

The Purpose of God and the Politics of Salvation

BY DOROTHY JEAN WEAVER

Between two thematic framing devices—Zechariah’s announcement of John’s vocation and Paul’s description of his own vocation—Luke the Gospel Writer paints a vivid portrait of forgiveness as it plays itself out in ongoing and often astonishing interactions between God and God’s people. Here then are the outlines of that portrait, in broad strokes and surprising colors, of “forgiveness” in the writings of Luke.

“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins” (Luke 1:76-77). “But by refusing to be baptized by [John], the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God’s purpose for themselves” (Luke 7:29-30).

Forgiveness. This term lies at the heart of our Christian confession and has done so from earliest days. The ancient words of the Apostles’ Creed put it very simply: “I believe . . . in the forgiveness of sins.” In his introduction to this issue of *Christian Reflection*, Bob Kruschwitz states it as follows: “The Triune God loves us, offers us forgiveness, and seeks our reconciliation. This is the bedrock truth.”

But what does “forgiveness” mean? And who is the God who offers this to us and seeks reconciliation with a stubborn and sinful humanity? And what shape does such forgiveness take? What sorts of actions or

interactions are involved? What does forgiveness ask of God and of humans? And what does it offer in return?

Here Luke/Acts can give us help, for Luke the Gospel Writer is vitally concerned with these questions about forgiveness throughout his two-volume narrative.

From its outset to its conclusion Luke's "orderly account" of Jesus and the early church (Luke 1:1-4; cf. Acts 1:1-2) highlights the theme of forgiveness in persistent and unmistakable fashion. Early in the story Zechariah announces the vocation of his son John "to give knowledge of salvation to [God's] people *by the forgiveness of their sins*" (Luke 1:77, emphasis mine). And near the end of the account Paul describes his own vocation "to open [the] eyes [of the Gentiles] so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, *so that they may receive forgiveness of sins . . .*" (Acts 26:18, emphasis mine). And between these two thematic framing devices Luke paints a vivid portrait of forgiveness as it plays itself out in ongoing and often astonishing interactions between God and God's people. Here then are the outlines of that portrait, in broad strokes and surprising colors, of "forgiveness" according to Luke.

FORGIVENESS AS THE PURPOSE OF GOD

The most important truths in life are frequently the simplest and the most basic. And this is without question the case for Luke and his portrayal of forgiveness. In Luke's words, it is nothing other than God's "purpose" to forgive God's people (Luke 7:30). As Luke sees it, forgiveness is a central focus of God's activity within the human realm. In reflecting on the response of the Pharisees and lawyers who "refuse" John's baptism, a "baptism of repentance *for the forgiveness of sins*" (Luke 3:3, emphasis mine; cf. 1:77), Luke concludes that these religious leaders have in fact "rejected God's purpose for themselves" (7:30). And this divine "purpose" is clearly visible throughout Luke's two-volume narrative, in the words of those who boldly and publicly proclaim God's forgiveness: Zechariah, John the Baptist, Jesus, Peter, and Paul.¹

But if, in Luke's eyes, forgiveness is "the purpose of God" for humankind, it claims this role as the means to a still more encompassing end. As Zechariah puts it, John's mission is to "go before the Lord to prepare his ways, *to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins*" (Luke 1:76b-77, emphasis mine). The ultimate aim of God's intervention within the realm of human affairs is the *salvation* of humankind. The prominence and location of "salvation" language within Luke/Acts leave no room for doubt in this regard. The "salvation" motif is first announced at the outset of the story in Mary's hymn of praise (Luke 1:46b-47) and then picked up in rapid succession by Zechariah (Luke 1:69,

71, 77), the angel of the Lord (Luke 2:11), Simeon (Luke 2:30), and the word of the prophet Isaiah that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Luke 3:6). Throughout the narrative Luke focuses prominent attention on the “saving” ministry of Jesus.² And in the final scene of the story Paul once again restates the “salvation” motif as he declares to the unbelieving Jews of Rome “that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles;

they will listen” (Acts 28:28). As Luke sees it, “salvation” is both the first and the final word in the story of God and God’s people. But as Zechariah makes clear, the necessary route to this salvation, the essential means by which God

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works toward reconciliation with the human community, is forgiveness. “Knowledge of salvation” can come to God’s people only by means of “the forgiveness of their sins”. This is God’s single and all-crucial strategy for “saving” God’s people, a strategy, as it turns out, with profound implications for all parties involved. Framed in the language of societal interaction, forgiveness is, for Luke, neither more nor less than the *politics* of salvation.

