

Forgiveness in the Hebrew Bible



Sabbath Afternoon

MEMORY TEXT: “The Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Exodus 34:6, 7).

IN JULY OF A.D. 144, Marion was condemned as a heretic for teaching that the God of the Old Testament was an evil being who could not be the same loving God of the New Testament.

Though that view is erroneous, some even today tend to think that the God of the Old Testament is not the same God of the New, particularly as revealed by Jesus. Of course, it is the same God—a loving, merciful God who forgives all who come to Him in true penitence and faith, no matter how bad they have been.

This week we will broach God’s forgiving nature as revealed in some books of the Hebrew Bible; in them we will see the love of Christ manifested centuries before Jesus came in the flesh.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: Why do we need divine forgiveness? What does it mean to sin against God? What are the various Hebrew words in the Old Testament for “forgiveness,” and what can they teach us about how God forgives? What does the story of Hosea teach us about God’s willingness to forgive sins? Is forgiveness any different in the Old Testament than in the New?

*Please study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 12.

THE FORGIVING GOD.

“But he, being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity, and destroyed them not: yea, many a time turned he his anger away, and did not stir up all his wrath” (Ps. 78:38).

The Bible is filled with examples of God’s forgiveness toward humankind. The theme pulsates through its pages. The reason, of course, is simple. The Bible is a book about God’s interaction with humanity; that is, fallen humanity, a race that through transgression has severed itself from its only Source of life—a race, therefore, in desperate need of God’s forgiveness. In short, we needed forgiveness, and God has supplied that need. If He didn’t, we would have no hope.

Look up these texts: Gen. 39:9; Ps. 51:4; Jer. 51:5; Dan. 9:8; and Zeph. 1:17. What do they all share in common? How do they help us understand why we need divine forgiveness?

When a person violates a criminal law, even if his or her act involved hurting another person, the violation is viewed as an act *against the state*. That person transgressed a law of the state; thus, he or she is deemed as having acted against the state, the one who made the law.

In parallel, sin—whether or not someone else is directly involved—is always an offense against God, the One who established that law as the moral foundation of His government. Now, if all humans sin and all sin is against God, then all have sinned against Him. Is it any wonder, then, that we need His forgiveness?

Fortunately, God is merciful, loving, and compassionate. That is why He is willing to forgive, again and again and again (after all, we sin again and again and again). If He did not forgive, what hope would we have?

The Old Testament abounds with examples of divine forgiveness. It has to, because it is filled with examples of human sin; and were it not for the promise and the reality of forgiveness, such sin would lead to death. The Old Testament is a book filled with hope, because it is a book filled with forgiveness.

It is easy to understand the idea of sinning against another person. You violate, cheat, or steal from him or her, and the hurt can often be seen. But to sin against God? What does that mean? Does sin “hurt” God? If so, in what way? Think about this during the week, write out your thoughts, and share them with your class on Sabbath.

TO BEAR, TO CLEANSE, TO FORGIVE.

The Old Testament is filled with examples of God’s forgiveness. The word *forgive* in translation often comes from three main words, rich in meaning. Each conveys its own aspect of forgiveness; taken together, they form a nice tapestry that helps us understand the concept as it appears in the Hebrew Bible.

Look up the following texts: Exodus 32:32; Psalm 25:18; Psalm 32:1. The Hebrew word translated there for *forgive* comes from a word whose most basic meaning is “to bear,” “to carry.” In the context of these texts, write out how that basic meaning helps you understand how God forgives:

Look up Deuteronomy 21:8 and Jeremiah 18:23. The word translated for *forgive* here comes from the word that, at its root, means “to atone” (Lev. 1:4; 4:20, 35). This makes sense, because atonement is the foundation of forgiveness. The word also carries the meaning of “to cleanse,” “to wipe off,” and even “to cover” (in Genesis 6:14 the noun and the verb “pitch” come from the same root). Again, write down how knowing these meanings helps you understand the concept of forgiveness.

In Leviticus 4:26, 5:10, 1 Kings 8:30, Psalm 86:5, and Jeremiah 31:34, the Hebrew verb in these verses for *forgive* (by far the most common word) means, basically, “to pardon.”

Take what you have learned from these different root words and the verses they’re used in and write out how all together (look also at the context in which they are used) they give you an understanding of the process of forgiveness, as it appears in the Old Testament. Is the basis of forgiveness any different in the New? If so, what are the differences?

THE LORD REPENTS (Exodus 32:1-14).

