

Does God Always Forgive? Joshua 8:1-35

Contemporary Christian thinking is worrysome superficial. Under 'market pressure', a great many churches have turned away from serious interaction with Scripture to 'sermon-lite': warm-hearted, upbeat, anecdotal and topical, highly entertaining but insubstantial. Careful Bible study has given way to no-answer-is-wrong, what-does-this-passage-say-to-you and how-does-it-make-you-feel explorations of inner subjectivity. Consequently, our understanding is weak even of the core themes related to salvation, such as forgiveness, grace, and faith. The terms are widely defined and applied without careful regard for how Scripture – or historic Christianity – uses them. The end result is appealing: a God who gives much and expects little, a Savior who dies for us and accepts a token response, a Spirit who, well, we may not be entirely sure what he does, but we are sure he does something good, without expecting much from us.

We start with a few biblical words, define them in self-serving ways, and walk away hoping that God will act within the parameters we have set for him. We come up with sparkling little theological ditties, such as: "God forgives all my sins, past, present, future." Are you sure? Does any Scripture actually say this? Isn't this too important just to hope it is true? Or, as a recent book puts it, "In Christ, there is nothing I can do that would make [God] love me more, and nothing I have done that makes [God] love me less." Really? You mean, so long as I give my life to Christ, I can live like a Pharisee without Jesus treating me like he treated Pharisees in his day? Or, so long as I am a Christian, I can sleep my way around the office, or ignore the poor while I play rich American tourist? Really? So long as we appeal to grace and forgiveness, we can sin with impunity? This is all very convenient, but is it actually true? Since our lives ultimately depend on it, it seems a wiser strategy to study Scripture to learn how God defines and applies crucial ideas, such as 'grace' and 'forgiveness.'

Joshua 8 provides us such a passage, as it clearly portrays God forgiving Israel. One passage does not a comprehensive theology make, but it does supply an important and substantial data point.

Day 1: Joshua 8:1 Israel finds forgiveness, but at steep cost

This is the point of God's exhortation to Joshua, "Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged... For I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai, his people, his city and his land." Why need not Joshua and Israel be afraid? After all, the army of Ai has already beaten them decisively in battle, and killed 36 of their fighters. This is sufficient reason to be genuinely afraid. The only reason they need not fear is the decisive one: now God will be with them. He has forgiven them for

Achan's sin, and will once again look after them, and fight for them.

It is crucial to note, though, that God does not – he cannot – just wave his wand and poof! their sin is no more. The forgiveness and restoration of Joshua 8 come after – and as a result of – their decisive action against the sinner and his sin. Their restoration comes at steep cost: the death of the guilty with all his family, including women and children, and the destruction of all his property. They were wiped off the face of the earth so that Israel could once again be in relationship with God. While this incident may raise several questions, it makes one point with crystal clarity: forgiveness cannot be taken for granted; it may be possible, but it comes at tremendous price.

Day 2: Joshua 8:1-29 Forgiveness provides restoration, mostly ...

God does not merely forgive Israel, he also reverses the damage that sin had done to their relationship, and the removes the alienation that resulted. He demonstrates this by returning to help them gain the land. God ensures the defeat of their enemies (v7), and directs advises Joshua in war strategy (v18). God is no longer their adversary, but has resumed serving as their defender.

Notice, though, two differences between this battle and previous strategies. For one, God tells Israel to bring its entire army, not just a few people, so that they can fight, not just march around the city. This development calls for more action, and less faith. For the other, God permits them to pilfer to their hearts' content. This adjustment calls for less obedience, and permits more self-indulgence. Together, they imply that God has lowered his standard: he does not expect the faith he once did; he does not expect the level of devotion and obedience that he once did.

Which raises the obvious question: Which sort of people do we want to be for God? Those from whom he asks a lot because he can trust us to be daring and to live sacrificially? Or those from whom he asks only a little, because he can trust us only to give a little? Or, to put it the other way around, what do we want to tell God: that we consider him worthy, and so are willing to risk a lot and give a lot? Or that we are not entirely sure that he is worthy of our devotion, and so we risk only a little, and offer only a bit.

Day 3: Joshua 8:30-35 God directs, Israel obeys

The chapter, unlike many contemporary Christian books, does not end here: Israel repents, God restores and blesses. Instead, after the spectacular victory, 8:30-35 provides a crucial postscript: Joshua leads Israel in a ceremony of covenant renewal.

