

The Ensign

of the Christian Israelite Church

‘And he shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.’ Isaiah 11:12.

Understanding Forgiveness

by *Trudy Adams*

The Challenges of Forgiveness

It is often difficult to forgive those who have hurt, betrayed or committed an injustice against us. We may feel that forgiveness means the offending person will ‘get away with it’, not face consequences, or not realise the impact of their actions. Or, we may worry that forgiving them will suggest that what they did wasn’t really that bad or didn’t matter that much, when the truth is, it did. Sometimes we are hesitant to forgive because we are afraid to trust them again or aren’t convinced they won’t reoffend in the future – we want to protect ourselves or others from further hurt. Sometimes it’s because forgiving them will change the way we interact with them, and we are unsure about what that will mean for us. Mostly, though, people struggle to forgive because they misunderstand what forgiveness is – a decision to obey God, separate to rebuilding trust.

What Forgiveness Is (and Isn’t)

Forgiveness is the decision to not harbour hatred towards another person because of something they have done. It is recognising (but not excusing) that they were acting out of their own wounds and/or under the influence of the devil (Ephesians 6:12). It is releasing them from the ‘debt’ they owe us and recognising that’s a debt only God can repay. It means treating them with respect and

dignity if and when we see them again, just as we would for any other person.

Forgiveness does not mean putting ourselves in a position to be harmed again, especially when the other person has made no admissions, expressions of remorse, or attempts to change. This is also the case if they minimise their actions, or blame others for their behaviour. We can forgive people (even without them apologising) and treat them well while still having protective boundaries in place, even if only as a temporary measure, i.e. until changes are made and the issues are resolved. In some cases, not reinstating the relationship may actually be the healthiest thing to do, especially if the other person is not inclined to recognise or improve their behaviour or alleviate the impact of their behaviour on those around them.

It is vital that we maintain healthy boundaries with people who behave in a toxic manner or significantly impact our emotional well-being. Forgiveness is about releasing people from past mistakes, but doesn’t necessarily speak for the future – that is the domain of reconciliation. Forgiveness is an action taken by one person; reconciliation requires the actions of both parties, and the other’s willingness to commit to that process and make changes is not in our control. While we always hope reconciliation is possible and, with God’s help, work towards that whenever

we can, forgiveness can thankfully exist either way.

God Respects Boundaries

Throughout the Bible, God regularly teaches us how to have positive relationships with others, including maintaining healthy boundaries, which he himself role-models for us. For example, if we don't wish to engage with God or to have a relationship with him, he respects that and doesn't harass us. If we sin, he withdraws himself from us until we recognise and deal with that sin:

'But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear.' Isaiah 59:2.

He clearly tells us what behaviour he will and will not accept, such as the list in Galatians 5:19-21, and yet, if we choose to continue in sin, God allows us to do that, too. He never approves of our sin, but he gives us free-will regardless. He provides us with choices and tells us the consequences of these choices, such as in Deuteronomy 30:16-19:

'I command thee this day to love the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commandments and his statutes and his judgments, that thou mayest live and multiply ... But if thine heart turn away, so that thou wilt not hear, but shalt be drawn away, and worship other gods, and serve them; I denounce unto you this day ... I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live.'

He tells us what he hopes we will choose, but ultimately gives us the freedom to make that decision. He tells us what his boundaries are, and he respects ours in turn. If a person chooses to hurt another, they have the free-will to do so; the hurt person also has the free-will and choice to implement boundaries in

that relationship, which in some cases may be the relationship's saving-grace. But while boundaries are essential, we must not forget to temper them with forgiveness, just as God forgives us.

God's Forgiveness of Us

God's forgiveness is always available to us. God is love (1 John 4:8), so he does not harbour hate towards us – that would be contrary to who he is. But we are only able to access and receive the benefit of his forgiveness when we repent:

'He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.' Proverbs 28:13.

When we repent and ask God for forgiveness, he provides this and chooses to forget our sins altogether:

'I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.' Isaiah 43:25.

Note that he says this is 'for mine own sake'. God wants to have a relationship with us, and he doesn't want sin to compromise that relationship.

However, like us, God does not want empty words of apology either. He requires that we genuinely recognise the impact of our sin and make a firm decision to turn away from it, as David exemplified in Psalm 51, and as Isaiah instructs us:

'Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.' 55:7.

Confession of sin is an integral part of receiving God's forgiveness. It shows him that we recognise that we have acted contrary to his will, that we realise the impact of our

sin, and that we wish to make things right. God may lead us to confess our sins to others, including those we have hurt or offended, and/or a trusted friend who will meet us with compassion. Doing so helps us to be accountable and leads to emotional and physical healing for all parties involved:

‘Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.’ James 5:16.

