

# The Knowledge of God Mediated by Forgiveness

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REFLECTION on the forgiveness of sins, in the Bible passes through three chief stages, which in their main characteristics may be described as those of the prophets, of Jesus, and of St. Paul. Prophets and psalmists undoubtedly laid hold of pardon, but in their consciousness of it a certain precarious element lingers. It was, so to speak, provisional. The index of its reality tended to lie, at least partly, in outward felicity, just as on the other hand the man for whom calamity had given place to joy was *eo ipso* convinced that his transgression had been taken away. But a great personal disaster shook certainty to the foundations. It seemed to prove beyond dispute that the sinner had been rejected by

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God. "Why hast Thou cast me off?" is the appeal flung to the skies by the believer on whom evil days had fallen. I do not think it reasonable to dismiss this kind of religion, half-scornfully, as merely prudential. The psalmists were as far from being utilitarians as any men who ever lived. Doubtless they were wrong when they found the mark of Divine favour in individual or national prosperity, yet in the deepest sense of all were they simply wrong? Jesus Himself conceived the Kingdom of God as an order of things, as world-dispensation, in which the loving omnipotence of God has free course, and the realms alike of spirit and nature are one in absolute perfection. When we use the word "heaven," we are thinking of the same thing. We are thinking of "the changeless prime of body and of soul," a perfect society in a perfected environment, with God over all. Old Testament believers were but antedating that ideal when they claimed that  
61 goodness and happiness should go together, and felt faith totter as the good man sank in affliction.

Somehow this problem of theodicy does not torment the apostolic writers: the New Testament contains nothing like the Book of Job. For reason the problem is not solved, but it is solved for faith. In Christ they have had a view of God which is conclusive, and suffering no longer jars their certainty of pardon. This implies that thought regarding forgiveness has come to rest on and revolve round the fully known character of God. When men rejoice over pardon with joy unspeakable and full of glory,

it is because of what they have discovered God to be. That is to say, the experience of being forgiven brings out into new and solemn clearness some great aspects of God's character. One or two of these are worth careful study.

I.

To begin with, the forgiven man knows that only God can forgive, and He can forgive in none but personal ways. Self-absolution is impracticable. It is true, men not infrequently have tried to deal with their own sin by absolving themselves, by making apology as it were to their own higher nature, and in turn accepting that apology. They have sought to reconcile their own heart to its guilty woes by registering the fact that they condemn what they have done and are resolved not to do it again. These are grounds in the human mind for believing that this cannot satisfy. To pardon his own sin cannot, to one of enlightened conscience, afford a real and deep sense of being reconciled with righteousness, for he is not righteous. No man who at all admits his wrong-doing will go on to identify himself in this direct sense with the righteous order of the world. He is at variance with that order, and to bring himself into unity with it by an act of will is as impossible as to lift himself up by his shoulder-  
straps. This method, however, is a hopeless one for dealing with the corruption of man's heart. This corruption the sinner either owns or denies. If he

owns it, his case is the more desperately incurable by his private powers; if he denies it, his sin is the deeper for his lack of candour.

In other cases, men have asked forgiveness from each other. They have acknowledged the fault to the injured one, and sought relief through unreserved confession. Up to a point there is virtue in this plan, but the pity is, many sins are all but irrelevant to relationships with our neighbour. They do not invade another's personality. Evil thought, worldliness, irreverence of course have a real bearing on society and our contribution to its warfare, but it would be difficult to single out any one friend whose pardon we could ask on their account, at all events without the feeling that we were somehow playing a part. He would be at least as much startled as ourselves if we craved his pardon, say, for a disorderly imagination.

These are but half-way measures: they are like sprinkling rose-water on an ulcer. For the Christian, indeed for the man who without being a Christian holds that Christianity is true, they fall away, and to call them inadequate is a mild expression. He knows that no hope exists for him except as there is One to whom he can go directly, with the words: "Father, I have sinned in Thy sight."

