confessed their sin, possibly may have even been rebaptized. They are desperately seeking forgiveness from the church. Why won't the church forgive?

Can the church really forgive? If not, then by what authority can I be forgiven? "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9, NKJV, emphasis supplied). Forgiveness comes from God!

Then, does the church forgive? The church is made up of many members. Without members there is no church. Paul admonishes us as members of the body: "You who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness" (Gal. 6:1, NKJV). We as Christians must forgive one another by bearing each other's burden, showing mercy, remembering that we, too, can be tempted.

Monday
May 5

Sex and Salvation in the Church

LOGOS

1 Cor. 5:1, 4, 5; 2 Cor. 2:1-11

The wickedness of the population in Corinth was so renowned in the ancient world that the term "Corinthianize" meant to become sexually immoral.

In his evangelistic work in Corinth, Paul was forced to confront many moral issues, which were equal to if not greater than the immorality we face today. The list is horrendous: sexual immorality, adultery, same-gender relationships, prostitution, thieving, swindling, greed, alcoholism, and slander (see 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10).

The good news both then and now is that none of these is incurable or unalterable. Paul writes and reminds the Corinthians that some of them had been involved and entrapped by these things: "You were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11, NKJV).

Despite his ministry and care, all is not trouble-free in Corinth. Paul has heard of an intolerable situation in the Corinthian church and writes to give advice as to how to handle it. Apparently a man has had sex with his stepmother. Whether he

**People are recovered by
love not criticism.**

has married her or is living with her is unclear. To Paul, as a Jew, this is completely unacceptable. According to the Mosaic Law this was a crime punishable by death (Lev. 20:11). It was also

forbidden under Roman law (Gaius *Institutes* i. 63). In Paul's view this behavior was bringing great disgrace on the church, as even unbelievers found it totally repulsive and unacceptable.

He counsels the Corinthian church to "hand this man over to Satan" (1 Cor. 5:5, NIV). This action is not to be understood as punishment or cruelty, but to lead the person involved to repentance and salvation. Formal decisive action is required by the church.

Sin always has consequences. By its very nature sin disrupts and distorts human relationships and is hostile to the purposes of God.

Sexual sins are generally the most difficult because they involve others. Those others may be husbands, wives, children, peers, grandparents, or close family friends.

This kind of sin is especially hurtful among Christians. It brings shame and disrepute on the church. It causes discouragement to young Christians, often leading them to abandon their Christian faith. It leads to cynicism among unbelievers. It is difficult to deal with.

This incident in Corinth and Paul's response to it gives some practical guidance as to how the church both then and now should respond to this kind of situation:

1. It must be faced. It cannot be ignored. Decisive action is required.
2. Those involved cannot avoid the consequences of their behavior.
3. All actions must be redemptive not punitive.

It is important to bear in mind that sin is its own punishment. When we sin it is not helpful to have salt poured onto our wounds, or to be constantly reminded and pushed down by our failure. God does not condemn the sinner (John 3:17). Why should we? People are recovered by love not criticism. As Paul wrote to the Romans counseling against the spirit of condemnation:

"Do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?" (Rom. 2:4, NKJV).

This love and kindness is not weak and afraid to confront sin. It takes decisive action primarily to help sinners recognize their sin, but also to protect the church as a whole. To recover those who fall into sin requires maturity. It cannot be done by a novice.

"If a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted" (Gal. 6:1, NKJV).

Paul practiced what he preached. Nowhere does he name the man concerned. He points out that where there is true repentance further punishment would be vindictive and have a negative effect. God has forgiven and forgotten the sin and we, as His followers, should do the same.

Verbal forgiveness is insufficient. The sinner needs reaffirmation and love. He needs people who will get along beside him and help him back into fellowship. Without this kind of practical love, it is possible that the repentant sinner will slide back into sin again. Paul gave this guidance to the particular case of the man in Corinth: "I urge you to reaffirm your love to him" (2 Cor. 2:8, NKJV).

Formal action had been taken to impose discipline and exclude the man from the fellowship of the church. Now it is necessary to take formal action to receive the person back. The sinner should not be left in any doubt that he is loved and accepted by both God and his fellow members.

REACT

1. Would you agree that immorality is different from, say, lying or stealing? Explain your answer.

2. How do you understand that the gospel can recover people from sexual sins?

3. How can we know the difference between a person who is truly repentant and one who merely desires to avoid consequences? How important is it to know the difference?

4. What are some practical examples of love that restores an offender to fellowship?

Tuesday
May 6

Forgiven and Bound by Love

TESTIMONY

John 8:4-11; 2 Cor. 5:19

“Human beings are Christ’s property, purchased by Him at an infinite price, bound to Him by the love that He and His father have manifested for them.”¹ By Jesus dying on the cross, we were all cleansed by His blood. Through this sacrifice, a strong bond was created, a bond of righteousness and love; drawing you and me closer to Him.

Another amazing thing He has promised is that His blood is ready to cleanse us once more when we have fallen away from the right path. What a wonderful

**It’s easy for Christians to
pinpoint wrongdoers in
our society.**

message! In John 5, we learn of a woman who committed adultery. The Pharisees brought her before Jesus, accusing her of the sin she committed. Contrary to their expectations, Jesus forgave her (verse 11). I

can’t imagine how relieved the woman must have felt. A big burden had been lifted. She had been condemned to die, but Jesus as a Savior had forgiven her sin. For when we sinned, we became worthless. God felt that something had to be done. Jesus’ blood cleansed us all. Our sins were forgiven, completely erased. Nothing sounds better than to be declared clean. So His blood is always available to cleanse anyone who repents. That’s the good news!

It’s easy for Christians to pinpoint wrongdoers in our society. The Pharisees condemned the adulterous woman (John 5) and wanted to stone her to death. None of them could bear the thought of forgiving her. They considered themselves clean and faultless. That’s the same belief that sometimes blindfolds Christians. “How careful, then, we should be in our dealing with one another! Men have no right to surmise evil in regard to their fellow-men.”²

Again it should be clear that we are all imperfect; we have no power to judge—but to forgive. So let’s forgive each other for we are all bound by His love.

REACT

1. What lesson do we learn from the act of forgiving others just as Jesus did?
2. Doesn’t forgiveness give people liberty to continue wrongdoing? Explain your answer.

1. *Gospel Workers*, p. 498.

2. *Ibid.*

Signing the Card

HOW-TO

2 Cor. 2:5-11

My uncle was passing around a little “We Miss You” card for others to sign at church. It was for Paula. She had stopped attending church because of some poor decisions she had made. Since he wanted to see her in church again, he started passing the card around, and he wanted others to second the motion by signing it. To my surprise, many members declined, and some even thought it unnecessary.

Why were they reluctant to sign the card? Were they expecting a direct apology from Paula first? Or was it that they didn’t want her back at all?

As children of God, we have a tendency to despise anything that goes against the very nature of our Father. We cringe at phrases like “sex out of wedlock,” “child abuse,” or “drug addiction,” and rightfully so. Though it’s perfectly OK to disapprove of these things, however, many times we find it hard to distinguish the sin from the sinner. We focus so much on the enormity of the sin that our own self-righteousness evokes feelings of rejection and censure.

There are several factors that motivate this behavior:

1. Unawareness of our “forgiveness.” If we go to the throne of grace daily for forgiveness, then we’re forgiven. It’s that simple. But sometimes God’s forgiveness becomes such a routine thing in our lives that we take it for granted. This unawareness of our forgiven state bars us from freely extending forgiveness to others, which in turn jeopardizes God’s own ability to forgive us. (See Matthew 6:12.)

2. Too big a sin to be forgiven. This very common school of thought states that certain sins are so extreme in nature that they cannot be forgiven. Furthermore, some think that they should not even associate with the individuals involved in the sin. However, though sins may have different implications in peoples’ lives, they *all* keep us from heaven. And God is willing to forgive them all.

3. The big-brother syndrome. Do you remember how the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son felt once his brother returned home? Maybe we’ve never done something as despicable as the brother who left the church, yet we must accept him back into the flock just as the father did in the parable.

Whatever category we fall under, we must strive not to forget the role God plays in our lives, how He pulled us out of the mire, and how He continues to mold us in His image. He wants you to exercise forgiveness, something He offers you at no cost on a constant basis. He already signed your “Welcome Back!” card. He wants you to do the same thing for others.

He already signed your
“Welcome Back!” card.

Thursday
May 8

A Few “Lines” on Forgiveness

OPINION

John 8:7

When we speak of lines, we think of many things. We call a line any wire or wires (such as power lines) used to transmit power. In communications a line is a connection (as in a line needed to “log on”). We speak of our ancestry or lineage as our family line. We even call words or a phrase used to impress or win affection a line!

Take a moment and imagine forgiveness as a line. Do you view it as a line segment that stretches between two defined points? Or maybe as a horizontal line denoting a point that you do not cross. Perhaps you are more of a circle person—you see forgiveness as a line that forms a circle: Inside the circle are the things that you (or the church, and hence God) will forgive, and outside the circle are the

**Mercifully Jesus wrote
those lines in sand.**

areas that are inexcusable, unforgivable, and just plain unpardonable! The truth is, whether or not we admit it, there are boundaries to forgiveness in our minds—the things outside of

the circle of forgiveness—the line that should not be crossed.

When the woman caught in adultery was brought before Jesus, He simply wrote lines in the sand. Were they lines of rebuke and censure? Perhaps. But they were lines written to remind those present to extend to others the same mercy and forgiveness of which they had been recipients. Mercifully Jesus wrote those lines in sand, easily erased by wind or a high tide, never more to be remembered.

Forgiveness is our line to our Father—our means of communicating and connecting for power. Forgiveness is a line—our family line. (You *do* realize we are in The Royal Family and are “joint heirs” with Christ, don’t you?) Forgiveness was that line God used to impress us. (“You know, I loved you so much, and could not imagine eternity without you in it—that I gave My only Son to die for you.”)

So back to that question of whether you view forgiveness as a circle or a line. Well, truth is, it is both a circle and a line. It is an infinite line stretching across the outstretched arms of Jesus when He died on the cross and forgave you. Yet it is the circle His arms make, as He embraces you and receives you back when you accept His forgiveness.

REACT

Do you think the Jewish leaders emphasized forgiveness in their everyday lives? Do we have any biblical evidence either way? Read Luke 18:10-14 and comment on what God is asking of us.

Emilie Cartwright, Stone Mountain, Georgia

Truth That Sets Us Free

EXPLORATION

Gal. 6:1, 2

CONCLUDE

Condemnation is the enemy's domain (Rev. 12:10). Convicting others of sins is the Spirit's role (John 16:7-11). Ultimate judgment belongs to Christ (John 5:22; Rev. 22:11-13), and the works of discernment, caring confrontation, accountability, and restoration have been given to the church (1 Cor. 5:12, 13; 2 Cor. 5:16-21; Gal. 6:1, 2). The church's tasks are challenging. It is easier to ignore sin than to restore sinners to the body of Christ. Sometimes we are better at condemning than healing. Restoration involves lovingly telling the truth about the sin, and telling the even larger truth about God's grace and forgiveness for sinners.

CONSIDER

- Handcrafting a "You Are Loved" card for someone whom you have not seen at church in a while. Personalize the kind of message in the card you would want to receive if you were feeling uneasy about people's perceptions of you, their readiness to forgive, or your connection to God and the church.
- Conducting brief interviews with people in your neighborhood. Ask them: Why do you think people leave their church, and what do you think the church might do to help them want to stay?
- Listening to Ray Boltz's song, "Thank You" and imagine that you are the one in heaven, meeting people for whom your actions of reaching out and caring in the name of Christ have had eternally positive results.
- "Prayer walking" or "prayer driving" (with your eyes open, of course) through your community, noting the homes and places of work of people you know who may feel estranged or alienated from your church. Pray specifically for those individuals and their families. Ask God to help you be a friend to them.
- Reading on the topic and preparing a one-page outline to share with your class on the subject, *Why People Leave Our Church and What We Can Do to Encourage Them to Return*.

CONNECT

1 Corinthians 5:12, 13; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Galatians 6:1, 2.

Lawrence J. Crabb, *Connecting: Healing for Ourselves and Our Relationships*, pp. 7-29; Roger L. Dudley, *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church: Personal Stories From a 10-Year Study*, pp. 93-133, 145-150, 209-212.

For the **Love** of **God**



“As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him” (Col. 2:6, NKJV).

Love Forever— Forever Love?

INTRODUCTION

Jer. 31:3

The last two years of my studies I spent in France at the Institut Adventist du Salève, Collonges. The campus at the foot of Mount Salève lies in a beautiful landscape. Even from the window of my room, I had a great view over the city of Geneva, its surroundings, and Lake Geneva with its marvellous fountain. When you climb up the mountain, you get an even better view, especially in autumn, when fog lays heavily over the valley. Soon after lunch I often was on my way to escape the fog. Normally it took only 15 minutes to go and I enjoyed bright sunshine, entering a totally different world. Being high on the mountain and looking down on the clouds far below, you felt like you were flying in a plane.

My first year there I didn't climb the mountain a single time. Was it respect, laziness, or lack of motivation? I don't know. But at the beginning of my second year

**Humans can change the
surface of rock just with
their bare hands.**

I caught the virus. And I discovered that I was not the only one to have caught the virus of Mount Salève. The route I liked most—named *Les Varappes*—was not that difficult. There were some chains and at one place

even steel hooks fixed in the rock like a ladder, so you could climb the route on your own without a rope. It was frequented. I'd never realized before that humans can change the surface of rock just with their bare hands. But many hands and much sweat have their effect. I remember especially one place just at the beginning that was polished like marble. It was a beautiful sight for the eyes, but it offered nearly no grip to my hands. It had been used too often.

This rock is a picture of overuse. One of the most overused words in our day is "love." So many musicians use it, so many films covering its theme that the word "love" is polished like marble and has completely lost its usefulness. All this information about love doesn't help people to experience it. Why are there so many broken marriages, so much hatred, and so little love? Perhaps the message of love is not about something that makes me feel good, but rather about something I do to make others feel good. Discover this week what the Inventor of love means by it.

Sunday
May 11

The Law's Last Word

LOGOS

Exod. 19:5, 6; Rom. 13:8-10; 1 John 4:19; 5:3

The New Testament Church was in a bit of a bind. Many of its members had personally seen or heard Jesus sometime during His earthly ministry. But they were mostly Jewish, steeped in religious traditions that went back centuries—all the way to Abraham. But the largest number of new converts to the early church were Gentiles, people unfamiliar with Jewish social and religious customs.

At the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-35), the earliest followers of Christ tried to answer the question: Can a person be a Christian without being a Jew? In other words, does a person have to subscribe to all the Jewish rituals and traditions in order to be a follower of Christ?

After much debate, Peter addressed those assembled: "Why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they" (Acts 15:10, 11, NKJV).

Although that statement has been challenged often over the last 2,000 years, Scripture's testimony is clear: "A righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (Rom. 3:21, 22, NIV).

A Higher Standard

But if keeping the law isn't a prerequisite for salvation, how do we know whether we're being loyal to God or not?

There are two ways to demand loyalty. One is through oppression. By imprisonment and executions, dictators and despots have earned the "loyalty" of their citizens throughout history. But when the dictator is overthrown, the loyalty disappears. The other way to achieve unvarnished loyalty is through love, mercy, and grace. God uses the latter.

The statement "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19, NIV) is acknowledgment of the fact that God took the initiative to bring us back from our rebellion caused by sin. And Paul's observation that Christ died for us "while we were still sinners" (Rom. 5:8, NIV) means that obedience to a set of

**How do we know whether
we're being loyal to God
or not?**

rules or commandments is not so much a prerequisite of experiencing God's love as much as it is a response to the love He demonstrated while we were still rebels.

Rules are fine, insofar as they produce a kind of mechanical obedience. But God is looking for something more. The Pharisees of Jesus' time were experts in

keeping the law, but He said about them: “ ‘Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” ’ ” (Mark 7:6, NIV).

Say It Simply

The Ten Commandments are divided into two sections: one linked to our relationship with God and one to our relationships with each other. When we respond to God's love, we won't take His name in vain, worship other gods, profane His Sabbath, etc. Loving each other means that we won't steal from each other, lie to each other, kill each other, etc.

