

## A God Who Forgives

2Chronicles 6:22-31 -

By Russell Muilenburg

Sunday, 30 May 2010 00:00

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2 Chronicles 6:22-31      *A God Who Forgives*      Would you turn with me in your Bibles to 2 Chronicles 6:22-31? Our text this morning is 2 Chronicles 6:22-31. Today we are in the 4th week of a series of sermons I am calling *"No God Like You."*

Here's the scene:

Solomon is on his knees in prayer, surrounded by the entire assembly of Israel at the dedication of the gold-encrusted temple he has built for the Lord. All around him sacrifices are being offered and songs of praise are being lifted up to God. Above the temple, the cloud which contains the glory of the presence of the Lord is already gathering. It is an electric, powerful, and sacred scene.

And Solomon begins his prayer by saying, *"O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven or on earth."* In other words, there is no one or nothing like God. No one is bigger. No one is stronger. No one is smarter. And no one has more love. God is the unmatched and unrivaled God of the universe.

The rest of the prayer, then, goes on to detail just what it is about God that makes Him so unique.

We've already seen that He is a promise-keeping God. He is truthful, constant, and strong. He keeps His *"covenant of love with His servants who continue wholeheartedly in His way."*

Then, last week, we saw that God is a God who is both very great, and yet incredibly near. He is the God of the cosmos, and yet He is closer than a friendly, next-door neighbor. *"The heavens, even the highest heavens"* cannot contain Him, but still he gives attention to the prayers of His people. He is strong enough to make a difference in our lives, and He cares enough to do so.

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And now, today, in the verses we have before us, Solomon is going to give us a picture of a God who forgives. 2 Chronicles 6:22-31

22

"When a man wrongs his neighbor and is required to take an oath and he comes and swears the oath before your altar in this temple,

23

then hear from heaven and act. Judge between your servants, repaying the guilty by bringing down on his own head what he has done. Declare the innocent not guilty and so establish his innocence.

24

"When your people Israel have been defeated by an enemy because they have sinned against you and when they turn back and confess your name, praying and making supplication before you in this temple,

25

then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your people Israel and bring them back to the land you gave to them and their fathers.

26

"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 confess your name and turn from their sin because you have afflicted them,

27

then hear from heaven and forgive 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.

28

"When famine or plague comes to the land, or blight or mildew, locusts or grasshoppers, or when enemies besiege them in any of their cities, whatever disaster or disease may come,

29

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and when a prayer or plea is made by any of your people Israel—each one aware of his afflictions and pains, and spreading out his hands toward this temple-

30

then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Forgive, and deal with each man according to all he does, since you know his heart (for you alone know the hearts of men),

31

so that they will fear you and walk in your ways all the time they live in the land you gave our fathers.

<<pray>>

Our God is a forgiving God. In the words of one preacher, &quot;

**God is never more like God than when He forgives**

&quot; (John MacArthur, from the internet).

This is the heart of what we believe as Christians. It is the center of the gospel. We believe God is full of forgiveness.

Yet God's forgiveness is not a simple thing. God's forgiveness is not easy or cheap. When we say that God forgives, we are saying something remarkable about sin and punishment—and what God does to overcome them.

There are three distinctive features in this text which I want to call your attention to this morning.

□

### **I. □ *The Seriousness of Sin***

The first is what it has to say about

**the seriousness of sin.**

As you scan the text you see that each paragraph has to do with consequences for sin.

In the first paragraph, verses 22 & 23, Solomon prays that God will repay the man who has wronged his neighbor

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### **&quot;by bringing down on his own head what he has done**

.&quot; In the next paragraph, verses 24 & 25, Solomon anticipates the possibility that

### **Israel may be defeated by her enemies**

if the people fall away from God.

Likewise, in verses 26 & 27, he realizes that a time may come

### **&quot;when the heavens are shut up and there is no rain**

&quot; because the people have sinned against God. Then, in the final paragraph, Solomon gives a whole list of consequences that may result from Israel's sin. Things like:

### **&quot;famine or plague...or blight or mildew, locusts or grasshoppers**

&quot; or enemies besieging them in their cities, or other disasters or diseases.

Now, it isn't like Solomon is praying for these things to happen. Nor is it as though he has a crystal ball before him and can see these things in Israel's future (though, if you continue reading in the Old Testament you will see that many of these things did befall the nation).

Rather, Solomon is here acknowledging the seriousness of sin. He knows that--despite the great devotion being shown at this dedication--the people of Israel will probably still fall into old patterns of disobedience. And he understands that when people sin there are serious consequences.

Notice also, the escalating severity of the punishments Solomon lists. This passage takes us from individual punishment to community punishment. From one man being repaid for what he has done to entire cities suffering under siege to the very environment and land itself being damaged. While defeat at the hands of an enemy would be bad enough, Solomon envisions the even darker scenarios of drought and famine and plague.

The point is that sin is serious business. The breaking of God's law is a big deal and it has grave consequences.

## **II. *The Certainty of Punishment***

So Solomon knows how serious sin is.

