

# OUT OF THE DEPTHS: GOD'S FORGIVENESS OF SIN

## Study Seven

### RECEIVING GOD'S FORGIVENESS OF SIN

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#### FROM ABOVE

In the last study we saw how thoroughgoing is the role of the Holy Spirit in conveying to us God's forgiveness of sin wrought once for all on the cross and in the resurrection of Jesus. Forgiveness of sin is never just a transaction at some distance from God. It is always God Himself coming to us in direct action. The Holy Spirit conveys to us, from the inside, the entire saving work of God in Christ. Not only that, but the triune Godhead comes to dwell in and among us, such that we then participate with God in His words and actions. As Jesus said:

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works . . . Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father . . . I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth . . . You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you . . . I am coming to you . . . Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them (John 14:10, 12, 16–17, 18, 23).

This is forgiveness, reinstatement and trust indeed!

In this study we focus on our receiving forgiveness from God through faith and repentance. While this sounds like things that we do from our side, we will find that both faith and repentance are exercised by us as gifts from God. The very notion of us doing things from 'our side' still participates in a false and sinful over-against-ness with regard to our relationship with God—as if we are still 'taking sides' in some kind of ongoing struggle—as we remain opposed to God and God to us. Are not such distinctions wiped out by God's coming to dwell in us? There is no independent ground we can stand on in our relationship with God. 'In him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28). In this situation, are there any true actions we can rightly call our own in an exclusive sense? Rather: 'those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds *have been*

*done in God*' (John 3:21). The experience of Jesus in the flesh becomes true of us: 'The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works' (John 14:10). We will find that this is true even of such actions and dispositions on our part as faith and repentance. Even what we may think of as our response to God we find to be a gift within us from God. How else could it be, for those who at their best are dependent upon God for 'life and breath and all things' (Acts 17:25), and especially so when we have become defiant hardened sinners?

### **Questions for Discussion:**

- *How affronted, or gratified, are we by these words addressed to the Spirit of God?*

Where You are not, we have nought,  
Nothing good in deed or thought,  
Nothing free from taint of ill  
(Archbishop Steven Langton,  
*Veni sancte Spiritus*, circa AD 1200).

*What does this tell us about where we stand with God?*

- *What has been our experience of faith and/or repentance as God-generated exercises on our part?*

## **BORN OF THE SPIRIT**

One way Jesus spoke of our receiving of forgiveness was being 'born anew' or 'born from above' (γεννηθῆναι ἀνωθεν, *gennēthēnai anōthen*, John 3:7), and that this is by the Spirit of God (John 3:5, 6, 8). We find that we have no more control over being born anew than we had over being born the first time. It is 'from above'—from God:

to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12–13).

Jesus said that no one can 'see the kingdom of God', or 'enter the kingdom of God', without being 'born from above' (John 3:3, 5). The kingdom of God is God ruling over all things, ourselves included. This is what we acknowledge ('see') when we repent towards God as He really is and experience ('enter') when we entrust ourselves to God by faith. Jesus is saying that we can do neither of those things apart from the regenerating action of God.

He goes on to say: 'What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit' (John 3:6). The implication is that without being born of the Spirit we cannot receive the things of the Spirit: 'If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?' (John 3:12). This corresponds with what Paul the apostle says:

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit (Rom. 8:5).

Those who are unspiritual [meaning *those without the Spirit*] do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned [or *discerned by the Spirit*] (1 Cor. 2:14).

This would include such gifts as repentance and faith. But Paul also says:

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God (1 Cor. 2:12).

