



2 forgiveness

forgiveness in the old testament
david montgomery

introducing the series

This paper is the second in a series of 15 papers to be produced over a two-year period as part of the *Embodying forgiveness* project run by the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland (CCCI). Drawing on a broad range of contributors, from a broad range of backgrounds, the papers aim to explore the meaning of forgiveness in the Bible and in different Christian traditions, and to ask about the implications of the practice of forgiveness for our society. It is worth saying at the outset that we have not insisted on a particular definition or understanding of forgiveness among those who will be contributing papers to the series. Rather, our hope is that through this series of papers we will come to a fuller and more authentic understanding of forgiveness and its implications for church and society.

introduction

Forgiveness is something no-one finds easy and yet it is something none of us can live without. It should therefore be obvious that any religion or theology which is to take seriously the human condition needs to have something to say on this most crucial of issues.

This paper aims to set the issue of forgiveness in the Old Testament in the context of wider biblical revelation looking at what is meant by God's forgiveness, to ask what, if anything, we can learn from that regarding inter-personal forgiveness, and to assess the contribution the Old Testament may make to a Christian understanding of this whole subject.

On the way we will need to look at the nuances of some Hebrew words for forgiveness. However, we cannot look to this alone. The concept of forgiveness is central to the 'big story' of the Old Testament and must be seen in the wider context of biblical theology.

the god who forgives

From the very beginning of salvation history God has been active in forgiveness. The promise of Genesis 3:15, the story of Noah (primarily a story of salvation rather than judgement - see Genesis 6:13ff), the subsequent covenant with Noah (Genesis 8:21-22), and the story of Abraham (Genesis 12ff) are all early examples of God's determination to save and restore his people into fellowship with him. So right from the start the Bible presents us with a picture of a God who is actively involved with his creation, and who takes the initiative in trying to make provision for the healing of humanity's broken relationship. While this is perhaps a familiar concept to those brought up within a Judaeo-Christian framework it is not to be taken for granted, for it is radically different from the portrayal of other deities in the comparative literature of the Ancient Near East. Here is a God who is not distant, but who chooses to reveal himself; here is a God who is not so inscrutable that his subjects cannot predict when he will be angry and when he will show mercy, but who presents himself as a covenant God of promise, who will always keep the door of relationship open yet will not hesitate to allow his judgement on evil to fall on those who flout his commands.

While other deities needed to be pacified by a series of offerings, including at times human sacrifice (see 2 Kings 3:27), and extreme rituals sometimes involving prostitution and self-mutilation (see Hosea 4:4; 1 Kings 18:28), the Old Testament God had nothing to do with such a mechanical or morally ambiguous religion. He could not be 'bought off', purely because of the elaborate nature of the sacrifices, nor was his righteous anger automatically averted because of a sacrificial process (Amos 4:4; Psalm 51:16-17).

Rather, the sacrificial process was part of a wider relationship encompassing the ethics, and even the whole culture, of the people of God. Other things needed to be in place, externally and internally, in order for sacrifices to be efficacious.

Yet, at the same time, the major difference between the God of the Old Testament and the pagan deities is that Israel's God could be known. This was a God who spoke to and listened to his people, a God who was intricately involved in the lives of the humanity he had created, and a God who loved and cared for them and was in relationship with them.

Since, in order for this relationship to be maintained, provision needed to

be made for the problem of sin which spoiled the divine-human relationship, we are soon introduced to the concept of a God who is able to forgive. While other deities occasionally, according to their whim, showed mercy, there is nothing in the other ancient literature comparable to the comprehensive Old Testament understanding of a forgiving God: a God who doesn't just show mercy or overlook wrongdoing at certain times, but who actually initiates a cosmic plan of forgiveness and salvation.

biblical words

That God is in the business of forgiveness and that it is central to his very nature can be seen from the fact that he is almost always the subject of the various verbs for 'forgive', which we find in the Hebrew Scriptures. There is no single word for forgiveness in Hebrew, but rather a series of images.