But it is especially important for us to confess our sins to God in order for us to receive redemption from our sin:

‘In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.’ Ephesians 1:7.

Christian Israelites do not believe that one person can forgive another on God’s behalf, or that people are absolved from their sins by confessing to another person alone and not to God. Only God has the power to forgive:

‘I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin.’ Psalm 32:5.

‘If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.’ 1 John 1:9.

There is no sin too bad or too shameful that God is unable to forgive. Sin can make us feel ashamed and impure, but God is able to cleanse us no matter the circumstances:

‘Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.’ Isaiah 1:18.

‘Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow ... Create in me

a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.’ Psalm 51:7,10.

‘There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.’ Romans 1:8.

At the same time, God has firm boundaries when it comes to forgiveness, in that he makes it clear that as we are forgiven by him, so too should we forgive others.

God’s Desire For Us to Forgive Others

‘If ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.’ Matt. 6:14-15.

The Word tells us several times that we are to pass on the forgiveness we receive from God. Not doing so can prevent our prayers from being answered and invite torment into our lives. God encourages us not to pray to him until we have given and/or sought forgiveness wherever needed:

‘If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.’ Matthew 5:23-24.

This principle of passing on God’s forgiveness is also explored in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:23-35), who owed his lord 10,000 talents. When the servant couldn’t pay the debt, the lord had compassion on him and released him from it. The servant then demanded a repayment of a hundred pence from his fellow servant – a minuscule debt compared to the one he had been released from. When the lord found out about this injustice, he said:

‘Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee?’ vs 33.

The parable concludes with a reminder as to what happens when we refuse to pass on the generous forgiveness God has gifted us:

‘And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not everyone his brother their trespasses.’ vs 34-35.

This gives us some insight into how important the forgiveness of others is to God, and how unforgiveness provides the devil with an open door into our lives, thereby bringing torment. Unforgiveness is like a poison with a detrimental effect on our emotional, spiritual, mental, and even our physical health. It leads to bitterness, hatred and a desire for revenge. There are many cases throughout history where it has even led to murder, including that of Abel and John the Baptist. What can start as a minor emotion can fester and grow until we are crippled and controlled by resentment, which then steals our peace. Paul warns against this in Ephesians, again reminding us to pass on the forgiveness God has given us:

‘Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: Neither give place to the devil. Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.’ 4:26-27; 31-32.

Unforgiveness is senseless in that the other person is frequently unaware and unconcerned about the issue or its effect on us, while we are suffering for their behaviour. It’s like punishing ourselves for what another person has done. Forgiveness releases us of all

such futile suffering. It is primarily for our benefit.

While ideally a relationship is repaired and strengthened throughout this process, as mentioned, reconciliation isn’t always possible. The Bible asks us to try for reconciliation and provides some instructions on how to do so, while also acknowledging that boundaries may be needed:

‘Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.’ Matthew 18:15-18

While it is our responsibility to, ‘if it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men’ (Romans 12:18), we are not responsible for the actions and choices of others. We should always seek God’s advice on whether to pursue reconciliation or to remove ourselves from a situation. Sometimes we hang on too tightly to a toxic relationship; sometimes we give-up too easily. Only God knows which path will provide the best outcome for all.

When Reconciliation Isn’t Possible

Sometimes it becomes clear that a relationship is not reconcilable. The other person may set their hearts against us, refuse to change their behaviour, blame us for the problem, or try to pretend there isn’t a problem. They may behave completely irrationally and/or simply cannot be brought to understand any side of the issue but their own. They may reject God and his attempts to correct them. Some may even actively wish for our harm.

The Bible refers to such people as our enemies. While it is a strong word, it accurately describes their active opposition towards us and allows us to view the situation as it is – hostile. Thankfully:

‘No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper.’
Isaiah 54:17.

David’s psalms are full of accounts of his unjust struggles with enemies, and he lamented openly about how they grieved him:

‘For the mouth of the wicked and the mouth of the deceitful are opened against me: they have spoken against me with a lying tongue. They compassed me about also with words of hatred; and fought against me without a cause. For my love they are my adversaries: but I give myself unto prayer. And they have rewarded me evil for good, and hatred for my love.’
Psalm 109:2-5.

It is also David who tells us (from experience) not to worry or be fearful of enemies:

‘Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity. For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb.’ Psalm 37:1-2.

The Old Testament’s way of dealing with enemies was to seek an ‘eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot’ (Exodus 21:24). It wasn’t until Jesus Christ came that we were invited to step up to a higher form of morality:

‘Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.’ Matthew 5:43-44.

