

## EDITORIAL

### HOW MUCH WILL GOD FORGIVE?

Mary's stale marriage dissatisfied her. Though she had no biblical grounds for divorce, and other Christians had counseled her against it, she decided to end the marriage. She rejected every attempt to redirect her path according to God's clear will.

Following the pattern of Scripture (Matt 18:15–17), the elders of her church patiently and lovingly attempted to convince Mary to reverse her decision. But ultimately we had to dismiss her from the congregation. We wondered, *Would Mary ever repent of her sin and return?*

Over the years, I have met many people like Mary—Christians who rebel against God's will. But I have also met others who were truly repentant and desperate to be restored. "Dick," they say, "I've committed the unpardonable sin. What do I do now?" Or, "I can't forgive myself—how could God forgive me?" Sometimes they refer to Scripture passages that seem to put them outside God's forgiveness (Mark 3:29; Heb 6:4–6; 10:26, 27).

Ironically, some people run from God's forgiveness because they refuse to part with their sin. Yet other people desperately need forgiveness, but doubt God will give it.

Some also question the forgiveness that God has already provided others. I've heard many objections to Scripture passages about forgiveness, particularly at men's retreats, when I explain King David's experience of pardon and restoration. Though David broke all of the Ten Commandments, the Bible refers to him as "a man after God's own heart" (Acts 13:22).

### No Cover-up

The Bible does not cover up the sin of God's people. Moses dishonored God by his disobedience (Deut 32:50, 51). Nadab and Abihu profaned the tabernacle service (Lev 10:1, 2). Uzziah made an unauthorized sacrifice (2 Chron 26:16–21).

In the New Testament, Peter denied Christ three times (Matt 26:69–75). Ananias and Sapphira lied to God (Acts 5:1–11). John Mark proved unfaithful in ministry (Acts 13:13; 15:38). Demas deserted Paul (2 Tim 4:10).

Some of them died immediately for their transgressions; others remained a while before God's judgment. Still others lived a full life by God's mercy. But none chronicled the details of their sin and God's response as thoroughly as King David did after his transgression with Bathsheba.

David's diary in Psalm 51 presents his spiritual spill and subsequent recovery. His words will assist others who have gravely sinned, but whom God has sovereignly and mercifully allowed to live. Psalm 51 answers the question, "What if this happens to me?"

### **The Scope of Sin**

David's sin (2 Sam 11, 12) occurred during a period of peace. His capital of Jerusalem was safe from attack, and the tabernacle now resided on God's mountain. Tragically, David's attention diverted from God's agenda. While his troops were out securing the kingdom, he stayed home and conquered a woman's heart.

The sin of adultery alone deserved the death penalty (Lev 20:10). But David directly violated at least three other of the Ten Commandments. He coveted his neighbor's wife (2 Sam 11:2, 3), he tried to cover his sin with a lie (vv. 6–13), and then he arranged for Uriah's murder (vv. 14, 15).

In addition, David stole Bathsheba's virtue, dishonored his parents, profaned the Sabbath with unholy worship, defamed God's sacred name, made women his idol, and substituted them for God. He represents the classic case of breaking the law in one point and thus violating it all (James 2:10). No wonder the divine commentary reads, "But the thing David had done displeased the Lord" (2 Sam 11:27). It's hard to imagine any believer sinning worse than David.

Psalm 51 outlines David's spiritual rehabilitation after an apparently hopeless situation. He first confessed his sin before God – an open repentance (vv. 1–6). He then prayed for God's restoration (vv. 7–12). Finally, he made a recommitment, praying that God would use him as before (vv. 13–19). If you are facing similar circumstances, you should follow the same course of action.

### **Genuine Repentance**

David's testimony illustrates eight characteristics that distinguish true repentance from selfish regret:

- He openly admitted his sin. When Nathan the prophet confronted him, David immediately responded, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Sam 12:13).
- His guilt drove him to cry out for God's mercy and cleansing. "Have mercy on me, O God ... Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin" (Ps 51:1, 2).

- He openly acknowledged his unrighteous disposition. “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me ... Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (v. 3, 5).
- He understood his sin as rebellion against God. “Against you, you only, have I sinned” (v. 4a).
- He submitted to God’s standards of moral right and wrong. “(I have) done what is evil in your sight” (v. 4b).
- He willingly accepted whatever punishment God deemed just. “You are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge” (v. 4c).
- He expressed a desire for God’s truth. “Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place” (v. 6).
- He publicly acknowledged his battle with sin to warn others who might also walk in the same unholy way. “Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you” (v. 13).

Perhaps David’s Psalm 51 experience led to his memorable prayer of Psalm 139: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (vv. 23, 24).

Years ago, shortly after my conversion as an adult, I had to confront my parents about another kind of sin. They were believers, but actively involved in a congregation that rejected the authority of Scripture. In addition, rather than teaching the true gospel of salvation, the church emphasized a “social gospel” of doing good. God has called us to separate ourselves from such false teaching, I explained. He does not want us to be “yoked together with unbelievers” (2 Cor 6:14–18).

My parents could have told me to mind my own spiritual business. Instead, they approached this issue just as David did. They admitted their error and left that church to worship at a Bible-believing fellowship. They immediately experienced God’s forgiveness and were quickly revitalized through their new diet of God’s Word.

### **A Basis for Hope**

Some might be asking, “Was King David a special case, or will God forgive all true believers?” Seven biblical truths convince me that David is the rule, not the exception:

First, forgiveness represents an essential part of God’s own character (Exod 34:7; Neh 9:17; Pss 86:5; 130:4; Dan 9:9).