salach

This, the most common verb, often translated 'pardon', always has God as the subject. This raises a key question: although various words may be used throughout Scripture to describe God's forgiveness, does the existence of a prominent word which is used exclusively for God's forgiveness, contribute in some way to the belief that a forgiving God is of essence different from a forgiving human being? A parallel may be seen with the word *bara* (create) in Genesis 1 which also without exception has God as the subject, in spite of other words for 'create' being available and used elsewhere. Again one may ask, does this show a basic and substantive difference between the creative acts of God and the creative acts of humans? This will be of relevance to later discussion.

If one looks at the numerous references to *salach*, the breadth of the concept becomes obvious. Guilt incurred by a particular offence is annulled, people are released from the power of that guilt and are restored into a state of reconciliation. *Salach* does not only lead to spiritual blessings but may also have a physical or material benefit such as health, security, honour or children.

The first use of the word in the Bible is in the pivotal verses in Exodus 34:7ff recording God's self-revelation, where forgiveness is listed among other divine attributes such as compassion, grace, patience and love.

The various references in Leviticus (chapters 4-6) and Numbers (chapters 14, 15, 30) are essentially formulaic and show the importance of forgiveness in the worship of the people, particularly as an essential component of the sacrificial system. God here is the implied subject of the formula since it is clear from the context that no-one but him is in a position to forgive. The mere bringing of offerings or participation in a sacrificial ritual would not guarantee forgiveness, nor would the priestly rite. What happens through the sacrificial ritual is that God is first and foremost recognised as the one who is willing to forgive and forgiveness comes about because of the willingness of a gracious God to forgive. Forgiveness is a prerogative of God.

What is particularly interesting about the references in Leviticus is that they are almost always to do with unintentional sin (Leviticus 4:2; 5:14).¹ It is clear from the broad sweep of the references to God's pardon in Leviticus and Numbers that the people of Israel, in spite of all the provisions of the law, would not have had complete assurance that deliberate sin could be atoned for satisfactorily under these provisions.

The majority of occurrences of the verbs for 'forgive', are found in the Law, the Psalms and the prophetic books. Of the few references in the historical books, the majority are found in prayers, notably five times in Solomon's prayer (1Kings 8:30, 34, 36, 39, 50; and see 2 Chronicles 6:21ff.) where the formula "hear from heaven and forgive" occurs at the end of many of the petitions. In this prayer Solomon recognises the inevitability of a nation wandering from God and of individuals within that nation regularly falling into sin. His prayer simply asks that when they come to their senses, and return to God in the midst of a wide variety of calamities, he will "hear and forgive."

In the Psalms, God's forgiveness is explicitly praised as something which indicates his inherent goodness (86:5), and which gives hope to the hopeless, while at the same time inducing awesome fear: "If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, therefore you are feared" (Psalm 130:3-4).

The causal nature of the clause is significant. We fear this God, with all the connotations of worship, obedience, awe and humble reverence that are implied in that word, because he and he alone is the one who can forgive. It is God's attribute of forgiving that marks him out as being unique and so utterly different from fickle and vengeful humans and false gods. It is this understanding of forgiveness as being integral to all that God is which leads the psalmist to cry out for forgiveness of his "great iniquities," "for the sake of your Name" in Psalm 25:11.