## II.

Again, the forgiven man is acutely conscious of the Personality of God. If proof were insisted on, I should have to quote one half of the Psalter. Unless

God be a personal Spirit, who hears and understands and answers prayer, the sinful man who comes yearning for reconciliation is of necessity as much disconcerted as if, to use Newman's famous illustration, he were to look into a mirror and not see his own face. 63

This, it cannot be too strongly said, is a point of crucial importance. It is in the strict sense fundamental: it must be laid down as a foundation-stone of all profitable thought upon the subject. If I am engaged in a discussion of the possibility of forgiveness, or its meaning, with one who denies that God is personal in the sense that He can have personal relations with us, I know from the outset that our arguments and counter-arguments can never meet. They are moving in different planes, and unless we are out purely for logical exercise, the debate might just as well be called off at the start. Discussion about constitutional government with a true-blue anarchist, to whom all government is anathema, could not be more in vain than reasoning on forgiveness with one to whom God is anything but a self-conscious person.

Is not this why a book of philosophy so seldom prepares the mind for insight into the forgiveness of sins? We search vainly in works of metaphysics or even moral theory for any serious approach to some issues which concern the passionately religious man, such as the hearing of prayer, pardon, or the acquisition of power to be good. This may perhaps be explained quite simply. After all, the predomi-

nant stream of philosophical tradition has relatively little positive teaching, or none at all, with regard to the personal being of God. Even Plato hesitates. Aristotle, the Stoics, Scotus Erigena, Bruno, Spinoza, Hegel—they are all concerned to speak of what may much more justly be described as the Absolute than as God. Now you may speculate on the Divine, dream of the Divine, aspire to the Divine, lose yourself in the Divine without ever raising this problem or even after deciding it in the negative; but you can ask for pardon only if the Divine be a holy, loving, 64 conscious Spirit. It is as a Person that He claims us, rebukes us, comforts us; in particular, it is as a person that He forgives sin. In his recent Gifford Lectures Mr. C. C. J. Webb writes, in criticism of less adequate views of sin, “I can only declare my conviction that to regard Sin as an offence against a personal authority, and still more to regard it as an affront to a loving Father, is a more intelligible and a more ethically significant way of thinking about it than it is to conceive it after the analogy of a physical defilement or an automatic mechanism.”<sup>1</sup> The love of God will lose meaning for the heart in proportion as He ceases to be personal for the intelligence. And it is love we need, and must have at all costs, when we come with the burden of sin.

Hence there is no cure for Pantheism like a fit of penitence. In the language of Amiel’s *Journal*: “What tears us away from the enchantments of Maya, is

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<sup>1</sup> *God and Personality*, p. 250.

conscience." The man who has faced up to his own badness is in no danger of confusing himself with God. He knows, without reasoning, that God and he are not identical, and that he must stifle conviction before he can adopt the lines:

"I am the eye with which the Universe  
Beholds itself, and knows itself divine."

Ignore conscience, and it is easy to construct a metaphysical view according to which Pantheism is perfectly simple and satisfactory. Everything, then, is God, and nothing but God exists anywhere—not the intellect or heart of man, not the difference between truth and falsehood or between right and wrong. One touch of contrition breaks the spell. Instantly the personal distinction between God and man stands forth: we awake to the fact that moral law is the will of God, and that in contravening it we have lost touch with the Father. And unless on analysis "Father" includes the idea of personality, does it have any clear sense at all?

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### III.

Again, He from whom we receive pardon is, in the great Biblical phrase, the Living God. He is known as One who wills and acts; in forgiving, He produces a change in our relation to Himself. What the plain Christian man is thinking of when he says forgiveness is not primarily an alteration in his own mind; it is something accomplished by God. In religion the

central interest always is what God does, and it is He who initiates pardon. In forgiving our sin, He acts towards us, He acts upon us.

Opposition to the idea of a God who veritably acts within the believer's experience has come from two quarters otherwise keenly antagonistic to each other. Thus traditional theology from early times has done a very great deal to suggest a conception of God as the one unchanging Substance, strictly devoid of all attributes and out of positive or direct relation to any time-order. This idea moves down the centuries parallel to the warmer and more living New Testament thought of the Father whose gracious action on our behalf is the source of all hope; and much of the interest of historical theology consists in watching the struggle between these two interpretations. Even the convinced foe of speculative rationalism, Ritschl, as is well known, did homage to speculation rather than faith when he taught that it is a mere subjective appearance when the pardoned man feels that the expression of God's love towards him has changed, in forgiveness, from condemnation to merciful acceptance. He surely is on much firmer ground when he declares, as he does so emphatically, that the Divine act or judgment of forgiveness is a synthetic or creative judgment. But if  
66 it is creative, it must produce a new situation. It is the Father opening the door of communion with Himself and placing the penitent in the position of a reconciled son. It is the love of God depriving our sins of their power to expel us from His fellowship.



