



VIRTUES FOR DISCIPLES

# FORGIVENESS

*Choosing to Receive and to Give*

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# *Contents*

Introduction 4

Assurance of God's Forgiveness 6

Forgiving as Jesus Forgives 16

Sharing in the Mission of Jesus 28

# *Introduction*

**Alive in the Word** brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each of the chapters.

- **For a parish-wide event or use within a larger group,** provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the event for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume on the topic of forgiveness is one of several volumes that explore **Virtues for Disciples**. Each of us is called to be a disciple, a follower of Christ. The life of a disciple is challenging, but it is the most fulfilling way to live. Called by name by the God who created us, we are shaped by the teachings of Christ and continually guided by the Holy Spirit. As we grow more deeply into this identity as disciples of Jesus Christ, we discover the valuable virtues that mark God's people.

# *Assurance of God's Forgiveness*

*Begin by asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then read through Psalm 130, a prayer of penance in the presence of God.*



## Psalm 130

<sup>1</sup>Out of the depths I call to you, LORD;

<sup>2</sup>Lord, hear my cry!

May your ears be attentive  
to my cry for mercy.

<sup>3</sup>If you, LORD, keep account of sins,  
Lord, who can stand?

<sup>4</sup>But with you is forgiveness  
and so you are revered.

<sup>5</sup>I wait for the LORD,  
my soul waits  
and I hope for his word.  
<sup>6</sup>My soul looks for the Lord  
more than sentinels for daybreak.  
More than sentinels for daybreak,  
<sup>7</sup>let Israel hope in the LORD,  
For with the LORD is mercy,  
with him is plenteous redemption,  
<sup>8</sup>And he will redeem Israel  
from all its sins.

*After a few moments of quiet reflection on the passage, consider the following background information provided in “Setting the Scene.”*

### *Setting the Scene*

Forgiveness is a central tenet of our Judeo-Christian faith and an integral characteristic of a personal relationship with God. We profess that God is loving and forgiving, and we believe that God calls us to be people of forgiveness when we have been wronged. Whether hearing the Old Testament stories of Joseph forgiving his brothers (Gen 45) and God forgiving David (2 Sam 12:13), or Jesus’ instruction to forgive “not seven times but seventy-seven times” (Matt 18:21-22), Scripture is filled with passages about forgiveness.

The psalms function as a “prayer book” for the people of Israel and for the church. Totaling one hundred fifty, the psalms in all their variety express every emotion possible in the relationship



between God and God's people—some psalms are filled with gratitude, others with pleas for help, and still others with cries of pain or sorrow.

Psalms 130 is a penitential psalm, a song of lament in which the psalmist acknowledges a personal need for God and pleads with the Lord for forgiveness. Inherent in the psalm is not only an admission of guilt but also a firm confidence that God will hear the penitent's cries and respond with forgiveness. After

seeking the Lord with hope and waiting on the revelation of God's presence, the psalmist expresses a strong faith that the Lord's steadfast love will be what redeems him despite his own faults and failings.

The experience of fault and forgiveness expressed in Psalm 130 is familiar. We who know our own limitations likewise know God's infinite mercy. It is this firm conviction—both of our neediness and of God's abundance—that allows us to seek forgiveness from God, even from “out of the depths.”

*Psalm 130 will be considered a few verses at a time for a deeper understanding. The questions in the margins are intended for group discussion, personal reflection, or journaling.*



### *Understanding the Scene Itself*

<sup>1</sup>Out of the depths I call to you, LORD;  
<sup>2</sup>Lord, hear my cry!  
May your ears be attentive  
to my cry for mercy.

The psalmist begins this song with geographical language. He identifies himself as being in the depths of the abyss, feeling far removed from God and needing to cry out loud in order to be heard. This lament is not a whimper or a still, small voice of pain. It is a cry, an entreaty that seeks a hearing from the Lord. The soul's desperation is evident, and the utter need for God to listen is made plain. This is no feeble request, no tentative petition; this is a full-throated plea looking for reception and receptivity.

The mere utterance of this cry demonstrates the psalmist's faith and hope in God. To plead for a hearing from God paradoxically implies a belief that God has already heard the plea to listen. The psalmist relies on the promise of Psalm 34, that

Call to mind a time when you have felt yourself in "the depths" and far distant from God due to your own poor choices. How did your soul cry out to God?

“the eyes of the LORD are directed toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry,” and that God will answer those who seek him, delivering them from all their fears. The request for God to listen, then, is already an act of faith.

When we are in “the depths,” it is likely God’s absence that we experience most strongly, and we cry out from the deepest parts of our souls. Even in the felt experience of absence, however, we express our faith in God’s presence by the very act of crying out. If we truly believed that God was absent, our cries would be pointless, mere expressions of pain and despair. It is in addressing our cries to God that our faith is expressed, even from places of misery and pain.

What experiences in your life have revealed some level of trust in God’s presence even when you felt God’s absence at the same time?

<sup>3</sup>If you, LORD, keep account of sins,  
Lord, who can stand?  
<sup>4</sup>But with you is forgiveness  
and so you are revered.

