

The Forgetfulness of God

B Y B R I A N L . H A R B O U R

Perhaps the most neglected doctrine of theology is the forgetfulness of God. But this is the good news of God's word. When God forgives, God forgets. This truth is repeatedly affirmed in Scripture. When God forgives our sin he puts it out of his mind; he erases it from the pages of time; he forgets it.

Colossians 2:13-14

William Cowper (1731-1800) penned the familiar words "God moves in a mysterious way / His wonders to perform," which were the poet's way of declaring that God deals with things in different ways than we do. Nowhere is this more evident than when we consider the subject of our text: guilt. What we do with our guilt and what God does with our guilt are not the same.

To be sure, we all have guilt to deal with. It's universal cargo in the human heart. Paul Tillich said it is impossible to have both a sensitive conscience and a clear conscience at the same time, for a sensitive conscience is inevitably a guilty conscience. I think he's right. Guilt has always been with us.

Guilt caused Adam and Eve to hide behind the tree in Eden when God came walking in the garden in the cool of the day (Genesis 3). Guilt caused David to cry out, "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me" (Psalm 51:3). When the holy God confronted Isaiah in the temple, it was his guilt that caused him to say, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5). When the Pharisees brought the woman caught in adultery to Jesus and Jesus responded, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to

throw a stone at her," it was their guilt that caused the accusers to slip silently away (John 8:7).

When a man recently sent \$100 to the IRS and said, "If I still can't sleep, I'll send more money," it was guilt with which he was contending. When Shakespeare had Lady Macbeth cry out, "All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten the little hand," it was her guilt by which she was tormented. Guilt is a universal experience of life.

So, what do we do with our guilt? We usually try one of three approaches.

One common approach is to *rationalize our guilt away*. One individual who was stopped for speeding explained to the policeman, "There are so many horrible accidents on the highways that I drive as fast as I can to get away from them quickly." How similarly we try to excuse our sins. Instead of accepting responsibility for what we have done and facing it, we project responsibility for our guilt on someone else. We rationalize it.

Or, we *deny our guilt*. A person who owned a Rolls Royce was on vacation when he experienced mechanical failure. He called the company from which he had bought the car, and they flew in a mechanic from England to repair it. After waiting a number of weeks for a bill, the man wrote to the company in England and asked for a bill for fixing the mechanical failure in the Rolls Royce. He received a telex that read, "We have no record of a Rolls Royce with a mechanical failure." Likewise, we often try to deny our guilt because we don't want to admit that there is a spiritual failure in our lives.

A third response is to *run away from our guilt*. We know it is there. And we know it's our fault. We just try to avoid dealing with it. A man in Chelsea, Massachusetts stole a watch from his neighbor. Conscience stricken by his act, he tried to give the watch away but no one would take it. Finally, he threw it away, but he could not throw away his guilt. For 35 years he tried to get away from it, to no avail. Finally, he sent a letter and some money to his rabbi and asked him to give it to the family from whom he had stolen the watch. He ran for 35 years, but he could not run away from his guilt. Likewise, after we have run as far as we can, we will still hear the haunting footsteps just behind us as our guilt follows incessantly in our pathway.

What do we do with our guilt? We try to rationalize it away. We deny it. Or we try to run away from it. These are usually our approaches to guilt.

How differently God responds to our guilt. Listen to the way Paul expressed it in our text: "God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with

its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross” (Colossians 2:13-14).

What does God do with our guilt? God *faces our guilt*. Notice the cryptic commentary in the last phrase of verse 14. God took our sin upon himself, “nailing it to the cross”. How seldom do we realize the awesome truth that at the cross Jesus, who knew no sin, actually became sin for us.

