

FORGIVEN UNTO LIFE: A SERMON ON JUDICIAL
FORGIVENESS FROM 1 KINGS 8:33–40 AND
COLOSSIANS 2:13–14

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Editor's note: The following paper is adapted from a sermon preached at Calvary Memorial Church on September 6, 2020 by Calvary's Senior Pastor and CPT co-founder, Gerald Hiestand. The sermon was part of a year-long sermon series that explored the overarching narrative of Scripture, entitled "All Things New: The Story of the Bible and the Healing of the World." The sermon has been lightly edited for print, and discursive footnotes have been added to provide clarity about the theological paradigms and primary source material that undergirds the logic of the sermon. The reader will observe that most of the notes are drawn from patristic sources, which is in keeping with the author's primary area of theological competency. The aim of this paper is to provide a model for how the work of a pastor and theologian intersects with preaching.

This morning we continue our sermon series, "All things New: The Story of the Bible and the Healing of the World." For the past month or so, we've been in the age of the Kings (an approximately 600-year period of history between the age of the Judges and the coming Exile). This morning we turn our attention to 1 Kings 8 and Solomon's dedication of the temple. For those who missed last week (or for those who joined us but didn't pay any attention), let's get our bearings. All of chapter 8 is the ribbon cutting ceremony for the new Temple that Solomon has made. And the majority of the chapter is focused on Solomon's dedicatory prayer.

By way of introduction to our theme this morning, let me read for us 1 Kings 8:27–30, which is where Solomon begins his prayer.

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O LORD my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day, that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you have said, 'My name shall be there,' that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers toward this place. And listen to the plea of

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your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive [חַלֵּס].²

“And when you hear, *forgive*.” The first time I read that verse, the ending caught me off guard. I was expecting Solomon to say something like, “and when you hear, *answer*”; but he says “forgive.” Forgiveness is *the* major theme in Solomon’s prayer;³ and indeed the concept of God’s forgiveness is a major theme throughout the Bible. So that’s going to be our focus this morning. Our aim this morning is to look at how this moment in Israel’s history informs our understanding of God’s forgiveness.

What is forgiveness, really? What is Solomon asking for, when he asks God to forgive? More importantly, what are *we* asking for when we ask God to forgive? Our sermon series theme is the healing of the world, and my goal this morning is to show us how God’s forgiveness, properly understood, is connected to, is indeed synonymous with, this healing.

So, there are three parts to the sermon. In the first part of the sermon, we’re going to see what we can learn about God’s forgiveness of Israel from 1 Kings 8:33–40. In the second part of the sermon we’re going to use that framework to help us understand St. Paul’s articulation of forgiveness as seen in Colossians 2:13–14. And then I’m going to close by offering some reflections about how God’s forgiveness intersects the lives of Christians and non-Christians, both of which are present with us this morning.

And then for those of us who have embraced God’s forgiveness, we’ll celebrate that forgiveness together by taking communion.

So let’s get started with 1 Kings 8:33–40.

I. FORGIVENESS IN 1 KINGS 8:33–40

Last week we reflected on the idea of God as a judge; and we saw that he is a gracious and compassionate judge. But even as a gracious and compassionate judge, there comes a point when God steps in and enforces the terms of the covenant. And in 1 Kings 8, Solomon can see the day coming when Israel’s sin will reach the limit and God’s judgment will finally fall. Solomon is appealing ahead of time for God’s forgiveness. Let’s look at his prayer, starting with verse 33. “When your people Israel have been defeated by an enemy because they have sinned against you. . . .” Let’s pause there. Why would sin lead to defeat? Well, it’s because of the covenantal agreement handed down to the people by Moses at Mount Sinai, way back

² חַלֵּס is most often translated in 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles, as “forgive” or “pardon.”

