

WHAT EVERY HUMAN HEART WANTS¹

How Can One Be Sure of God's Total, Eternal Forgiveness?

By Paul Penno Jr.
October 11, 2014

What the world wants above all else is to know the truth about their most important questions. Millions who are sick want to know what medicine or treatment will bring healing. People lost in a wilderness storm want to know the way out.

But far more important than any materialistic knowledge is the hunger to know for sure if God forgives you. To know *that* is more precious than knowing that the IRS holds nothing against you. Everyone feels a deep inner awareness that he is responsible to God and must someday face a moral life-audit. Even if he tries to stifle his conscience, he

cannot force himself to forget where he has gone wrong. The memory cannot be erased like a computer file. In the middle of the night, or perhaps in the dreaded hour of death, it intrudes.

The question takes many forms: How will I stand when God audits me? What about those secret wrongs I have tried to hide? Does He hold a debit balance against me? Will some person I have wronged come out of the forgotten woodwork and accuse me before God and embarrass me in the judgment? This kind of worry is enough to cause psychosomatic sickness. Estimates run as high as nine-tenths of organic diseases having their ultimate origin in the secret fears engendered by unresolved guilt.

What has God already done for us? God's forgiveness is the primary subject of the Bible, pervading all 66 of its books. It gets to the heart of our problem in a direct way that eliminates the labyrinthine worries that *karma* induces. Your constant fear lest your debit

¹ Acts 13:32, 33. 71, 337.

balance weighs more than your credits is gone. God has already made a sacrifice that atones for all human guilt, that has already provided forgiveness for the entire human race. Understand it and believe it, and behold, your burden is lifted. While newspapers tell us what the world is doing, the Bible tells the “good news” of what God has done and is doing for us. That good news is the substance of the word gospel. The gospel declares that God has laid the world’s *karma* on Christ, the total burden of the world’s sin and guilt, that He became the new “Adam,” the new Head of the human race, that He has absorbed the sum of our total debits and has credited “every man” with His perfect righteousness.

It was good news for the people living two thousand years ago when Christ’s apostles first proclaimed it. But when you begin to understand it, you will see it is still the best good news possible today. Paul was happy to say, “We declare unto you glad tidings—that promise which was made to the fathers. God

has fulfilled this for us their children” (Acts 13:32, 33).

There is something very special about the gospel. What the apostles proclaimed was the mighty act that God had done for man. Every non-Christian religion in the world can only declare what we should do for God. Only the Bible tells the “news” of what He has done for us. But how many people unknowingly cherish a heathen concept of God, the idea that He will do nothing for you unless you do something for Him first!

God has already provided healing for the human race, a healing for a disease that is the root cause of all our human troubles. Isaiah describes our problem: “The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the soul of the foot unto the head there is no soundness in it: but wounds and bruises, and putrifying sores; they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment” (Isa. 1:5, 6).

Something inside is wrong. What sickness is

to the body, sin is to the human heart. But the “good news” is that, no matter how deep is the sickness within our human souls, Jesus Christ as Saviour is already a Physician who heals completely. “Unto you who fear My name the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings” (Mal. 4:2). “He is also able to save to the uttermost [completely] those who come to God through him, since He ever lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25).

Just as sickness is something that does not belong to the human body, so sin is something that does not belong to our souls. It is foreign; God did not create us with it. Most translations of First John 3:4 tell us that the definition of sin is “rebellion.” As two people who have been friends begin to quarrel and break up because of misunderstanding and hatred, so sin is a quarrel that man has instigated with God. If we try to kid ourselves into thinking that we are by nature too good to be included in that alienation, we only sweep our problem under the rug. “The carnal mind [that is, the natural

mind of sinful man that we all have] is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be” (Rom. 8:7).

The quarrel is all one-sided, we started it, and we have kept it going. God has no enmity against us. (Actually, it was Lucifer or Satan who started it in the beginning, but we have involved ourselves in it with him.)

Someone may say, “Well, I am all right, I know I am not angry with God!” Surely no one wants to be at enmity with God. But isn’t it possible that we have a sickness that we haven’t known we have? The unknown problem is the root of our tension and stress. The alienation is far deeper than we have imagined it to be. John says that “if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). If we think we have no sin we have cut ourselves off from Christ, for he is a Saviour only to sinners who know they need Him. “All have sinned, and come short.” “There is none righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:23, 10). How to recognize what

sin is?