The original covenant ceremony – and every renewal – sends two messages: (a) God offers to be a benevolent patron, and (b) Israel offers to be a loyal

subject. They made this covenant at Sinai, but broke it in Joshua 7 (and not for the first time). Now Joshua leads them in covenant renewal, as they commit themselves afresh to love and obey God.

Notice the emphasis on obedience to God throughout these verses. Joshua builds an altar, in obedience to the command of God through Moses; and he constructs it in the way that God commanded (undressed stone). They offer sacrifice (as commanded in the Law). Joshua then coats the altar stones with plaster, and writes the Law on them. All the people participate in the covenant ceremony, just as Moses previously directed. Then Joshua reads the Law to them, with special attention to its blessings for the obedient and its curses on the disobedient. A second time the author stresses that Joshua read each and every word, to each and every one of them, men, women, child, Israelite and foreigner. Law ... law ... law ... obedience ... obedience ... obedience.

The point? Forgiveness and restoration are not to be taken for granted. They do not come cheaply (day 1), are incredibly valuable (day 2), and require reciprocation (day 3). God's people cannot appeal to him when they want his help, and disregard him at other times. He is a gracious Lord, but let there be no doubt, he is master and not servant. In all three points, Joshua 8 anticipates the gospel (though Christ marks dramatic improvements).

Day 4: Romans 3:21-26 We find forgiveness, but at even steeper cost

In his letter to the Romans, Paul spends chapters 1-3a establishing that all of us, Jew or gentile, are sinners under judgment. The nature of our sin is found in this: we neither respect our creator nor obey his moral directives (1:18-32). We are each Achan, and our sins, like his, warrants our execution.

But in a startling change from Joshua 7, it is not we sinners who die, but the divine Christ: "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished" (3:25). Apart from Christ, there is no hope for any of us. But in Christ, we find forgiveness. Here is the major difference from the message of Joshua 7: it is not the sinner who dies, but the Son. God gives us what he never offered Achan, a substitute to bear the consequences of our sin.

Day 5: Romans 5:12-20 Forgiveness provides restoration, entirely

At a second point, we again find that the gospel of Jesus is analogous – but superior – to the salvation under Joshua: forgiveness provides restoration, not mostly, but entirely.

In Romans 5:12-20, Paul compares Christ to Adam. The comparison is risky, because Adam was purely human, a sinner, and the one who brought disaster

on both mankind and nature. So as soon as Paul proposes a comparison, he feels obliged to sketch out the dissimilarities. For present purposes, we need not unravel all the complexities here. Verses 18-19 suffice to make the point: "The result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men ... Through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous."

That is to say, Christ not only forgives our sins, but also reverses Adam's sin and ours, and frees us from its consequences, both judgment and deformation. As Paul writes just a few verses earlier, "When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son" (5:10). In short, he restores our relationship with God.

Day 6: Romans 8:1-14 God directs, we obey

At this third point, we find yet again that the gospel of Christ is analogous – but superior – to the salvation under Joshua. In his time, God restored and blessed, and, in reciprocation, Israel promised to obey. The problem was: they never kept that promise. The law told what to do, but did not empower people to do it. So what was intended to facilitate their salvation led only more resolutely and finally to their condemnation.

In contrast to what a great many Christians think, obedience is no less required of us than of believers in Old Testament times. The real difference is that we are empowered and enabled to fulfill the obligations upon us. Under the new covenant, God not merely directs, he also transforms. Christ not merely dies, he also resurrects and indwells (Romans 6:1-23). He gives us not only his life, but also his Spirit (Romans 8:1-14).

In Romans 8:12-14, Paul sums up both ideas: our obligation to be holy, and our capacity to be holy. First, our obligation: "Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die" (8:12-13). The death of Christ does not free us from the obligation to obey God. Nor does the death of Christ guarantee our salvation no matter how we live, for if we "live according to the sinful nature, [we] will die." Secondly, though, this in no way entails earning salvation through good works. Instead, our obedience is the result of our transformation by the Spirit: the children of God are led by the Spirit of God, through whom they put to death their sinful deeds.

So the difference between Joshua and Jesus, between Old Testament and New, is not that we can count on God to overlook our sins in the name of Christ, but that Christ not only atones for our sins but also empowers us to fulfill our necessary reciprocation, loving and obeying God in response to his love and sacrifice for us.