One who has passed through this regenerating experience will have difficulty in believing that God was not the agent in causing light to rise within him, or that nothing really happened except his waking from a bad dream to perceive that God and he had never been estranged at all.

Moreover, the act of God in pardoning men is definitely supernatural in quality. Consciously to receive forgiveness is to know that a change has been effected in our relation to the Father which can be accounted for only by His direct interposition. If it be said, as doubtless it may be said with some point, that in the world of love forgiveness is a matter of course, this only throws us back on the marvellous character of a love such that to it forgiveness is natural.

That the view just stated is, in essentials, our Lord's, can hardly be questioned. By His behaviour to the paralytic in Mark ii., He calls attention to the fact that pardon is as miraculous as cure. "That ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins (He saith to the sick of the palsy), I say unto thee, Arise, take up thy bed." His judgment is echoed by the Christian mind. In the pardoned soul, all the pardoned feel, something has occurred which merely psychical forces moving wholly within the mind could not have effected, something so great that it asks for a Divine cause. "It is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes." Life has been given a new start. It is not only that the tendencies of character are in principle

67 reversed; that, true as it is, is the result of something else. As a prior condition the burden of past sin—sin that cleaves to us with the warning that it is ours for ever—has been lifted away; by revolutionising mercy we are drawn back to the great heart of God. Who but He can thus open to us the gates of righteousness? Who but He can knit up the broken strands of union, or say to the aching heart, “I am thy salvation”? Thus in pardon, in the only sense a religious man cares to give the word, God does an act which is decisively supernatural and impossible for any other being—He separates between the sinner and his evil. He abolishes the guilt of sin, not by declaring it to be not sinful, or forgetting it, or letting the sinner off, but by countervailing its power to hinder communion with Himself. The man who comes to God with a load of felt unworthiness may undoubtedly be fiercely tempted to deny the possibility of its removal, and this is the more likely if in any degree he has yielded to that sombre naturalistic pessimism which tells broken men that things must always be with them as they are now, and bids them endure their fate as best they may, with brave dumb stoicism. But in countless instances, as believers known, these misgivings have vanished like smoke in Jesus’ presence. At first glance it is unbelievable that God should forgive, yet over and over again He does so. So it dawns upon us that within and above cosmic law there is a Father. In the last resort, we stand to face not impersonal tendencies of nature, but the living God,

who in Christ puts forth His hand to grasp ours, and through forgiveness ushers the contrite into a new and boundless world of good.

In the proper sense of the word this is supernatural. It is a transcendent act to which the normal operations and processes of phenomenal reality are irrelevant. It cannot be at all expressed by mechanical relations of inviolable sequence, for it means that God Himself enters our life immediately to inaugurate a new attitude in which He and we shall henceforth stand to each other. Of course the psychologist will have his own account to give. He will have much that is important to say regarding ways in which the assurance of pardon captures the focus of consciousness, and instals a new reigning system of ideas in the mind. But what the believer is most concerned with lies on another plane. What supremely interests him is the direct fatherly act of God in bestowing the boon of reconciliation. It is indeed part of the definition of forgiveness that it comes solely from the mighty grace of God; it is part of the Christian thought of God that He is the Being who can do this thing. He only can rescue us from the necessities and fatalities of evil in which nature and history appear to entangle us, as if to make free personal life an impossibility. Forgiveness, bestowed by the living God, is the act by which we are really constituted persons—not things, or links in a chain, but free men.

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Should we not do well to form our idea of miracle from this point of view? There is a moral order

as there is an order we describe as physical. We are to-day the creatures of yesterday, and we are now shaping the to-morrow that will be. "Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap" is a text from which imaginative literature has preached with terrible power. Yet this adamant moral order can be entered remedially by God's love, and the experience of forgiveness is there to prove it. By His mercy, men need not reap all they have sown. He is above as well as within these laws. He can use them. He uses them perpetually, but His love in its sovereign might can overflow their narrow bounds; it can intervene to make all things new. He can come near to deal with us personally, approaching so closely that His hand and our hand meet. And for God thus to effect a transforming change in our relation to Himself is a supernatural event whose amazing character is concealed from us solely by that familiarity which too often makes even the Gospel common-place.