³ The entire thrust of Solomon’s prayer is focused on the theme of forgiveness. Like Moses in Dt 30:1–10, Solomon anticipates the coming apostasy of the people and provides directions on how to repent when such apostasy comes to pass. Both Moses and Solomon base their respective counsel/prayer on the framework of the Torah’s promises of blessing for obedience, and cursing for disobedience, with the ultimate curse being banishment from the land. And both Moses and Solomon presume on the gracious, forgiving character of God—even in the midst of the covenant curses.

in Exodus 19. The terms of the Sinai Law stated clearly that obedience to the covenant would lead to national blessing, but disobedience would lead to ever-increasing divine chastisement, ultimately culminating in banishment from the land.⁴

Solomon is acknowledging that Israel will indeed fall short of the covenant obligations and invoke the covenantal curses. But he appeals ahead of time for mercy. “When your people turn back to you and give praise to your name, praying and making supplication to you in this temple, then hear from heaven and forgive [חלס] the sin of your people Israel and bring them back to the land you gave to their ancestors.”

Solomon, when he is asking for divine forgiveness, is asking for deliverance from divine punishment. It won't be an accident when Israel winds up in captivity (or blight or famine). Their national calamity will be punitive; it will be divine punishment for failing to uphold their end of the covenantal agreement. Solomon, when he asks for forgiveness, is asking for relief—from mercy—from the legal and judicial consequences of their sin.

This same basic prayer is repeated in verses 35–36. Solomon continues:

When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because your people have sinned against you, and when they pray toward this place and give praise to your name and turn from their sin because you have afflicted them, then hear from heaven and forgive [חלס] the sin of your servants, your people Israel. Teach them the right way to live, and send rain on the land you gave your people for an inheritance.

The same pattern can be seen: Israel's sin, divine punishment, Israel's repentance, divine forgiveness and removal of the divine punishment. Solomon prays the same thing a third time in verses 37–40, and then again for a fourth time in verses 46–51. Each time Solomon is saying, “When we break covenant, and you enact the covenantal curse, and then we repent, please forgive us and roll back the covenantal curse.”

So, here's the pattern of Solomon's prayer all throughout 1 Kings 8: Solomon acknowledges that Israel will break covenant, God will punish, Israel will repent, and then Solomon asks that God forgive and roll back the punishment. And the main thing I want us to see is that when Solomon is asking for God's *forgiveness*, he is asking God to *release Israel from the weight of God's judgment*. He's asking God to take back, to undo, the covenantal punishments of famine, defeat, captivity, mildew and blight. Solomon is not looking for God to merely have benign thoughts about the Israelites, or change his disposition toward them, or re-establish relational harmony; he's asking for God to deliver them from his judicial punishments. Verse 39 captures well the main thrust of Solomon's request, “[Then] hear in heaven your dwelling place and forgive and *act*...”

Now, in order to clarify the nature of Solomon's request for forgiveness, let me briefly compare two types of forgiveness—relational forgiveness, and

⁴ The blessing and cursing of the Law is seen clearly in Deuteronomy 28.

judicial forgiveness. These are similar, but not the same, and it's important we understand the difference.⁵

Relational forgiveness seeks a change of disposition in interpersonal relationships. In relational forgiveness, the consequence of one's sin is the offended person's disposition of anger. If we've offended someone, and we are asking for relational forgiveness, we are asking the offended person to change his or her disposition toward us—typically from anger to non-anger—so as to re-establish normalized relations.⁶ This is the main type of forgiveness that is sought in family contexts. Relational forgiveness is great for family relationships, but that's not what Solomon is seeking.

Solomon is seeking God's *judicial forgiveness*. Judicial forgiveness seeks a change of action in legal and contractual agreements. When we are asking for judicial forgiveness, we are asking a court, or a judge, or a king, to relent regarding the legal consequences they have placed upon us because of our covenantal or legal failure. Judicial forgiveness is not concerned with the anger or the disposition of the judge. For instance, when we seek debt forgiveness, we are not concerned about the creditor's disposition; we are concerned about the creditor's actions. We are seeking leniency (e.g., absolution of the debt, more time to make payments, etc.). Judicial forgiveness, then, seeks the removal of the punishment or consequences of one's offense.

Now, many of us tend to think of God's forgiveness primarily in terms of relational forgiveness. From this perspective, we think about God's forgiveness as primarily a change in his disposition toward us—typically from anger to non-anger.⁷ But that's not what Solomon is asking for here.