This is a pastorally significant verse for all those who are moved to doubt God's forgiveness, because tying up God's forgiving acts with the glory of his name, is to say that for God not to forgive the genuine penitent would necessitate him being unfaithful to his very self as he has revealed himself. In Psalm 103:3 forgiveness is the first of the many "benefits" (v2) which the psalmist lists. This psalm shows forgiveness to be an integral part of redemption and reconciliation and healing.

kipper

The term *kipper* conveys the idea of atonement or the paying of a ransom price. It is found over a hundred times in the Old Testament and features prominently in the first five books because of the importance of reconciliation to the whole sacrificial system. It is often translated 'atonement' and therefore incorporates more than forgiveness, referring instead to a complete and satisfactory reconciliation between two parties - in this case, the human and the divine. Often *kipper* will be used along with *salach*, showing the close bond between atonement and forgiveness, and in the divine-human relationship the former is certainly always seen as a prerequisite for the latter. Atonement must be made before forgiveness can be expected (Leviticus 4:20; 19:22; Numbers 15:25).

nasa'

Another word used in several key forgiveness passages is *nasa'*, a word with a wide range of meanings and nuances. In forgiveness contexts it seems to refer to the taking away of an offence. In many cases it means simply 'to lift up,' and when the object is 'sin' the context determines whether the connotation is lifting up or bearing sin in the sense of incurring guilt or responsibility (so Exodus 28:43; Leviticus 5:1,17), or in the sense of removing or forgiving sin (so Exodus 34:7; Numbers 14:18; Psalm 32:5).

Although God is usually the subject, *nasa'* is the verb used in each of the

Old Testament instances where a person is requested to forgive (see below). In one famous instance an animal - "the scapegoat" - is the subject (Leviticus 16:22). Here the goat acted as a powerful visual aid to the people of how their sin needed to be borne, or removed, and at least in some way inserted into the consciousness of the people the concept of vicarious suffering.²

inter-personal forgiveness in the old testament

Clearly, the language of forgiveness in the Old Testament has God almost exclusively as the subject. When it comes to dealing with this issue the Old Testament authors are concerned with portraying a consistent theological view of a God who is not only able but also willing to forgive.

What are the implications of this, then, for inter-personal forgiveness? It should be said at the outset that in the realm of inter-personal forgiveness the usual forgiveness words mentioned above are conspicuous by their absence. There are, it is true, instances of people - usually those in power, or in the position of God - showing mercy, or kindness (*hesed*, 'covenant love') to those who are subordinate or would be regarded as undeserving of such mercy or kindness (see Joshua 2:12- Rahab; 2 Samuel 9:3- Mephibosheth; 2 Samuel 16:5ff- Shimei). But none of these employ the same strong vocabulary as is used of God's forgiving or pardoning of his sinful people.

Even in perhaps the most obvious example of human reconciliation in the Old Testament - that of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 33 - the phrase used is "to find favour in your eyes." Now, in essence Esau does seem to have 'forgiven' or, in the words of Proverbs 17:9 and 19:11, to have "overlooked the offence," but forgiveness vocabulary is not used in a context where it would seem from our perspective to be wholly appropriate. The writers do not wish to undermine or belittle what is happening in these passages, but it does seem that there is a recognition that this human reconciliation is at a wholly different level than the God-human reconciliation effected, for example, by the sacrificial system. There are however four instances where the traditional forgiveness vocabulary is used in human interaction.

joseph and his brothers

In Genesis 50 at the end of the fascinating and complex narrative outlining the dysfunction, fragmentation and eventual reconciliation of Jacob's family, Jacob has died and Joseph's brothers fear that the reconciliation may only have been a charade to please a dying man. So they fabricate a dying wish of Jacob's (v17) and say that their father has asked Joseph to "forgive" (*nasa'*, as in all of the instances in this section) the sins which his brothers had committed against him. Joseph's response (v19) is telling. Having wept - probably at how little the implications of their reconciliation had permeated into the minds and hearts of his brothers - Joseph said "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God?" He then told them not to fear, promised to provide for them and their dependants, and "reassured them and spoke kindly to them" (v21). Significantly, the word "forgive" which was the only thing for which the brothers asked is absent.