If sin is “enmity against God,” what form does it take? We read that “all unrighteousness is sin” (1 John 5:17). In other words, thinking, saying, doing things that are not right. But let’s be careful: sin is not merely outward acts that we perform. Sin goes far deeper. Knowing how deep our sin goes is really good news, for only then can we appreciate how deep the healing must go.

Paul teaches us from his own experience how deep sin is. “By the law is the knowledge of sin,” he says (Rom. 3:20). That is, “I had not known sin, but by the law” (Rom. 7:7). The police cannot arrest you for eating bananas because no nation has a law against eating them. But if you drive your car on the wrong side of the road, they may arrest you immediately. You have broken a law made by your government for the good of the people.

God’s moral law is for the good of all people, “the perfect law of liberty” (James 1:25). Every sin is exposed somewhere in that law of the

Ten Commandments. “Your commandment is exceedingly broad,” says David in his prayer (Ps. 119:96).

Here is how Paul learned what his real problem was. He thought he was quite good, because as he read the first nine commandments and checked each one, he said to himself, “I’m all right—I haven’t broken that commandment, I haven’t murdered anybody, I haven’t robbed a bank, I haven’t told lies.” He was feeling quite proud of himself by the time he came to the tenth commandment. Then suddenly his heart was arrested. “I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known [or recognized] covetousness unless the law had said, ‘You shall not covet’” (Rom. 7:7),

Coveteousness, this was something Paul hadn’t understood was sin! Coveting is far deeper than doing something or even saying something: it is heart longing for something you shouldn’t have. The tenth commandment reads, “You shall not covet your . . . neighbor’s

wife . . . nor anything that is your neighbor's" (Ex. 20:17). Jesus "magnified" this law when He said, "Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:28). By now Paul was honest enough to start sweating.

To covet means to desire something that God has not given to you. Even if it is something no one else knows anything about, still it defiles the soul. Paul realized now that what the tenth commandment forbids is lust hidden deep inside. He understood that in wanting what God has not given us, that always involves the idea that God has not been fair to us. And you can't indulge that feeling without getting involved in the sin of "enmity against God." It may be ever so polite, but it always involves unbelief, indulging in the thought that God is unjust. "Enmity against God" and coveting belong together. You cannot covet unless you doubt God's active, personal love to you. If He truly loves you, He will certainly give you what is best for you. But if you don't believe it, you

have no alternative other than to harbor a deep grudge against Him, too deep maybe for consciousness but nevertheless one that poisons the secret depths of your soul.

When we get to the bottom of what sin is, we find that there is never a good excuse for this "enmity against God." Has anyone ever hated you without a cause? If so, you know a little of how God must feel when His people whom He has created and loved feel that way against Him.

Perhaps the Lord permitted you to have that experience so you could understand this problem. Jesus said of His enemies, "If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would have no sin; but now they have seen and also hated both Me and My Father . . . 'They hated me without a cause—(John 15:24, 25).

Just as our first parents indulged the slanderous lie Satan told them about God when he implied that God wasn't taking good care of them, so it has been our nature to go

on believing that God has been against us, holding back something good from us. It doesn't take much thought to see how this unbelief is the root of every sin you can think of—including of course fornication and adultery (which always involves wanting or taking someone else's spouse), and the sin of materialism (which always involves wanting the goods someone else has).

The idea that God doesn't give us all we need is a lie. But it's been hard for us to recognize it. The truth is God loves us. But, being deceived, we did what anyone does who mistakenly thinks his friend hates him. He also begins hating him. Thus our doubting thoughts and imaginings about God have taken root. David asks, "Why do the people imagine a vain thing?" (Ps. 2:1). These "vain imaginings" have penetrated human cultures worldwide since the dawn of civilization. All pagan or "natural" religions have been based on them as a common denominator.

How does God solve the problem of human

guilt and alienation? Here is what He did: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Let us analyze this statement:

(a) God has had no quarrel against us; all this long time while we have imagined Him as our enemy, He has loved us.