Paul adds:

‘If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.’ Romans 12:21.

Treating our enemy with kindness is a powerful way to wage war against our true enemy, Satan. By doing so, we may well convict the other person of their behaviour and provide them with a catalyst for change, sometimes without even saying a word. Kindness has the potential to break the power of the devil in their lives and gives them a glimpse of what following God can do for people. It also promotes God’s kingdom:

‘By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.’ John 13:35.

Both Jesus’ and Paul’s words can be difficult to process and put into action as our natural instinct is that the offending person doesn’t deserve kindness. It’s important to remember, though, that no one deserves God’s forgiveness and mercy, and yet he continues to offer it.

Jesus’ and Paul’s instructions are not just for the benefit of our enemy, but ultimately for ours as well, as being kind to our enemies prevents the rise of bitterness, jealousy and resentment. When we pray for our enemies, we release ourselves from the responsibility of their behaviour and hand it back to God. Praying for them also allows us to develop compassion, as we begin to understand that the other person’s actions stem from brokenness, insecurities, delusion, trauma, and ultimately the direct influence of the devil. Such people need divine help to realise and overcome all of this if they are to ever change. We don’t have to like or approve of a person’s behaviours to be kind to them, and it doesn’t mean their behaviour is excusable. We don’t even have to continue in a relationship with them if it is not safe to do

so. But we do need to forgive them and treat them respectfully.

Forgiveness is a decision we make regardless of how we are feeling. Often we need to decide to forgive before we begin to feel any better – otherwise we aren't released from hatred and bitterness – but it is normal for feelings of hurt and anger to continue even after such a decision is made. These feelings are not usually a problem unless we choose to act on them in a sinful way, but they can also leave us feeling bereft. Praying for our enemies helps us to process those feelings and eventually be healed from them. Sometimes it can be difficult to know *what* to pray – substituting their name into a blessing like that of Numbers 6:24-27 can be a simple but meaningful place to start.

We can't dictate how an enemy may act, but as we saw in David's psalm, we don't need to worry about them or be afraid of them. If we've done everything we can, we need to leave the rest up to God and remember that:

'When a man's ways please the Lord, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him.'
Proverbs 16:7.

God's Promise of Vindication

One of the reasons unforgiveness can be so hard to relinquish is because of the injustice of the situation. We may be afraid that if we let it go, they will 'get away with it' and that other people may start to think that person's behaviour was acceptable as well. There is a natural instinct within most of us to want what is right and good, to want integrity, and justice for breaches of integrity. God is righteous (Psalm 147:17), and we are made in his image – it follows that deep down we want what is right, too. But only God can make things truly right.

Ultimately, we hang onto things because we want to control them. Trusting God to take care of a situation on our behalf is difficult because we have to relinquish that control,

but that is exactly what we must do if we are to live in peace:

'Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is.' Jeremiah 17:7.

'You will keep him in perfect peace, Whose mind is stayed on You, Because he trusts in You.'
Isaiah 26:3.

We must trust God to vindicate us whenever he needs to. He may not need to if we have merely perceived rather than experienced an offence, as can happen, too – another reason we need to trust him rather than ourselves to bring about true justice. An important part of the forgiveness process is to examine our own behaviour and take responsibility for any possible contribution we may have made to the problem. We may well be the ones who are blaming others for our problems and who God needs to chastise, something that can (in time) bring happiness and a blessing (see Job 5:17, Psalm 94:12 and Hebrews 12:11). Or, it may be that we are making a minor event a major one and just need to let it go.

When we have suffered a legitimate injustice, though, God is thankfully a just God:

'I the Lord love judgment.' Isaiah 61:8.

He sees and recognises all injustices committed against us and promises to vindicate us for them:

'Seeing it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you; And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.' 2 Thessalonians 1:6-8.

He asks us not to seek revenge ourselves, whether in our thoughts, words, or actions, as this can interfere with the justice he can bring:

‘Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the Lord.’ Leviticus 19:18.

‘Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath¹: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.’ Romans 12:19.

God wants us to stay in a state of peace and love, which we cannot do if we are seeking to avenge ourselves. He can, however, avenge us on our behalf without falling into the trap of bitterness and hatred simply because it is impossible for him to do so. He is also equipped to truly understand the dynamics of the situation, including the other person’s brokenness, our part in the problem, and the devil’s contributions, all of which we often have no or little insight into until he reveals it to us. It therefore makes sense that God is in charge of vengeance.