FORGIVENESS AS THE POLITICS OF SALVATION

If forgiveness is both the “purpose” of God and God’s strategy for doing salvation, how does Luke describe the character of God’s “politics”? How does God’s salvation strategy function? What is the nature of the interactions involved? A close reading of Luke’s story yields an instructive list of observations.

(1) *Forgiveness is God’s initiative.* If forgiveness is God’s “purpose” for humankind, it is also God’s initiative. Throughout his two-volume narrative Luke portrays forgiveness above all else as an act *of God*, an action that *God* does on behalf of humankind. Each time Luke employs the noun form “forgiveness” (*aphesis*) it refers to the action of God;³ and in 14 of 18 references to the act of “forgiving” Luke portrays God (or God’s agent) as the actor of the verbal forms (*aphiemi*; *apolyo*) as well.⁴ As Luke sees it, the politics of salvation is God’s enterprise. This is foundational reality. It is in fact the “bedrock truth” of which Kruschwitz speaks. And it is clearly “good”. But this is *well-known fact* for all concerned.⁵ It is not yet the “good news” of Luke’s story.

(2) *Forgiveness is God’s action through Jesus of Nazareth.* What is new to Luke’s story is that God has chosen to work at forgiveness *through the*

agency of Jesus of Nazareth. In the words of Peter, “*God exalted [Jesus] at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins* (Acts 5:31, emphasis mine).” This is the “good news” which compels Luke’s story and drives it forward from beginning to end. At the outset of the story Jesus employs the vocabulary of “forgiveness” to announce his mission (Luke 4:18).⁶ Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus proclaims forgiveness boldly to the sick and the sinful, exhibits forgiveness fearlessly in his social interactions, and tells stories persistently about a forgiving God.⁷ As he hangs dying on a cross, Jesus calls on God to forgive those responsible for his crucifixion (Luke 23:32-24). And following his resurrection it is the Risen Jesus in whose “name” and by whose authority forgiveness is both proclaimed and received.⁸

There is no question for Luke. Jesus is the prime agent of God’s politics of salvation. This is the “good news” that compels Luke to write. It is also the “scandal” that rocks Luke’s story. When Jesus pronounces forgiveness for a paralyzed man, Jesus’ detractors accuse him of “blasphemy” for daring to assume the prerogative of God: “Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Luke 5:21). Jesus’ table companions at a banquet are equally dismayed by Jesus’ evident presumption: “Who is this who even forgives sins?” (Luke 7:49). And Jesus himself openly acknowledges this “scandal” by pronouncing a “blessing” on those who have “seen and heard” his ministry yet do not “take offense” (*skandalizomai*) at him (Luke 7:22-23).

(3) *Forgiveness is God’s gift to all humankind.* But there is more to the “scandal” of forgiveness. God is for Luke an “equal opportunity forgiver”. The forgiveness that God enacts through Jesus of Nazareth is in Luke’s eyes a universal gift, offered without restriction to the entire human family. To be sure, Luke’s story of God’s forgiveness begins in Jerusalem⁹ with God’s “people,” the “Jews” [*Ioudaioi*] or “Israelites,” who view themselves as “children [of] Abraham.”¹⁰ Even here, however, the picture is a universal one, since the “Jews” gathered “in Jerusalem” for Pentecost have in fact come “from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5; cf. 2:9-11). And it is precisely back to these “nations” [*ethnoi*], the Gentiles, that the word of God’s forgiveness is ultimately destined in Luke’s story. Luke first sounds this theme at the outset of his story in the words of the prophet Isaiah that “*all flesh shall see the salvation of God*” (Luke 3:6, emphasis mine). And as the story moves forward, the universal character of God’s salvation strategy echoes prominently in the words of Jesus, Peter, the Judean believers, and Paul.¹¹ God’s forgiveness is for “the Gentiles” (Acts 11:18; 26:17-18), for “all nations” (Acts 24:47), and for “everyone who believes [in Jesus]” (Acts 10:43; 13:39).