Imagine someone who—having neither seen the Bible nor heard anything about the God revealed in it—found a fragment that contained only Exodus 32:1-14. Write down what this person might think about the Lord. Why could this section alone possibly give the wrong impression about the character of God?

Most people do not believe that Moses, by pleading with the Lord, changed God’s mind about wiping out the Hebrews because of their worship of the golden calf. Look at what the Lord had done for them through the miraculous deliverance from Egypt after centuries there (Exod. 12:41), look at the swiftness of their apostasy (Exod. 32:8), and look at the fact that they sinned despite the clear command of God (Exod. 20:3-6). Nevertheless, even after all this, God was willing to forgive them. Thus, far from presenting a harsh God who relents only because some sinful human being asks Him to, this story is an example of God’s willingness to forgive His people, even though they do not deserve it.

We believe that the God presented in this story is Jesus of Nazareth. See John 8:58, 14:9, and 1 Corinthians 10:1-10. What examples can you find from the life of Jesus that reveal this same willingness to forgive the undeserving?

Many are confused by the phrase found in Exodus 32:14 that says the Lord “repented” of His intention to wipe out the Israelites. How does an all-powerful God, who knows the beginning from the end, “repent” from something? Even if one can find a translation with another verb (the NIV uses the past tense of the verb “relent”), how can we understand this idea of God, in a sense, changing His mind?

The best answer seems to be that the words *the Lord repented* are a feeble attempt to express the divine will in human language. God “repents,” not when He changes His mind but when, instead of bringing wrath and punishment on sinners as they deserve, He forgives out of His own mercy and graciousness.

Imagine that you met a person who knew nothing else about our Lord other than what he or she found in Exodus 32:1-14. What other verses and stories could you share that would give this person a fuller account about the character of God? What lesson can we learn, too, about the danger of building a theology from a single passage or a single story?

LOVING THE UNLOVABLE: PART 1.

“The beginning of the word of the Lord by Hosea. And the Lord said to Hosea, Go, take unto thee a wife of whoredoms and children of whoredoms: for the land hath committed great whoredom, departing from the Lord” (Hos. 1:2).

Many are the ways in which the Lord teaches us what forgiveness is about, what it means, and what results it brings. The story of Hosea and his adulterous wife dramatically demonstrates some of these important truths.

Read Hosea 1. Why would God ask someone to marry an adulterous woman? What point was the Lord making?

How many people would marry someone, knowing beforehand, that this person was going to commit adultery at some point in the marriage? Yet, this is what Hosea did; and his story presents a graphic message, not only about sin but about forgiveness, as well.

Think about it: There are few ways in which a husband-and-wife relationship (symbolic of the intimacy God wants with His people) can be more violated than in the case of adultery. The key word here is *relationship*. Sin, at its core, damages our relationship with God and with each other. Sin is a corruption of the entire being, one that results only in conflict and turmoil within ourselves and with others. A person becomes incapable of trusting or being trusted, loving or being loved. Sin is not just what we do; it reflects what we are. Adultery, as presented here in Hosea, is just one dramatic manifestation of sin and of how it impacts our relationships, not only with each other but with God.

“O miserable man, what a deformed monster sin has made you! God has made you ‘little lower than the angels’; sin has made you little better than the devils.”—Joseph Alleine, quoted in Michael Brown, Go and Sin No More (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1999), p. 20.

Only as we understand just how damaging sin is to us can we understand what it cost to forgive us our sin. Look at the Cross and what happened there. Jesus, equal with God Himself, bore in Himself the penalty for our sins—the only way these sins could be forgiven. What, then, does that tell us about just how evil sin must be, that it took so much to be able to forgive it?

LOVING THE UNLOVABLE: PART 2 (HOSEA 3).

“The Lord said to me, ‘Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes’” (Hos. 3:1, NIV).

Try to catch what is going on in this story. Gomer openly commits adultery, and yet the Lord tells Hosea to take her back, despite such a blatant violation of their marriage vows.

Read Hosea 3:1-3. What must have been on the minds of those who saw Hosea go back and redeem her? How many understood this act as an example of God’s willingness to take back His adulterous people, forgive their sins, and heal them from what those sins have done to them?

According to the letter of the law, Hosea could have stoned her to death; instead, he brought her back to live as his wife. That is the basic difference between law and grace: The law demands death for the transgressor, grace grants forgiveness.

Read Romans 5:20, 7:5; 1 Corinthians 15:56; Galatians 2:21; and Ephesians 2:8. What do these texts say about the difference between law and grace?