(b) He has loved all the bad people, not just the so-called "good" ones. He loves the world.

(c) Sometimes we tell people that we love them, but our words betray our empty feelings. God proved His love—He gave something for us.

(d) The gift He gave was His only Son. He did not lend Him, as many suppose; He gave Him. There is a great difference between giving something valuable and lending it. Banks lend money but that doesn't mean they love people. They expect to get their money back again—with interest. But Jesus is ours forever, an eternal gift. He became part of the human family. He will forever remain our Brother.

(e) Our part is not to do something to merit His gift or to pay for it. Our part is to believe. To “believe” does not mean to nod your head and raise your hand and say “I’m a Christian!” “With the heart one believes to righteousness” (Rom. 10:10). Believing the gospel is not like believing arithmetic or science, which involves only a mental assent to an axiom; to believe the gospel is to feel a deep heart-appreciation of what God has done for the world and for you personally. Such heart-belief immediately does something to a person, for it begins to work miracles within him. “Faith . . . works by love” (Gal. 5:6).

But of course it is impossible for any honest person to feel any meaningful appreciation for such a gift if he/she doesn’t realize what the gift cost the Giver. You say thanks when someone gives you a gift card but you don’t waste energy appreciating a gift that you know involved no real sacrifice.

When we talk about the sacrifice of Jesus on His cross, we draw a blank from many people.

They just don’t feel anything, they say, even though they may try. Often they get discouraged, thinking that their hearts are so hard that there is no hope for them to experience salvation. Many who superficially say they believe in Christ do not know the kind of faith which works by love. They have only believed some cold facts or logic, with their heads. But the genuine faith moves the heart. That’s why Paul could say, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one who believes” (Rom. 1:16). There is no power in all the world to change a person’s life like that of the gospel of Christ when it is properly understood and believed. When you understand what it cost the Son of God to save you, your heart will be deeply moved.

Don’t you agree that this is good news? We stand back and look amazed at this most wonderful thing that God has done. “All things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 5:18). Who did

the reconciling? The text says that the Father did it.

We must never harbor the mistaken idea that although Jesus loves us, the Father is angry with us, or is cold and severe towards us. “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them” (2 Cor. 5:19). It is a pagan idea to think that the Father is angry with us while Jesus is the “good one” who pleads with the uncaring Father to be lenient towards us. It is even more pagan to suppose that Jesus is so busy or so distant towards us, that we must plead with the “Virgin Mary” or some “saints” to intercede with Him for us!

No, we “have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). God already had “peace” with us; now we also have peace with him. We are the ones who were alienated, and now are reconciled.

Sin is like a great unpaid debt that hangs over us. The only way to pay the debt is to die, for “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). There

is no way that God could preserve a fair government if He should forgive the sin without the debt being paid. All good government is based on law, and the government of God can be no exception. His holy law is the foundation of all true happiness. But how can the sinner pay his debt of death and still enjoy life?

As the innocent and divine Son of God, Christ became one of us, entered the corporate stream of our fallen humanity so that He could take the load of guilt upon Himself, and pay our debt of death. By His perfect life He satisfied the demands of the law, and His death is accounted as our death because He became one of us.

The Bible sees this corporate union of Himself with us as so real that Paul can say, “I have been crucified with Christ,” and again, “If One died for all, then all died” (Gal. 2:20; 2 Cor. 5:14). This does not mean that He paid the debt for our sins, *but* that we are identified with Christ as He paid the debt. Our huge balance on the books of heaven is stamped “Paid!” As

we consent to be united with Christ by faith, we are experientially involved with what He did. His death on the cross becomes our death and His righteousness becomes ours

When the Father gave His Son, Christ also gave Himself. The price that Jesus paid was not merely a brief time spent as a visiting diplomat to this earth after which He returned to His former abode; rather He gave Himself to be one of us, with us, forever. He will always retain His humanity. Again, the price He paid was not a few days or hours of physical or spiritual agony to be endured with the prospect in view of relief and restoration; He actually went to hell in order to save us. He consented to die the equivalent of the "second death" which means, as one author puts it, "goodbye to life forever." He had to "taste death for everyone," so that we might not have to taste its bitterness (Heb. 2:9).