⁵ In my estimation, these two conceptions of forgiveness fork the road for all subsequent atonement theology. Did Jesus go to the cross chiefly to resolve a hostile (even if justified) divine disposition toward humanity? Or did Jesus go to the cross to roll back the punitive curse of death (both physical and spiritual) that had fallen upon humanity? These are not mutually exclusive, but one perspective typically takes precedence over the other. Anselm's *Cur Deus homo* tended toward the former, while Athanasius' *On the Incarnation* tended toward the latter. I find Athanasius more consistent with Solomon's dedicatory prayer. More on this distinction in note 13 below.

⁶ This is the primary way that forgiveness is conceived in the public and therapeutic spheres. In 2018, the Center for Pastor Theologians engaged in a year long symposia series on the theme of "Forgiveness and Positive Psychology" funded by the John Templeton Foundation. Notably, the primary thrust of the various studies all related to offenses and forgiveness in interpersonal relationships. Considerations regarding family dynamics, interpersonal stress, anxiety from fractured marriage relationships, etc., served as the primary framework for thinking about forgiveness. Our primary reading included Everett L. Worthington, Jr., and Steven J. Sandage, *Forgiveness and Spirituality in Psychotherapy: A Relational Approach* (Washington D. C.: American Psychological Association, 2016); Everett L. Worthington Jr., *Forgiving and Reconciling: Bridges to Wholeness and Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2003); F. LeRon Shults and Steven J. Sandage, *The Faces of Forgiveness: Searching for Wholeness and Salvation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2003). Notably, all three texts focus on granting forgiveness to others when relationally offended or hurt. Shultz and Sandage draw an explicit connection between human and divine forgiveness, but notably stay in the realm of relational forgiveness. God extends relational forgiveness to us, so that we can extend relational forgiveness to others (139).

⁷ This sort of relational framework is seen in Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Throughout the sermon Edwards conflates judicial

He's asking for judicial forgiveness. The God with whom Israel has to do is the Lord and Judge of the covenant. He is the one who enforces the covenantal obligations. Israel's problem is not God's disposition, but God's punishments. Relational forgiveness won't really solve the problem of Israel's sin and subsequent punishment; Israel is going to need judicial forgiveness.

A while ago I moved some of my funds between two bank accounts—or at least I thought I did. Turns out, I didn't. But before I discovered my mistake, I spent the day making purchases against the empty account. As a consequence, the bank charged me \$120 worth of overdraft fees. So I called the bank. I acknowledged my sin, and I pleaded for forgiveness. What was I pleading for, when I pled for forgiveness? I wasn't asking the bank to stop being angry at me. Indeed, the banker I spoke to was very kind; she had no personal animus toward me. What I needed was judicial forgiveness, not relational forgiveness. I had broken the terms of our covenant, and now I was looking for covenantal relief. In short, I was asking the bank to "take back" the \$120 worth of overdraft fees. The bank, like the Good Lord above, was indeed merciful; I received the bank's forgiveness and the fees were dropped.

Let's tease this out a bit more. What if the banker had been my father? The issue would have been the same. Imagine I called the bank and my father-banker said something like, "Son, I'm angry at you for being so irresponsible and overdrawing your account. I raised you better than that. I'll erase the fees, but I'm not happy about it." Or perhaps he is a patient and understanding father, and says something like, "Son, we all make mistakes. I'm not angry, but rules are the rules and you have to pay the fees." How he *feels* about my fiscal offense is not chiefly relevant to whether or not I have to pay the overdraft fees. He can relationally forgive me all he wants, but if he doesn't roll back the contractual jeopardy, relational forgiveness doesn't solve my problem.

In the same way, Solomon is not primarily concerned with relational forgiveness. He is praying for *judicial* forgiveness. No doubt it matters to Solomon how God feels about Israel. But Solomon knows that when Israel is suffering the punitive and legal effects of her sin—be that blight, drought, defeat, or captivity—they will need more than relational forgiveness. Imagine

and relational condemnation. The sinner is under God's judicial sentence of hellfire; at the same time, the sinner has deeply offended God, who is "very angry" with him; indeed, quite possibly "a great deal more angry" with him than those he has already cast into hell. God is "full of wrath...dreadfully provoked...and incensed." In one of his most memorable sentences, Edwards warns his congregation, "The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire." See John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema, eds., *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), 97. Very few preachers today speak in such dramatic terms, yet the same underlying sentiment often drives contemporary expressions of the gospel. Forgiveness theology (and atonement theology) is then articulated to address the "just and proper" relational condemnation that God has toward the sinner. Basing one's atonement theology solely (or even primarily) on relational forgiveness often results in unbiblical conceptions of atonement theology, wherein God is viewed as an angry potentate who won't be pacified until he's had his pound of flesh.