When Jesus was asked what He considered the greatest commandment, He responded: “ ‘ “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments’ ” (Matt. 22:37-40, NIV).

Jesus thus boiled down the Ten Commandments that were delivered on Sinai to just two great principles: loving God supremely and loving each other as we love ourselves.

The apostle Paul made it simpler still: “Love,” he said, “is the fulfillment of the law” (Rom. 13:10, NIV).

Circular Reasoning

To summarize: Creation and Redemption are results of God's unconditional love for us. We benefit from both, even though we played no part in either.

God's love is the guiding principle of the universe, and our response to His love is the fundamental motivation of our relationships with God and with each other. We can't fully love God until we recognize the influence He's had in our lives. And we can't fully love each other until we internalize the love God has shown to us. How well we love, not how well we keep the law, is the ultimate outward indicator of our loyalty to God.

Sometimes you hear people assert that to be ready to meet the Lord when Jesus comes again we will be better law keepers than at any other time in history. But if “love is the fulfillment of the law” (verse 10, NIV), only those who most completely reflect God's character of love will be prepared to say, “ ‘Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. . . . Let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation’ ” (Isa. 25:9, NIV).

There is, in fact, no tension between law and love. By doing the latter, we fulfill the former. But we don't do either unless we've first been captivated by God's love, and seek to reflect it to as many as we can, as often as we can, in as many ways as we can.

Monday
May 12

The Brothers

TESTIMONY

1 John 4:19

God really loves His people. He expressed His love many times and in many ways. He accepted and loved poor as well as rich, hungry as well as full, black, white, men, women and children, regardless of their previous lives. God offered His love all the time to the ill, the unhappy, the suffering; in a word, to all who desired to come to His feet and decided to accept His love.

God's love is unconditional. He loves us despite our sinfulness. On the other hand, He desires and expects us, after accepting His offer, to demonstrate His character in our lives. That means that we should also share this love with other people around us so they also can find happiness.

God says: "Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not bear false witness,' 'You shall not covet,' and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:8-10, NKJV).

**It is we who should
think differently.**

"If our hearts are softened and subdued by the grace of Christ, and glowing with a sense of God's goodness and love, there will be a natural outflow of love, sympathy, and tenderness to others."*

Once there were two brothers. The younger one was married and had two children. The older one was alone. Every year they worked together in the field and they always divided the crop in half. One day, after the harvest was over, they went to bed but the older brother could not sleep. He thought: *My brother has a family. I am alone, but I take the same part of the crop. It is not fair.* He got up quietly, took some grain, and added it to his brother's pile. Then he slept.

The same night, but a little bit later, the younger brother woke up. He began to think: *My brother does not have a family. Who will look after him when he grows older?* So he got up, took some grain, and added it to his brother's pile.

In the morning, when they came to the barn they were surprised to see equal piles of grain. But neither said anything. Next night they met each other, each carrying a big amount of grain, and they were filled with happiness over their relationship.

We also should express love for each other, looking for different ways to make people happy around us.

*Testimonies for the Church, vol. 5, p. 606.

Free to Feel Constrained

EVIDENCE

John 15:14; 2 Cor. 5:14; 1 John 4:19

Because God loves us, we are free to choose our priorities, our way, our destiny. He doesn't interfere with our choices. Yet Paul says the love of Christ "constrains" us (2 Cor. 5:14).

The human mind works according to certain laws. Hatred, contempt, disgust, or even indifference can never awaken feelings of love, admiration, respect, or gratitude. Proverbs 27:19 states it quite clearly: It is only *natural* to respond the same way one is treated. Yes, there are people who are kind to those who hurt them, but it is not the other's hatred that elicits their love.

**The catalyzer to this
unnatural reaction is the
love of God.**

Instead, the catalyzer to this unnatural reaction is another love—the love of God, which has so filled the heart that now it overflows toward everyone else around, regardless of their attitude.

There is no guarantee, though, that, when loved, one will love back. Respecting one's freedom of choice, while at the same time caring for and doing what is best for them (which, at times, *may* mean sitting back and just watching), is the only chance to help them understand love. And if one doesn't reject, but opens one's heart to this love, it will gradually draw them nearer and constrain them to behave differently.

The only kind of love that gives everything without expecting anything in return is called *agape* in the New Testament. It is not surprising, then, that the verb used for "love" in 1 John 4:19 is *agapao*—the correspondent of *agape*. This is the way God loves us. The only way we can learn how to love Him and those around us is with the same *agape* love. And this is the only way others can learn how to love, in their turn.

This has been made possible only because God loved us first. He is our role model, as well as the source of self-sacrificing love; we have no altruistic resources of our own. His initiative indeed challenges us. If we allow His love to remold our hearts, it challenges us to forget ourselves and put Him and the others first. John only repeats in 1 John 5:3 what he had heard Jesus say: If we love Him—*because* we love Him—we will obey His commands (John 15:14).

REACT

1. Did God love us before He created us or does He love us only because He created us? Explain your answer.

2. How does God's love constrain us without violating our freewill?

Wednesday
May 14

How to Live God's Love

HOW-TO

Rom. 6:23

From a spiritual point of view, a human being is handicapped.

From a spiritual point of view, a human being is handicapped. Since sin entered this world, human life has experienced constant suffering motivated by selfish interests against Divine nature. Paul shows us this drastic reality of living in sin: "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our

Lord" (Rom. 6:23, NKJV).

It's a fact that we deserve death, but God wants to give us eternal life. By His infinite love, God's will is to restore in us initial life by giving the opportunity to live His love. It is really

marvellous that our God wants to redeem our lives. To obtain God's forgiveness is possible only if we live a life motivated by God's love.

God wishes something very special for His children. Not only does He expect us to be His ambassadors in this world, but also to reveal His holy love and therefore be " "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" " (Exod. 19:6, NKJV). What a phenomenal gift and huge privilege God is giving to humanity.

But how is this possible? How can we live God's love? By divine grace we have the Holy Word to answer this.

1. Accept God's love revealed in Christ (1 John 4:9). The clearest evidence of God's revealed love is that He sent His Son to die for humanity's sins. God's love will be manifest in us when we accept Christ as the only-begotten Son of God and His sacrifice on the cross as a source of victory over sin. However, this can't be accepted occasionally or just for brief moments. We shall live by Him, which implies continuity. This is called living the gospel.

2. Observe God's law (1 John 5:3). By accepting Christ and allowing Him to live in us, we can't live in sin; therefore we learn and desire to live by His character. This means that we live an unconditional love toward God and a disinterested love for our neighbour. We observe the law because the accomplishment of law is love. Living in love is observing God's commandments.

3. Produce fruits (Gal. 5:22). "Nobody can correctly present God's law without the gospel, nor the gospel without the law. The law is the synthesized gospel and the gospel is the developed law. The law is the root and gospel is her fragrant flower and fruit."* As Christians, we shall go beyond Christ's acceptance and beyond acting according to law. Living like this we naturally produce fruits by the presence of the Holy Spirit in us.

*Words of Great Master's Life, p. 99.

He Loved Me First

OPINION

1 John 4:19

No matter where I met them, I had trouble with men. The ones I liked, didn't know I existed. The ones who liked me were dullsville. Then into my solitary landscape rode, not a shining knight astride a white charger but an ordinary guy with a modest income. His only asset, aside from clear blue eyes, was his devotion to me. His eyes followed me about the room. He excused himself from other friends to be with me. He enjoyed doing what I liked, sang the songs I loved, and took me where I liked to go. In short, he loved me, even when I was ungracious. His love wore down my defenses and won my heart.

Jesus drew me to Himself in much the same way. He knew my likes and dislikes, my virtues and my faults. From the time He created me, He never let me out of His sight. He guided me from the darkness of my sin into the shining light of His love. He didn't wait for me to shed bad habits, answer an altar call, or complete a 20-week Bible doctrines course.

When Jesus said, "I want you," I nearly got a whiplash turning around to see who He was talking to. Not sinful, unloving, and unlovable me! But there was no one there except me, and the Savior who gave His life for me.

Are we making religion too complex? "We love Him because He loved us first" (1 John 4:19, NKJV). Tears flowed as I knelt and prayed and confessed and prayed

Are we making religion too complex?

some more. The wonder of it all! The Lord of the universe loved me, wanted me, cherished me. Because God is love, He not only forgave my sins but showed me that sin had brought all my

sorrow. Because I loved Him, I wanted nothing to get between the two of us. "Take it all away!" I cried. He filled me with joy, putting a song in my heart that had to be sung or whistled or hummed—even danced to—in every waking hour, a melody of love that had to be shared.

Paul wrote to the Romans that "the whole law can be summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal. 5:14, NLT). What does that mean to us today? Can we measure our obedience by our love—or our love by our obedience?

REACT

1. If love is conditional, then is it really love? Explain your answer.
2. Since Christ loved us while we were yet sinners, how should we respond to people who want to join our fellowship while they show outward signs of sinning such as drug use, promiscuity, homosexuality, etc.?
3. When we pray, how do we know God is responding to us?

EXPLORATION

Jer. 31:3

CONCLUDE

She looks for ways to please him, and he brings her flowers because he knows she'll absolutely love it. Because they're in love, they are willing to give up and go out of their way to communicate that love to each other. Similarly, Jesus gave up and went out of His way to communicate His love for you and me. Because of it, I go out of my way to show Him how much I'm in love. Bible passages like the Ten Commandments (the law) are exciting now because they point to more ways to show Him I'm in love.

CONSIDER

- In Jeremiah 31:3 God says He loves us with an "everlasting" love. Do a word search and find different words that describe *everlasting*. Remind yourself that Jesus' love for you is even deeper and stronger than all the adjectives combined.
- Going to a search engine like www.google.com and typing in "story of a martyr for the cause of Christ." Click on one of the many Web sites and read how far others have gone to express their love for God.
- Writing out Jeremiah 31:3 in an email or card to assure someone who is having a hard time of God's and your love for them.
- Reading and reflecting on 1 Corinthians 13:4-8. List people who have shown one or more elements of love's description (i.e., love is patient: my mom, roommate; kind: Jimmy, Sue; etc.).
- Sculpting from Play Dough, clay, or firm mud an object that symbolizes how God has shown you that He's in love with you.
- Taping a large piece of paper to the back of your door, attach a marker, and on your way out the door each day, jot down a word or two that tells Jesus how much you love Him.
- Listening to the Rich Mullins album *The Jesus Record* with your eyes closed. As you hear the words, create a "mind movie" of what Christ's life was really like.
- Recording in a journal for one week the nature of the conversations you can recall at day's end. Categorize them as including words that were encouraging, harmful, etc.

CONNECT

Jerry D. Thomas, *Messiah*, chap. 74 to the end; DC Talk, *Jesus Freaks*.

Where are your Loyalties?



“ “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment” ’ ” (Matt. 22:37, 38, NKJV).

Godfather or Father God?

INTRODUCTION

John 13:34

You know the scene: The finely tailored, pinstriped suits. The mahogany desk with the solitary shaded lamp hanging over it, the cigar smoke rising like liquid silk, the ominous suited figures looming in the shadows on either side of the man at the desk. He is the only man sitting. He is what this room is all about. Fur around his neck, gold glistening on his fingers, he sits silent and still. His eyes gleam somewhere, back in those dark recesses made by the harsh light from above. He

The first commandment seems simple enough.

sits wreathed in smoke, the creases of his age made infinitely deep by the conquest of light and dark. He speaks, and the voice like cold waves on a frozen gravel shore reaches every ear. "Let's talk about loyalty for a minute. You wanna be a part of dis family, you gotta behave like a part of da family; and da family, it listens to me. I am da family. Remember where you were before I made you what you are now. You were nothing! Remember that next time you think about putting something above me and dis family."

There's a moment of respectful silence, followed by a chorus of voices, "Yeah, boss," "Of course, boss," "Whatever you say, boss." The boss raises his head, "Oh, and one more thing—I want you all ta love everybody." The Italian opera record playing in the background screeches to a halt. A dozen hatted heads turn in surprise, "What?" The scene dissolves, letting in the sunshine and blue sky.

Jesus is standing in front of a group of Pharisees, who look slightly puzzled, despite themselves. Behind Jesus, a crowd of happy people have gathered, including an ex-leper, who can't believe he has fingers again, and a shy little girl, who just stands by Jesus, clutching a fistful of His robe, staring up at Him. The mumbling of the Pharisees indicates that Jesus has just made a big statement. Love everybody?

The first commandment seems simple enough. God is number one, give Him everything, do whatever He says, be loyal at all costs. He's God. It makes sense that we owe Him everything—right? It would be simpler if He had left it at that. The first commandment by itself is wonderfully abstract and lends itself well to our favorite response, "Yeah, boss, of course. Uh, you can count on me, boss." But we don't know what we are saying, or what He is really asking for. Mercifully He does not leave us lost. He continues to reveal His character, and we are made to ponder the mystery of how our loyalty to God becomes loyalty to each other as well.

The Word That's *Not* in the Bible

EVIDENCE

Rev. 17:14

A word that's not in the Bible? That's right. It doesn't occur in *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*. In fact, it didn't appear until the year 1400. The word "loyalty" is derived from the French word *loi* (law) and the Latin word *lex* (leg). By far the more interesting of the two is *loi*, meaning law, but not just in the limited sense of a written code. *Loi* has a deeper significance denoting a law of nature or the dictates of reason and conscience. It is something beyond the external, something internal.

Webster uses a word more familiar to Bible students in defining the word loyalty: faithfulness. Loyalty is faithful adherence to a person, government, cause, duty, or Divine command. Loyalty is the service of those who desire to serve, up to the very limit of their ability, the thing that claims their allegiance. It is faithful adherence, devotion, and ministration to the thing that matters most to you in your life, the thing that claims *your* allegiance.

What claims your allegiance? What are you faithful to? Your education? Your career? Your family? Your God? Each is a worthy recipient of your loyalty, but which one is primary? Shouldn't the ultimate claim on your allegiance be to the God who is faithful to you? (Lam. 3:23). God should be the absolute number one part of your existence. You belong to Him and He deserves to reign supreme above all else in your life.

The irony of the situation is that our loyalty to God is manifest in our loyal interaction with our fellow human beings. Our allegiance to God is revealed by our management of the lesser loyalties that surround us. Can I claim

loyalty to my boss and treat his kids with disrespect and discourtesy? No, of course not. I have to show my respect to my employer by

treating his children with equal consideration. In the same way, we must show our respect, devotion, and love for the King of the universe by treating His children as we would Him.

Loyalty is crucial for Christians in their walk here on earth and it will be one of the deciding factors in the last days. It is one of the things that will show that we are on God's side. " 'Those who are with Him are called, chosen, and faithful' " (Rev. 17:14, NKJV). Will you be found faithful to be with Him? Challenge yourself to be found faithful.

**Our loyalty to God is manifest
in our loyal interaction with
our fellow human beings.**

Monday
May 19

Loyalty, God, and Me

LOGOS

Exod. 20:2, 3; Jer. 9:23, 24; Matt. 19:16-22; Luke 12:15-23; 2 Tim. 3:1-5

One of the greatest rewards that I have as chaplain at an Adventist university is to witness the loyalty that God has for students who are faithful to Him. Gabriel has been planning to embark upon a mission trip to Kenya that my office is organizing for this spring. He has been praying and asking for God to open doors for him as evidence that God wants him to go to Africa. Just as I sat down to write this, Gabriel walked in with an envelope. The envelope contained \$1,914 worth of donations from loyal church and family members. This student trusted fully in God and God provided. Gabriel is going to Africa, without spending one dime of his own, and has money left over to purchase a passport as this is his first trip out of the United States of America. It is exciting to see how being loyal to God pays!

Webster defines loyalty as “feelings of devoted attachment and affection.” Loyalty is “steadfast faithfulness to a person, ideal, or custom.” The Bible does not have the word “loyalty” within its pages, so one has to look at it conceptually in order to understand what God has to say about loyalty.

Matthew 22:37-40

In Matthew we read these very important words from Jesus: ““Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind”” (verse 37, NKJV).