Picture in your mind again the events of that fateful day. Throughout the night, Jesus had been harassed and ridiculed as he was moved from one clandestine courtroom to another. Finally, Pilate sealed Jesus’ fate when he took the bowl of water and declared, “I am innocent of this man’s blood” (Mt 27:24), and he turned Jesus over to the angry mob. See Jesus as he struggled toward Golgotha. See him as he stumbled beneath the weight of the cross, and as Simon of Cyrene was enlisted to carry the cross for him. See him as the soldiers removed his robe from him and laid him forcefully on the crossed pieces of wood. See him as they put first one spike and then another through the quivering flesh of his precious hands. See him as they put his feet together and fastened them to the wood with a fourteen-inch spike. See him as they raised the cross until it slid into the chasm in the ground and his entire body was jarred. See him hanging for six hours before the ridiculing, mocking crowd. And then realize that as Jesus hung on the cross, all the guilt of all the people of all time was placed upon his shoulders, until, at last, the one who knew no sin actually became sin for us.

Then, as the earth trembled and the skies blackened and that Friday afternoon’s stormy winds began to blow and the veil in the temple split and the centurion cried, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (Mt 27:54), Jesus exclaimed, “It is finished” (John 19:30).

Note that Jesus did not say, “I am finished.” This was not the cry of despair from a man

whose dreams had been crushed, but the declaration of a man who had met every condition and then with a note of victorious finality declared, “I’ve done it. It is finished.”

What was finished? God’s plan to deal with our guilt. God did not rationalize our guilt away, did not deny it, and did not try to run away from it. God faced our guilt in Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross. God

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Then, after God faces our guilt, he now *forgives our guilt*. Don't think it is an easy process by which our guilt is removed because it is not. A price had to be paid. But, here is the point: Christ paid that price. God can deal with our guilt, the Bible says, because on the cross Christ erased “the record that stood against us with its legal demands” (2:14).

John expressed it this way in his epistle: “If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). God faces our guilt. And then he forgives our guilt.

But then notice this third step. After having faced our guilt and forgiven our guilt, God is now willing to *forget our guilt*. Paul said in verse 14 that “he set this aside.” He has removed our sin from his sight and has forgotten it.

Perhaps the most neglected doctrine of theology is the forgetfulness of God. But this is the good news of God's word. When God forgives, God forgets. This truth is repeatedly affirmed in Scripture. According to the psalmist, God has removed our sin from us as far as east is from west (Psalm 103:12). Jeremiah predicted that when Messiah came, God would forgive all our iniquity and remember our sin no more (Jeremiah 31:34). Micah said God would cast our sins into the deepest sea (Micah 7:19). Paul told the Roman Christians God would forgive our sins and cover them up (Romans 4:7). When God forgives our sin he puts it out of his mind; he erases it from the pages of time; he forgets it.

The poet was right: “God moves in a mysterious way / His wonders to perform.” In Christ, God faces our sin. Through Christ, God forgives our sin. Because of Christ, God forgets our sin.

So what does this mean for us? A certain notorious character, involved in all sorts of evil deeds, was changed by the grace of God. In the aftermath of his conversion, he took every opportunity to tell the story of how the grace of God had changed his life. On one occasion, just before he rose to speak, someone sent an envelope up to the platform. Opening it, he saw a long list of sins and crimes that he had committed. The unspoken implication was, “What right does a person like you have to stand up and speak for Christ?”

When he saw the note, his first impulse was to leave. Instead, he stepped boldly to the pulpit and said, “Friends, I am accused of crimes and sins committed in this very city. I will read the note to you.” One after another, he read the sins from the list and, at the conclusion of each accusation, he stopped and said, “It is true. I did that. I am guilty.” When he had finished the whole list, he paused a moment and then continued, “You ask how I dare stand before you to speak of righteousness and truth

with a list of crimes like that against my name? I will tell you how: 'In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses'" (Ephesians 1:7).

How will you respond to those who whisper in your ear, "How dare you stand up and claim to be a Christian with a list of sins like that against your name?" Will you allow the accusations to silence you? Will you load up your guilt and sadly walk away? You can do that. Many Christians do. But there is a better way. You can stand up before your accusers and say: "I dare to take my stand for Christ because Christ took his stand for me on the cross." There, God faced my sin. Through Christ, he forgives my sin. And now, praise his holy name, he has forgotten my sin. He has buried it in the deepest sea. He has separated it from him as far as east is from west. He has covered it up. He remembers it no more.

Will you let God be as good to you as he wants to? Give your guilt to God. Lay it at his feet and allow him to take care of it. Then you can begin, perhaps for the first time, to truly experience the forgiveness of God.



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