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There are those in our time who might well find in the adequate analysis of Divine pardon the decisive aid towards a more joyous and triumphant faith in a free and living God who is perpetually present and perpetually at work. Let them inquire anew as to the meaning of what happens when by Divine creative act, their sin is blotted out, and they will realise that what confronts them is, quite seriously, a miracle not in the far distances of ancient history, but in their present lives. God has entered their individual career in a way which neither nature nor human nature can explain, in a power which transcends na-

ture, and for ends which lie beyond it. This is the kind of miracle that lies nearest, for it belongs to experience, and without experience religious ideas are hypotheses and nothing more. Why should we not have courage to say that forgiveness is the uniquely verifiable case of that direct, personal and infinitely varied activity of God to which religious men, and amongst them such as have drunk deepest of the Christian spring, give the name "supernatural." On the spiritual side, it may be manifested in the reconciliation of a sinful man to the Father; on the physical side, just because there is one world and one living Lord of heaven and earth, it may be manifested in similarly unforeseeable ways, as by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. These are works which only God can do. They are works declaratory of the truth that almighty Love is personally active in history and in the world as a whole; and to the objection that they are isolated events we may answer, with Ruskin, that "an energy may be natural without being normal, and Divine without being constant."

#### IV.

Let us now pass on to something else. Our aim is to elucidate those qualities in God which are revealed to the forgiven man, to the man who has this experience of the living God working the wonder of wonders in his own life. We have found that to such a man God is disclosed as personal, and as the Doer of miracle. To this may now be added the further

insight reached by way of pardon that His nature is sacrificial love.

In other words, we are unable (as the apostles were) eventually to separate the question of Divine forgiveness from the question of the atonement, i.e., the action of God in reconciling the world to Himself. Not that the two subjects cannot be distinguished and treated so far in abstraction from each other: the thing has often been done. But though a man may receive forgiveness without raising the problem in what sense Christ is involved in its mediation or even feeling that for him this is a problem of vital interest, it is almost certainly different if he should proceed to make forgiveness the subject of sustained reflection and specifically to ask what are its implications for the love of God, on whom the strain of pardon falls. In the New Testament, the grace of God makes on the contrite an impression of absolute and unreserved sacrifice; the pardoned feel that they owe everything to Him. If we have taken this in, and if we have also learnt the lesson that the best things in life are of dearest price, we shall not be able to refrain from putting atonement and forgiveness in a close unity.

Who was the first to describe atonement as the cost of forgiveness to God? I have not succeeded in tracing the idea further back than Horace Bushnell, and his was an intelligence so free and rich that the phrase may well have been his own minting. No one was ever readier to lift the anchor and steer his own way. In *Forgiveness and Law* he writes, with a

curious turn of phrase: "Our human instinct puts us always on making cost when we undertake to forgive." At an earlier point, when explaining how atonement is reached between a good man and an offender, he lays down that true forgiveness demands two things: "first, such a sympathy with the wrong-doing party as virtually takes his nature; and secondly, a making cost in that nature by suffering, or expense, or painstaking sacrifice and labour." This is followed up by two or three affecting and credible examples of how one man can really and spiritually pardon another only in so far as he takes the other's sin upon him in the cost he bears for his sake. It appears to me that this is an exceptionally attractive and rewarding path of approach, with collateral advantages of many kinds. If it be true, as has been said in only too familiar words, that the higher man of to-day is not worrying about his sins, the reply made by Dr. Hutton is very much to the point: "If I don't worry about my sins, somebody else has to worry about them all the more." That is a principle worthy to interpret even the relationships of God and man. I could understand a preacher who told his congregation—though the expression might be far below the solemn dignities of dogmatic theology—that atonement was a learned word signifying that Christ, in whom God was present, had worried about our sins so that it brought Him to His grave. It is no poor forgiveness He imparts, but one flowing from unimaginable expenditures of spirit and will.

Hence we may find a key to God's experience in forgiving the sinful if we attempt to realise, even if it be only imaginatively, what happens when a man forgives a great wrong done to himself. As has so often occurred in religious history, the best things in human intercourse turn out to be a window in the life of God. It is clear we must take an instance of great gravity, with something hideous to be pardoned—say the treachery of a friend, bringing disgrace to the injured man and a loss of happiness never quite to be made good in this life.