Our attention turns away from the psalmist now and lands squarely on the Lord. Who is this God whom we worship? This is a God who does not mark our sins or count our failings; this God not only “has” forgiveness or “gives” forgiveness but *is* forgiveness; our God is revered and literally adore-able because he is a God who forgives.

In Hebrew, the wording in the third verse of the psalm, “who can stand,” is harmonic with the phrase in the first verse, “out of the depths.” Only when we rely on the forgiveness of God can the disharmonies of our life choices be resolved into an ability to rise up again and worship rightly.

God's willingness *not* to mark our sins is what allows us to take our rightful place, standing before him in worship. We revere God not because of *our* worthiness but because of God's.

In verse 4, the Hebrew word *hasselihāh* is translated as “forgiveness” in English. This is the only place in the entirety of the Bible where this particular word is used, and the connotation is that the power to forgive is a power that belongs solely to God. One translation of verse 4 is “Yours is the power to forgive, / so that You may be held in awe” (*The Jewish Study Bible*, edited by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler). For God to choose to forgive our sins, then, is for God to choose *us*, to choose a renewed relationship with us despite our sins. It means that God exercises the divine option to not “keep account” of our sins, which would add up to condemnation; rather, God chooses to forgive us. This choice leaves us, the forgiven ones, in a position of reverence for God's unfathomable goodness.



<sup>5</sup>I wait for the LORD,  
my soul waits  
and I hope for his word.  
<sup>6</sup>My soul looks for the Lord  
more than sentinels for daybreak.

Call to mind a time when God felt distant, not because of your own choices but simply because God's presence was not perceivable. What helped you to "keep watch" for the return of God's presence?

Having expressed firm faith in God's mercy, the psalmist now returns to his own experience—one that remains an experience of God's absence. The promise of God's forgiveness is sure, but the return of God's felt presence has not yet occurred, and so he waits. His cry has been uttered; he believes it has been heard because of his firm confidence in who God is, and now he waits on the response of the Lord.

The psalmist characterizes this waiting as a time of hope but also with the language of vigil. "My soul looks for the Lord / more than sentinels for daybreak." Those who keep night watch are eager for the first streaks of dawn, longing for the end of the darkness and the coming of the new day. This has undertones of the experience of the "rising Son" that was the event of Christ's

resurrection, wherein the first rays of dawn manifested the empty tomb (see Luke 24:1).

Those who keep night vigils know that the morning is coming; it is only a matter of time. The arrival of the Lord is inevitable, so the psalmist waits in hope and long-



ing. No matter how long the wait, no matter how dark the night, morning comes as a promise to every soul who waits for the Lord.

**More than sentinels for daybreak,  
7let Israel hope in the LORD,  
For with the LORD is mercy,  
with him is plenteous redemption,  
8And he will redeem Israel  
from all its sins.**

The soul's hope in the Lord is not a personal hope only; it is a hope for the entire people of God. "Let Israel hope in the Lord!" This redemption is not just for the penitent individual; this redemption is for all the people of Israel, who have no hope save the hope provided by God's forgiveness. Israel's history gives ample evidence of the chosen people's faithfulness but also many occasions of violating the covenant qualities of mercy, justice, and righteousness. The prophets of Israel raised awareness of this collective sinfulness, calling the community to cry out to God for forgiveness.

It is precisely the steadfast love of the Lord that is our hope and our shield as well, and it is the love and forgiveness of God alone that saves. In the book of Lamentations, we read: "The LORD's acts of mercy are not exhausted, / his compassion is not spent; / They are renewed each morning— / great is your faithfulness! / The LORD is my portion, I tell myself, / therefore I will hope in him" (Lam 3:22-24).

How has a previous experience of God's forgiveness bolstered your hope today?

Just as Israel felt the weight of her sins, so does the church. How might the church seek God's forgiveness and in what areas?

God's love for his people is what prompts his forgiveness of our sins. The full strength of God's redemptive power is demonstrated in the gentleness of his response to our iniquities. And all Israel, all those chosen by God for union with himself, all the ends of the earth shall see the saving power of God (see Isa 52:10).

### *Praying the Word / Sacred Reading*

*Plumb the depths of your life experiences to name those areas that still need forgiveness from God. Rather than dwelling on your own mistakes, faults, or sins, turn your gaze to God, and hear the words of forgiveness that come from God's word: "For with the LORD is mercy, / with him is plenteous redemption."*

*Receive these words into your mind, let your breathing become deeper, and repeat the words slowly and continuously until you feel a greater stillness of spirit.*

*Consider putting these words somewhere you will see them multiple times each day: on a bathroom mirror, over the kitchen sink, or as wallpaper on your phone's home screen, etc.*

### *Living the Word*

*Receiving God's forgiveness is a beautiful concept with which to pray but can be difficult to live. Sometimes the shame of owning our sinfulness prevents us from opening up to God's forgiveness. Sometimes our fear of punishment*

*paralyzes us and keeps our relationship with God very shallow.*

- *This week, try to identify a time in your past when you had a genuine experience of feeling God's love for you.*
- *Spend a few minutes just soaking in that experience of love, absorbing the warmth of it. Rather than contrast that with your own sinfulness, just bask in the truth of who God is without focusing on yourself at all.*
- *Keep your gaze locked on God.*