So those who are born of the Spirit can believe and repent—they can know God as He is in His saving rule over all things, and they can turn and entrust themselves to Him—they can ‘see’ and ‘enter the kingdom of God’.<sup>1</sup>

In speaking of ‘faith’ and ‘repentance’, can we say which one comes first and which follows? It is difficult to separate them. In repentance we turn to the One we see and believe by faith, and in believing we take the step of entrusting ourselves to that One. It is best to understand them as parts of the one salvation package:

There is no priority. The faith that is unto salvation is a penitent faith and the repentance that is unto life is a believing repentance.<sup>2</sup>

Some attempts have been made to systematize the order in which these saving events occur,<sup>3</sup> on the basis of Paul’s words in Romans 8:28–30:

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Paul’s purpose here is to emphasise the whole and sure work of God, who is ‘for us’, in bringing us to the hope that He has willed, through the intervention of what God has done in Christ and by the workings of His Spirit (see Rom. 8:24–27, 31–34). The words ‘foreknew’ (loved and chosen beforehand), ‘predestined’ (our destination set in advance), ‘called’ (in a way that we heard and responded), ‘justified’ (brought into a position of guilt-free righteousness), and ‘glorified’ (brought to the goal of God’s eternal glory)—all these words, including the last, are in the same past (aorist) tense. Being the active plan and purpose of God, ‘who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will’ (Eph. 1:11), they are as good as accomplished and, as far as God is concerned, are all in the same time scale. We are being encouraged here to see our salvation from God’s point of view, rather than our own, as whole, complete and assured. This is a salutary perspective.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

- *What do we remember of being born?*
- *What do we remember of being born anew?*
- *What is the relationship between being born from above and believing and repenting?*
- *Where does the assurance of our forgiveness rest and reside?*

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<sup>1</sup> Googling ‘Ordo Salutis’ (the order of salvation) will admit us into the controversies that still rankle between ‘Arminian’ and ‘Calvinist’ believers. Arminians put faith (albeit faith made possible by ‘prevenient grace’) before new birth, and Calvinists say faith follows from new birth, as we do here. Does that make us ‘Calvinist’? The (post Calvin—1618–1619) Arminian–Calvinist debate arose from seeking on both sides to apply human logic to the saving mysteries of God, such that some end up going beyond what the Scriptures strictly say. We need to say what the Scriptures say, and to avoid saying what the Scriptures do not say, even if that appears to leave some loose ends not tied off neatly, while also seeking to speak in love without recrimination.

<sup>2</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Banner of Truth, London, 1961, p. 113 (with thanks to Grant Thorpe).

<sup>3</sup> See previous note on the ‘Ordo Salutis’.

## THE WORD OF TRUTH

How does the new birth come about? The apostle Peter spoke of the coming of the gospel: ‘the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven’ (1 Pet. 1:12). He went on to say that this gospel has brought us to new birth:

You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God. For

‘All flesh is like grass  
and all its glory like the flower of grass.

The grass withers,  
and the flower falls,

but the word of the Lord endures forever.’

That word is the good news that was announced to you (1 Pet. 1:23–25).

James the brother of the Lord concurs with this:

In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures (James 1:18).

Paul also declares the connection between coming to salvation in Christ and hearing the gospel as the word from Christ:

‘The word is near you,  
on your lips and in your heart’

(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved . . . But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? . . . So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ (Rom. 10:8–10, 14–15, 17).

This emphasises the importance of hearing and speaking out the word of the gospel in the power of the Spirit.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

- *What is the place of ‘the word of Christ’ in bringing us to new birth and the forgiveness of sins?*
- *What have we seen, in ourselves and in others, of persons coming to new birth through the proclamation of the gospel?*

## REPENTANCE AND THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS<sup>4</sup>

Though, as we have seen, faith and repentance belong together in the same saving package, they are distinct, and we will treat them separately, taking repentance first.

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<sup>4</sup> See further: Martin Bleby, *God’s Holy Love: For Newcomers to Christian Faith*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2001, pp. 152–6.