The Bible speaks of two kinds of death. (a) The first is what we commonly call death but which the Bible defines as a sleep (1 Thess.

4:15; John 11:11-14). Since everybody dies this first death, it cannot be the death that Jesus had to "taste . . . for everyone" since everyone has to taste it too. (b) The second death is the real thing, the ultimate horror of despair, darkness, and unrelieved guilt that extends forever. The lost will experience it after the final judgment (see Rev. 2:11; 20:14). But when they do, it will have been totally unnecessary for them because Jesus already experienced it for them as He died on His cross; they must at last experience it only because by unbelief they have rejected what He accomplished for them and have despised the truth of His identification as them. Therefore, the lost will be lost not because of their sins, for their sins were already atoned for by Jesus (God cannot put them in double jeopardy); they will perish because of their unbelief. This is what Jesus says in John 3: "God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is

not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already. . . . And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved [or chose] darkness rather than light" (verses 17-19).

How is our forgiveness assured? If you question if God has forgiven you, look and see what Jesus has done on His cross. What is important is not your feelings, but what He has done for you. We must not trust our feelings, for they are sometimes up and sometimes down. You may feel unforgiven when in fact you are forgiven. The sooner you believe it, the better.

Faith is not feeling. Faith believes what God says when He promises, "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). Let's take our eyes off ourselves, and look again at the cross and see what happened there. When that is clear in our mind and heart, we will know forever how we stand with God. This is why we

must sharpen the picture and focus it more clearly. We will see why Paul said, "I determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2).

The people who crucified Jesus were ordinary people like you and me who suddenly found themselves face to face with the innocent Son of God. His pure, righteous character was a rebuke to them. Because He told the full truth, they hated Him. He had been sent "in the likeness of sinful flesh," (Rom. 8:3); "made in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:7); so that the only way anyone could recognize Him as the Son of God was by humble, contrite faith. Pride blinded many people's eyes to His true identity. The Holy Spirit convicted them, but they fought and resisted the conviction.

Therefore we must not blame the Jews, or the Romans for the crucifixion of Christ, and despise them. We all have carnal minds which are "enmity against God" (Rom. 8:7). Isaiah shows us who really was to blame: "He is

despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. And we hid as it were our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted" (Isa. 53:3, 4). Not only the Jews and the Romans thought God was angry with Jesus and was punishing Him; we thought so too!

It was our sins that caused all the trouble. What was so terrible as He hung on the cross was that He felt the burden of our guilt and sin as though it was all His by right. He felt that He was the sinner, that He deserved that horrible second death: "He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him . . . The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:5, 6). Peter adds that He "Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24). This means that He took our sins on Himself as though they were

His own.

Someone may ask how He could do such a thing. How can one man feel the guilt of another?

The death on the cross was different than any other death. No government in the world today sentences criminals to die by crucifixion. But in the days of the Roman government, bad criminals were usually sentenced to die that way rather than by more honorable methods such as beheading.

According to what the great Moses had said, death on a tree was evidence that God had cursed you forever. If the judge sentenced you, a criminal, to die "on a tree," you could not pray for forgiveness from God, for He would not hear you. "It is written, Cursed is everyone who hangs an a tree" (Gal. 3:13). The ancient world believed what Moses had said (Deut. 21:22, 23). The Jews remembered his words when they saw Christ hanging on His cross. They felt certain that they had done the right thing in condemning Him. They felt that His being

nailed to a tree meant that God had virtually said He rejected and condemned Him. Paul says reverently that Christ “was made a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13). He endured a more awful pain of mind and anguish of soul than anyone has ever had to endure. In fact, since the world began He is the only person who has ever yet truly died—all the other billions have only gone to “sleep,” awaiting the resurrection.

At first Christ was able to remember the joyful truth that His Father loved Him and that He would be raised from the dead, for He assured the repentant thief, “You will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). But Luke tells us that after about twelve o’clock there was “a darkness over all the earth” (verse 44). A great shadow of spiritual darkness covered the soul of Christ also. Now the full weight of our guilt and condemnation rested on Him, and the Father’s face of love seemed to be forever withdrawn from Him. Now He was tasting death “for everyone” (Heb. 2:9), tasting the unspeakably bitter anguish that will be felt in

the final judgment by those who at last reject Him. No one should ever have to suffer that unless he/she rejects what Christ has done.