Joseph's phrase "Am I in the place of God?" certainly picks up on the implied fear of the brothers, and has the primary meaning of "Why should I punish you or put you to death? Only God is the judge in these matters." However, it is also possible that we have here one of the many double-entendres we find in biblical narrative. Joseph is not in the place of God, therefore he cannot execute judgement on the brothers' sincerity

and motivations, but since he is not in the place of God, neither can he “forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father” (v17).

Now, the subsequent narrative shows that in reassuring, speaking kindly to, and providing financially for the brothers, many of the key elements of inter-personal forgiveness were present. However, the Genesis narrative is constructed so carefully that when the brothers specifically ask for something and yet that something is absent from the response, we are meant to take the absence seriously. A theological point has been made: Joseph has not explicitly “forgiven their sins” because he is not “in the place of God.”

moses and pharaoh

In Exodus 7-11 we have the story of the encounters between Moses and Pharaoh at the time of the plagues on Egypt. There is a certain predictability in the narrative as Pharaoh consistently refuses to give way, until after the seventh plague of hail he relents only to change his mind, a pattern that continues through the rest of the plagues until the final confrontation at the Red Sea. In these later exchanges Pharaoh asks Moses to pray for him (9:28) and to bless him (12:32). Most notably, after the plague of locusts Pharaoh asks that Moses would “forgive my sin” (Exodus 10:17).

The way in which Pharaoh’s character has been developed and the progression of the plot-line of the narrative make it clear that the reader is not to regard this request as serious repentance on the part of Pharaoh. It is, rather, just one more attempt to buy time while he changes his mind and thinks of another way to keep the Hebrews in Egypt (see 9:30). Whatever the content of Moses’ prayers (9:29; 10:18) there is no indication that forgiveness was requested by Moses on Pharaoh’s behalf. Even if it had been, it would be God who would be doing the forgiving. Moses nowhere takes upon himself the responsibility of forgiving Pharaoh.

In fact Pharaoh’s request for forgiveness should not be seen as a request for one person (Moses) to forgive another (Pharaoh). Rather, in the religious environment of this time it would be presumed that Pharaoh would not be forgiven by Moses, but by Moses’ God, with Moses acting as an intermediary.

We have here a case of an ‘outsider’, using religious forgiveness language for his own purposes, and no case can be built for seeing this as an early request for inter-personal forgiveness in the Christian sense.

samuel and saul

We come across a similar situation in 1 Samuel 15. The fact that the plaintiff is not a foreign ruler but Saul, the anointed king of Israel, should not blind us to the similarities with the Pharaoh episode. Both Saul and Pharaoh are confronted with the word of God through a prophet (Samuel, Moses), and both make a type of confession including the request that the prophet would “forgive my sin” (1 Samuel 15:25). In both cases no response is made by the prophet regarding forgiveness, but the subsequent dialogue and events show that forgiveness has not been granted.

david and abigail

In 1 Samuel 25 we have the remarkable story of Abigail whose husband

Nabal is described as “surly and mean in his dealings” (v3). When Nabal's insult provokes David's anger, Abigail intervenes and confronts a David who is en route to slaughter. She prays for forgiveness (v28) and bases this prayer on the consequences for David of what he is about to do. She wishes David to be free from the “staggering burden of needless bloodshed or of having avenged himself” (v31), because God has promised to appoint him as a leader in Israel (v30) and therefore David need only fight God's battles not his own (v28) since God will ensure that David is “bound securely in the bundle of the living” (v29). In this dialogue Abigail displays not only common sense, but an amazing theological, almost prophetic, insight.

While David (like Joseph, Moses and Samuel) does not explicitly say that he forgives, he does heed her, praise her and then says, “Go home in peace, I have heard your words and granted your request” (v35). Since her request was for forgiveness, this is certainly as close as the Old Testament comes to an example of inter-personal forgiveness. However, when we look more closely we see that there are still too many gaps for this to be regarded as fully-fledged forgiveness.