We need to be prepared for the fact that vindication may not look how we expect it to. Firstly, God rarely avenges us when we want him to, but his timing is always perfect. Secondly, his vengeance does not necessarily mean harm will come to the other person, nor should we wish this. His plan is not to condemn or punish those who have hurt us, but to convict and change them, and to help them make amends or live out the consequences they need to so they can, if willing, face their problems and rise up as better people.

It’s true that God’s vengeance may mean a public downfall of the other person if that’s what they need to prompt them to change or to stop hurting others, but it may also mean they cease to prosper, or that they come to the realisation that they are wrong. Sometimes we

may be avenged or justified through a simple apology and changed behaviour. Sometimes it may be a much bigger crime that is avenged through a fair outcome at court. We may be re-paid through another person altogether.

How God chooses to deal with wrong behaviour and repay us good for evil is up to him, not us. Our role is to demonstrate kindness and good boundaries, and to avoid falling into the trap of passing judgement on others.

Show Mercy; Don’t Judge

Paul tells us that:

‘All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.’ Romans 3:23.

This is a reminder that we all make mistakes, that we all sin, and that we all hurt the people around us from time to time. That is why Jesus encourages us to remove the ‘beam that is in thine own eye’ before trying to remove the ‘mote that is in thy brother’s eye’ (Matthew 7:3-5). God knows our frailty and shows us mercy accordingly:

‘For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust ... But the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children’s children.’ Psalm 103:14, 17.

While Christian Israelites hope to overcome the sin in their bodies so that God’s spirit can become the life of their bodies, this is a work that takes time and which requires God’s ongoing grace and mercy. Mercy is showing compassion to someone when we actually have the power and position to punish them if we so chose, just as God could with us. Thankfully he is merciful, and he desires us to pass on his mercy just as with his forgiveness:

¹ This refers to God’s wrath, not our own.

‘Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.’ Luke 6:36.

This doesn’t necessarily mean the offending person escapes the consequences of their actions. We all need consequences to truly recognise the impact of our behaviour and make changes. Being deprived of consequences can actually hinder our personal growth and deny the course of justice. But if we have a genuine knowledge of our sins and their impact, and wish to make amends, mercy may mean that consequences are less severe, or that we are treated with kindness despite the way we have acted.

Ultimately, the way we treat others affects the way we are treated:

‘Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven.’ Luke 6:37.

Jesus further warns us not to let ourselves become judgemental (i.e. to place ourselves in a position where we think we know best about what another person deserves), as we may well suffer the judgement we had thought to place on them:

‘For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged.’ Matthew 7:1-2.

If we mistreat others, we invite mistreatment into our lives:

‘Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.’ Galatians 6:7.

The overwhelming message is that we need to treat others as God treats us, i.e. with forgiveness, love, and mercy, and in the way we want to be treated (Luke 6:31). This extends to how we want to be treated when we sin. If we want to experience the freedom forgiveness brings, we must offer it first.

The Greater Freedom

Forgiveness is key to our relationship with God and those around us. It is central to our emotional well-being, whether we are able to achieve reconciliation with someone who has hurt us, or not.

Sometimes we may need to forgive someone more than once, or even more than ‘seventy times seven’ times (Matthew 18:21-22), remembering that God has already forgiven us of more than we will ever need to forgive of another person. What’s important is that we don’t succumb to feelings of bitterness and hatred and thereby give place to the devil (Ephesians 4:27).

It’s true that, even when reconciliation is possible, it can be hard to risk hurt again, but without taking that risk we would never have any long-term relationships. No relationship can receive a pain-free guarantee, but we are guaranteed to have access to God’s help and healing whenever we need it, making the risk, more often than not, worth it.

Our best hope is to reach a place where we are so secure in our relationship with God and in our self-worth that even if we are hurt by another person’s treatment of us, we are no longer devastated and certainly no longer controlled by it. This mirrors the way God operates in relationships – he is saddened by our sinful behaviour, but he never allows this to make him question or doubt himself. He doesn’t allow anyone to steal his joy or his peace, doesn’t react in an aggressive way or become cynical, and is not devastated or unable to function at his best however we behave – and we betray and fail him on a daily basis. It is a blessing that God doesn’t treat us according to how we treat him. Often we adopt an attitude of ‘if you didn’t treat me like that, I wouldn’t react like this’, but this binds us to another person’s behaviour and is a failure to take responsibility for our own actions. We can’t control how a person acts, but we can control how we react. When someone treats us badly and we can react in a godly way independently of them,

demonstrating the Biblical principles of forgiveness, then we have reached an even greater freedom:

‘And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.’ Matthew 7:25.