Christ truly bore “our sins in His own body” on the cross (1 Peter 2:24). He felt like those sins were His own, even though they were ours. He was tempted to feel that He Himself was lost forever, and that He would never come forth from His grave again. This anguish forced from His lips that terrible cry, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” Sin—yours and mine—was crushing out His very life. It was not the wounds of the nails in His hands and feet that caused Him to die so quickly. He truly died of a ruptured, broken heart, killed by our total, corporate guilt of the human race.

If human beings will just look and see what happened on that “tree,” they will see what true love is. They will see how Christ gained the victory over sin for us as He cried out with His final breath, “It is finished!” He took our sin from us, trampled it under foot, crushed it and broke its power forever. It was a frightful

struggle, and before the bloody battle was over, Christ was dead. His resurrection in no way changes the fact that He died the equivalent of our second death; it only proves that He was successful in truly dying in our place and conquering sin forever.

Now we can see what the Bible means when it says that "you have been reconciled in the body of His flesh through death" (Col. 1:21, 22). Who now can doubt that God loves him and has forgiven his sins? "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us." He sent His Son as the remedy for the defilement of our sins (1 John 4:10, KJV and NEB).

Now we come full circle from where we started. Our alienation and "enmity with God" are healed. Now it's time for us to make a response. "We implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20, 21).

Do you remember the story of the poisonous snakes that bit the children of Israel in the wilderness? The Lord told Moses to make a snake out of brass and put it high on a pole

before the people, so that those who would consent to "look" might be healed. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:14, 15). Christ was lifted up as though He were the "serpent," "made to be sin for us"! Here is the remedy that draws out of our hearts that poisonous sting of sin.

How can one know that God has forgiven him totally and forever? The question has become passé. Now the proper question to ask is, How can anyone who sees the cross of Christ ever doubt that God has forgiven him?

But a lingering doubt may arise. Has God forgiven me if I am still indulging in sin or living in it? Paul asks a good question, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?" (Rom. 6:1, 2). Christ outlawed sin, condemned it in our flesh, and disarmed the devil. The Book of Hebrews says that He died for us so that "through death He might

destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Heb. 2:14, 15). The Greek word here translated "destroy" actually means to "paralyze." Satan may tempt you, may roar at you like a lion, may try to frighten you, but he is chained. He cannot touch you without your consent. There is no excuse to continue in sin. In fact, you can't go on living in sin and giving in to Satan if you believe the pure, true gospel of this "good news."

So, if you stumble and stagger, be humble before the Lord and recognize that your problem is one of two things: (a) you don't yet fully grasp how good the "good news" is, or (b) you don't yet believe it. Don't feel bad if you must realize that your faith is not yet strong. If you have even a little faith, be thankful. Pray the prayer of the distraught father who was begging Jesus to heal his sick child: "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). That's a good prayer for every one of us to pray from

now on! As our faith grows, so will our obedience grow.

Looking at yourself and worrying about your progress or lack of it can only bring discouragement. Remember what happened on that cross; don't forget that you were there.

It's time to make a choice and to act on that faith

There was a poor man at Bethesda who had not been able to use his arms or legs for 38 years. Our captivity to sin is like that. We can learn from his story in John 5 how we can know that our sins are forgiven.

Jesus met the poor sufferer and said, "Rise, take up your bed and walk." The sick man might have doubted and argued, "Lord, if You will heal me first then I will do what You say." But no, he believed Christ's word, believed that he was already made whole by the word of Christ. In spite of the fact that he was tempted to doubt as badly as we are tempted, he made a choice to believe. He aroused to walk by faith, and he did walk!

In the same way we take the Lord at His word. You cannot change your heart or cleanse yourself. But God promises to do all this for you through Christ. You confess your sins, and give yourself to Him. You will to serve Him. Then you simply believe His promise, “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). If you believe the promise, God supplies the fact. It is so if you believe it.

Do not wait to feel forgiven; say, “I believe it; it is so, because God has done it and He has promised. And the cross is the guarantee that it is so!”