Second, salvation extends to all sins (Col 2:13; Heb 10:12, 14; 1 John 2:12).

Third, divine forgiveness is full forgiveness. Though earthly consequences may remain, the divine pardon is complete. God treads our sins underfoot and casts them all into the depths of the sea (Mic 7:19). He throws them behind His back (Isa 38:17). He remembers them no more (Jer 31:34). He removes them as far as the east is from the west (Ps 103:12). He completely cleanses us from the stain of our sins (Isa 1:18).

Fourth, Jesus Christ's high priestly work as our heavenly advocate never fails (Heb 7:25; 1 John 2:1).

Fifth, the Lord designed confession as the means of receiving forgiveness (James 5:16; 1 John 1:9).

Sixth, God's plan to complete us in Christ anticipates the forgiveness of sin (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; Eph 4:13).

Finally, God's forgiveness of believers models the complete forgiveness we are to give one another (Matt 18:21–35; Eph 4:32; Col 3:13).

Horatio Spafford beautifully captured the truth of forgiveness in his time-honored hymn, "It Is Well With My Soul":

My sin – O, the bliss of this glorious thought,  
My sin – not in part but the whole,  
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more,  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

### **Blessings Restored**

In Revelation 2, Christ confronted the Ephesians over leaving their first love. "Remember the height from which you have fallen!" He said, "Repent and do the things you did at first" (v. 5).

The alternative? "If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place" (v.5). Jesus' message could not have been clearer – repent and I will continue in your presence. Or, continue to sin and I will remove your ministry.

This pattern for Ephesus repeats the process that David followed 1,000 years earlier. Because of its timeless nature, the same blueprint remains valid today.

It's amazing how much that David gave up, in light of how little he gained by his sin. David, therefore, prayed that God would restore the blessings (not the reality) of his salvation that he had forfeited during his spree of unconfessed sin (Ps 51:7–12):

- Personal holiness. "Cleans me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow" (v. 7).
- Emotional peace. "Let me hear joy and gladness" (v. 7).
- Physical health. "Let the bones you have crushed rejoice" (v. 8b).
- Intimacy with God. "Hide your face from my sins" (v. 9a).
- Spiritual integrity. "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (v. 10).
- Assurance. "Do not cast me from your presence" (v. 11a).
- Power. "Or take your Holy Spirit from me" (v. 11b).
- Sustaining grace. "Grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me" (v. 12b).

After his repentance and revival, the king recommitted himself to five spiritual basics that had characterized his life before the sin: Personal testimony (v. 13), the

song of salvation (51:14), praises to the Savior (51:15), true worship (vv. 16, 17), and prayer for Israel (vv. 18, 19).

### **Facing the Consequences**

To say that Christians cannot sin is to misunderstand our unperfected nature, even after salvation begins. Yet, to think that Christians can habitually sin without consequence equally misunderstands the nature and extent of salvation. Both distort the true picture of God's forgiveness.

To assert that God will not forgive and restore a repentant Christian is to miss the incredible scope of God's grace and mercy. On the other hand, to assume that God will overlook patterns of unchecked, unconfessed sin in a believer's life badly misunderstands God's holiness and purity.

Ananias and Sapphira testify to the awful price paid for lying and hypocrisy (Acts 5:1–11). Because of abuses of the Lord's Supper, the Corinthians were weak, sick, and some even died (1 Cor 11:29, 30). John warns that sinful patterns can lead to death (1 John 5:16). James urges confession of sin to avoid God's chastisement through severe illness (James 5:14–20). Paul even alerted the Corinthians, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves" (2 Cor 13:5).

Our Lord designed church discipline to bring about restoration through repentance and forgiveness (Matt 18:15, 16). But those who refuse to deal with their sin should be treated as an unbeliever—because they are acting like an unbeliever in not seeking God's forgiveness (v. 17).

Mary, the woman I mentioned in the beginning, disobeyed and divorced her husband. After several months, however, the pain of her sin became greater than its pleasure. When she could no longer bear broken fellowship with the Lord and other believers, she repented and returned to her husband, asking forgiveness of the Lord and him. She also came to the next elders' meeting to thank us for loving her enough to discipline her sin.

Through repentance, Mary experienced full forgiveness from the Lord, her husband, and the church. She received full restoration to the relationships previously broken by sin.

### **Reaffirmed by God**

David's example shows that any repentant Christian can be forgiven. Did God accept David's repentance as genuine? Did He answer David's plea for restoration: Did He respond to David's prayer of recommitment? Consider God's affirmation; "I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do" (Acts 13:22). Because these words were repeated a millennium after David's sin, we can be assured that God brought spiritual recovery to his life.

David certainly had no doubts about his forgiveness from God. Recall his testimony in Ps 32:1–5:

Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord"—and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

### **The Starting Point**

No sin looms so great that God cannot forgive it. But all sin must be dealt with on God's terms. God's forgiveness always begins with true repentance.

Several years ago, a student at The Master's Seminary tragically embezzled a sizable sum of money. When caught in his sin, he confessed and asked the Lord and the administration to forgive him. He genuinely repented, including total restitution of the funds he illegally obtained. We assured him of God's forgiveness and ours.

Because the student no longer fulfilled the biblical requirement of blamelessness for church leaders (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:6, 7), he was not allowed to continue at the seminary. I have, however, encouraged him in his new pursuits as a forgiven Christian.

Bernard of Clairvaux, in "Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee," brilliantly captured the spirit of God's forgiveness for true believers. If need be make it your theme song.

*O hope of every contrite heart,  
O joy of all the meek,  
To those who fall, how kind Thou art!  
How good to those who seek!*

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