A quick lesson in the original Greek: This statement is a future indicative tense or imperative; both give a similar meaning and describe reality. This is just the way it is—not conditional or subjunctive. This is truth. This is real! Love your God—period. Love your neighbor—period. This is the law—period. My wife often tells me in a reminding kind of way: “You better take out the trash tonight.” There is no ambiguity. If I want a peaceful encounter the rest of the evening, no matter what I do, I will remember to take out the trash.

To be loyal to God is to be tested. The Greek word ΔOKIMAZO, to be examined, has a similar meaning. I have opened up a new package of Fruit of

Gabriel has been planning to embark upon a mission trip.

the Loom underwear and have found a little piece of paper inside that says “Inspected by #345672.” The garments were literally tested and approved by

someone who enjoys stretching men’s underwear. Once we are stretched a bit and are tested in our walk with God, we become loyal to Him and He fulfills us in every way possible. His inspection is our testing and our testing brings His sticker of approval. Not because of who we are, but of whom we trust during a testing time.

Exodus 20:2, 3

The issue of being tested became more and more clear as the Israelites went through their wilderness experience. God brought them to a testing point in their walk with God, a literal and spiritual walk. God physically walked with the Israelites out of Egypt and toward Mount Sinai. The journey was not only for the physical fulfillment of being loyal to Him, but a spiritual fulfillment too. We see this in Exodus where God lays out very clearly the law of God. In that law, He calls us to be loyal to Him, to honor Him, to love Him and be tested by Him. “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:2, 3, NIV). It was very clear that God calls faithful people to be loyal to Him and have no other gods. The wonderful promise for being loyal to God in keeping His law is found in Exodus 20:24. ““Wherever I cause my name to be honored, I will come to you and bless you”” (NIV). Today little Israelite children receive blessings at the supper table or before the Sabbath hour and are blessed from “papa” with such words of promise. When you are loyal to your Father in heaven and honor His name, He blesses you. When we honor God through our faithfulness and loyalty to Him, He blesses us beyond any measure. Again and again, God upholds loyalty in that if we are faithful to Him in our lives and are loyal to Him, He is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins.

My best friend, my wife, is loyal to me. I would have it no other way. Our loyalty to one another exceeds cultural expectations. My loyalty to her is so strong that no matter what happens in our circumstances (kids, jobs, etc.) she knows I will be there for her. No fear ever needs to cross her mind that I won't be there. No doubt needs to creep into her heart that I will not support her or give her the encouragement that she needs. I can express my loyalty to her simply by not giving up on us. This is the expression of loyalty that God wishes to have with His people—that through the obedience that I can give to God through His Word, no matter what disappointment I may have in life, or how far I have fallen into sin, my devotion to God, my love for God, my faithfulness for God, my loyalty for God, will remain in Him.

REACT

1. When you consider a friend's loyalty, what are your expectations? Be specific.
2. List up to five ways in which you believe God may have been testing your loyalty to Him in the past.
3. Have you ever been betrayed by someone close to you? How did it make you feel?
4. How do you think God reacts when you are not loyal to Him? What should this teach us about how to treat others who might not always be loyal to us?

**American Heritage Webster Dictionary* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981).

TESTIMONY

Matt. 22:37, 38

"I entreat you who have long professed the faith and who still pay outward homage to Christ: Do not deceive your own souls. It is the whole heart that Jesus prizes. The loyalty of the soul is alone of value in the sight of God. . . . Christ is at this moment addressing you personally, stooping from His throne, yearning with pitying tenderness over those who feel not their danger, who have no pity for themselves."¹

"We cannot serve God with a divided heart. Bible religion is not one influence among many others; its influence is to be supreme, pervading and controlling every other. It is not to be like a dash of color brushed here and there upon the canvas, but it is to pervade the whole life, as if the canvas were dipped into the color, until every thread of the fabric were dyed a deep, unfading hue."²

"Not alone for men in positions of large responsibility is the lesson of Elijah's experience in learning anew how to trust God in the hour of trial. He who was

"It is not to be like a dash of color brushed here and there upon the canvas."

Elijah's strength is strong to uphold every struggling child of His, no matter how weak. Of everyone He expects loyalty, and to everyone He grants power according to the need. In his own strength man is

strengthless; but in the might of God he may be strong to overcome evil and to help others to overcome. Satan can never gain advantage of him who makes God his defense. 'Surely, shall one say, in the Lord have I righteousness and strength.' Isaiah 45:24.

"Fellow Christian, Satan knows your weakness; therefore cling to Jesus. Abiding in God's love, you may stand every test."³

REACT

1. We are called to give our "whole heart" to Jesus. How can we do this amidst the demands of life?
2. How was Elijah able to remain loyal to God in the middle of his trials? How can we apply this to our own experience?
3. What areas of your life do you struggle to give completely to God?

1. *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 73.

2. *The Desire of Ages*, p. 312.

3. *Prophets and Kings*, p. 175.

"I Will Not Work!"

HOW-TO

Ps. 37:4, 5

Long ago in the terrible days of slavery there was a slave named Joe. Joe was a grand specimen of manhood, big, strong, and healthy, but there was a great pain in his heart. Because of his master's death Joe was put up for auction. As he stood by waiting, thoughts of anger and frustration swarmed in his head. He hated his chains and he hated the system of slavery. That was when a determination grew in his heart not to be bought, and if he were, he would not work.

Joe's name was called and the auctioneer began to describe him. When the bidding began, Joe began to shout, "I will not work." Everyone ignored him and the bidding went on and Joe continued to protest, "I will not work!" To Joe's amazement, he was sold at the highest price he had ever heard offered for a slave. As Joe's new master escorted him to his wagon, Joe stated, "I will not work."

Everyone ignored him and the bidding went on.

Joe's new master kept quiet all the way to the plantation. Finally they arrived and the master, instead of leading Joe away to the usual dirty slave quarters, led him to a neat little cottage, remarking, "This will be your new home while you are with us, Joe." Joe was surprised. "Thank you, but I will not work." The master remarked, "You don't need to work, just live here as long as you please."

"Aren't you going to force me to work?" Joe replied. "Oh, no," said the master, "I bought you to set you free."

"To set me free," cried Joe falling to his knees, "I will gladly serve you for the rest of my life."

We are all like Joe in that we are slaves to sin and Christ has paid the ultimate price to set us free, and when we are able to see the unconditional love that God gives, our automatic response is to serve Him for the rest of our lives.

Once you have established your loyalty to God you might be prompted to ask: What next? Here are a few steps to help you get started:

1. Commit yourself to God each day.
2. Remind yourself of the awesome and wonderful things He has done for you and how you grew to love Him.
3. Model Christ's character.

REACT

1. Why do you think it is important to commit yourself to God each day?
2. Do you think you are capable of modeling Christ's character? Why or why not?

Thursday
May 22

What About Your Sweetheart?

OPINION

Matt. 22:39

When we hear of the greatest commandment, we usually think of that text in Matthew 22:37, “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart’ ” (NIV). On the other hand, this is only the first part. In verse 39 we read: “ ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ ” (NIV). Both of these are important.

The fact is, however, that the only way we will show that we love the Lord our God is through loving our neighbor, especially those closest to us. This is why you cannot talk about being loyal to God without talking about being loyal to your sweetheart.

Many times we jump over this reality. I have heard people talking about how we cannot let our girlfriends or boyfriends come between God and us. Certainly

**God should be the Captain
of the relationship.**

this is valid. However, we should never separate the two. In fact, instead of choosing between one and the other, we should put them together. God should be the Captain of the relationship.

We should be able to spend time together with God. In other words, if you are not ready to spend time together with your special someone and God (together), you are not ready to have a special someone.

God wants His children to love Him—and to show that love in compassion and service for others (Matt. 25:31-46). “Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness” (1 John 2:9, NIV). “This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another” (3:11, NIV).

Loyalty is about love. My love for God is shown in my love for my girlfriend. Therefore, my loyalty to God is shown in the way I am loyal to my girlfriend. If I am not loyal to my girlfriend, I am not loyal to God.

There are many ways to be disloyal to our special someone. We naturally think of getting involved with someone else. However, anything done without love toward the person you love most is disloyalty, just as when we don't obey God out of love we are being disloyal to Him.

If you are in a relationship, it is a wonderful thing! Be careful, however, because how you treat your special someone is how you treat God. If you are not in a relationship, besides helping a friend who is, chances are you will be in a relationship one day. Let us all pray for true love and wisdom on this matter.

Loyalties

EXPLORATION

John 15:14

CONCLUDE

What kind of friend would insist, "You can be my friend as long as you do whatever I tell you"? Yet that's the condition of our friendship with God, not because He's a power-crazed megalomaniac, but because He is not our equal, but our Creator. He made the laws by which we operate: most importantly, the law of love for Him and for our fellow human beings. He promises complete faithfulness—loyalty—to us if we offer Him our complete loyalty in return. That's the only way our human lives can run successfully: absolute loyalty to our Designer's operating instructions.

CONSIDER

- Reading your car owner's manual and comparing it to your Bible. Think about these questions: What laws do your car manufacturers lay down for operating your vehicle? What's the penalty for breaking those laws? In what way is this like the loyalty God requires from us? In what ways different?
- Creating a sculpture that illustrates your vision of God's faithfulness to His followers.
- Writing a story about a time when you believe God was faithful to you by fulfilling His promises.
- Performing the hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" either in your private devotions or in a public setting—Sabbath School or church.
- Volunteering several hours in a community service project as a practical way of applying God's command to " 'love your neighbor as yourself' " (Lev. 19:18, NIV).
- Interviewing your friends or family with the questions: Who are you loyal to? Who in your life has been loyal to you?
- Viewing a TV sitcom in which forgiveness is an important theme. Think about how forgiveness is portrayed and whether its depiction is consistent with your understanding of biblical forgiveness.

CONNECT

The Desire of Ages, chap. 31.

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, bk. 4, chap. 9.

Exhibiting Reverence



“Holy and awesome is His name” (Ps. 111:9, NKJV)

What Does Preparation Mean?

INTRODUCTION

Eccles. 12:13

A group of adolescent students once planned to take part in the Lord's Supper one Friday evening. They had been studying the Bible and praying together for a number of weeks. This was going to be a special evening of fellowship. They invited the pastor to conduct the service for them. But the pastor's reply was, "I'm sorry, this needs preparation and I am not ready for it now."

This event made me think of the relation between preparation and reverence.

Our minds must be prepared to exhibit reverence. Perhaps it may take some elaborate actions for this preparation. On the other hand, it may take only a few seconds to prepare mentally to reverence God.

Certainly preparation is important before we meet our God for worship.

Reverence is the respect that we show to God by obeying His commandments and fearing Him. It is also exhibiting our love toward other human beings by serving the community. It can take place at any time or situation.

We show our reverence to God by the way we worship Him, by the way we use our energies to serve Him. The world may see our actions, but God looks into our hearts. Reverence must begin with the heart. Superficial actions alone will not do. This week let us see how we can make our worship of God more meaningful.

**The world may see our
actions, but God looks into
our hearts.**

Sunday
May 25

God Is Worthy of Our Adoration

LOGOS

Deut. 13:4; Eccles. 12:13; Isa. 6:5; Heb. 2:9; Rev. 14:7

Reverence is an integral part of worship in most of the eastern religions. I have often observed the act of worship of these sincere devotees and have learned lessons on worship. Let me give you the sequence of a typical worship. The person removes the footwear (often followed by washing of feet with water) before entering the place of worship, places the offering (flowers, money, fruits, etc.) before the idols or priests, bows silently with folded hands, joining in the chants of the priests, and then walks away softly. No matter how crowded the worship hall is, uttermost reverence is kept by worshippers one and all.

In some of these religions, worshipers are to appease 330 million gods! Besides being regular worshipers, they also make pilgrimages to sacred places and conduct sacrifices. Often, an individual or family may opt for a favorite god to worship, perhaps to avoid the confusion that such a number of gods can bring about.

Worship is about God.

But I marvel at the sincerity with which these people worship their gods. Then I look at myself and wonder if I am as serious in my worship of God as these fellow citizens of mine. My God has clearly identified Himself in these words: " 'You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice, and you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him' " (Deut. 13:4, NKJV). I find no room for doubt or confusion in selecting whom to worship.

Why We Do It? (Ps. 5:7)

Reverence for God originates from a feeling of respect and honor. A deliberate decision is made by the worshiper to honor and exalt God. David says, "As for me, I will come into Your house in the multitude of Your mercy; in fear of You I will worship toward Your holy temple" (Ps. 5:7, NKJV). One has several reasons for reverencing God. Five of the attributes of God that make us worship Him are that He is a God of power (Ps. 62:11); wisdom (1 Kings 4:29); beauty (1 Cor. 2:9); law (Ps. 111:7, 8); and love (1 John 4:7, 8).

The church has much to learn about a God-centered worship. In many worship situations, we often make our worship services so human-centered, cluttered with announcements, thanksgiving (not to God but to each other), and other human-centered elements, that we do not experience the glory and majesty of God. Worship is about God, praising God for who He is, what He

has done, what He has said. Worship is also *for* God: We worship God and praise Him solely for His pleasure and for His glory.¹

“Modern man, with his world falling apart, needs what man has always needed. And God is the same as He always was. Nothing can ever be so important to a man as for God and him to get together. Before a God of power, wisdom, beauty, law, and holy love, man may truly worship. This is the God of the Bible.”²

How Angels Worship (Rev. 14:7)

Sinless angels reverently veil their face when they take the name of the Lord upon their lips. How much more we, who are created sinful, “a little lower than the angels” (Ps. 8:5, KJV), must reverence Him! The third angel’s message reminds us of this: “Fear God and give glory to Him” (Rev. 14:7, NKJV). What makes the angels reverence God? Knowing Him, of course. Angels reverence God because they know their Creator. They have seen His wonderful love, mercy, and justice shown to all His created beings. We, too, must get to know God to understand His awesomeness.

How do we know God? We can study God’s Word, especially the life of Jesus in the gospels. We can know God through the study of the wonderful books given to the church through the Spirit of Prophecy. The following books are especially interesting: *Messages to Young People*, *Steps to Christ*, *The Desire of Ages*, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, and *Education*.

REACT

1. In what specific ways can we be more reverent in church? in other worship situations?

2. How is reverence related to our love for God?

3. Have you ever strongly adored someone or something? What was it like? How did it make you feel toward that person or thing?

4. Have you ever felt this strongly toward God? When and why?

5. How do you feel toward God now? Be honest and see if you know why.

6. How well are we demonstrating reverence in our churches today? Explain your answer.

7. “The sacred things which connect us with God are fast losing their hold upon our minds and hearts and are being brought down to the level of common things.” Do you agree? Why?

8. Upon what do you base your definition of what is sacrilegious in jokes and stories? Be specific.

1. Samuel Ling, “Is Worship God-Centered or Man-Centered?” *Pulpit Helps*, p. 21.

2. Arthur E. Lickey, *Highways to Truth* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1952).

TESTIMONY

Eccles. 12:13

"True reverence for God is inspired by a sense of His infinite greatness and a realization of His presence."¹ The dictionary defines reverence as a "profound adoring, awed respect."

"Well would it be for the young and old to study, ponder and often repeat those words of Holy Writ that show how the place marked by God's special presence should be regarded. 'Put off thy shoes from off thy feet,' He commanded Moses at the burning bush, 'for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.' Exodus 3:5."²

" 'The Lord is in his holy temple let all the earth keep silence before Him'

Habakkuk 2:20. . . . From the sacredness which was attached to the earthly sanctuary, Christians may learn how they should regard the place where the Lord meets with His people.

There has been a great change

"We must not approach Him with the boldness of presumption."

. . . the sacred things which connect us with God are fast losing their hold upon our minds and hearts and are being brought down to the level of common things."³

"In the name of Jesus we may come before Him with confidence, but we must not approach Him with the boldness of presumption, as though He were on a level with ourselves. . . . There are those who conduct themselves in His house as they would not presume to do in the audience chamber of an earthly ruler."⁴

"While God's servants are presenting the words of life to the people, some will be reading, others whispering and laughing. Their eyes are sinning by diverting the attention of those around them. This habit if allowed to remain unchecked will grow and influence others. Children and youth should never feel that it is something to be proud of to be indifferent and careless in meetings where God is worshiped. God sees every irreverent thought or action, and it is registered in the books of Heaven."⁵

1. *Messages to Young People*, p. 251.

