

## PLEASE FORGIVE YOURSELF!

**Today's Text:** 1 Tim. 1: 1-20

### Extracts:

**And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honour and glory forever and ever. Amen [1 Tim. 1: 12-17]**

*A British woman from Wales has had a long history of drug abuse and mental health problems, leading to her children being placed in foster care.<sup>1</sup> Recently, she gave birth to twins: a boy and a girl. She named her son, very poisonous chemical that she saw as “a lovely pretty n associations.” Local govt took them to court. The civil s ob family court ruled against her, and it has been upheld by the Court of Appeal, on the ground that she was not acting to secure her*

*The names the woman chose for her new twins suggest her present state of mind: hope for reform (Preacher) and memory of her past failure (Cyanide). Believers do find themselves in a similar situation. We were terrible sinners before we accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour. Yet, in spite of the fact that He has forgiven us and we are now a new creation in Him, we do not seem to have forgiven ourselves! Those who may have forgiven hardly forget! What is responsible for that situation and how can we deal with it? In today's Bible we read of a persecutor and blasphemer and how he had put everything behind- forgiven and forgotten. There is so much that we can learn from that story for our own walk with the Lord.*

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<sup>1</sup> Story based on: Anthony Behar, “Court to new mom: No, you can't name your daughter Cyanide,” Associated Press, April 14, 2016; <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/04/14/british-court-rules-woman-cant-name-her-daughter-cyanide.html?intcmp=hplnws>

## 1. Background: The past can have a hurting memory!

On the night that Jesus was arrested by the Jewish leaders, He was betrayed by two of His twelve apostles, Judas Iscariot and Peter. Judas was His treasurer for he “had the money box.” He was also a thief who stole much of what was kept in that box [**Jn 12: 4-6**]. He had collected thirty pieces of silver from the chief priests as his fee for betraying Jesus to them [**Matt. 26: 14-16**]. But the moment Judas saw that Jesus had been condemned to death, he became “remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, ‘***I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.***’” When they refused the money, he threw down the pieces of silver and “went and hanged himself” [**Matt. 27: 3-5**]. Why?

In the case of Peter, Jesus had already chosen him as the head of His disciples and the church [**Matt. 16: 17-19**]. As His Passion drew near, Jesus warned Peter that Satan was desirous to “sift him as wheat” but that He had prayed for him that his faith should not fail. But when Peter kept boasting that nobody could make him deny the Lord, Jesus told him emphatically that he would deny Him thrice before the rooster would crow [**Lk 22: 31-34**]. When the trial came, Peter denied Jesus as prophesied. To the first girl who challenged him as a disciple of Jesus, Peter replied, “I do not know what you are saying.” His second denial was with an oath and the third with a curse! Then, the cock crew and Peter remembered the words of Christ. We are told, *Peter “went out and wept bitterly”* [**Matt. 26: 69-75**]. What does that mean?

Let us examine those two cases more closely. Judas had repented- he was said to be remorseful and admitted that he had betrayed innocent blood. He had returned the bribe money, a kind of restitution. Why then did he commit suicide? One plausible reason is that he could not believe that his sin was forgivable (or had been forgiven) by God. So, why live with shame for the rest of his life? Suicide became quite attractive. He could not forgive himself.

Did Peter also forgive himself? Previously known as Simon, the son of Jonah [**Matt. 16:17; Jn 21:15**], Jesus changed his name to Cephas (Peter) which means “a stone” [**Jn 1:42**]. He could be impulsive where others were introspective, such as when he rebuked Jesus for wanting to go and die in Jerusalem [**Matt. 16:21-23**], or refused Jesus to wash his feet [**Jn 13:6-10**], or struck the ear of the chief priest’s servant when Jesus was being arrested [**Jn 18: 10**]. However, he was a born leader and he made sure everyone around him knew it! For example, he asked or answered Jesus most of the daring questions [**Matt. 17:4; Matt. 18:21; Matt. 19:27; Mk 8: 27-29**]. Nevertheless, when he faced overwhelming odds, he was cowed, afraid and vulnerable. That was his state after he had denied Jesus thrice [**Matt. 26: 69-75**]. Yes, he wept bitterly soon after but did he forgive himself?

The only hint we have of Peter's lingering fears can be glimpsed from the encounter that Mary Magdalene had at the tomb of the risen Christ on that memorable first Easter Sunday with "a young man [an angel] clothed in a long white robe sitting on the right side." He was the one who told the women that Jesus had risen and showed them where He had been laid. He told them, "But **go tell His disciples -and Peter-** that He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, as He said to you" [Mk 16: 1-7]. Peter was one of His disciples but why was his name specifically mentioned? The likelihood is that he would not have considered himself still worthy to be one of the invited disciples. He had not forgiven himself for the betrayal- not so soon!

From the foregoing, the matter we have at hand is a serious problem for most of us, especially believers. What are you yourself or those close to you dealing with right now? The word of **God says that when He forgives our iniquity and sin, He will remember them no more** [Jer. 31: 34]. Yet, even where we have owned up or confessed our sins to Him and asked for forgiveness from those we have offended, have we forgiven ourselves? How about you? **Do you still suffer from bouts of shame and regret each time the memories flash back at you? How can you be so forgiven by God and others but refuse to forgive yourself? This is where Paul's First Letter to Timothy becomes quite handy.**

Paul was writing to Timothy, a young pastor saddled with the heavy burden of running the church at Ephesus. Paul was now old and very experienced. He wrote to young Timothy that he had mentored, saying, "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that **Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.** However, for this reason, **I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life**" [1 Tim. 1: 15-16]. In other words, Paul's appreciation of Christ's forgiveness of his past enabled him to forgive himself.