And here lies the further “scandal” of God’s politics of salvation.

There are no special privileges in the kingdom of God for the “children [of] Abraham” (Luke 3:8), and no special benefits for the people of “Israel” (Luke 4:25, 27). Instead, as Jesus announces in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:18-27), the gift of God’s forgiveness is available universally and without ethnic restrictions. This is nothing short of scandal; and the people of Jesus’ hometown have no trouble recognizing it as such. They respond accordingly, in lynch-mob fashion, dragging Jesus to the edge of the village in order to “hurl him off the cliff” (Luke 4:28-29). But Jesus simply moves through the crowd and walks off (Luke 4:30). And the “politics of salvation” goes on.

(4) *Forgiveness is God’s solidarity with sinners.* As if there were not already sufficient offense associated with God’s strategy of forgiveness, the Jesus of Luke’s story adds daily to the “scandal” by his daring social interactions and the outrageous stories that he tells. The list of Jesus’ public indiscretions is long and vivid.

Jesus socializes regularly with the outcasts of society, the “tax collectors” and the “sinners” (Luke 7:34; 15:1-2), not merely accepting their banquet invitations (Luke 5:27-29) but inviting himself to their houses as well (Luke 19:5-6). He throws all caution to the winds and welcomes the unseemly display of emotion offered him in public by a woman of bad reputation, a “sinner” (Luke 7:39), who bathes his feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, anoints them with ointment, and kisses them repeatedly (Luke 7:36-50). And his stories and teachings are equally outrageous. There is the story about a father who throws a huge “welcome back” celebration for the son who has shamed him and abused his trust by running off and wasting his share of the family estate in wild living (Luke 15:11-32). Another story tells of a tax collector, a self-acknowledged “sinner,” whose prayers for “mercy” have greater weight with God than the prayers of a law-abiding and right-living Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14). And Jesus teaches his listeners about the “Most High” who is “kind to the ungrateful and the wicked” (Luke 6:35). There is seemingly no length to which Jesus, *or the God whom Jesus represents*, will not go to “welcome sinners” (Luke 15:2) and show solidarity with them.

Without question this is a major “scandal” in proper Jewish circles. The religious leaders take massive offense at Jesus’ indiscretions, challenging his actions at every turn.¹² And Jesus himself acknowledges the reputation he has gained among his detractors for being “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 7:34).

But, as Luke tells the story, this “scandal” is itself the very heart of Jesus’ ministry. This is the forgiveness that Jesus proclaims. Jesus’ “scandalous” display of solidarity with “sinners” is in fact the practical outworking of God’s “purpose” for humankind. Jesus has come expressly

“to call . . . sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32) and “to seek out and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). *And this is what it takes to do so.* If Jesus flouts social convention and offends religious sensibilities at every turn, he does so neither by chance nor by malice, *but because this is what it takes to engage in God’s “politics of salvation.”*

(5) *Forgiveness is God’s call to costly repentance.* Solidarity is God’s side of the forgiveness interaction. Repentance is the human side. And the call to repentance echoes loudly and persistently throughout Luke’s story in the words of John the Baptist, Jesus, Peter, the Judean believers, and Paul.¹³ This call to repentance is a challenging call and not for the faint of heart. It is first of all a call to profound humility before God and open acknowledgement of sin.¹⁴ But it is far more than that. It is a call to radical and costly life changes, the “fruits worthy of repentance.”¹⁵ In Luke’s eyes the call to repentance has clear social and economic implications. It is no less than the call to “do justice” in one’s relations with others. It means sharing one’s coat and food with those who have none, giving one’s possessions to the poor, doing honest business with one’s clients, refusing to extort money from the powerless, and repaying with ample interest those whom one has “defrauded” (Luke 3:11-13 and 19:8). The call to repentance is for Luke a call to a profound reordering of human perspectives, patterns, and priorities.