First, the broken relationship was between David and Nabal; the ‘restored’, relationship was between David and Nabal's wife. Second, it could be argued that if forgiveness was included in what David granted Abigail, it was of no consequence since, with regard to Abigail's actions, there was essentially nothing to forgive. Furthermore, although David withheld his vengeance, for Nabal the end result was no different since he died shortly afterwards (v36-38), thereby experiencing none of the benefits which one would normally expect to enjoy in a fully restored and reconciled relationship.

In some ways this story stands between the Saul and Pharaoh episodes on the one hand and the Joseph episode. In some ways it exceeds the Genesis account in that Abigail is a far more worthy plaintiff than Jacob's sons, but in other respects it is more unsatisfactory since the forgiveness requested is essentially second-hand, and the real offender still dies.

inter-personal forgiveness and the forgiveness of god

In the first three episodes it is worth noting the standing of each of the plaintiffs in relation to God. Joseph's brothers, although on a spiritual journey from disobedience and godlessness to patriarchal status, still regard themselves as somewhat on the outside compared with Joseph who is presented as the faithful servant of God. Notice how in Genesis 50:17 they refer not to ‘our God’ but rather to “the God of your father.” Pharaoh is a foreign king from outside the covenant community whose heart is steadfastly hardened towards God. Saul, though King of Israel, is by the time of this episode at the point of being rejected by God because of his failure to execute his duties as king in accordance with God's will.

The fourth episode is slightly different in that Abigail shows herself to be a person of godliness and of faith. However, although she says she has offended she is essentially praying for forgiveness on behalf of Nabal. This being understood, this episode coheres with the others in that, although all four situations reflect on the surface a human relationship in which forgiveness is being sought, God - specifically his acts, his will, his future plans and his relationship with the parties concerned - is invariably there in the background.

Joseph asks “Am I in the place of God?” (Genesis 50:19). Even in the reconciliation of Jacob and Esau, where forgiveness language is not

explicitly used, Jacob says to his erstwhile enemy Esau, “to see your face is like seeing the face of God” (Genesis 33:10). In each case parties who are either alienated, about to be alienated, or consider themselves to be somewhat alienated from God, request forgiveness from a representative of God. It is therefore sensible to see these situations, in keeping with the rest of the Old Testament perspective, as requests for God’s forgiveness, albeit by proxy.

the old testament and the christian understanding of forgiveness

It appears to be the case, then, that forgiveness in the Old Testament is primarily concerned with the means by which alienated humanity can have their sins dealt with and be reconciled to an all-holy Creator.

It further seems, that all human reconciliation recorded never moves very far away from the backdrop of this ‘macro-reconciliation’, or from the awareness that ultimately it is God’s forgiveness which is needed. Given this, we need to ask what, if anything, the Old Testament can contribute to an understanding of Christian forgiveness.

forgiveness is ultimately founded on the character of god

Since Scriptural revelation is progressive the emphasis of Old Testament teaching on forgiveness tells us something about the foundation on which all forgiveness is based. The fact that forgiveness is seen as God’s business prepares us for the fact that, however the doctrine of forgiveness may be developed or fleshed out in later revelation, it is only because God is a God who is willing to forgive that forgiveness between people is both possible and desirable. The fact that Christians, particularly, are to be characterised by forgiveness, is based on the fact that they know what it is to be forgiven, something which would have been part of the consciousness of God’s people as early as the days of Moses.

This rooting of forgiveness in the character of God aids definition and prevents forgiveness being either ignored by those who do not see an obligation to forgive, or cheapened by those who would glibly and indiscriminately apply the term to a wide variety of emotional or psychological responses.

the sacrificial system foreshadows the vicarious suffering and atonement of christ

As in many other areas of biblical theology the doctrine of forgiveness as it is fully developed in the New Testament can be traced back into the Old where it can be seen in embryonic form. This is most obviously so in the case of the ceremonial and sacrificial regulations and their subsequent fulfilment by God in Christ, which opened up for us a whole new vista of possible relationships with him and with one another.