“ ‘Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt’ ” (Hos. 2:14, 15, NIV). What does this text say about the willingness of the God of the Old Testament to forgive? In what ways can you see Jesus in these words?

Time after time Israel was surprised by the depth of God’s love and forgiveness. True, there were moments when the people had to be disciplined in order for them to perceive how low they had fallen, but it was always for the purpose of helping them see God’s love more clearly. A superficial reading of the Old Testament might give the reader the impression that God is not the same deity manifested in Jesus Christ. However, a careful reading unveils the same forgiving Deity who—in order to help His people grow into the likeness of the God who passed in front of Moses—met a rebellious people where they were in their social and spiritual development and gently led them step by step in an effort to bring them up to the level of the relationship He envisioned.

FURTHER STUDY: Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 552–556.

As Moses interceded for Israel, his timidity was lost in his deep interest and love for those for whom he had, in the hands of God, been the means of doing so much. The Lord listened to his pleadings, and granted his unselfish prayer. God had proved His servant; He had tested his faithfulness and his love for that erring, ungrateful people, and nobly had Moses endured the trial. His interest in Israel sprang from no selfish motive. The prosperity of God’s chosen people was dearer to him than personal honor, dearer than the privilege of becoming the father of a mighty nation. God was pleased with his faithfulness, his simplicity of heart, and his integrity, and He committed to him, as a faithful shepherd, the great charge of leading Israel to the Promised Land.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 319.

“Few give thought to the suffering that sin has caused our Creator. All heaven suffered in Christ’s agony; but that suffering did not begin or end with His manifestation in humanity. The cross is a revelation to our dull senses of the pain that, from its very inception, sin has brought to the heart of God. Every departure from the right, every deed of cruelty, every failure of humanity to reach His ideal, brings grief to Him.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 263.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Look at the second quote by Ellen White. How does the Cross help us understand what sin does to God?
2. Read Daniel’s prayer in chapter 9. Look specifically at verses 18, 19. On what basis is Daniel appealing to God for forgiveness? How does that appeal fit in with our understanding of the gospel? In other words, is his appeal really based on anything different than what someone in New Testament times would appeal to? Explain your answer.
3. Think about this: The whole concept of forgiveness implies the existence of guilt. For example, does God forgive animals if they steal food or kill someone? Of course not. But why not? It is because the animal is amoral; it is not capable of making a moral choice. It is no more guilty and in need of forgiveness than would be a car that kills someone in an accident. Yet as human beings, we need forgiveness from God, because we have been guilty of wrong acts. The fact that we (as opposed to animals) need forgiveness implies what about us as moral beings?



Touched With God's Love

J. H. Zachary

Valentina grew up in a village near Rostov-on-Don, Russia. Her life was centered on the Orthodox church, which she believed was the only true church. In spite of this, she never owned or read a Bible.

One day a neighbor invited Valentina to visit her church. She agreed. However, the service was so alien to her understanding of a worship service that she felt awkward, as if she was going against God. Valentina feared that God was very angry with her and would punish her for attending the church.

Her friend gave her a Bible. Valentina took it, but later she decided to sell the dangerous heretical book. When she was offered another book, called *The Great Controversy*, she refused to take it.

Then tragedy struck. Within a few weeks Valentina’s sister, then her brother, died. She wept bitterly and asked God, “Why don’t You love me?”

Valentina’s Adventist friend attended her brother’s funeral and later visited her at home. She introduced Valentina to a missionary couple who had recently moved to town. They also visited Valentina and prayed for her. Hope began to return to Valentina. The three friends shared precious Bible promises that proved God’s love and revealed His plan to return for those who love Him.

It was difficult for Valentina to abandon her lifelong faith and her precious icons. At first she thought that if she did, she would be denying God. But little by little Valentina saw that personal faith in the Lord and His promises were the source of peace and salvation.

She began attending the Adventist church in a neighboring town. It was difficult to adjust her thinking to observe the Sabbath and to focus her worship on the God revealed through Bible study. She joined a small group that met in her village. As they studied and prayed together, her life changed. Her heart was filled with peace. She relaxed in the knowledge of God’s love for her. Valentina began to reach out to others.

There are only five Adventists in Valentina’s village. Their burden is to share Jesus with their neighbors. They are patient, for they understand how difficult it is for people to leave their lifelong religious traditions. But they share their faith in God, knowing that God will bless them and those they touch with His love.

J. H. Zachary is coordinator of international evangelism for The Quiet Hour.

Produced by the Office of Mission
Sabbath School-Personal Ministries department of the General Conference
Email: gomission@gc.adventist.org