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But, we think, maybe God could just overlook our sin. Maybe He could turn His head, or ignore our misdeeds. Maybe He won't notice all of the wrong we do. After all, you can't be punished if you aren't caught.

Sadly, Solomon knows this is not the case. We are dealing with a holy God, and He can't just &quot;overlook&quot; sin. That's the second feature of our passage today. A feature I am labeling

### **The Certainty of Punishment.**

The key verse is the last portion of **verse 30.**

Solomon prays:

Deal with each man according to all he does, since you know his heart (for you alone know the hearts of men).

Here Solomon is making a profound statement about God. It's in parentheses, but it is not incidental to God's character. He knows the hearts of men.

In other words, God knows what you and I are thinking. He knows what we are feeling. He knows what's going on deep inside the most personal and intimate details of our character that we would never dream of sharing with anybody else.

If we think, then, that we can commit some secret, quiet sin and it will go unnoticed--we are sorely mistaken. Last week we learned that there is no place in the universe that God is not, and now we learn that there is nothing He does not know.

Thus, if we think we can have lust in our heart--just so long as we don't act on it--and we are o.k., we are wrong. Jesus says that &quot;anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart&quot;; (Matt. 5:28). God knows. He knows the hearts of men.

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Or, again, if we think we can harbor anger in our heart just so long as we don't do anything rash, we are wrong. Jesus said, "I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment (Matt. 5:22)." God knows. Evil does not escape His detection. If we break His law--either in our actions or in our attitude--He knows.

There is no chance, then, that God will just "miss" our sins.

Neither can He simply choose to overlook them. Because God knows the sins of His people, He must deal with them. As Solomon says, He must deal "with each man according to all he does."

This is because God is a holy and righteous God. Within the perfections of God there is not the slightest trace of sin or wrongdoing. He must punish sins, therefore, because the moment He starts to "overlook" them or "turn His head" He would cease to be fair. If He chose to ignore sin, then He wouldn't be dealing with men according to what they deserved. And that wouldn't be right.

Solomon's father David puts it like this in

### **Psalm 5:**

You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil; with you the wicked cannot dwell. The arrogant cannot stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong. You destroy those who tell lies; bloodthirsty and deceitful men the Lord abhors.

A holy God can take no pleasure in evil. Nor can a righteous God partner with wickedness.

And yet, if God were to shrug off our sin, that is exactly what He would be doing.

God knows the hearts of men. He knows about every sin we've ever committed. And He must punish sin. He cannot overlook it or brush it under the rug.

Proverbs 11:21 says: "Be sure of this: The wicked will not go unpunished." Isaiah

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59:18 warns: "According to what they have done, so will he repay: wrath to his enemies and retribution to his foes." Our sins deserve punishment, and that is exactly what they will bring.

### **III. The Possibility of Forgiveness**

To this point, then, we have not only learned that sin deserves punishment, but that it requires it. Sin is a serious business, and it cannot nor will not escape God's wrath.

So far, this is probably not the most appealing picture of God. We are supposed to be looking at a God who forgives, and so far all we have is a God of unyielding justice.

But that's the wonder of this passage, and the wonder of our God. Because despite all Solomon knows about the seriousness of sin and the certainty of punishment, still the bulk of this section of his prayer is made up of requests for forgiveness. Notwithstanding His righteous hatred for sin, God is still a God who forgives. The third and most important feature of this passage, then, is what I have labeled t

**he Possibility of Forgiveness.**

□

### **Solomon's Confidence**

The thing that has impressed me throughout our study of this prayer is just how confident Solomon is when he talks to God. Even though this passage consists primarily of requests, there is no sense in which you could say that Solomon wonders whether or not they will be fulfilled. Indeed, it is because of what Solomon knows about God that he makes the requests that he does. Thus, he asks God to keep His promise to David because he knows that God is a promise-keeping God. He asks God to hear the prayers of Israel because he knows that God is a great God who is also near. And now, he asks God to forgive because he knows that God is a forgiving God.

Look for example at  
**verse 24.**

After recognizing that the time may come when the people of Israel will be defeated because of their sin, Solomon prays: "when they turn back and confess your name, praying and making supplication before you in this temple, then hear from heaven and forgive." This is not the wishy-washy pleading of someone who wishes God would be something He isn't. It is

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the confident prayer of someone who knows that God is a God who forgives.

Or again, in

### **verse 26**

, Solomon understands that the sin of the people may lead God to shut off the rain. But at the same time, he knows that the people may be led to turn away from their sin because of their affliction. If they do, then he asks God to "hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel." Solomon isn't crossing his fingers and hoping this will happen. He knows. He knows that God is a God of forgiveness.

The same confidence is seen in verses

### **29 and 30**

. No matter what disease or disaster may beset Israel, Solomon's one request is that if the people would spread out their hands and pray toward the Lord that He would "hear from heaven, [his] dwelling place" and "forgive." Solomon asks God to forgive because he knows it is in God's nature to do just that.

What I want you to see is that Solomon truly believes--with all his heart--that there is always a possibility of forgiveness. If the people will just turn back from their sins and again confess His name and pray to Him, then God stands ready--like the father in the parable of the prodigal son--to welcome them back with open arms.