Jesus expected Nicodemus, as ‘a teacher of Israel’ to understand these things pertaining to the new birth (John 3:10). What Jesus told him about being ‘born of water and the Spirit’ (John 3:5)<sup>5</sup> corresponds with the promise made to Israel six hundred years earlier through the prophet Ezekiel:

I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD, says the Lord GOD, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. I will save you from all your uncleannesses, and I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. I will make the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field abundant, so that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations. Then you shall remember your evil ways, and your dealings that were not good; and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds. It is not for your sake that I will act, says the Lord GOD; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and dismayed for your ways, O house of Israel (Ezek. 36:23–32)

Repentance (μετάνοια, *metanoia*) is literally a ‘change of mind’ or attitude—a change of heart—as here: ‘A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you’. This is a forgiven heart—one that is clean from all uncleannesses of sin and idolatry. It is a warm, palpable, living, human heart, flowing with the good issues of life (as in Proverbs 4:23; John 7:38), not a cold, hard, dead heart of stone. It is a heart ‘after God’s own heart’ (1 Samuel 13:14). It comes by God’s gift of His Holy Spirit—‘I will put *my* spirit within you’—bringing to bear in us all the work and life of Christ. It issues in glad and loving obedience to God: ‘I will . . . make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances’. We become warmly and intimately related with God: ‘you shall be my people, and I will be your God’. These are the elements of what is meant by ‘repentance’ that comes with the forgiveness of sin. Repentance and forgiveness come as a result of God’s kind and gracious blessing: ‘I will take you . . . and gather you . . . and bring you into your own land . . . I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. I will make the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field abundant’. Only when we know the greatness of the forgiveness and blessing that is there can we then truly face the extent of our own evil: ‘Then you shall remember your evil ways, and your dealings that were not good; and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds . . . Be ashamed and dismayed for your ways’.

Sometimes repentance is portrayed as a grim and heavy-hearted response to a stern reprimand. While it does include genuine sorrow for sin, its primary elements are a relieved and joyful turning to God in response to His blessing. This was how Jesus presented it when he said:

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news (Mark 1:15).

The kingdom of God! When ‘the LORD will become king over all the earth’ (Zech. 14:9); when God in righteousness, justice, steadfast love and faithfulness (see Ps. 89:14) will take away our judgements and turn away our enemies (see Zeph. 3:15); and when there will be peace for all:

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<sup>5</sup> For the range of interpretations of this phrase, see Martin Bleby, *The Gift of God: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper as Sacraments of the Cross*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2007, pp. 42–5.

they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,  
and no one shall make them afraid (Micah. 4:4).<sup>6</sup>

Who would not want to repent with a view to that coming near! How did Jesus bring Peter to repentance—by telling him what a terrible person he'd been? No—by blessing him with two boatloads of fish! (see Luke 5:1–11).

As a result of his death and resurrection, Jesus was able to instruct his disciples:

Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem (Luke 24:46–47).

They were to 'stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high' (Luke 24:49). Repentance, then, became available to all on the day of Pentecost, after the Spirit had been poured out, when Peter said:

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

It was an appeal repeated many times:

Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord (Acts 3:19–20).

This was an appeal made first of all to Israel and its leaders:

When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you, to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways (Acts 3:26).

In this it was made clear that this repentance comes as a gift from God—even for those who crucified Jesus:

God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins (Acts 5:31).

No less is repentance a gift when it comes to the Gentiles:

God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life (Acts 11:18).

While this is a gift, it is also very much something that we are commanded to do:

While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:30–31).

God's word of command in the gospel is also always His enabling.

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<sup>6</sup> For a full examination of the kingdom of God, see Geoffrey Bingham, 'The King: the Kingdom of God: the Kingship', *Living Faith Studies* 20, vol. 2, NCPI, Blackwood SA, 1981, pp. 64–83.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

- *What difference does it make when we see that repentance is not just being sorry for sin but a complete change of mind, heart and attitude towards God?*
- *How does repentance and God's cleansing assist us in coming to a right estimate and stance with regard to our sin?*
- *What difference does it make to know that repentance comes as a result of blessing rather than recrimination?*
- *While repentance is very much something that we do personally, what are the implications of receiving repentance as a gift from God?*

## **FAITH AND BELONGING TO GOD<sup>7</sup>**

Faith is first of all an acknowledgement of the reality of God:

without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him (Heb. 11:6).