This is the theme of the book of Hebrews (see Hebrews 10:10). In the light of Christ’s atonement aspects of the Old Testament atonement and even some of the promises of the prophets are seen in sharper focus. Through the provision of the scapegoat (Leviticus 16:20-22) and the general sacrificial system, God illustrated his willingness to overlook the sins of his people because they had been paid for, borne away by someone or something else. He therefore has no call to remember their sins; they are irrelevant (see Psalms 25:7; 103:9-12; Micah 7:19). Isaiah uses identical language as he looks forward to the ultimate scapegoat sacrifice who will bear the sins of the people (Isaiah 53:8-12).

This fulfilment of the sacrificial system - without which there would be no forgiveness - in the death of Christ, reminds us above all that forgiveness is costly. This idea of cost was certainly present in the Old Testament, since the whole concept of sacrifice implies cost. But it is increased exponentially when one sees a perfect man becoming the sacrifice rather than a perfect lamb. This more perfect sacrifice completes what was lacking in the old, particularly the Old Testament ambiguity over the possibility of forgiveness for deliberate sin.

the recognition that only god can forgive is given new perspective with the coming of the holy spirit

Joseph asked "Am I in the place of God?" God is the subject of virtually all the forgiveness words in the Old Testament. Requests for forgiveness from person to person are never fully granted in the Old Testament. This prepares us for the fact that only God can forgive (Mark 2:7). However, if God by his Spirit dwells in us, this then enables us to use the same language of forgiveness towards those who have wronged us, as is used of our reconciliation with God (Luke 11:4). While we are not in a position to forgive people's sins towards God, God the Holy Spirit in us makes it possible for us to forgive the offences against us.

certain old testament narratives foreshadow christian forgiveness

If the sacrificial system foreshadowed the atonement of Christ, then certain narrative passages foreshadow what is involved in Christian forgiveness. As Christians we show mercy towards those who abuse us (so David with Nabal and Shimei), we are prepared to overlook the wrongs once done to us (so Esau with Jacob, David with Saul's family through Mephibosheth, and Joseph with his brothers) and are also willing to extend to the forgiven party the privileges of a new reconciled relationship (so Joseph and his brothers). Although the term forgiveness is not applied to these situations, in the light of the Gospels, we can interpret the actions of these characters as being positive models of the mechanics and implications of Christian forgiveness.

old testament wisdom extols the virtue of avoiding revenge and healing relationships

The Book of Proverbs is concerned with "attaining wisdom and discipline. . . acquiring a disciplined and prudent life" (1:2-3) and this wisdom is said to begin with "the fear of the Lord" (1:7; 9:10). We have not had space to look in detail at this genre of material, but included among the many gems relating to wise living are a number which state in axiomatic form the truths which people like David and Joseph lived out.

Proverbs 17:9 says: "He who covers over an offence promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends." In 19:11 we read: "A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offence." The counterproductive nature of spiralling hatred is exposed in 10:12: "Hatred stirs up dissension but love covers over all wrongs," and in 29:11: "A fool gives full vent to his anger but a wise man keeps himself under control." In 12:18 we have one of several proverbs which advocate the healing, rather than the further fragmentation, of relationships: "Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing."

A thoughtful reading of the whole of Old Testament wisdom literature will show that the type of life advocated is one where personal wrongs are not taken to heart nor allowed to fester leading to increased dissension and even violence. The narrative sections show us what accepting or ignoring

this advice may lead to in real life, while we wait for the New Testament to teach us how we may be enabled to live this type of wise life in all its fullness.

conclusion

Forgiveness - its nature and implications - as the rest of the papers in this series will doubtless testify, is a constant pastoral issue for the people of God, not least those caught up in decades of inter-communal strife. Whilst much of the discussion relating to the implications of this issue for the Irish context lies outside the parameters of this paper, a number of relevant observations may be made.