2. *Child Guidance*, p. 540.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 540.

4. *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 252.

5. *Child Guidance*, pp. 546, 547.

Fear and Reverence

EVIDENCE

Ps. 111:9

In the Bible, fear is represented in many ways, all of which fall into two categories: beneficial and baneful. Hence, fear is either a friend or a foe. In its natural sense, innate fear serves as an alarm system, alerting one to impending danger. This prepares for the reaction to fight, to flee, or to freeze. Fear of this character is an asset.

In Scripture, however, clear distinction is made between two types of fear:

The most prevalent use of fear in the Bible is the fear of God. Next to that is the fear of God's people. The former is the reverential side of the fear spectrum. This fear is beneficial:

1. As religion of God's people. The fear of God is synonymous with religion and therefore rewarding. "The fear of God" and "the fear of the Lord" occur frequently in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament. The Hebrew Deity was awesome, so naturally the Israelites were called to "Fear the Lord your God" (Deut. 10:20, NKJV). Proselytes in the New Testament were called "God fearing" or those who "fear God"; for example, Cornelius (Acts 10:2) and Paul's congregation in Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:16, 26). The fear of God was required in the following ways: by keeping His commandments (Exod. 20:20); by serving Him and keeping His statutes (Deut. 16:13, 24); by harkening to His voice (Isa. 12:14); and by worshiping in His temple (Ps. 5:7).

2. As reflected on God's people. When God made humankind and gave them dominion over the earth, He said, "The fear of you and the dread of you shall be on every beast of the earth, on every bird of the air, on all that move on the earth, and on all the fish of the sea" (Gen. 9:2, NKJV). Moreover, God's people are feared by wicked people. As the Israelites began the conquest of Canaan, God said, "This day I will begin to put the dread and fear of you upon the nations under the whole heaven" (Deut. 2:25, NKJV).

The negative kind of fear is harmful to those who experience it, and in turn it makes them a source of

fear. This fear is a foe. It disorganizes, demoralizes, and destroys:

1. As it affects evil people. The wicked person is destroyed by his fears. "The wicked flee when no one pursues" (Prov. 28:1, NKJV). Numerous records confirm this. When Cain was exiled, he was seized with a fearful dread that "anyone who finds me will kill me" (Gen. 4:14, NKJV).

2. As it affects godly people. No matter how it works, "Fear of man will prove to be a snare" (Prov. 29:25, NIV). It takes its toll among good people. It disqualified men from fighting the holy wars. Moses left instruction that, "What man is there who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house" (Deut. 20:8, NKJV).

**Fear is either a friend
or a foe.**

How to Make a Difference by Reverence

HOW-TO

Deut.13:4; Isa. 6:5

When people plan to do evil, they go to a clandestine place and make sure that no one is aware of their deeds. Usually no one remembers to look up and behold the eyes of our loving Father, who sees “every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Eccles. 12:14, NKJV).

Spiritual growth is relative to the time we spend with God. As goes the old adage,

**Spiritual growth is relative
to the time we spend
with God.**

“Practice makes perfect.” Christ’s life was a vivid exemplification of what human beings ought to be. His was a life that was fully dedicated to reverence to God. As we strive to be like Him, we should remember, “The Lord requires

perfection from His redeemed family. He calls for perfection in character-building.”

In our quest to be like Christ and to make a difference in our spiritual life by reverence, we should take note of the following:

1. Acknowledge our inability (Isa. 6:5). The first step toward communion with God is to accept our mortal fallibility. It is only by humbling ourselves before our Father that we can keep on the track.

2. Desire to be obedient (Deut.13:4). The most elementary duty of every believer is to be obedient. The joy of being a family of believers is the realization that we fellowship together with God. Obedience emanates from love that binds us together with God—not from fear.

3. Behold the Cross (Heb. 2:9). Like a lighthouse on top of the hill, Christ’s sacrifice at Calvary beckons every wandering sinner to the warmth of our Father’s arms. As long as we are within the radius of Christ’s territory, our hearts will always yearn to do things that show reverence to our God.

4. Live up to the standards (Heb. 12:7, 8). We should be able to overcome temptations. As the battle surges on, we should remember, “Moral and spiritual perfection, through the grace and power of Christ, is promised to all. Jesus is the source of power, the fountain of life.”²

Everything around us reverently sings the mighty wonders of God’s love. The blossoming flowers, the snowing, thawing, vaporizing water, the roaring sea, glittering mountain caps, and many other features are plain for all to see. Let’s all join nature in obeying God by fulfilling our duty.

1. *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 1085.

2. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 478.

Out of Fear, or Love?

OPINION

Deut. 13:4

"It is the Lord your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him" (Deut. 13:4, NIV).

Reverence, as defined in *Webster's Dictionary* is: "a feeling of profound respect often mingled with awe and affection." The word "reverence" has brought down the most distinguished, exalted, and commanding people of our time. The word "reverence" implies hushed tones, fearful, bowed figures. It implies restriction and submissiveness. Our society is governed by our many "reverences"—for movie and television stars, the boss back in the office, our spouses, our studies. Great pains are taken to guard these, yet the most revered Being is shut away and brought out once a week or when it is convenient for us.

Reverence is not the result of fear but of love. When God created the Sabbath for Adam and Eve, they did not cover their nakedness in shame until sin entered. The Sabbath was a joyous occasion in which the love of God linked Him with His creation. When our focus leaves God, we direct our reverence to other more insignificant things and thus it becomes a service out of fear instead of out of love.

Silence has always been a powerful source of maturity. In reverence, silence speaks louder than any dynamic sermon could. Silence allows the person not just to center on what is at hand but to open his mind to listening to others. In Asian culture, children show their reverence and respect by not voicing their opinions in the presence of elders, even if there is difference in opinion. As Christians, our relationship with God leaves room for us to question Him. By doing so, the relationship flourishes, each receiving respect and as a result, reverence.

**Reverence is not the result
of fear but of love.**

REACT

1. Do I need to show reverence to other religions that I don't believe in? Explain your answer.
2. Why is silence associated with reverence?
3. Where does the element of reverence stand in one's personal relationship with God?
4. Whom are the people you revere? Why do you revere them?
5. How do you show reverence to them? In what ways should your reverence to God be similar to or different from this kind of reverence?

CONCLUDE

Yes, so, what's in a name? We all have a name, and that name provides part of our unique identity. In biblical times, names often described the characteristics and personality as well as the person. Some examples are: Adam (human of the earth); Eve (living); Nabal (fool—the man who refused to assist David); Isaac (laughter); Ruth (friend); Naomi (pleasant—later, after deaths in the family, Mara, or bitter); Boaz (strength and ability). Or, that most important name, Joshua—later, in Greek we know it as Jesus (the One who saves). God has multiple names in the Old Testament; all of them show elements of God's character. No matter what the title/name is, the point is respectful reverence for who God is. One way we show our relationship to God is by meaningful worship that is both respectful and reverent.

CONSIDER

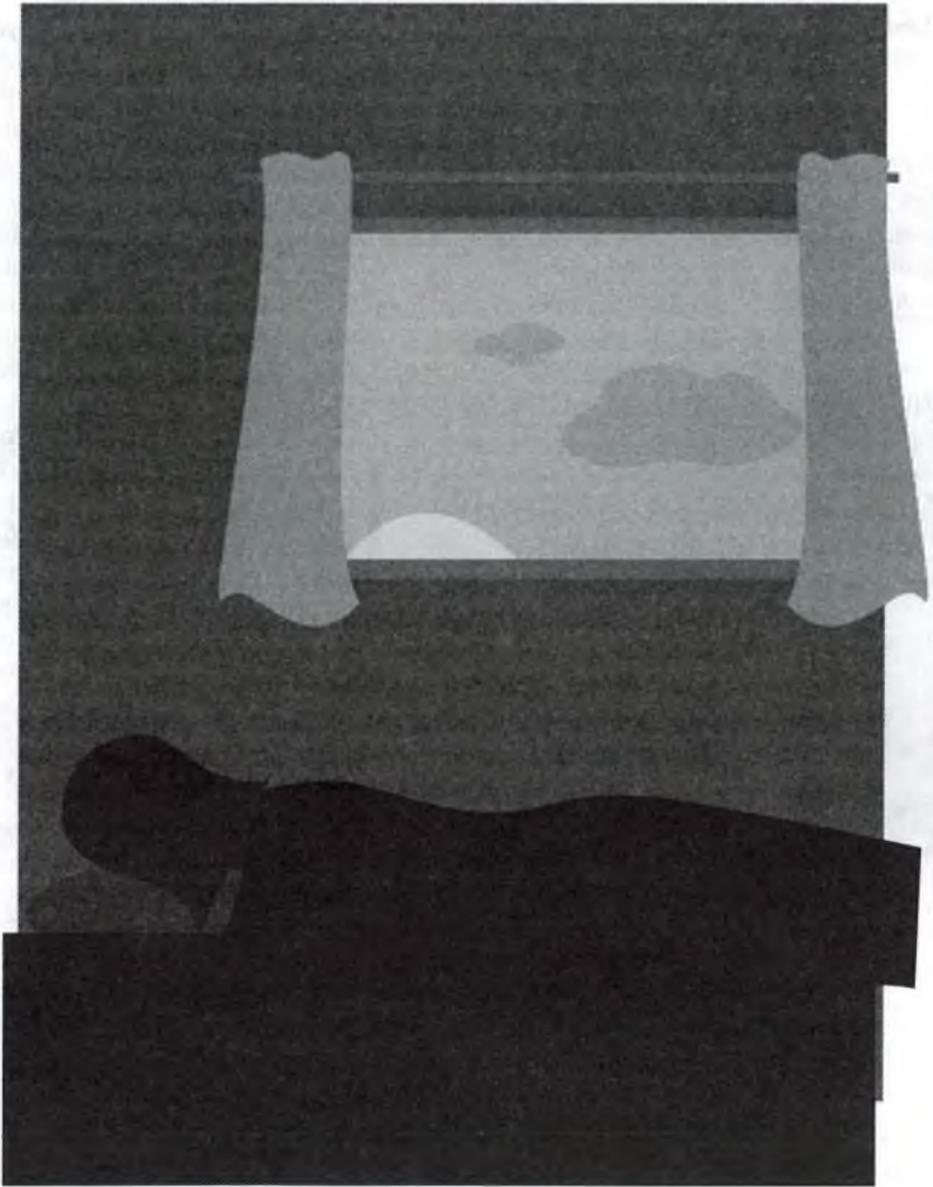
- Using a note pad (for individual work) or a flipchart (for a class) and listing the names of people in your experience whom you respect. Think of why you respect them and what characteristics invite respect. Discuss/reflect how they show respect to you and how you show respect for them.
- Acting out how you would greet the three highest government officials of your country if they came to your home for a visit, if you were invited to meet with them in their official office.
- Reflecting on these statements: Respect promotes obedience. Obedience promotes respect. Is it possible to: Obey without respect? Respect without obedience? Explain your answers.
- Counting and listing the number of times “worship” or its variants are mentioned in Revelation 13; 14.
- Interviewing several people about how and why respect acts as a magnet to draw people into a relationship and how fear separates and destroys relationships.
- Observing a common flower, its complex parts, texture, color, details, design, and Designer.

CONNECT

Psalm 34:9-14; 1 Peter 1:17.

Messages to Young People, pp. 265–267.

Why Forgive?



“Bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do” (Col. 3:13, NKJV).

"New Every Morning"

INTRODUCTION

Matt. 18:21, 22; Rom. 8:35-39

"Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times'" (Matt. 18:21, 22, NIV).

There are two significant periods in my life when God illustrated His love for me.

The first is that there were a few situations where I would deliberately go against God's will and then find myself in a sticky mess. I would be alone and in need of God's help and He would always deliver me, even though I did not deserve it.

The second period was when I kept disobeying God again and again with the same mistake. After a while I thought there was no point in asking for forgiveness, but God showed me that there is nothing He cannot forgive if I just come to Him.

"Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lam. 3:22, 23, NIV). How does this scriptural reference make you see God?

**It does not matter what
you do.**

Is there something deep inside that you feel God will never forgive you? Pray to Him and ask Him to help you give it over to Him. It does not matter what you do and how many

times you have done it. God loves you and His mercies are fresh like the new day.

The Golden Rule

EVIDENCE

Eph. 4:32

I must have been around ten years old when my parents finally allowed me to join the martial arts club near my home. I remember vividly how I would return home after each lesson, feeling like Bruce Lee, able to fight anyone and anything.

That is how it all happened when one day, during playtime at school, I found myself in a fight with a boy from another class. I had never made a secret of my love for Jesus Christ, and Renee started to tease me during break that morning. It all ended with me grabbing Renee's shoulder, throwing myself backwards and launching him high into the air. His fall ended abruptly against a big tree, and an hour later he was in the hospital. I was in trouble.

When I returned home from school that day, my mother had heard what had happened and first reminded me of the golden rule of martial arts. You are not allowed to use your skill outside the club. And then came the hardest part, the golden rule of Jesus Christ. Forgive each other, just as Jesus forgave us. That same evening I visited Renee in the hospital and asked him for forgiveness. And do you know what happened? For the next four years Renee and I were the best friends ever.

The apostle Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians around A.D. 60. He wanted to encourage unity among the believers in the church in Ephesus, which was at the time the most important city in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). The Ephesians had an important task to fulfill. They were to be an

Renee started to tease me during break that morning.

example to the many people living in and visiting this city. Paul intended to awaken in them a higher calling—God's calling—and to help them learn to relate to one another as parts of the same body. Showing the character of Jesus in daily situations could transform people's perception about Him. How else would other people learn who this Jesus was unless the believers would show them in their way of life.

We have received a great invitation from Jesus to share the good news with everyone we meet. People can see Him through our actions. Jesus forgave people their sins and showed them a better way. We are invited to do the same. Jesus forgave us, and we are to do the same to those who hurt us. Is this easy? I am still learning. But Jesus will help us. He promised.

REACT

Have you ever had a situation in which you had to ask forgiveness? How did it make you feel? How did you feel when you received it?

Monday
June 2

Forgiveness Means to Let Go

LOGOS

Matt. 5:43-45; Eph. 4:32; 1 Pet. 2:13, 14

We live in a world that is in desperate need of forgiveness. We only need to think of places like Afghanistan, the Middle East, and Northern Ireland. Or the issue of world debt in which billions are owed by the poorest nations in the world to the rich nations, which the rich are unwilling or at least very hesitant to forgive as they deliberately keep the poor nations in a stranglehold. It is a world that is full of hurting, damaged, and offended people who deliberately and accidentally cause each other pain and suffering. As a result, in order to protect ourselves, our relationships often become superficial and meaningless. This means that when it comes to forgiveness it is frequently meaningless also. We say it so easily: "I forgive you!"

But what does it truly mean to forgive? What are we saying when we express those words?

According to Colin Brown's *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* forgiveness means to send forth, send away, to let go, to leave, to dispatch, to loose, to discharge, to give up.¹

The idea that flows through all of these definitions is that of letting go. So often we think forgiveness is for the benefit of the offended. Try to look at it this way: Imagine you hold an object in your hand. As long as you hold on to it you are in control of that object, but it limits what you can do with your hand. Whatever you try to do with it, the object will be in the way of your full use of the hand. If you let go of the object, however, you do two things: (1) You release the object from your power. It is set free to be its true self again, free from your power over it. (2) Your own hand becomes free and can be used for that which it was originally intended.

This is what forgiveness does. It sets both me who has been offended and the offender free to be fully human again. As long as I hold on to the offense, I have power over the offender. I have him in a kind of control, but I cannot live as

**The foremost motive for
forgiveness is God's
initiative.**

a free human being. The moment I forgive—let go of—the offender, not only do I release him from my power, but I am also set free to live a full life again. Forgiveness is, therefore, not only for the

benefit of the offender, but also for the benefit of the one who has been offended.