the Israelites—beset by drought, defeated by their enemies, and hauled off to captivity—crying out to God for forgiveness. God freely and graciously grants it, but leaves them still beset by drought, defeated by their enemies, and languishing in captivity. What good would that do them? No good at all. Solomon is praying for deliverance from the covenantal curse, not merely for divine compassion and benign feelings.

Here's the main principle from 1 Kings 8—when God grants forgiveness to Israel, he removes the judicial consequence, or punishment, that attends Israel's covenantal offense.

1 Kings 8 is such a beautiful chapter because it offers us a picture of our own salvation. The way in which God interacted with the nation of Israel helps us see how God interacts with us. So with 1 Kings 8 as the backdrop, let's look at Colossians 2:13–14. We're going to see the exact same principle at work.

II. FORGIVENESS IN COLOSSIANS 2:13–14

Paul begins in verse 13 by acknowledging the plight of every human being, namely that we enter the world “dead in trespasses” [*νεκροὺς ὄντας ἐν τοῖς παραπτώμασιν*].⁸ What does that mean, exactly? Paul is referring to spiritual death. To be spiritually dead means to be cut off from the life of God; it means living your human life without God's divine life. The human life was not created to exist independent of God's own life; so the human life cut off from God's life is really just a dead and dying life.⁹

Humanity's sinful action led to spiritual death, and then our spiritual death led to more sinful actions. Cast off into death, our souls die and our wills turn inward in futile attempts to save ourselves.¹⁰ And that often doesn't look very pretty. It looks like a bunch of people clamoring over each other in a mad rush to get off a sinking ship, only to drown in the sea. Spiritual death is why the world is so full of violence; why our political and cultural landscape is so polarized and totalizing. It's why we don't do the things we should, and why we do the things we shouldn't.

The story of humanity can be summarized succinctly as follows: God created human beings to live by his life, and to extend his life to all of creation.¹¹ But then we thought we knew better than God and didn't obey

⁸ See the nearly identical Greek expression in Eph 2:1.

⁹ The Church Fathers generally maintained a strong connection between spiritual and physical death. Indeed, these are not two separate realities; the latter is merely the consummation of the former. See for example St. Augustine, *Civ.* 13.12 “When, therefore, it is asked what death it was with which God threatened our first parents if they should transgress the commandment they had received from Him, and should fail to preserve their obedience,—whether it was the death of soul, or of body, or of the whole man, or that which is called second death,—we must answer, It is all,” (NPNF 5:40). All Augustine quotations taken from NPNF 5, unless otherwise noted. See also *Civ.* 13.2, 14.3; St. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.18.7; St. Athanasius, *Inc.* 6.

¹⁰ Luther's memorable *incurvatus in se*.

¹¹ This anthropological framework has served as the starting assumption for the “All Things New” sermon series. Humanity was made as priests-kings and queens of the world,

him. This resulted in death—the very thing that God warned would happen if we disobeyed him. That’s the story of Adam and Eve, told in the opening chapters of Genesis in primordial fashion, and it’s the story of every human being since. The Bible makes clear all throughout, and especially in the New Testament, that this state of “death” in which humanity finds itself is the consequence of God’s judicial judgment.¹²