(6) *Forgiveness is God’s invitation to the banquet.* But in the end it all comes down to celebration. Forgiveness, as Luke portrays it, is nothing less than God’s exuberant and unrestrained joy over “finding” what has been “lost” (Luke 15:6, 9, 32), a joy that demands celebration: “But we had to celebrate and rejoice”

(Luke 15:32). And God will not celebrate alone. The extravagant party which God throws is a celebration intended for all of God’s “friends and neighbors” in the human community: “Rejoice with me, for I have found [what] was lost” (Luke

15:6, 9). And it is a party for which the entire house must be filled (Luke 14:23). This is the bottom line, the ultimate “good news” of Luke’s story: an extravagant and cosmic celebration over God’s reconciliation with humankind. The “politics of salvation” ends up for Luke nowhere else than at the banquet table, with “music and dancing” (Luke 15:25) and the “fatted calf” (Luke 15:23, 27).

The call to repentance is not for the faint of heart. It is first of all a call to profound humility before God and open acknowledgement of sin. But it is far more than that. It is a call to radical and costly life changes.

This is the God “who seeks our reconciliation”. And this is the forgiveness that God offers us. Let the party go on!

NOTES

1 Thus Zechariah (Luke 1:77), John the Baptist (Luke 3:3-4), Jesus (who announces in Luke 4:18 that “the Spirit of the Lord” has “sent” him “to proclaim release [i.e., “forgiveness”] to the captives” and to “let the oppressed go free” [i.e., “into forgiveness”]); and 24:45-47), Peter (Acts 2:38-39; 3:19-21; 5:30-31; and 11:18), and Paul (Acts 13:32-39 and 26:17-18).

2 Luke 6:9; 7:50; 8:36, 48, 50; 9:24, 56; 13:23; 17:19, 33; 18:26, 42; 19:10; and 23:35; Acts 2:21, 40, 47; 4:9, 12; 11:14; 14:9; 15:1, 11; 16:30, 31; and 27:20; cf. Luke 8:12 and 23:37, 39. See also Luke 19:9, where Jesus announces that “salvation” has come to the house of Zacchaeus.

3 Luke 1:77; 3:3; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; and 26:18; cf. Luke 4:18 twice.

4 Luke 5:20, 21, 23, 24; 6:37c/b; 7:47a, 47b, 48, 49; 11:4a; 12:10a, 10b; and 23:34; Acts 8:22. Note, by contrast, Luke 6:37c/a, 11:4b, 17:3, and 17: 4, where “forgiving” is the action of humans.

5 Note, for example, the indignant question of the scribes and Pharisees (Luke 5:21): “Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

6 The dual use of *aphesis* in Luke 4:18, translated respectively as “release” and “liberty.”

7 Thus Jesus’ proclamation (Luke 5:17-26 and 7:36-50), social interactions (Luke 5:1-11, 27-32; 15:1-2; 19:1-10; and 23:39-43), and stories (Luke 15:3-7, 8-10, 11-32; and 18:9-14).

8 Luke 24:46-47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; and 13:38-39; cf. 3:19-21.

9 Jerusalem is the implied location of Luke 1:5-79 and the designated location (Acts 2:5, 14) of the Pentecost narrative.

10 Thus forgiveness is for God’s “people” (Luke 1:17, 68, 77; Acts 26:17), the “Jews” (Acts 2:5, 14) or “Israelites” (Acts 2:22, 29; 3:12; 13:16; cf. 2:36; 5:31; and 13:24), and those who view themselves as “children of Abraham” (Luke 3:8).

11 Thus Jesus (Luke 4:18 cf. 4:24-27 and 24:47), Peter (Acts 10:43), the Judean believers (Acts 11:18), and Paul (Acts 13:39; 17:30; and 26:17-18).

12 Luke 5:30; 7:39; 15:2; and 19:7.

13 John the Baptist (Luke 3:8; cf. 3:5), Jesus (Luke 5:32; 10:13; 11:32; 13:3, 5; 15:7, 10; and 24:47; cf. 16:30 and 17:3, 4), Peter (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; and 8:22), the Judean believers (Acts 11:18), and Paul (Acts 13:24; 17:30; 19:4; 20:21; and 26:20 twice).

14 Luke 5:8; 15:18, 21; and 18:13.

15 Luke 3:8; cf. Acts 26:20.



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