True faith, however, is not just intellectual consent to a proposition, apart from personal engagement and trust:

You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder (James 2:19).

Saving faith needs to be more than just believing that there is a God—those directly opposed to God can do that. Faith is better seen and known as a relationship of love and trust—as the apostle John calls it, to ‘abide’ in another person. With God, this faith or mutual abiding is a work of the Holy Spirit:

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit (1 John 4:13).

By this abiding we do come to know certain things. This knowing, however, is not just intellectual but experiential and relational:

And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us (1 John 4:14–16).

Faith, like repentance, is something that is commanded for us to do:

This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent (John 6:29).

As in the case of repentance, God's command to believe is that which also effects and enables it. Being something that is worked in us by the coming of the Holy Spirit, faith, like repentance, is designated as a gift from God:

For he has graciously granted you the privilege . . . of believing in Christ (Phil. 1:29).

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God (Eph. 2:8).

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<sup>7</sup> See further: Martin Bleby, *God's Holy Love*, pp. 157–62.

It is through faith centred in what God has done in Jesus that we receive our justification before God in the forgiveness of sin:

For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 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; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:22–26).

This is the twofold blessedness of being, like David, ‘one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin’ (Rom. 4:8; quoting Ps. 32:2) and of being like Abraham who ‘believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’ (Rom. 4:3; quoting Gen. 15:6). This is ‘the righteousness from God based on faith’ (Phil. 3:9). When Paul says that in the gospel ‘the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith’ (Rom. 1:17), he may be saying that it can be seen only by those who have faith (‘revealed through faith’), and can be received and experienced only by those who have faith (‘for faith’). This would correspond with what Jesus said to Nicodemus about not being able to either see or enter the kingdom of God without being born anew (see on John 3:3, 5 above). Or Paul could be saying simply that God’s righteousness is received ‘by faith from first to last’ (Rom. 1:17, NIV); that is, ‘apart from works prescribed by the law’ (Rom. 3:28) and ‘to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek’ (Rom. 1:16). Either way, forgiveness of sins and the consequent righteousness of Christ in a person’s standing and living before God comes through a faith-relationship with God in Christ by the Spirit.

As we have seen in a previous study, our forgiveness of sins has in view our acquittal on the day of judgement (‘surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God’, Rom. 5:9), and being fitted for ‘new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home’ (2 Pet. 3:13). John writes of the faith-relationship:

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love (1 John 4:16–18).

Faith, then, looks not just back to what God has done in Christ but also forward to its glorious outcome:

faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see (Heb. 11:1, NIV).

So it also has to do with being enabled to persevere right through to this end:

we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved (Heb. 10:39).

Faith, being to do with an abiding relationship of love and trust, also naturally issues in relational and practical love flowing through to others:

We love because he first loved us. Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also (1 John 4:19–21).



James makes the point that faith is ‘active’ and is ‘brought to completion’ by works (James 2:22), and that these works are to faith what breathing is to the body:

For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead (James 2:26).

Paul concurs when he says: ‘the only thing that counts is faith working through love’ (Gal. 5:6). As Jesus said, ‘the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do’ (John 14:12). As Peter found when he was told ‘from now on you will be catching people’ (Luke 5:10), forgiveness extends to and includes our reinstatement as God’s co-workers, as God magnificently entrusts to us participation with Christ in His great enterprise.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

- *What difference does it make when we see and know that faith is not just an intellectual acknowledgement but a relationship of love and trust?*
- *What sense does ‘abide’ convey when applied to the faith-relationship?*
- *What is the relationship between faith as something commanded and faith as a gift from God?*
- *Why is faith necessary to the receiving of forgiveness?*
- *How are faith and forgiveness linked with God’s promise and hope regarding the day of judgement and the age to come?*
- *What is the connection between faith, forgiveness and doing works of love?*