This connection between death and God’s judgment is made explicit in verse 14 of our passage, where Paul writes that our “deadness in sins” is the result of the “record of debt” and the “legal demands” against us. It is the same basic thing he states in Romans 6:23: “The wages of sin is death.” Just as Israel’s sin led to the judicial punishment of exile, so too our sin has led to the judicial punishment of death. The judgment of God fell upon humanity in Genesis 3, and we’ve been living in the exile of death ever since. The Bible doesn’t merely teach us that human beings *will be* judged one day; rather it teaches us that the entire human race has *already* been judged. The fact that we all die—every one of us—is the great sign that we *right now* live under the judgment of God.¹³

appointed to serve in the garden sanctuary of Eden. For the priestly function of creation, see G. K. Beale, “Adam as the First Priest in Eden as the Garden Temple,” in the *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 22.2 (2018), 9–24; for the kingly function of Adam, see Michael LeFebvre, “Adam Reigns in Eden: Genesis and the Origins of Kingship” in *The Bulletin of Ecclesial Theology*, vol. 5.2 (Oct 2018), 25–57. For the “priestly” function of humanity, and its relation to gender, see Phyllis A. Bird, “‘Male and Female He Created Them’: Gen 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation,” in *Harvard Theological Review*, 74.2 (1981), 129–159. For a theological perspective on the gendered nature of humanity’s priestly function, see Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2018), 104–14. Per Schmemmann, humanity stands with a foot in both heaven and earth, mediating the life of God to the world, and the world to God. The man is the chief representative of God to creation, and the woman is the chief representative of creation to God. The woman stands with the man as he mediates the life of God to the world and works in conjunction with him. And the man stands with the woman as she mediates the life of the world back to God and works in conjunction with her.

¹² Jaroslav Pelikan notes, “Christian faith knows that death is more than the natural termination of temporal existence. It is the wages of sin, and it is the sting of the law.” See his *The Shape of Death: Life, Death, and Immortality in the Early Fathers* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1961) 108–09. Pelikan rightly goes on to observe that the “legal” and “judicial” aspects of death are vital for understanding Christian soteriology and the doctrine of creation. When death is viewed primarily as a natural termination (such as we see in Origen), one’s entire doctrine of creation becomes Platonic and sub-Christian; salvation becomes deliverance from creation, rather than deliverance in the midst of creation. Athanasius gets it right when he states, “For death...gained from that time forth [i.e., since Adam] a legal hold over us, and it was impossible to evade the law, since it had been laid down by God.” *Inc. 6*, from Edward R. Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Louisville, Kent.: Westminster John Knox), 109. Created for immortality, humanity fell into the judicial judgment of death through disobedience. So too Augustine, “For the corruption of the body, which weighs down the soul, is not the cause but the punishment of the first sin.” *Civ. 14.3*, trans., Marcus Dods, (New York: The Modern Library, 1993), 444.

¹³ Theologians have long noted the different soteriological emphases between Anselm’s *Cur Deus homo*, and Athanasius’ *De incarnatione*. The different emphasis is rightly noted, but the difference is not (as is typically thought) between “forensic/judicial” on the one side (Anselm), and “ontological” on the other (Athanasius). Both Anselm and Athanasius have a

But here's the gospel news. Where there is judicial judgment, there is also judicial forgiveness. And indeed, that's what Paul is saying in verse 13. Notice how Paul, just like Solomon, links together forgiveness and restoration. "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven [χαρισάμενος] us all our trespasses." For Paul (and the rest of the New Testament), to be forgiven by God is to be released from his judicial judgment of death, which means (now listen to this) that to be forgiven is the *same thing* as being made spiritually alive. Just like "getting rid of darkness" and "turning on the lights" are the same thing, so too, when God forgives the spiritually dead sinner, he makes the spiritually dead sinner alive.

So when the New Testament talks about God's forgiveness, it's talking about God's *judicial* forgiveness—about how God is rewinding the judicial punishment of sin—namely our spiritual death. He's giving us new spiritual life by reintroducing us to his own divine life through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In sum, to be forgiven in Christ means to be made alive in Christ—to be reintroduced to the life of God.¹⁴

category for the "forensic" jeopardy of humanity; (see Athanasius, *Inc.* 6 in the note above.) The fundamental difference relates to the nature of that legal jeopardy—has humanity's legal sin created a relational barrier between God and humanity, or has it created an ontological barrier? Of course, it's not either/or. But for Anselm, humanity's legal sin has primarily created a relational barrier; God's honor has been offended, and atonement must be made. For Anselm, Christ's death is the means by which humanity restores God's honor and is welcomed back into a loving relationship with God. But for Athanasius, humanity's legal sin has resulted in humanity's ontological corruption into death, threatening to unmake God's good creation. Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection are the means by which God restores humanity back to his original intention for humanity (and beyond).