Not As Easy As It Sounds (Matt. 5:43-45; 1 Pet. 2:13, 14)

This sounds easy, but in practice it is one of the most difficult things to do,

especially when you see the extent to which the Bible writers want to take it. Though neither of the above texts talks directly about forgiveness, they do express the Christian attitude, which includes forgiveness toward my enemies and human authorities. The Christian is asked to show this Christian attitude to everybody, according to Jesus, in order to reflect the character of the Father who “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matt. 5:45, NIV), and thereby shows that they are different from the unbelievers or the pagans. Peter applies the same principle to the state, which in his days was symbolized by the persecuting authority of the Emperor Nero. The motivation behind Peter’s argument is that “by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men [and] live as free men, [and] as servants of God” (1 Pet. 2:15, 16, NIV).

God’s Initiative (Eph. 4:32)

It is important to notice, however, that in the biblical accounts on forgiveness the foremost motive for forgiveness is God’s initiative. Human forgiveness of a debtor—even an enemy—comes about only as a consequence of God’s forgiveness in Christ, showing itself in the following or imitation of Christ and His forgiveness.

This is the point in the parable about the unmerciful servant. Jesus told this story in response to Peter’s question, “‘How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?’” (Matt. 18:21, NIV). By responding, “‘Not seven times, but seventy-seven times’ ” (verse 22, NIV), Jesus is telling Peter that there should be no limit to the amount of times he should be willing to forgive. The reason for this is then given in the parable in which the servant is forgiven an immeasurable amount by the king. However, as that forgiveness does not have any practical effect on his personal life, the king withdraws it.

The parable is summed up in verse 33: “‘Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ ” (NIV). The initiative comes from God. Because He has forgiven, we should also be willing to forgive. As Paul says, “forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Eph. 4:32, NIV).

“Observe that the cross of Christ is the sole medium of Gospel forgiveness. All pardons pass through Immanuel’s hands. God’s evangel exhibits a miracle of mercy that should ensure largeheartedness in its recipients; but that mercy is essentially *cruciform*.”²

REACT

What could be said to a person who feels remorse for hurting someone who has passed away before an apology was given?

1. Colin Brown, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, p. 698.

2. E. K. Simpson, *Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 112.

Tuesday
June 3

The Testimony on Forgiveness

TESTIMONY

2 Cor. 5:19; Rom. 3:26

“Satan was ready to carry out his plan for securing to himself the allegiance of heavenly beings. He had declared that the principles of God's government make forgiveness impossible.”¹

“Through Jesus, God's mercy was manifested to men; but mercy does not set aside justice. . . . God did not change His law, but He sacrificed Himself, in Christ, for man's redemption. ‘God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself.’ 2 Cor. 5:19.”²

“The very righteousness of the law is fulfilled in the believer in Christ. God can ‘be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.’ Rom. 3:26.”³

**The strength in forgiveness
is easier to experience
than to describe.**

Does God want only to forgive us? “Mere forgiveness of sin is not the sole result of the death of Jesus. He made the

infinite sacrifice not only that sin might be removed, but that human nature might be restored.”⁴

To forgive us is just a start of what God is willing to do in our lives. We should constantly remind ourselves that repentance for the past, as well as forgiveness, is to be sought of God through the atoning sacrifice of Christ. We are counseled not to approach God as we do other human beings. God will not insult us or treat us as we think we deserve.

“It is no degradation for man to bow down before his Maker and confess his sins and plead for forgiveness through the merits of a crucified and risen Saviour.”⁵

Here is a privilege, the servant of the Lord expresses so beautifully, that many are not aware of due to misunderstanding. “When we repent of our past transgressions of His law, and resolve to render obedience in the future, we should believe that God for Christ's sake accepts us, and forgives our sins.”⁶

1. *The Desire of Ages*, p. 37.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 762.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 762.

4. *Selected Messages*, bk. 3, p. 154.

5. *Mind, Character, and Personality*, vol. 2, p. 778.

6. *Messages to Young People*, p. 111.

Dancing to the Rhythm of God's Heartbeat

HOW-TO

Matt. 18:21, 22; Luke 5:31-33

Lewis Smedes writes: "When you make a hard decision against forgiving, you lock yourself in a straitjacket of your own resentment. You get boxed into a house haunted only with horrid memories. Unrelieved resentment is like a videotape inside your soul, playing its tormenting reruns again and again of the rotten things somebody did to you. You become a hard-core addict and you cannot leave it alone. Your only hope is to find the freedom of forgiveness."*

But how? True forgiveness is no doubt more than a mere flick of the mind. It can be a long and difficult process. It might lead along the path of seeing the one who wronged you in a different light. Sin wounds in all directions, so the one who wronged you doesn't go free really. You know that from when you were on the wounding side, right? That is

True forgiveness can be a long and difficult process.

maybe why Jesus' seemingly outrageous suggestion "Love your enemies" (Matt. 5:44, NKJV) might not be too farfetched after all.

It is said that forgiveness comes in progressive stages. The following suggestions might sound odd to you, yet, forgiveness has more to do with the relationship between you and God than with your enemy or the wrong done to you. These points might be helpful to you:

1. The act of forgiveness belongs to God. Realize that forgiveness doesn't naturally exist in your heart, so ask God to place it there. Justice is a rational power easy to relate to. Grace is a supernatural and transforming power, coming straight from the heart of God to you and others.

2. Forgive yourself. Acknowledge your human limitations and give yourself time and space. Allow God to free you from bitterness, resentment, hate, and self-protection (Eph. 4:26, 27).

3. Surrender the one who wronged you to the Judge (God). Surrender your right to get even or your wish to decide the deserved punishment. Remember, God is just and God is love.

4. Ask God to grant you the grace and strength to forgive. As you are forgiven, forgive, even if your feelings resist it (Matt. 6:12). Forgiveness is an act of faith. It will set you free. When you forgive, you are dancing to the rhythm of the Divine heartbeat.

* Lewis Smedes, *How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong?* (London: Pocket Books, 1982).

Thursday
June 5

Forgiveness Brings Personal Peace

OPINION

Matt. 5:43-45; Eph. 4:32

Have you ever had an argument or an unkind word spoken in anger? Had an article taken from you without knowing? How did you feel? Were you able to forgive that person? A few years ago I read a story of a young man who was about to experience what it means to forgive and truly receive personal peace.

It was 1938 when 18-year-old Joseph Mavsar* left home to study for the ministry.

Joseph had heard many sermons about forgiveness.

He had heard many sermons about forgiveness. In a few short years, however, he was to discover how hard it became to live out those sermons.

In 1941, four years prior to the end of the Second World

War, Italy invaded Yugoslavia and occupied Joseph's village. The family's trouble increased when his father, a respected leader, refused to be conscripted into the local Communist resistance.

The family gathered for Christmas of 1942. Two days later the Communists invaded the house and killed Joseph's parents, four brothers, and his sister. Joseph and his 12-year-old brother, Bill, escaped by jumping from the second-floor window and fleeing into the woods. The Communists burned the other bodies and stole the family's belongings. Only the two brothers of this large family survived the war.

Joseph went to the United States in 1948 as a minister. He amazed some, shocked others, as he preached forgiveness for war crimes. He wanted everyone to know the truth of what happened to his family.

Approaching the twenty-fifth anniversary of his ordination, Joseph still struggled to forgive personally the people who had killed his family and ransacked the family home. A cousin in Yugoslavia wrote to Joseph, explaining that some of the killers were haunted by what they had done. He requested that Joseph come back and make peace with them.

Joseph returned to the village, found one of the Communists living in his father's house. "As I shook this man's hand and told him I forgave him," Joseph recalls, "he thanked me over and over and said it was the best day of his life."

In his old age, Joseph continued to preach forgiveness. He said, "In life we cannot be happy unless we are able to forgive. It is important to forgive, no matter how much pain we endure." He knows what he is talking about.

*Nelson Word, *Devotional and Study Aids* (Loveland, Colo.: Group Publishing, 1993), p. 859.

Why Forgive?

EXPLORATION

Col. 3:13

CONCLUDE

Christ advocated and demonstrated forgiveness, showing His great love for people. Forgiving not only shows Christianity in action, but also tends to bring unity. The world is in desperate need of both. The act of forgiving can be seen as letting go of negative aspects of living. God has taken the initiative in forgiving. It is a difficult task to forgive, and the process may take years. Forgiveness is imperative if happiness is to result from an action that requires forgiveness.

CONSIDER

- Brainstorming ways that forgiveness can be accomplished so there are no residual negative feelings after the forgiveness.
- Analyzing the kind of persons you find easy to forgive. Think about why this is so.
- Discussing with friends situations in which forgiveness should be silent and in your heart rather than verbal because the latter might make the original situation worse.
- Listing and discussing specific techniques to bring the focus on God's blessings rather than feelings that could cause a person to feel that forgiveness was needed from another. An example might be thinking about Christ and the promises of God when frustrated.
- Viewing the film *The Spitfire Grill*. Think about how it depicts the importance of forgiveness in a small-town community.
- Exploring *Sojourner* magazine's feature on forgiveness at <http://www.sojo.net/magazine/index.cfm/action/sojourners/issue/soj9505/article/950526.html>.

CONNECT

Psalms 51:8-13; Isaiah 1:18, 19; Jeremiah 31:34; Amos 5:14; Micah 7:19; Matthew 6:14.

Out of the Heart



“By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt. 12:37, NKJV).

The Power of One

INTRODUCTION

James 3:5, 6

"The tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell" (James 3:5, 6, NIV).

A little girl watching the news said, "Why would people want to do this to other people?"

Black and brown trees seemed naked without their usual refreshing greenery. The choking smell of smoke still lingers above our heads. Sydney is burnt out this Christmas. It seems unbelievable that the majority of blazes were started by "fire bugs" in human form.

An elderly pensioner sobs in front of his shattered house. It is the second time in six years. "I don't know what's the use of going on any more!"

Thousands of protected wildlife from the Royal National Park in Sutherland have lost their habitats. Many have lost their lives. There is an urgent request for volunteers to care for the orphaned animals including koala bears, which require constant feeding on special eucalyptus leaves. A

**There is an urgent request
for volunteers to care for
the orphaned animals.**

teenager stands on top of a pile of charred rocks. "This used to be my bedroom," her voice quavers.

The bushfires of Sydney 2001-2002 left a devastating path, consuming land, animals, and homes once more. It also left a trail of chaos and much heartbreak.

James warns us how an uncontrollable tongue can be as devastating to our relationships. How can this be possible? "Sticks and stones may break my bones . . ." James also talks about a rudder turning a titanic ship around. So then how may we harness the tongue for good? How may we use it to give life and regeneration to others?

Sunday
June 8

Forgiving Words From a Forgiven Heart

LOGOS

Lev. 19:16; Matt. 12:35; Phil. 4:8; James 3:6, 9, 10

"By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned"
(Matt. 12:37, NKJV).

Peter's Words

The rough-living and impetuous Peter who was so inclined to speak before he thought would, in so doing, often hurt others with his ill-chosen and judgmental words. It is significant that after much progress in his conversion experience and probably a number of years of hard knocks, he makes the following statement: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Pet. 3:15, NIV). It makes better sense to read that this statement is qualified in the same verse by the following essential prerequisite to gracious Christian speech: "But do this with gentleness and respect" (NIV).

Gracious words come from
a gracious heart.

Gentle and respectful words come from a gentle heart and a mind that chooses to respect the human dignity of others. Gracious words come from a gracious heart. Kind and loving

words come from a heart that knows kindness and love. Forgiving words come from the heart of a person who understands forgiveness—someone who has been forgiven and who knows how to forgive. "A wise man's heart guides his mouth" (Prov. 16:23, NIV). And Jesus said, " 'Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks' " (Matt. 12:34, NIV).

Morrie's Words

The place where gentle words seem most apt is when we pray for forgiveness while forgiving a brother (6:12). Such thoughts and words take time and contemplation. Mitch Albom spent much time with a dying friend during the last days of his former professor, Morrie, who said, "Forgive yourself before you die. Then forgive others . . . Don't wait, Mitch. Not everyone gets the time I'm getting. Not everyone is as lucky."¹

Nelson's Words

Throughout the Bible, God emphasizes the need to guard the words that proceed from our hearts. The words we speak to someone are tempered by the attitude we have for that person. Leviticus 19:17 warns, " 'Do not hate your brother

in your heart' ” (NIV). And James describes the role of the tongue as follows: “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse others, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be” (James 3:6, 9, 10, NIV).

It is, of course, easier to speak kindly to a friend. The challenge is to speak lovingly to an enemy. Nelson Mandela was often asked how he could accept the 1993 Nobel Peace award jointly with F. W. de Klerk after he had criticized him so severely. The two had, until recently, been bitter enemies—one representing the perpetrator of apartheid atrocities, the other the victim and representing the millions of people who had suffered as Mandela had. Mandela said, “To make peace with an enemy, one must work with that enemy, and that enemy becomes your partner.”² This requires a resolve to overcome naturally developed negative attitudes toward others. It is a decision of the mind—a choice to love and to serve! For Christians, this can only be a decision to “let this [attitude] be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5, NKJV).

Satan’s Words Versus Jesus’ Words

“The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him’ ” (Matt. 12:35, NIV). No one illustrates the “good man” in this text better than Jesus, who is “the way, the truth, and the life’ ” (John 14:6, NKJV). No one represents the “evil man” more accurately than Satan, who is described as “‘A murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies’ ” (John 8:44, NIV). We are cautioned that claiming to love God while we hate a brother makes us liars (1 John 4:20, 21).

My Words

Whether my words build people’s lives in truth or whether they break others down in lies depends on the choice of attitude I have in my heart. Words from the heart will simply reflect the condition of the heart.

“A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver” (Prov. 25:11, NIV).

REACT

1. Why does God place such importance on the words that we speak?
2. Is it possible to be too apologetic? Explain your answer.

1. Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, a Young Man, and Life’s Greatest Lesson* (London: Warner Books, 1997), p. 167.

2. N. Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (London: Abacus, 1994), pp. 734, 735.

Monday
June 9

A Difference Worth Talking About

TESTIMONY

Matt. 12:37

"Unchristlike speech lies at the foundation of nine-tenths of all the difficulties that exist in the church. Satan's agents are industriously trying to get professed Christians to speak unadvisedly. When they succeed, Satan exults, because God's followers have hurt their influence. . . .

"My brother, my sister, be afraid to find fault, afraid to talk against your fellow workers. You have enlisted to fight against Satan's forces, and you have no time to fight against your fellow soldiers. The truly converted man has no inclination to think or talk of the faults of others. His lips are sanctified, and as God's witness he testifies that the grace of Christ has transformed his heart. He realizes that he can not afford to talk discouragement or unbelief. He can not afford to be harsh or faultfinding. He has not received orders to punish the erring and sinful by heaping abuse upon them.

"Speak words of kindness, words of uplifting; for this is the fruit borne upon the Christian tree. Overcome all harshness. Eternity alone will reveal the harm that harsh words do to those who utter them, and to those who hear. Hold firmly to the One who has all power in heaven and earth, and although you often fail to reveal patience and calmness under provoc-

"Unchristlike speech lies at the foundation of nine tenths of all the difficulties that exist in the church."

ation, by no means give up the struggle. Resolve again, this time more firmly, that you will be an example of Christian patience. Remember that those only will enter heaven who have overcome the temptation to think and speak evil. . . .

"Have you told those with whom you have come in contact what banner you are serving under? Have they been able to see, by the Christlikeness of your words and acts, that you are a true follower of Jesus. O that our hearts may be deeply impressed with the importance of living holy lives, that the world may take knowledge of us that we have been with Jesus, and have learned of him. Christian worth does not depend upon brilliant talents, lofty birth, wonderful powers, but on a clean heart,—a heart which, purified and refined, reflects the image of divinity. It is the presence of him who gave his life for us that makes the soul beautiful."*

**The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, November 24, 1904.

Branded by Forgiveness

EVIDENCE

Matt. 6:14, 15

God cares how we handle forgiveness, so that we can know Him better by extending forgiveness to others. By doing this, we are blessed to receive all that He longs to give us. In being forgiven by God for our sins, we are changed mortals. But if our hearts are not branded with that evidence, we can never hope fully to walk with the Lord.