The Old Testament has at times been utilised to defend at best a lack of forgiveness, at worst an active hostility bordering on 'jihad' towards the enemy. This can be seen in newspaper interviews, pamphlets and gable walls. Such misuse is not helped by a simplistic Christian response which amounts to little more than "that was the Old Testament, and it doesn't apply any more." The answer to a misuse of Old Testament revelation is not a disuse but a proper use. As we have shown, all the seeds of Christian forgiveness are in the Old Testament. It is there we encounter a God who is merciful and willing to save. It is there we see revealed bit by bit the amazing plan of grace which we know as the Christian gospel, a plan which would be undertaken by God at supreme cost to himself purely out of love. His anger and judgement against evil still holds, but it is this fuller, more balanced, depiction which is the true Old Testament God, not the stereotypical caricature of much popular theology.

Those who would look to the Old Testament to undermine or qualify in some way Christ's clear commands to forgive tend to forget at least two important principles.

First, there is a difference between sins against God and sins or offences against us. The former only God can forgive, the latter we are called to overlook (so Esau, David and the Proverbs cited above). This is the relevance of the distinction between God's forgiveness (*salach*) and ours (*nasa'*). There is a qualitative difference and because, like Joseph, we recognise that we are not in the place of God, that means that we are not omniscient and therefore in no position to deny forgiveness to those who ask for it for wrongs they have committed against us.

If one wants to push this further and claim that only God can engage in any kind of forgiveness, then we need to remember that it is God by the Holy Spirit working in and through the believer that makes it possible for us to forgive "as we have been forgiven."

Second, whereas forgiveness followed atonement under the sacrificial system, it is a mistake to then demand repentance as a prerequisite to inter-personal forgiveness. Final atonement has now been made through Christ and so forgiveness can be freely offered by those who are in Christ. We should not demand on the human level preconditions which only apply in relation to the divine-human relationship. Whilst those who have offended will only enter into the full benefits of forgiveness once repentance has taken place, we are not to wait for that before beginning along the road to forgiveness ourselves. To do so would be to assume the place of God.

The Old Testament properly understood presents to us the amazing possibility of a God who is Love, and Mercy and Grace; a God who will even forgive our great sin and wickedness. Building on that the New

Testament makes clear that such forgiveness applies not only to accidental but also to deliberate sin and no longer requires complex ritual and sacrifice. Instead, it demands faith in the complete sacrifice of Christ himself, who at the point of death and without waiting for any signs of repentance on the part of his crucifiers had the grace to pray "Father, forgive" (Luke 23:34). It is this atonement, an atonement of which Joseph and Moses and Samuel and David could only dream, that brings us into a new relationship with God and enables us to live a life characterised by forgiveness.

notes

1. The only possible exceptions would appear to be Leviticus 6:1-7 and 19:22. But the sins mentioned in chapter 6 are particularly narrow and refer to deceit and theft among neighbours; similarly chapter 19 is even narrower in its focus and is dealing with a specific marital situation which if unmentioned could have led to an unnecessarily harsh application of another law.

2. In a longer study some other images would warrant close attention: the term *abar* which implies a passing over or overlooking and which, in addition to its strong echoes of the Exodus, is also found in a key forgiveness text such as Micah 7:18-19 (and see Proverbs 19:11), or the image of God not remembering sin (Isaiah 43:25), or of putting sin "at a distance" in another key passage (Psalm 130:12. See also Isaiah 38:17 - 'treading sin underfoot' - and Micah 7:19 - hurling sin "into the depths of the sea").

recommended reading*introductory article*

Gary Thomas, "The Forgiveness Factor" pp 38-45 *Christianity Today*
January 10, 2000

theological perspectives

L Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*
(Eerdmans: Grand Rapids 1995)

websites

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Forgiveness and Social Groups
Forgiveness and Politics
Forgiveness in Literature and Popular Culture
Concluding Reflections

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