¹⁴ This is why the Church Fathers so frequently conflate regeneration and forgiveness. In the patristic tradition, death is the primary judicial divine punishment for sin. To have one's sins forgiven is to be released from the consequence of one's sin (i.e., death), which is simply another way of saying that one is regenerated (i.e. made spiritually alive). This is especially notable in Augustine, who writes (to note but one example), "In God', however, he declares are the 'works of him wrought, who cometh to the light,' because he is quite aware that his *justification* results from no merits of his own, but from the grace of God. 'For it is God,' says the apostle, 'who worketh in you both to will and to do of His own good pleasure.' This then is the way in which *spiritual regeneration* is effected in all who come to Christ from their carnal generation...He left it open to no man to settle such a question by human reasoning, lest infants should be deprived of the grace of the *remission of sins*' (emphasis added). *Pec. merit.* 1.62, (NPNF 5:40). For Augustine, justification takes place at baptism and is linked almost synonymously with spiritual regeneration and the remission of sins. All three concepts (regeneration, remission of sin, and justification) are just different ways of speaking about the same basic reality—i.e., being released from the judicial consequence of death. This same basic framework is found in Athanasius, whose soteriology, like Augustine's, is primarily concerned with overcoming the judicial punishment of death. Thus, the themes of regeneration, restoration, new life, and resurrection make frequent appearances in his writings. He seldom mentions forgiveness/remission of sins, not because the concept is unimportant, but because he has already covered the idea through the use of his other soteriological terms. See Gerald Hiestand, "Not 'Just Forgiven': How Athanasius Overcomes the Under-Realised Eschatology of Evangelicalism" in *Expository Times*, 84.1 (2012), 47–66, especially 58.

Now my point in all of this is not to say that God never gets angry. He often gets angry.¹⁵ But his forgiveness isn't about him getting past his anger. It's about him reversing, taking back, his punishment of death. Which is to say, the forgiveness that God provides us in the gospel is judicial forgiveness—release from spiritual and physical death.

III. WHAT THIS MEANS FOR CHRISTIANS

So, what does this view of God's forgiveness mean for Christians? This perspective can save us from a truncated view of redemption. When we rightly emphasize forgiveness as the key aspect of the gospel, but then wrongly reduce God's forgiveness to relational forgiveness, we inadvertently reduce his saving activity to a change in divine disposition—as though the only thing, or most important thing, that happens when we become a Christian is that God stops being angry at us about our sin. In that framework, grace hasn't changed us at all. We're just as spiritually dead as we've always been; just as prone to sin, just as prone to anger, just as prone to lust, to envy, idolatry, greed, and gossip as we were before we came to God for forgiveness. The most we can say is, "Well, at least God isn't angry at me about it anymore."

But that's too short-sighted. Reducing the gospel to relational forgiveness completely misses the most significant aspect of the gospel. The gospel isn't "trust in Jesus and God will stop being angry with you"; the gospel is "trust in Jesus and he will redeem you from God's judicial judgment—namely your spiritual death;" Listen, I'm very glad that God through Christ loves me with the tender and gracious love of a father. But I needed more from him than kind thoughts.¹⁶ I needed him to release me from the

¹⁵ Ascribing emotions to God is fraught with difficulty. Clearly the scriptures ascribe emotions to God (*regret* in Gn 6:6, *anger* in Nu 22:2, *joy* in Is 62:5, etc.). But in the Hebrew Scriptures, emotive concepts such as "joy" and "gladness," are understood in relation to their outward expression. Thus, when the Hebrew scriptures ascribe an emotion to someone, the primary concern is not describing what a person *feels internally*, but how a person is *expressing themselves externally*. One *does* one's joy (e.g., clapping, singing, dancing), just as much as one *feels* one's joy. Michael Horton insightfully makes this same basic point about God's wrath; wrath is not only something God feels, but something God does. "Of course, it is grounded in his moral character, but wrath and grace are divine acts. This is why Paul can speak of wrath as 'being revealed' (Ro 1:18)... God expresses his wrath and his grace freely as he pleases, when and where he pleases. In both cases it is an event..." *Justification, Volume 2* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 125–26. I would add that God's emotive state of anger (however we conceive of divine emotions) and his judicial action of wrath are not always connected; just like in human beings (e.g., parents and police officers), it is often the case that those in positions of authority dispense wrathful consequences quite independent of wrathful feelings or personal animus.