72 The problem is one which has occasionally been touched in theology and in preaching, but technical moral philosophy has been curiously silent upon it. The present writer asked two of the most eminent philosophers in this country to name any passage in works on moral psychology where this precise matter is discussed, what in such a case goes on in the forgiver's mind and again in the mind of the person forgiven; yet, although there is in question one of the most tragic of ethical experiences, not a single reference could be given. It is possible that a sufficiently profound student of the Russian novelists, above all Dostoevsky, might aid us at just this point.

Denny has said, in his piercing way, that "there is no such experience in the relations of human beings as a real forgiveness which is painless, cheap, or easy. There is always passion in it on both sides—a passion of penitence on the one side, and the more profound passion of love on the other, bearing the



sin of the guilty to win him, through reconciliation, to goodness again." It is on the second side of this relation that we must fasten our thoughts. When by a self-conquest which bystanders feel to be sublime the injured man (or, it may be, woman), refuses to ignore moral realities yet reaching over the wrong to knit up the old bonds of communion, attains to the act of deep pure pardon, the act presupposes and is mediated by costly suffering.

It is an exacting thing to pardon a great wrong; not with a heart of stone can so brave and loving an act be carried through. A man is conscious of the wrench and agony in proportion as on the one hand he feels the shame of his friend's evil and as on the other sympathy brings him close to the guilty life, actually through intense feeling putting him where the other is. To enter by passionate imagination and self-projection into the other's conflict, to hold by intercession his faltering hand, to weep with his sorrow, actually to think himself still at the other's side in the loneliness and misery of guilt—how true that in heart and mind he must set out on "voyages of anguish"!<sup>2</sup> It is an experience of deep-reaching pain, of vicarious sacrifice. It is the state of a soul under great stress. To the onlooker it may appear as if the suffering were that of wounded pride, of reluctance to face what is at war with memories of old friendship; but it is not so. The man is not pardoning merely because he acknowledges pardon to be his

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<sup>2</sup> See *The Forgiveness of Sins*, by R. N. Flow.

duty, though abhorrent, whereas if a change offered he would wash his hands of the offender. That were suffering merely from the resented invasion of personality; but this is sacrificial pain. As he moves out to find and claim his friend again the other's evil, as never before, comes in upon him in its infinite repulsiveness and need of cleansing; yet redemptively he takes it upon himself as by a creative substitutionary fellow-feeling, submerging it in love.

If reasons are demanded for what seems, at first sight, the daring plan of taking this as an analogy for Divine forgiveness, its method and intrinsic cost, we must point out that the parallel is in fact natural and convincing. At least the analogy is drawn from "the most sure and sacred things in human experience." But in addition there are two intermediate steps of argument. First, in the Gospels we do see Jesus entering, in just this way, into the lives of sinners by loving communion with their misery. He places Himself beside the guilty: "when He felt the gulf fixed between God and sinners, He thought Himself on our side of the breach and numbered Himself with the transgressors."<sup>3</sup> Secondly, face to face with Jesus we receive the direct impression that the love in virtue of which He does this amazing thing, is positively the love of God Himself. What touches and blesses us in the Redeemer's sympathy is the Divine grace that beats and breaks through it upon our life.

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<sup>3</sup> H. S. Coffin, *Social Aspects of the Cross*, p. 23.

Thus if in a profound case of human pardon there is tragedy for both persons concerned—pain forming the necessary vehicle of forgiveness, in an experience where nature is rent asunder—it may well be so likewise between God and man. To us pardon is free because to Him its realisation came through agony. The cross presents God's anguish, an awful grief answering to the greatness of the remitted sin. In Him eternally there is the mind towards the sinful which we behold in the dying Christ. What holy love in God required as a condition of pardon, or rather as a living element of it, was not reparation from the guilty, but such a sacrificial expression of His own nature as must, if God and man be of one moral order, form the only conceivable medium of forgiveness. Thus, at Gethsemane and Calvary, faith discerns such a manifestation of Divine spiritual passion, such a tragic tension in which God spares Himself nothing, as makes our heart faint within us and stops every mouth before God. In this quite literal (and surely, in so far as we know what love can be, not unintelligible) sense, atonement is what it cost God to forgive the sin of the world. It is the supreme point at which we encounter the vast recurrent paradox of religious thought—that the God who stands infinitely above human life is yet deeply involved in our experience, and that to see into the unchanging heart of things we must gaze upon the travail of a cross. The forgiveness of God rises up through the depths of a passion that sinners can never fathom.