When we became Christians, did we surrender our hearts to Jesus? Did we appreciate His love so freely given, and understand our need for being forgiven? There are those who become Christians and dismiss need for divine intercession. They take it for granted that Jesus sacrificed everything for their salvation. They ignore their sins, thinking themselves to be saved as Christians just by believing what Jesus did for them, but not by expecting to have responsibilities. In truly acknowledging the gift, the broken heart cries out for forgiveness, and longs to be made right with God (Ps. 51:1, 2).

The decision either makes or breaks the relationship.

Do we turn a deaf ear when a loved one offers up forgiveness? Do we let a child who has made a mistake feel unwanted and unloved? Do we hold back from apologizing to defend our pride? By withholding or denying ourselves and others the chance for forgiveness, we fill our lives with stress, and are condemned in our sins. "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap" (Gal. 6:7, NKJV). (See also Matthew 18:21-35.)

Forgiveness is not giving up, nor is accepting forgiveness a way to boost pride. Rather, it is "an acknowledgment of the past and a willingness to move on in a new way for the benefit of both sides."¹ No matter if it is man vs. man or man vs. God, the decision either makes or breaks the relationship.

True forgiveness is not something we do for another person,² to be given at our discretion, else we take matters into our own hands, not allowing God to be in charge. Judgment is God's alone, and forgiveness, then, is our indebted responsibility when claiming to be His. This responsibility, reflecting Christ's character, leaves no room for greater evidence.

REACT

What ways can you think of to share forgiveness with others (besides words)?

1. Daniel McFarland, "Apology/Forgiveness." International Online Training Program on Intractable Conflict, Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, USA.

2. Lynn Woodland, "True Forgiveness" <<http://www.lynnwoodland.com>>.

How to Avoid Forgiveness

HOW-TO

Rom. 13:8-10; 1 Cor. 13:4-8; 1 John 4:7-12

- Don't take your feelings seriously. Make sure you swallow and don't express them.
- Make sure you heap on "religious" guilt so that you feel you have to forgive although you don't want to.
- Look for an opportunity to get back at the person that hurt you, but only in a "holy" way.

These suggestions *aren't* really helpful in learning forgiveness. Most of us would like an instruction manual that teaches a step-by-step process to handle forgiveness. This would make things easier but also of less value. Forgiveness becomes an impersonal act.

First, I believe forgiveness is a generous attitude toward myself and others. This attitude isn't a natural human trait; it's a decision I have to renew daily. The

This attitude isn't a natural human trait.

renewal of the decision includes the fact that not only am I willing to forgive others, but also myself. Many people I know find it hard to forgive because they can't forgive themselves. They worry

about whether they are forgiven, and this doubt weakens their ability to forgive. Believe it or not Satan likes to cause such confusion in us, because as long as we are indecisive we won't make a decision coming from the heart.

Isn't it funny? No one likes stress or wants to carry unnecessary burdens. But when it comes to forgiveness, it seems as if we *enjoy* carrying the extra load. Being unable to forgive will always limit us in our actions and relationships.

Last, but not least, forgiveness is love. Think about your last relationship. Were you always on cloud nine? Surely not! But because the other person was important to you, you didn't want to accept disharmony and were willing to reach out your hand.

The word "forgiveness" includes the verb "give." I give up *my* rights, power, and excuses for something better and stronger.

The message of the Cross is about forgiveness. Forgiveness is being willing to let go. Our inability to let go hinders us from meeting others without hesitation, questions, or feelings of guilt.

This is how God forgives. Forgiveness is not forgetting—how could Jesus, when He looks at His hands? Rather, it is the decision to love despite what happened and to give me and my neighbor a new and undeserved chance.

Epiphany

OPINION

Phil. 4:8; James 3:6, 9, 10

Forgiving oneself is the hardest thing to do, but the best way is to accept God's forgiveness and learn to forgive. Too often we refuse to forgive ourselves and we dwell on the sin that we've committed. This complex manifests itself in different ways: We refuse to ask for or give forgiveness, we are unable to accept God's forgiveness, or all too often we continue in sin (too ashamed to turn back to Christ). The reasons we do this vary from feelings of guilt to embarrassment and/or shame. And the more we nurture these feelings, the stronger they become until they crystallize, creating an obstacle for God's forgiveness to reach us. Our minds become stopped up with negative feelings about ourselves, and then the sin which we originally felt guilty about becomes a habit and the cycle continues. Forgiving oneself is one of the main lessons there is to learn about the huge concept of forgiveness.

Where to begin? How can we move away from wallowing in guilt and sin to freely accepting the forgiveness that God freely gives? The first step is to recognize the importance of self-forgiveness. It may feel silly or indulgent, but it's important for our spiritual growth.

The next step is to check your price tag: What's your self worth? Appraise yourself. God sent His Son to die for us and cover our sin, because He has an amazing love for us and wishes that we all be saved. We are worthy of forgiveness. It's provided for us to continue our walk with Christ. James 3:9, 10, declares that bad-mouthing people and praising God in the same breath is a contradiction. The same thing applies to us individually.

Last, put away the negative feelings! Let's break it down: You are not the first person to commit sin and you won't be the last (Rom. 3:23, 24). Let's be even more shocking and say that chances are between now and your nineties you'll probably sin again and again and again. If you take the opportunity to accept God's forgiveness and your own for this particular sin, however, chances are you're not going to commit it again. Dwelling on your sin and refusing to forgive yourself creates the illusion that self is the cornerstone to a sinless life, when in reality our cornerstone should be Christ.

We are telling Jesus that His sacrifice has limitations.

"Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report" (Phil. 4:8, NKJV), these are the things we should be dwelling on. Eventually our propensity to sin will lessen gradually, until our will is completely in synch with Christ's. Don't let Satan's guilt con you into believing that you are not worthy of Christ's forgiveness. Christ's sacrifice is sufficient to cover all sins.

Friday
June 13

Blessed Words of Hope

EXPLORATION

1 Pet. 3:15

CONCLUDE

Words are a powerful instrument for good. They can also lead a person to despair. "What sayest thou?" Are your words a force for good? Or do they sometimes cause pain—to others or to yourself? Are your words like a stream running clean and pure, or do they sometimes resemble a polluted river? Your words flow from the headwaters of your heart. If that source is clean and pure, so shall be the influence of your language. You should also be prepared to express through blessed words of hope why it is He in whom you believe.

CONSIDER

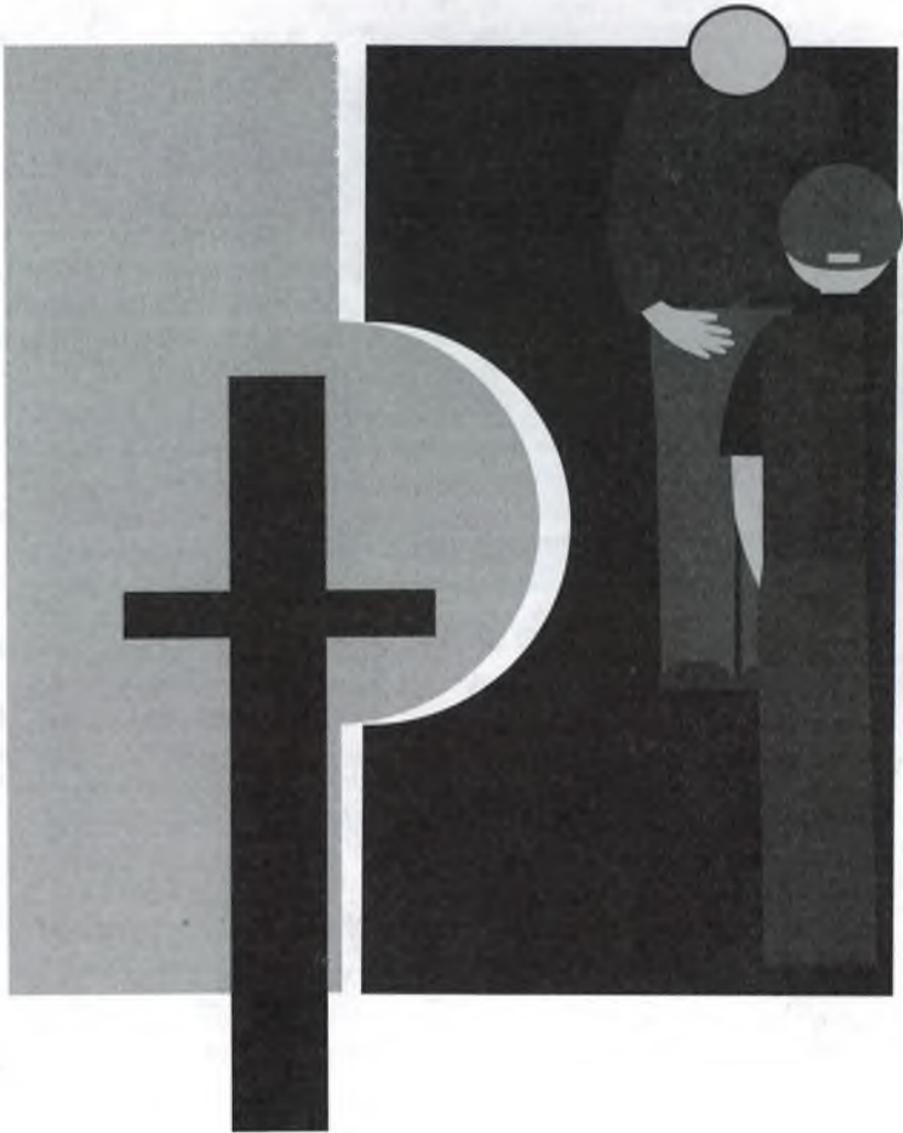
- Role-playing a few scenes that demonstrate the influence one can have who uses uplifting or encouraging words, words that hurt, or words that negatively reinforce feelings of inadequacy. What do you think Jesus would say if He were an observer in each role-played scene?
- Discussing several situations such as those described below, focusing on the positive or negative influence your words may have. Situations could include:
 - A. The local volunteer fire department has asked to use the undeveloped property owned by your church for a fund-raiser carnival. They have not yet decided the carnival dates. You are a member of the church board. Will you vote to approve or disapprove the request? Why?
 - B. The non-Christian spouse of a new member of your church has joined your table at potluck. What will you do? What will you say?
 - C. Your workmate has begun another ribald joke. You are again feeling uncomfortable as she continues. You decide you must say something. When will you speak? What will you say?
- Inviting some church members who have the reputation of always having an encouraging word to speak to your class about what makes them that way.
- Identifying hymns from the *The Seventh-day Adventist Church Hymnal* that contain uplifting lyrics and close your class by singing some of them.
- Reading an article on the subject of the impact of forgiveness on physical health in *Better Homes & Gardens'* Web site at
<http://www.findarticles.com/cf_dls/m1041/7_78/62896064/p1/article.jhtml>.

CONNECT

John 4:1-29.

The Desire of Ages, pp. 323, 324, 390, 391.

Selfless Service



“Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses”
(Luke 12:15, NKJV).

Piece Together the Puzzle

INTRODUCTION

Matt. 10:38, 39; 18:21-35

Forgiveness is like the simplest of jigsaw puzzles to piece together. First, there is God's forgiveness of human sin, made plain through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. As Christians we focus on this piece heavily. And rightly so. Without that act of unmitigated sacrifice there is no way that humanity could be made right with God. But there is a second piece to the puzzle that is often forgotten, or at the very least less emphasized. That is the human response to the example of Christ: forgiveness for each other.

Christ demanded His followers to take His example. But when it comes to our relations with each other humans have a tendency to become very mean and tightfisted. Jesus knew this would be a struggle, but He also knew that it would show the difference between a true disciple and a faker. " 'Anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it' " (Matt. 10:38, 39, NIV). Jesus makes it clear that His way is difficult, but that the rewards are rich.

His parable of the unforgiving debtor plainly shows the ugly reality of those who are happy to accept forgiveness, but are not willing to extend it. A high-ranking

**There aren't many subtle
nuances in this story.**

servant racked up an enormous debt. Fearing for his very life, he pleaded with the king to give him more time to pay. Astonishingly the king cancelled the debt. But more amazing is the response

of the servant. No sooner was he relieved of the debt than he condemned a fellow servant to prison for a lesser debt. When the king heard this, he was so angry that he revoked the servant's pardon and sent him straight to prison. There aren't many subtle nuances in this story. Could that be us? It's difficult to imagine. But the parable shows we do exactly the same when we accept God's forgiveness but refuse to change the way we deal with each other.

Ask this question when you accept God's forgiveness: What ought I do now? This week's lesson makes it plain. Turn from hater to forgiver, from selfish to selfless, from taker to giver. Consider how forgiveness and concern for others can change your life and the lives of those around you.

Sacrifice at Thirty-Seven Thousand Feet

EVIDENCE

John 13:4-10

Time was short but the directives from HQ clear. I was to rendezvous with the sales team in Ohio with a scripted demo for a powerful, potential client. Unfortunately, I was running a tad behind in my preparations. OK, I had not started it yet. However, I purposed to have it done en route to Columbus. I had made real steady progress on the trip into Atlanta. Now I was on the second leg intending not to converse with anyone for fear of not completing it in time.

We roared into the clouds and the pilot announced that we would be cruising at 37,000 feet. I pulled out my laptop and continued working. The woman beside me was quiet. Except for the short pleasantries exchanged earlier, she never uttered another word. I adored her for that! However, this would change. Almost out of nowhere, a question: "So, what kind of work do you do?" I felt my appreciation for her quickly slipping away. I told her. Then, out of courtesy, enquired about her job. That was when I saw it. Right there, in her eyes, staring back at me: pain.

**"Are you happy?"
I blurted out.**

"Are you happy?" I blurted out, instantly feeling embarrassed for being so blunt. She smiled. "No, I'm not at all happy." Maybe it was the tone of her voice or perhaps the mood that it created, but I knew, the demo was history. No matter how important it was to my career, I knew I had to make the sacrifice and minister to this hurting soul.

In washing the feet of His disciples, Jesus gave a new meaning to ministry. One that was not typical then, or now. Jesus advocated that " 'whoever wants to be first must be your slave' " (Matt. 20:27, NIV). He lived what He preached. Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi—even Bob Marley—though not all Christians, had a vision of this divine directive. All lived to serve. Personal comfort and safety were secondary to the object of their compassion: people. Their lives transcended the peripheral and resulted in their names being forever etched in the corridors of time.

Having not completed the project, I was in for a chilly reception from my hotshot sales associates who were waiting for me in Columbus. After having given unselfish service, however, I somehow felt empowered to take on anything.

REACT

1. To what extent, if any, should the security and comfort of your family be affected by your helping a stranger?
2. Which is easier: serving others, or being served by others? Explain your answer.

Monday
June 16

Selfless Service — Myth or Reality?

LOGOS

Matt. 10:7, 8, 38, 39; 20:26-28; Luke 3:10, 11; Acts 2:44, 45; 4:34, 35

“As you go, preach, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons; *freely you received, freely give*” (Matt. 10:7, 8, NASB, emphasis supplied).

I grew up in the church. I was in Sabbath School every week. I held offices, helped on the platform, led Bible study. You name it and I probably did it. Later in my life I came to a crisis place and realized that I had nothing to cling to. I had no relationship with God, and I realized I had been serving to gain acclaim and to

**I am still called to serve
even though I don't have
it in me.**

have people look up to me. As I looked around, I saw other people in the same boat. I saw men who had neglected their families in the name of God and the church; I saw women who were always exhausted and in

crisis because all they did was give. The promises of last being first and the first being last didn't seem to fit into the paradigm. All I saw was misery and the idea of selfless service appeared to be a total myth. The rub came in believing the Bible and knowing that there was something from the equation that was missing. But what? How do I truly serve selflessly and where was the abundant life that God promised?

Could part of the answer to these questions be that I can't serve selflessly, that I do not have it in me? “I know that in me [that is, in my flesh] nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice” (Rom. 7:18, 19, NKJV). So where does that leave us? It seems a sort of lost cause. I am still called to serve even though I don't have it in me. The answer, I believe, lies in part in the text above, “freely you received, freely give.” The operative word is received. Receiving comes first. We can't give what we don't have. This is why a recovering drug addict is able to comfort and support another drug addict in wanting to heal, or a mother who has lost a child is able to grieve and serve another mother who has just experienced the same.