¹⁶ I am not persuaded that atonement theology needs to address relational forgiveness. God does indeed get angry at humanity, and relational forgiveness is necessary between God and humanity. But God does not need atonement in order to extend relational forgiveness, any more than you or I require atonement in order to extend relational forgiveness. This observation does not negate the need for atonement, only redirects it toward ontological and *Christus victor* concerns. The curse of sin (ontological corruption into death) and captivity to the Devil's tyranny, are the great soteriological dilemmas that Christ's atoning work must

judicial judgment of death that he had put me under. My human life was made to exist in union with God's own divine life. His breath is what gives me breath. I needed that life, that breath again. And that's what you need, too. The redemptive, regenerating, restorative, life creating, forgiveness of God transforms us from the inside out. The forgiveness of the gospel isn't primarily about God changing his disposition, but about God changing us. Through his forgiveness, we are set free from the judicial judgment of spiritual death and brought back into union with the life-changing power of God's own life.

So, if you've just kind of rolled over in your fight against sin, and have contented yourself by saying, "Well, at least God forgives me"—let me wake you up to so much more. Be reminded that God's forgiveness comes with new life; be reminded that you have been set free from sin and raised up with Christ. Don't forget the life-giving *power* of God's forgiveness.

Or maybe in your truncated notion of God's relational forgiveness, you've gone the opposite direction. You're grieved by your brokenness; you hate your sin. But since you think the only thing you're going to get from God is a change of disposition, you've wrongly thought that any fixing that needs to be done is up to you. *You've* got to figure out how to get rid of the judicial punishment and all its consequences. *You've* got to figure out how to get yourself out of exile, survive the drought, bring yourself back from the dead, and so forth—all on your own. As though the gospel message is, "Confess your sins; God will stop being angry with you; and then try really hard to overcome the judgments of God in your own strength." And so you find yourself unsuccessfully trying to live the Christian life in your own strength.

Give up trying to overcome the judgment of God in your own strength. You can't undo the divine judicial consequences of your sin. But God can, and he does in Christ. The gospel offers you so much more than relational forgiveness. The gospel offers you restorative forgiveness. It offers you an "all things new" kind of forgiveness. So Christian, be happy for your relational forgiveness from God, but set your hope fully on the power of his judicial forgiveness.

IV. WHAT THIS MEANS FOR NON-CHRISTIANS

To my non-Christian friends, let me ask you: are you grieved by the consequences of your sin? Does the plight of your spiritual death weigh heavy upon you? Do you feel something in you rising up and saying, "Yes, I need healing; I need restoration. I've fallen into a pit out of which I can't

resolve. Jesus did not die to *appease* or *satisfy* God's wrath (i.e., his righteous anger), but to *undo* the dilemma created by God's wrath (i.e., the righteous sentence of death and the defrocking of humanity as God's royal vice-regents). Atonement theology is the story of how Jesus' incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension, rewinds—unmakes, undoes—the wrath of God that had justly fallen upon a disobedient humanity, and restores creation to its proper order. In other words, atonement theology best focuses its attention on judicial forgiveness, not relational forgiveness.

climb. I need help.”¹⁷ Do you see that you’ve created a problem for yourself that you can’t fix?¹⁸ Don’t despair. The judge who cast you into that pit is gracious and compassionate; he stands ready to help you if you would but repent, and turn to him in faith. Forsake your sin and self-reliance, and call upon him for mercy. He offers his mercy freely as a gift. You don’t have to earn it. Paul writes in Romans 6:23. “The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” God’s free forgiveness will roll back the judicial consequences of your sin and begin the sure process of making you into the person he created you to be.