That means that no matter what the most terrible thing you have ever done, there is forgiveness available.

- If you have taken God's gifts and squandered them on yourself; there is still the possibility of forgiveness, if only you will come to your senses and turn back to God.
- If you have broken God's laws--if you have lied or cheated or dishonored your parents; you can have forgiveness, if only you will turn from your sins and seek it.
- Even if you have abandoned God to chase after your own vain pursuits; you can be forgiven, if only you will come back to God and confess His name.

Our God is a God of forgiveness. He is a God who delights in pardoning sin. □ **How Can God Forgive?**



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But all of this begs the question:

**How**

**can God forgive**

?

When questioned about his permissive lifestyle, a French cynic once said: "The good God will forgive me, it's his job." But we would hardly dare to be so presumptuous.

We've just seen the seriousness of sin. We've seen how offensive it is to God. We've seen that it isn't something that He can just overlook. God can't simply brush our iniquity under the rug and pretend it's not there. He must punish sin. And so, the question must be asked: how can God forgive our sin?

To answer this question, we must leave our text. In this prayer, Solomon gives us the confidence and wonder of a God who forgives sin, but he is unable to tell us how this happens. Indeed, it is likely that Solomon, living in the Old Testament, did not even understand how forgiveness was possible. He understood that God is a forgiving God, he knew that it is a part of God's nature to show mercy, but he could not know the means by which that mercy is achieved.

And so we must fast forward. We must look ahead--to Solomon's distant descendant and to an execution on a hill outside of Jerusalem.

You see, God is caught between the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, He is a God of holiness and righteousness who must punish sin. On the other hand, He is a God of mercy and compassion who wants to forgive.

The question then is: How? How can He forgive while still meeting the demands of justice? How can He bring about the punishment sin deserves while still being merciful?

His answer is Jesus Christ. When God the Son decided to come to earth and die a criminal's death on the cross, He did it so that He Himself could bear the penalty our sins deserve. He

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substituted Himself for us, putting Himself in our place so that we could be forgiven while our sins were still punished in Him.

Theologian

**John Stott**

puts it this way:

At the cross in holy love God through Christ paid the full penalty of our disobedience himself. He bore the judgment we deserve in order to bring us the forgiveness we do not deserve. On the cross divine mercy and justice were equally expressed and eternally reconciled. God's holy love was 'satisfied'. (

*The Cross of Christ*

, p. 89)

The Apostle Paul teaches this same truth about forgiveness in

**Romans 3**

:

24

They [sinners] are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

25

whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed;

26

it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies [that is, He forgives] the one who has faith in Jesus. (Rom. 3:24-26, NRSV)

In other words, at the cross Jesus purchased forgiveness for the sins of the past (those of Solomon and the other saints of the Old Testament), as well as the sins of the future (the sins that you and I have committed and are yet to commit), by paying the penalty of those sins Himself. In the words of the Belgic Confession, "God expressed his justice toward the Son, who was charged with our sin, and poured out goodness and mercy on us" (BC #20).

And so the question of how God can forgive, as well as the question of how we can be forgiven, are both met with the same answer: Jesus Christ. If we will only put our faith and trust in Him, then the requirements of righteousness can be met at the same time that God shows Himself as a God who forgives.

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### **IV. Conclusion and Application**

Finally, we must consider

#### **how we should respond to all this**

. In light of God's forgiveness, what should we do?

For an answer, we can return to our text.

At the end of this section of the prayer, Solomon suggests two ways in which we can respond to God's forgiveness. In

#### **verse 31**

he prays that God would forgive "so that they [the people, Israel] will fear you and walk in your ways all the time they live in the land you gave our fathers."

Two ways for us to respond to God's forgiveness. By fearing Him, and by walking in His way.

1) First, we should

#### **fear God**

.

Now, it may seem odd to talk about fearing a God who forgives.

Thinking of God as a forgiving God may make Him seem like a great big teddy bear, and it is hard to be scared of teddy bears.

But we've just seen that that is not an adequate image of God at all. Sin is serious business and God has gone to great lengths to earn our forgiveness.

Thus, if there is anyone you should treat with fear--with awe and reverence--it is God. Nothing should terrorize you quite as much as the thought of offending someone who has forgiven you

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so much.

That means God deserves our allegiance and our devotion. It is right that we should worship and serve Him.

2) Secondly, then, we should  
**walk in His ways**

I have heard it said that forgiveness makes no demands on the past because you can't change the past. But it does place a heavy demand on the future. Because for forgiveness to have any meaning at all, there must be change.

God does not forgive us so that we can go right back to our life of sin. The father did not forgive the prodigal son so that he could pick up the other half of the estate and go out and squander it. God forgives so that we will walk in His ways. His forgiveness is an invitation to honor His laws and imitate Him. As the apostle Peter said about Jesus:

Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps...He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness. (1 Pet. 2:21, 24)

Brothers and sisters, our God is a God who forgives. He has forgiven us much at great cost to Himself. Fear Him, therefore, and walk in His ways.

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