When we have received from God and are ready to serve, what does that look like? In *My Utmost for His Highest*, Oswald Chambers asks about being abandoned to God. He asks when was the last time that we did something out of a love for God and not for any other reason than that. He makes the point that being abandoned to God is more important than personal holiness. When we are focused on personal

holiness, we are focused on what we do, if we are good enough, and not on what God would have us do.¹

Another issue that comes up in service is asking God where He wants us. Later in Oswald Chambers's book he says, "Practical work may be a competitor against abandonment to God, because practical work is based on this argument: 'Remember how useful you are here, or —Think how much value you would be in that particular type of work.' That attitude does not put Jesus Christ as the Guide as to where we should go, but our judgment as to where we are of most use. Never consider whether you are of use; but ever consider that you are not your own but His."²

I have found that God guides me to serve in areas in which I have received from Him. It is not necessary to run around looking for areas to serve in because I am supposed to. The service comes from a heart of love that was *given* to me. It is also important to remember that God doesn't need us. He created the universe in seven days out of nothing. He is perfectly capable of running it without our service. He wants us instead, despite all our foibles, because He knows that we benefit and He wants to give us those gifts. In these circumstances, with love, receiving, and abandonment to God, selfless service can become a reality and no longer a myth.

REACT

1. When have you felt that you were serving selflessly? What happened?
2. What is your biggest frustration with service and what is the scriptural solution?
3. What may God be asking you to do right now?
4. What kind of services are people most willing to do unselfishly, and what kind are they not willing to do unselfishly?
5. What kind of acts would be more appropriate for showing remorse than a verbal apology?
6. What can parents do to help develop a selfless service mentality in their children? Be specific.
7. What can teachers and preachers do to develop a selfless service mentality in a congregation and/or school?
8. What indicates to you that an act you did or are contemplating is truly selfless?
9. Does God expect us to make sacrifices to help people who are known to be lazy? Explain your answer.
10. How does a twenty-first-century Christian practice being a good Samaritan without being taken advantage of?
11. How do Christians create a balance as a servant of God and a friend to man without jeopardizing health, professional, and familial responsibilities?

1. *My Utmost for His Highest*, Feb. 21, p. 37.

2. *Ibid.*, Mar. 4, p. 46.

Tuesday
June 17

"All Can Do Something in the Work"

TESTIMONY

Matt. 10:7, 8, 38, 39; 20:26-28

Many times when the word service is mentioned, there are many of us who tend to think that service does not concern them. We say that service is for those who are gifted or service is for the ordained minister. The inspired writer does not agree at all: "All can do something in the work. None will be pronounced guiltless before God unless they have worked earnestly and unselfishly for the salvation of souls."¹ "Those who have taken part in the solemn rite of baptism have pledged themselves to seek for those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God; pledged themselves to labor earnestly for the salvation of sinners."²

That we may entertain a selfless service, something must happen within us. "The Christian's life is not a modification or improvement of the old, but a

**"The Christian's life is . . . a
transformation of nature."**

transformation of nature. There is a death to self and sin, and a new life altogether. This change can be brought about only by the effectual working of the Holy Spirit."³ "God is the fountain of life, and we can have life only as we are in communion with Him. . . . If you cling to self, refusing to yield your will to God, you are choosing death. . . ." ⁴ We must also constantly think of the cross of Christ. "There can be no self-seeking in the life of him who follows the Saviour. The true Christian banishes all selfishness from his heart. How can he live for self as he thinks of Christ hanging on the cross, giving His life for the life of the world? In your behalf Jesus died a death of shame. . . . Are you willing to sacrifice some of your plans for the sake of trying to lead him in safe paths? Many youth are in peril who might be saved if Christians would manifest toward them a loving, unselfish interest."⁵

Finally, "Christ has left us a wonderful example of self-sacrifice. He pleased not Himself, but spent His life in the service of others. He made sacrifices at every step, sacrifices which none of His followers can ever make, because they have never occupied the position He occupied before He came to this earth."⁶

1. *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 395.

2. *Messages to Young People*, p. 317.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

4. *Mind, Character, and Personality*, vol. 2, p. 693.

5. *Our High Calling*, p. 287.

6. *Reflecting Christ*, p. 232.

A Choice to Inspire

HOW-TO

Luke 22:42; John 13:1-16

Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane is a powerful example of how Christians should choose. The first part of the prayer reveals His humanity. He prayed, "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me" (Luke 22:42, NKJV). While Jesus prayed, "the powers of good and evil waited to see what answer would come to Christ's thrice-repeated prayer."¹ Jesus Himself shrank from the thought of self-sacrifice; the choice to save us was His own. He knows how we feel when we shrink from the thought of self-sacrifice; the choice to humble ourselves is our own. But He chose God's plan in Gethsemane. Even as He struggled with the thought of sacrificing Himself, Jesus prayed, "Not My will, but Yours, be done" (verse 42, NKJV).

Every day we face choices to sacrifice ourselves to the service of Jesus and others.

Here is the benefit of Jesus' choice: By resisting Satan and choosing God's plan, He gave humanity a chance for redemption. Every day we face choices to sacrifice ourselves to the service of Jesus and others. Satan discourages us to sacrifice; God encourages us to sacrifice. The choice is our own. Here are a few benefits of choosing God:

1. Self-sacrifice inspires yourself. After we fight our fear, our pride, after we take the step forward to serve others and place as little thought on self as possible, then comes an epiphany when we realize how much better a deal we got by disregarding self. The next time we face a situation that requires self-sacrifice, we're better prepared to resist fear and pride again, to receive another moment of realization. Those moments help us to understand what it means to work for Jesus instead of self.

2. Self-sacrifice inspires others. At Passover the disciples would not humble themselves to wash each other's feet. They bickered, boasted, gloated, envied, and grudged until Jesus picked up the towel and basin. A few minutes later 11 of them "saw themselves in altogether a new light"² as Jesus washed their feet. "They had become humble and teachable . . . Now with subdued and grateful hearts they could receive Christ's words."³ The disciples were humbled when they saw the humility of another person. When we sacrifice ourselves to serve others, our choice points toward Jesus. Our humility inspires other people to follow.

1. *The Desire of Ages*, p. 693.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 644.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 646.

Thursday
June 19

Servant of God— Friend to Man

OPINION

Gal. 6:9

It was Valentine's Day and Angella had been eagerly anticipating the surprise date Alan had told her of. As suggested, she was casually dressed.

Alan arrived and off they went. To Angella's surprise but not dismay, Alan had signed them both up for the local service club's annual blood drive. It was not the usual way for couples to spend a Valentine's Day, but these two were happy to do something that would benefit someone other than themselves. Not only were they living up to the creed of being "a

**This is our long-term
investment plan.**

servant of God and a friend to man" and thus demonstrating Christlikeness (called to serve and not to be served), they were also applying the principle of love that Valentine's Day is supposed to epitomize.

JOY is evident in the action of these two young people. The same can happen for you. Put J—Jesus first, O—Others next, and Y—You last. Like the two young people, you can allow Christ to live out His life within you, doing for others what you would want to be done for you. They must also do for others what no one else wants to do for them.

Recently, I saw an essay topic: " 'People must sometimes do things that are unpleasant for them.' Discuss." That is what service is about—doing the unpleasant, happily. When we, as Christians, do joyfully and willingly, that which we would ordinarily find unpleasant, the paradox of service presents itself. Indeed, doing a good deed for someone often leaves us with no time to think about our problems or troubles.

It is our responsibility as Christians to do the task, whether unpleasant or gruelling or pleasing, to make someone's life brighter. This is our long-term investment plan. We, however, collect the dividends not now, but later.

Ellen White tells us in *The Acts of the Apostles* that "strength to resist evil is best gained by aggressive service."* The best way to prepare myself to battle Satan is to participate in willing and committed service for the Lord. Nothing must be too hard, unpleasant, and inconvenient for the children of the Servant King to do. No one should be in want when God's children are present because God has blessed us and we *must* be willing to share that blessing.

For what does it profit for someone to have the whole earth and not share it with his brother who has naught?

*p. 105.

Simple Service

EXPLORATION

Matt. 5:40-48; 10:42

CONCLUDE

Sometimes, in our twenty-first century sophistication, we can complicate concepts such as service. Thank God there are writers who can help us refocus! The apostle Paul says, "The Kingdom of God is . . . a matter of . . . living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17, NLT).

Max Lucado puts it this way: "Christianity, in its purest form, is nothing more than seeing Jesus. Christian service, in its purest form, is nothing more than imitating him who we see. To see His Majesty and to imitate him . . . that is the sum of Christianity."*

CONSIDER

- Preparing a meal with friends or family and inviting only guests who cannot return your hospitality.
- Writing down three simple acts of service you could do for your least favorite person—then selecting one actually to follow through on.
- Learning the old hymn, "If Any Little Word of Mine" and making it your theme song for a month.
- Setting aside a modest amount of money and seeing how many acts of service you can do with it. Feed expired parking meters? Hand out quarters in a laundromat? Take a neighborhood child out for ice cream? The possibilities are exciting and endless!
- Observing the way in which people treat their pets. Think about how forgiving a pet is and how this is similar to and different from the way in which we are expected to be forgiving of others.
- Reflecting on your own history. What is the most selfless act of service someone has done for you?
- Adopting a section of sidewalk or roadway for a day. Pick up all the litter, sweep, weed, or plant to make it a more beautiful place.

CONNECT

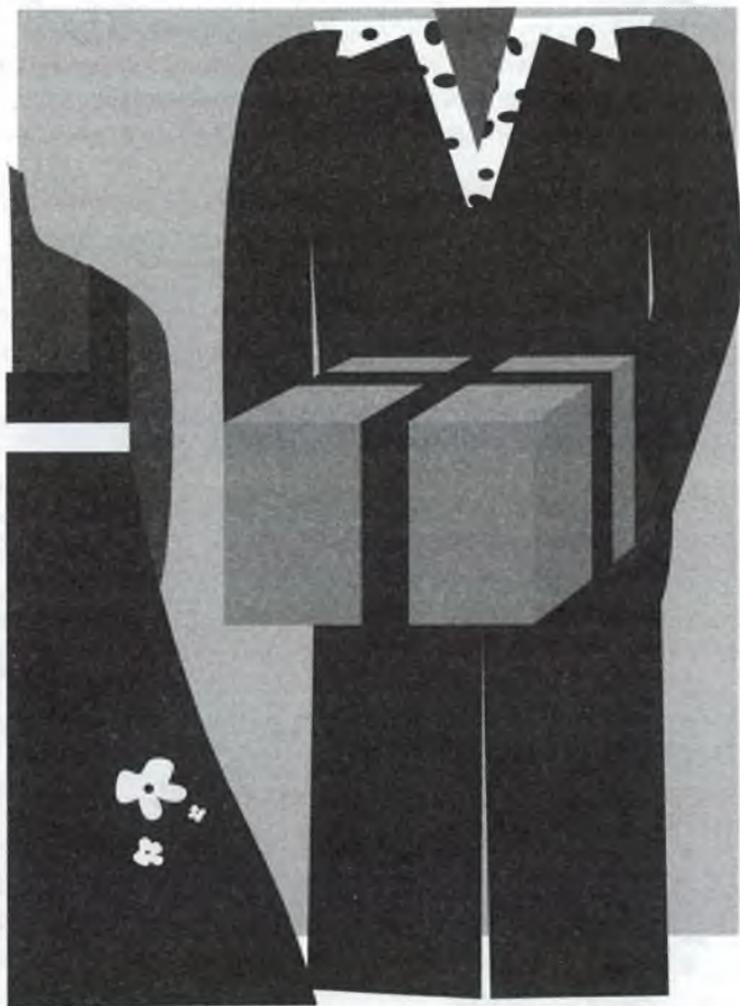
Luke 10:30-37; 12:13-21.

The Desire of Ages, chap. 54.

Max Lucado, *God Came Near*.

**God Came Near* (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah Press, 1989).

Living the life of Faith



“What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8, NIV).

Faith Outside the Box

INTRODUCTION

2 Cor. 5:7

Think of faith outside its traditional framework,
Outside the well-defined box we usually try to fit it (and all things spiritual) in.
Is faith the default setting that allows us to function
Even when we don't know what we're doing?
Is faith the key that unlocks the door,
Or is it the hinge that allows the door to move? Is faith reaching for Jesus'
garment or actually managing to touch it?
If faith is a tiny grain with power to move mountains,
Why, then, is the earth not constantly moving? (Or is it?)
We live by faith, not by sight. Is faith, then, blind? Everyone knows blind faith
can get you into trouble.
But can it also get you into heaven?
If we're saved by faith, why do we get so hung up on it?
Do we really believe our sins are forgiven, cast in the depths of the sea?
Is our faith measured by answered prayers? health and prosperity?
Does our faith make us whole? Does it happen right away,
Or do we have to wait for heaven?
Is faith what carries us through while we wait?
God has ways of which we know not; He is beyond our understanding.
Things beyond our understanding require faith.
Faith allows us to accept what we cannot understand.
He gives us many gifts—life, forgiveness, salvation.
Faith is the one essential we have to muster up ourselves,
Moving beyond what we can see, thinking outside the box,
Making sense of what doesn't make sense,
And accepting it all simply because it is and He is.
The gifts are ours for the taking,
Presented in love and received through faith.
Rejoice in life, claim salvation,
And in a leap of faith, let the gift of forgiveness carry you into eternity.

Sunday
June 22

Gaining Faith in Yourself?

LOGOS

Mic. 6:8; Rom. 1:17; Col. 2:10; 1 John 4:18

Having looked at forgiveness from two angles over the past weeks—both as forgivers and the forgiven—I think we are often better at forgiving others than accepting forgiveness for ourselves. As Christians, because of our knowledge of God's offer to forgive humanity, we endeavor to apply His example when dealing with others. Besides, in today's pluralistic world, society in general is becoming less judgmental and more tolerant.

The more difficult challenge is to convert our *knowledge* of God's forgiveness into a *personal acceptance* of it. By accepting God's forgiveness as a real and tangible thing, we can be empowered to live fully effective lives. So what do we let stop us?

In my life, the thing that has stopped me accepting God's forgiveness is the realization that my nature is fallen and I cannot make myself righteous. Since I am sinful, unholy, I cannot perfectly obey God. I have no righteousness of my own with which to meet the claims of the law of God.¹ How then, can I accept God's forgiveness when I have no faith in my ability to live up to His law?

Through the Old Testament prophet Micah, God reaches out to us when we have these feelings of worthlessness. Micah says, "[God] has showed you, O man,

"Your hope is not in yourself; it is in Christ."

what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (6:8, NIV). God doesn't expect us to be able to live a perfect life before we

accept His forgiveness. Instead, He asks us to acknowledge our faults and walk humbly with Him—sharing His justice and mercy (the gift of forgiveness) with others.

Accepting God's forgiveness, we can also rest assured that He will not leave us powerless to overcome the things that are making us angry, depressed, and feeling distant from Him. "In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority" (Col. 2:9, 10, NIV). Christ changes our hearts. He lives in our hearts through a faith that leads to the ongoing surrender of our will to Him. And if we surrender to Him, He offers us true reconciliation with God.² God doesn't expect us to accept His forgiveness and go on with life just the way it was—He wants something better for us!

By having faith in God's forgiveness and the power of Christ, we develop faith in our ability, through Him, to make the most of our lives and overcome feelings of worthlessness. "In the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Rom. 1:17, NIV).

Sadly, often when we think of “righteous” people, we have a tendency to think of those who are self-righteous—people who put on the appearance of a perfect Christian lifestyle, a perfect understanding of God’s Word, and claim a perfect relationship with Him. Often we feel our own actions being judged by those people and therefore get turned off by the whole concept of righteousness. But this is a false brand of righteousness that has little to do with the happiness God wants us to experience if we live by faith.