Here’s the incredible news of God’s free forgiveness—when God forgives, he can fix everything you’ve ever broken. He is able to wash the blood off your hands that you can’t wash away; he can take back the things you’ve said that you can’t unsay; he can undo the things you’ve done that you can’t undo; he can make all things news. Imagine being fully and finally free of all your sin. No more guilt, no more regret, no more exhaustion from trying to fix all the things that you have ruined. He can and will give you true and full and perfect freedom. Not all at once; salvation is a process. But it is a sure and certain process that will ultimately culminate at the renewal of all things, when God fully and finally remakes the world.

Baptism is the great sacrament of the church that marks the beginning of this process, precisely because baptism is a sign of our covenantal and judicial forgiveness. The apostle Peter says that baptism isn’t about the removal of dirt from the body, but about an appeal to God for a good conscience. And the apostle Paul tells us that baptism is a sign that we will be raised up with Christ and made completely new—just like Christ was raised up by God into resurrection and new life. Let me encourage you to turn away from your sin, and come to God for the true and full healing that comes only through his Son. Perhaps the Lord is calling you to the baptismal font at our upcoming baptismal service. I would love to talk to you about that.

¹⁷ The unbeliever, prior to conversion, must *feel* the hopeless weight of sin and death—like Augustine, quoting Seneca, who was “tired of living and scared of dying,” *Conf.* 4.6.

¹⁸ Athanasius insightfully observes that repentance is not sufficient for solving humanity’s plight of death. “Repentance does not call men back from what is their nature—it merely stays them from acts of sin. Now, if there were merely a misdemeanor in question, and not a consequent corruption, repentance were well enough. But if, when transgression had once gained a start, men became involved in that corruption which was their nature, and were deprived of the grace which they had, being in the image of God, what further step was needed?...For, being over all, the Word of God naturally by offering his own temple and corporeal instrument for the life of all satisfied the debt by his death. And thus he, the incorruptible Son of God, being conjoined with all by a like nature, naturally clothed all with incorruption by the promise of the resurrection. For the actual corruption in death has no longer holding ground against men...” *Inc.* 7, 9. As he succinctly states in *Inc.* 56, “the fruit of Christ’s cross is [our] resurrection,” Hardy, *Christology*, 62–63, 109.

V. COMMUNION

Now we turn to the table. If baptism is the great sign about how the Christian life begins, communion is the great sign about how the Christian life continues. Communion reminds us of our union (our communion) with Jesus. As Christians, we are invited to “feed on Christ” as a reminder of our continual dependence upon him. Just as the body needs food, the life of the human being needs the life of Jesus. His life is the life that makes us new. His life is the life that redeems us.¹⁹ His life was the life we lost when we fell into sin, and his life is the life we get back when we cry out to God for salvation. As Paul says in Galatians 2, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

And communion also reminds us that or forgiveness has come at a great cost. Paul says in Colossians 2:14–15, that God has released us from his judicial sentence—not by just waving it away—but by absorbing it into himself. That’s why we partake of Jesus’ *broken* body and *shed* blood. Jesus entered into our death, in order to bring us to his life. God, the Son, defeated our judicial punishment of death by absorbing our death sentence into himself. This was God’s plan all along, as he foretold through the prophet Isaiah, “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” (Is 53:4–5).

As we hold in our hands the gift of God to the people of God, let’s take a moment to reflect on both the great cost of God’s forgiveness, as well as the life changing power that God’s forgiveness brings.

¹⁹ St. Maximus, in *Amb.* 5.19, captures the “theandric” framework that underlies the Christian concepts of divinization: “[Jesus] completed the plan of salvation on our behalf in a ‘theandric’ manner, which means that, in a way that was simultaneously divine and human, ‘he accomplished both human and divine things.’ To put it more clearly, His ‘life among us’ was such that divine and human energy coincided in a single identity.” See Nicholas Constatas, trans., ed., *On the Difficulties in the Church Fathers, Volume 1, Maximus the Confessor*, Dumbarton Oak Medieval Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 51. Irenaeus, Athanasius, and Augustine all have the same basic soteriological theandric framework. Christ unites both lives in his single person. The life of God is the life that animates the human being, and thus the life of the human being redounds to the glory of God. See Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 4.20.7, also Augustine, *Civ.* 9.15; Athanasius, all of *Inc.*