

Isaiah 43:18-28

- ¹⁸ Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
- ¹⁹ I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
- ²⁰ The wild animals will honor me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
- ²¹ the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.
- ²² Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob;
but you have been weary of me, O Israel!
- ²³ You have not brought me your sheep for burnt offerings,
or honored me with your sacrifices.
I have not burdened you with offerings,
or wearied you with frankincense.
- ²⁴ You have not bought me sweet cane with money,
or satisfied me with the fat of your sacrifices.
But you have burdened me with your sins;
you have wearied me with your iniquities.
- ²⁵ I, I am He
who blots out your transgressions for my own sake,
and I will not remember your sins.
- ²⁶ Accuse me, let us go to trial;
set forth your case, so that you may be proved right.
- ²⁷ Your first ancestor sinned,
and your interpreters transgressed against me.
- ²⁸ Therefore I profaned the princes of the sanctuary,
I delivered Jacob to utter destruction,
and Israel to reviling.

Mark 2:1-12

2 When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. **2** So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. **3** Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. **4** And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. **5** When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” **6** Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, **7** “Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” **8** At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? **9** Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’? **10** But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic— **11** “I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.” **12** And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

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Isaiah 43:18-28; Mark 2:1-12

Authority to Forgive

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How does God forgive what we can't, what we don't, or what our voices would tremble to name?

How does God forgive that very thing that has caused us the most pain and misery?

How does God forgive us when we've been that miserable offender, or when we've allowed ourselves to casually reap the benefits of the worst evils of our own time and place?

And not just how, but why?

Why does an all-powerful God not use the "smite" button on the regular to get rid of the worst of the worst, so we could collectively all do just a little bit better?

These questions have been around for a very long time.

We question God's character.

Is God judgmental and punishing?

Is God merciful and forgiving?

Of course, I want God's loving and forgiving side – for me.

But when it comes to those who do the things I hate – a judgmental God suits me just fine.

It is in God's character, essential to God's nature, to forgive.

We might think we know otherwise.

We still sometimes imagine a punishing God in the Old Testament that wipes out humanity with a flood, or takes sides in battle, or is otherwise interpreted as interfering in human affairs with his dramatic opinions on things.

We anthropomorphize God often as loving what we love and hating what we hate. As Anne Lamott writes, "You can safely assume that you've created God in your own image when God hates all the same people you do." We turn God into an old man with a beard shouting "get off my lawn," or remake Jesus into this manly man caricature who is coming back to earth – thinking, and boy is he pissed!

Judgment makes sense to us. It's as I've said many times – this is Santa Claus theology – the good kids get gifts; the naughty ones get coal. We want it to work out that way. It only seems fair. Doesn't it?

Well, to a point it seems fair to us, maybe even like that would be true justice, if everyone got exactly what they deserved – in life and in death.

But that's not how God operates.

I know – it leaves us scratching our heads when we really read it for ourselves in scripture. We presume we know what's in there. There may have been someone who taught you – with certainty and with clarity – exactly what God wants from you – whether that something was to call on the name of Jesus and be saved, or to follow the 10 commandments, or to love your neighbor, or to quit dancing and playing cards. I don't know, but they made you feel as though God would ONLY love you if you were to do, or not do, certain things with your life.

But maybe, just maybe you have experienced that aha moment that lets you know that God's love is bigger than such quid pro quo contracts. Maybe something deep within you says that love doesn't work that way.

Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old.

For I am about to do a new thing? Can't you see it?

In Isaiah's imagination, God makes a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

That's how deep God's love goes for us.

Yes, we've been troublesome human beings.

There's no sugar coating that.

We couldn't be troubled to connect with God,

Instead, we trouble God with our petty iniquities.

And yet, God answers in this way:

*I am the One who blots out your transgressions for my own sake,
and I will not remember your sins.*

God completely cancels our debt, forgives our trespasses, and then eliminates our sin from God's eternal memory. How crazy is that! We human beings aren't that creative. We've been doing the same kinds of sinning, over and over again for millennia, and God forgets about it? Really?

We don't forget about anything.

We would be glad to hold God accountable for what happened last week, or last month, or anything that went on in 2020.

Now you are certainly free to accuse God if you want.

Take God to task for all your real or imagined offenses.

Go ahead – see how God will respond.

This is not an uncommon theme.

We get disgusted at the world around us.

We tire of the disasters – both the natural ones and the ones that are directly the fault of humankind.

We don't like our jobs, our houses, our cars, our spouse, our kids, our life.

We don't make enough money or have enough control over our own lives

– so we shake our fist at the heavens.

I truly do love what happens next in those Biblical scenarios.

When God has heard about enough of our whining, God gets fed up and responds.

Mostly by saying, "Hello. Who do you think you are complaining to here?"

THIS manager isn't going to refund your money, or soothe you with how right the customer always is.

Nope.

God's voice thunders from the whirlwind. God crushes you in court.

Jesus is astute enough to see to it that sins are forgiven FIRST, and THEN he says, "You want to really see something. Pick up your mat and walk."

Who has the authority to forgive sins? In this way?

God. Only God. Absolutely God.

That's what both of these texts are about.

Our human forgiveness is mere crumbs in comparison. Really.

That's what makes it so powerful, so awesome, so unbelievable.

God really does act in such a way that our own worst crimes, our own most awful moments can be redeemed. Jesus has the power, the authority, to forgive sins. It's actually the point of the story when it comes to this text in Mark's gospel than the fact that the dude was no longer paralyzed at the end of it. The fact that his sins were forgiven is the big deal.

I have struggled to believe that.

I think that living a relatively good life plays a part in my disbelief.

The ease at which I have been able to move in this world leaves me with the false notion that I can rely upon myself for all the good things, and by my own merit be able to overcome the bad things. That ain't always so.

Too often, I beat myself up for petty grievances and don't let go -because my ego allows me to hold on to those things like a security blanket – giving me something to worry and be anxious about. It hasn't been enough to make me totally reliant upon God.

But God is ready and waiting for us to wake up and open our eyes to the radical interconnectedness of the spiritual world where forgiveness is possible and freely given on a whole different kind of scale, a scale that has the known universe in mind.

If sins really are forgiven in this way – it is a game changer – for everyone.

That's exactly why the scribes question Jesus and call it blasphemy.

They got what he was doing. He wasn't forgiving someone for the \$5 owed to him.

He was taking away the man's sin.

Jesus takes away our sin. And we have treated that far too casually in our culture.

We use it as a test of faith.

Are you saved? Do you believe that Jesus saves you from your sins?

I'm not sure we've thought too much about the depth of that question.

We use the answers to determine what Christian denomination might suit you best.

We fail to see how often God has repeatedly put in front of us that there is nothing,

Not. One. Thing. That can separate us from God's love.

This is often used as guilt to keep young people in check – from having sex or trying drugs -

And yet, we don't dare tell them, we can't even tell ourselves that God's love

Goes so much farther than we could possibly dream that it does.

God's love reaches out to us in to the most horrible pits of despair that human beings have created.

God shows up on slave ships and in gas chambers.

God shows up in abusive homes, and loveless marriages.

God isn't absent, isn't missing in action.

When the consequences of our actions come calling, God still loves us.

God mourns for us. God weeps with us.

But God will also let us know when we are merely reaping what we have sown,

When even the earth pushes back on our human consumption and desecration.

How does God forgive what we can't? What we won't? What our voices tremble to name?

How? I don't know.

I only know that God has the authority to forgive, and it has always been in God's nature to do so.

Thank God for that. Thank God for that. Amen.