This week’s study shows us that living life by faith has many implications. It involves an appreciation of our own imperfections, a willingness to “act justly and to love mercy” (Mic. 6:8, NIV) and an acceptance of God’s forgiveness and the power of Christ to deal with our faults. “Your hope is not in yourself; it is in Christ. Your weakness is united to His strength, your ignorance to His wisdom, your frailty to His enduring might. So you are not to look to yourself, not to let the mind dwell upon self but look to Christ. Let the mind dwell upon His love, upon the beauty, the perfection, of His character.”³

Ironically, by looking beyond ourselves we are able to realize personal happiness by accepting and reflecting the love of Christ, a love that brought Him to earth not to condemn us for our sinfulness, but to give us the chance of a fresh start. It is something we can fearlessly believe in: “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:18, 19, NIV).

REACT

1. Is there a difference between accepting forgiveness and living by faith? Explain your answer.
2. How can you encourage your friends to have faith in God and His forgiveness?
3. In what ways do you expect Christ to influence your decisions when you live by faith?
4. What are some techniques that encourage individuals to have faith in themselves?
5. What can people, like parents, do to harm a person’s developing faith in themselves?
6. What possible benefits could accrue to a person apologizing to himself and God for an act that no person saw?
7. What is the impact on your Christian growth of having faith in yourself?
8. What indicates that gaining faith in yourself is not arrogance or self-delusion?
9. What can prevent having faith in yourself from developing into too much self-assurance?

1. Personalized from *Steps to Christ*, p. 62.

2. *Steps to Christ*, pp. 62–64.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

Monday
June 23

Work Out Your Faith With God

TESTIMONY

Rom. 1:17

In the life of the Christian, there must be faith. It is the only way we can survive. If we are living on this earth without the hope of the Second Coming, then what would be the point of being a Christian? Because of faith, we can know the gospel and live. However, being a Christian is not only about having faith.

“Add to your faith: You have faith in Jesus Christ as your Saviour. All should have faith in Him as a Saviour. We are to work in accordance with that faith. We show our faith by working, by keeping our eyes fixed on the mark of the prize of our high calling in Christ Jesus.”¹

Part of being a Christian is living out faith in our lives so that others may see our faith and works and glorify our Father in heaven. The Bible says that “faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (James 2:17, NKJV).

It is not enough to have faith; we must exercise it and “work” it out so that our faith doesn’t die.

How can we exercise our faith?

“We show our faith in God by obeying His commands. Faith is always expressed in words and actions. It produces practical results; for it is a vital element in the life. The life that is molded by faith develops a determination to advance, to go forward, following in the footsteps of Christ.”²

We need to go and have a workout session with God. It is as though He is the master trainer and we are the athlete that desperately wants to get better at their profession. We need to place ourselves in His capable hands and let Him do the molding. He will give us the workout that we need. However, we need to trust that He knows what He is doing

Part of being a Christian is living out faith in our lives.

and will not give us more than we are able to handle. He starts us out small. Gradually, He builds our trust in Him until He can ask anything of us and we will do it with ultimate faith and trust in Him. It just takes that initial step of faith toward God to help get your journey of faith on its way.

1. *Australasian Union Conference Record*, July 12, 1899, “The Higher Education,” para. 5.

2. *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 17, 1910, “The Need of Living Faith,” para. 6.

Faith Is the Evidence

EVIDENCE

Mal. 3:10; Rom. 12:2; 1 Thess. 5:21; Heb. 3:8, 9; 11:1

When I was in the natural sciences program at Loma Linda University, many of my classes included discussions on the evidence for (and against) Creation. We explored everything from fossil dating to the genetic relatedness of species. There was so much evidence out there that I was confused about what to believe.

One day I listened to a professor discussing several land formations that we believe were caused by the Genesis Flood. *Wow*, I thought, *with all this evidence how could evolutionists deny the Bible?* The professor then began to explain that

the same evidence was being used by evolutionists to create the “catastrophic theory” based on a series of floods in different areas of the world. Same evidence—different conclusions. In fact, most of the

Same evidence—
different conclusions.

evidence we discussed could be interpreted depending on what a person chose to believe. A professor read us the account of one staunch evolutionist. After examining all the evidence, he concluded that he had to believe in evolution by faith! Throughout the Bible God has also asked us to examine the evidence and believe by faith. The Bible presumes that God exists so what is this evidence that we are to base our faith on?

For a long time I didn't understand Hebrews 11:1. How could faith *be* substantive evidence? Wasn't faith what you had when there was no evidence? My best friend, Maxine, told me once that God uses every experience we face to strengthen our faith. God has forgiven us. When we decide to give Him our lives, we are testing—or as the Bible says—proving Him. Our faith increases as we accept His pardon and His will for us. Eventually the fact that our faith in God is strong and unwavering becomes tangible evidence of His work in us. By this faith we can testify to God's power as did the men and women in Hebrews 11.

Have you tried to prove the “perfect will of God”? Why not accept God's forgiveness today? Let Him change your life and let your faith become your evidence.

REACT

1. What do the following texts tell us about God's expectations for the basis of our faith: 1 Thessalonians 5:21; Hebrews 3:8, 9; Romans 12:1, 2; and Malachi 3:10.

2. According to Hebrews 11, on what did Paul base his statement of faith as evidence? Do you have faith that God has forgiven you for everything?

3. What can be said to a person lacking faith in others and/or God because of ill treatment that they have received?

HOW-TO

Mark 9:24; Rom. 4:15-24; Hebrews 11

Ever wondered how Noah could build an ark and preach for 120 years about rain while he himself had no idea what rain was? Or Abraham, blindly traveling to an unknown destination? Does it make sense for Abraham to see himself a father of many nations at 100 years of age yet without the promised child? What about Gideon fighting a war with torches and blowing trumpets or Joshua by marching around Jericho. That is faith, "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1, NKJV). "Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (verse 6, NKJV).

It is believing in the One "who . . . calls those things which do not exist as though they did" (Rom. 4:17, NKJV). Abraham believed in Him and "against hope [he] believed in hope" (verse 18, KJV). And he "became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken" (verse 18, NKJV). "He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore 'it was accounted to him for righteousness'" (verses 20-22, NKJV).

Wow! This is great! Can we also have this faith? Absolutely, because this was not written for Him alone, but for us also (you and me), and "it shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the

"Faith is blind except upward."

dead" (verse 24, NKJV). How? By praying that God will help us to believe and make daily commitments to:

1. Have faith. "Faith is blind except upward. It is blind to impossibilities and deaf to doubt. It listens only to God and sees only His power and acts accordingly. Faith is not believing that He can but that He will. But such faith comes only of *Close Continuous Contact* with *Christ* (4C's). Its birthplace is in the secret closet. And time, the open word, an awakened ear and a reverent quiet heart are necessary for its continued growth."¹

2. Trust God. "He can be trusted. And of course trust means trust in the darkest dark where you cannot see. Still trust means trust. It does not mean test. Where you trust you do not test. Where you test you do not trust. Making this our prayer means trusting God."²

1. S. D. Gordon, *Quiet Talks on Prayer* can be found at <www.posword.org/articles/gordsd/prayer00.shtml>

2. Ibid.

Forgiveness: Leaving No Regrets

OPINION

2 Cor. 7:10

I headed to my seat, satisfied with having recited my poem for a church service in Belize. Unfortunately, the stairs were a bit uneven and my sense of balance not the best. As I stepped down, I slipped and fell in front of the congregation. The room was silent, and I quickly got up. As soon as I reached the pew, I turned to my best friend and cried on her shoulder. That mission trip moment was the most embarrassing experience I have ever had.

Sometimes in life we realize we've fallen and try to hide our faces, wishing we could just disappear. Sometimes our sins humiliate us. We want to escape. And since we know we can't undo what happened, we hope those around us will forget.

When we sin, we have the comfort of knowing that, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9, NKJV). His blood cleanses us and our sins disappear from His memory. "I have blotted out, like a thick cloud, your transgressions, and like a cloud, your sins. Return to Me, for I have redeemed you" (Isa. 44:22, NKJV).

Letting our sin go means refusing to let the sin cloud our focus on the present.

It would have been silly for me to go away and keep bringing up the fact that I'd fallen. It would have been silly for me to imagine that every time those people saw me they remembered that incident. In the same way, perhaps letting our sin go means not only refusing to sin but refusing to let the sin cloud our focus on the present.

"Godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2 Cor. 7:10, NKJV). God doesn't want us to wallow in pity. He wants us sincerely to confess, and then get up and move on. It can take great faith to move on, but we have to keep going.

That day in the church in Belize, a little girl named Shanelly sitting in my pew saw past my fall and attached herself to me. That evening, she sought me out to play games with her at the goodbye party, and we have written letters to each other since then.

In the same way, God has compassion on us and seeks us out when we fall. Then we can look up to Him in faith and move on. We can accept His forgiveness and leave no regrets!

EXPLORATION

Mic. 6:8

CONCLUDE

Faith is more than an intellectual assent to a set of concepts, more than an abstract idea. For the men and women of the Bible who exemplified it, faith was a heart-pounding adventure with the living God. In Hebrews 11 faith is more a verb than a noun. "Abel offered . . . Noah built . . . Moses left Egypt . . . Rahab welcomed." All lived the adventure. All will receive faith's ultimate reward. Their first-round, short-lived experience of adventure here will morph into a grand, never-ending adventure of faith beyond belief.

CONSIDER

- Personalizing Psalm 73—an epic poem of faith found, lost, and experienced again from a new perspective. Think about these questions: When in your life have you felt like this psalmist: "Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure" (verse 13, NIV)? In what ways do the things that caused the psalmist to stumble affect your life? How did the psalm writer regain a grip on faith?
- Sketching or painting a picture of a person of faith. What does such a person look like? In what activities do you depict them engaged?
- Taking a walk in a natural setting. Without violating rules of the outdoors, collect simple, natural reminders of God's presence and power. How do these articles from nature help your faith grow?
- Listening to Vivaldi's "Four Seasons," or Groffe's "Grand Canyon Suite," or a similar piece of classical music that celebrates the beauty and grandeur of nature. Think about these questions: In what ways do such experiences draw you closer to God? What is your all-time favorite artistic work? What impact does that work have on your faith? What kind of things would Jesus do if He lived in our community?
- Meditating on Psalm 19. Read it through aloud twice without stopping. Think about these questions: What in nature most clearly declares to me the glory of God? Why is it that the Law of the Lord (Scripture) is perfect? What things can I learn from Scripture that may not be readily evident in nature? How do the two (nature and Scripture) work together to help form my faith and my understanding of God?

CONNECT

Steps to Christ, chaps. 1, 12.

Anthony Campolo, *A Reasonable Faith*; Paul E. Little, *Know Why You Believe*; Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, pp. 13–25, 255–275.

Next Quarter's Lessons

Sanctuary Themes: The Book of Hebrews

If you have not received a copy of *CQ* for third quarter 2003, here is a summary of the first two lessons:

Lesson 1: Jesus and the Book of Hebrews

Scriptures: Heb. 1:1, 2; 2:3; 4:15; 10:22, 23

KEYTHOUGHT: The book of Hebrews was written in order to help keep faithful those who were tempted to fall away from the faith. What Christian, in what era, hasn't faced the same temptation? Hence, the relevance of Hebrews for us even today.

Lesson 2: Jesus, Our King

Scriptures: Hebrews 1

KEY THOUGHT: Though Hebrews repeatedly presents Jesus as our High Priest, Jesus is also pictured as King.

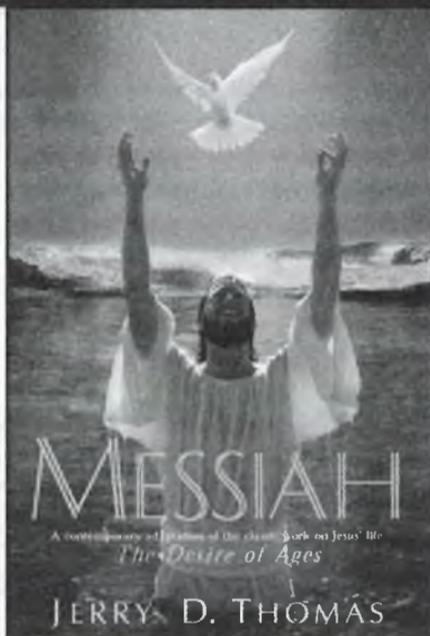
To order your personal copy of *CQ*, contact your Adventist Book Center or write:

Pacific Press Publishing Association
P. O. Box 5353
Nampa, ID 83653-5353
U.S.A.

Prices: U.S.A.: One-year subscription—\$15.40
Single copy—\$6.29

Outside U.S.A.: One-year subscription— US \$18.40
Single copy—US \$6.29

You've read *The Desire of Ages*. Now meet *Messiah*!



Ellen White's classic volume on the life of Jesus has been a source of inspiration and enlightenment to millions. Author Jerry D. Thomas's passion to make this powerful story more accessible to today's reader has given birth to *Messiah*—a contemporary adaptation of Mrs. White's great work.

"It is my conviction that for thousands today, this new edition will be as much appreciated and helpful spiritually as the classic original."

James R. Nix, director, Ellen G. White Estate

A book for today about a Man for all time

Messiah

By Jerry D. Thomas

0-8163-1845-X. Hardcover. US\$19.99, Can\$31.99.

© 2002 * Prices subject to change. 207/25590



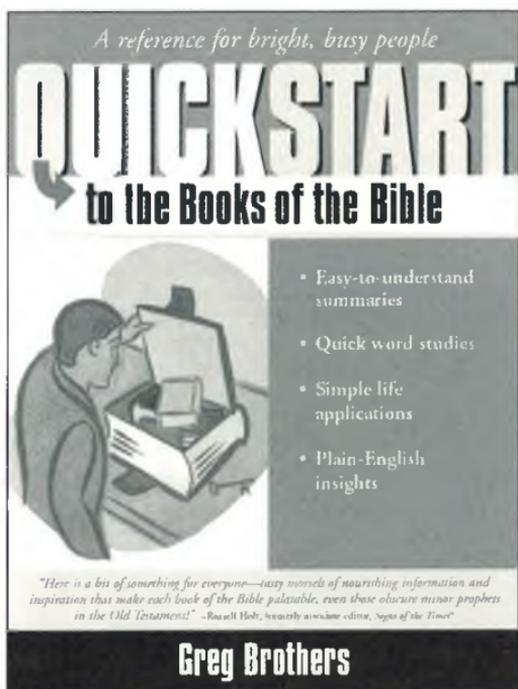
Pacific Press®

Find *Messiah* at your local ABC, 1-800-765-6955.

Or read a sample chapter first and order online:

www.AdventistBookCenter.com

The Bible made simple.



Ever start reading the Bible and get bogged down in names you couldn't pronounce, symbols that didn't make sense, and Elizabethan language you couldn't understand? *QuickStart to the Books of the Bible* is here to help. This friendly guide uses icons and text tools to break this sometimes intimidating collection of books into bite-sized pieces, making it easy to understand and apply to your daily life.

Get more from your Bible study with *QuickStart*.

QuickStart to the Books of the Bible by Greg Brothers

0-8163-1924-3. Paperback. US\$15.99, Can\$24.99.

Pacific Press[®]
Where the WORD Is LIFE



Available at your local ABC,
1-800-765-6955.

Or read a sample chapter
first and order online:

www.AdventistBookCenter.com

M
I
S
S
I
O
N

P
R
O
F
I
L
E



South Pacific Division

Mack Minnala, 21, grew up in an Adventist village in Papua New Guinea. He went to church because he was expected to, but he never

accepted Christ's claim on his life. When he enrolled in a boarding high school, he stopped attending church. When the other Adventist students left campus to attend church on Saturdays, Mack went to explore the market or to play rugby.

One day Mack and Tamil, a dedicated Adventist friend, were dreaming about the future. They talked of becoming politicians, perhaps even prime minister, one day. Then Tamil asked Mack, "If time does not last and Jesus comes before you realize your dreams, will you meet me in heaven?"

Tamil's question hit Mack hard. How could he give his friend a positive answer and still be honest? But how could he say no to heaven?

Learn how Tamil's question changed the course of Mack's life from campus troublemaker to university campus church elder. Read his story in this quarter's Mission.

Part of the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering this quarter will help build chapels and churches in Papua New Guinea.



FCQ030401