Let us pay attention to the following key points in his analysis:

a) *Yes, Paul was originally an enemy of Christ*

Paul wrote, "Although **I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man,** but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief" [v. 13]. Some background information is necessary here.

Paul (previously known as Saul) was a dual citizen- a Jew who was also a Roman by birth [Acts 22: 22-29]. He was a Jew of the strictest group, the Pharisees [Acts 26: 5], and he studied law under Gamaliel, a "doctor of the law" [Acts 5: 34; 24: 3]. He consented to the stoning to death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr and, thereafter, he "made havoc of the Church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison" [Acts 8: 1-3]. He was on his way to Damascus "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the

Lord” when he had his famous encounter with Jesus that dramatically changed his life. Jesus introduced Himself thus, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads” [Acts 9: 1-5]. Not quite long after, Saul the persecutor became Paul the apostle of Christ, a chosen vessel to bear the Lord’s name “before Gentile kings and the children of Israel” [vv. 6-16].

b) *But he put it all behind by faith and love*

Paul wrote, “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has *enabled me*, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry... and *the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant with faith and love* which are in Christ Jesus... For this reason, I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life” [1 Tim. 1: 12-16].

Knowing the trauma that both the other disciples and Paul would face should he try to join them soon after his conversion, the Lord led Paul into Arabia where Christ Jesus revealed Himself directly to the new convert. Paul did not immediately confer with flesh and blood. It was after his return to Damascus and three clear years after His first encounter with Jesus that he went to Jerusalem [Gal. 1: 13-18]. By that time, he had forgiven himself because he had come to realise that his blasphemy was committed out of ignorance and Jesus had forgiven him [1 Tim. 1: 13].

In Jerusalem, he “tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him and did not believe that he was a disciple.” It took Barnabas to facilitate his meeting with the apostles [Acts 9: 26], starting with Peter with whom he stayed for fifteen days [Gal. 1:18]. You can imagine how he would have felt. Would that have been the mood for him to forgive himself for his previous attitude to Jesus and His followers? Happily, he was able to put guilt and shame behind him because, by faith and love, Jesus had helped him to forgive his past blasphemy and to look forward to his now well-known ministry among the Gentiles. He now came to appreciate that whatever wrong he did in the past was done “ignorantly in unbelief” [1 Tim. 1: 13]. It is no wonder that Peter could later address him as “our beloved brother Paul” [2 Pet. 3: 15].

From the foregoing, it is clear that *our ability to forgive ourselves depends on love from a pure heart, a good conscience and sincere faith which are in Christ Jesus* [1 Tim. 1: 5, 14]. That is why Paul was able to write to the Galatian church, “I have been crucified with Christ; *it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me*” [Gal. 2: 20]. Can you say that of yourself? Can you now forgive yourself?

## 2. Lessons for our own full recovery

It is *a learning process*, just like a new baby learning to walk. We may fumble and struggle. But sooner than later, we can come to that level of performance that is compulsive (natural), not compulsory (expected)! Here are some steps that we can follow to help us to reach that desirable end:

### a) *Erase those displacement tendencies!*

When people find themselves in a status-threatening situation, they can respond by exhibiting displacement tendencies. For example, they will try to tune the subject off their consciousness completely, which they can hardly do! Or, they could regress by falling back into their status quo ante, if not worse. Or, they can mouth their regrets and apologies but deep down within, they are still hurting and bitter. Anything short of facing reality will not do it.

Take the case of King Saul after he had disobeyed God by not destroying King Agag of Amalek and his people as commanded. When the prophet Samuel confronted him, he first said, “But I have obeyed the voice of the LORD.” When Samuel asked why he did not kill Agag and the livestock, he blamed his troops for that. When the prophet then told him that the LORD had rejected him from being king on account of his disobedience, Saul said, “I have sinned for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD” [1 Sam. 15: 1-35]. From that point on, all he then tried to do was how to eliminate David so that he would not be able to take over as the next king of Israel!

Compare that with the reaction of King Hezekiah that God had sent the prophet Isaiah to reveal the LORD’s punishment for him and his family for showing all he had to the visiting Babylonian envoys. Hezekiah said, “The word of the LORD which you have spoken is good” and “At least, there will be peace and truth in my days” [Is. 39: 1-8]. He accepted responsibility for his sin (that is repentance!) and put the matter behind him. *So, once you have confessed your sins to God, accept it by faith that He has forgiven you. Go along and forgive yourself.*

### b) *A scar is not a fresh wound!*

Some wounds leave behind scars even when healing has occurred. A scar is not a fresh wound but a mere reminder that there was once a wound there. There may be nothing wrong in remembering what led to it but there is a problem when that scar is treated as a fresh wound. For example, in the Hall of Faith [Heb. 11: 8-40], the citation on Rahab states, “By faith, *the harlot Rahab* did not perish with those who did not believe, when she had received the spies with peace” [v. 31]. We know that, after Joshua had

taken Jericho, Rahab and her family moved out with the Hebrews. She married Salmon and bore for him Boaz [**Matt. 1: 5**], the grandfather of King David [**Ruth 4: 17-22**]! Therefore, “harlot” as used in the Hall of Faith is a scar, not a wound.

Every sin we commit is a stab wound on the soul. For example, people can see the child born out of an adulterous affair each time they visit his mother but that does not mean that God has not forgiven her for the indiscretion. When we confess our sins, God will forgive us and “cleanse us from all unrighteousness” [**1 Jn 1: 9**]. For instance, when the child of adultery (between Uriah’s wife and King David) was sick, David fasted for seven days to no avail. But, when the child died, David rose from the ground, washed up, changed clothes and “went into the house of the Lord and worshipped.” God loved the next child between David and Bathsheba, Solomon. He succeeded David as the king of Israel [**2 Sam. 12: 15-25**]!

Here is the heart of the matter: let go and let God. *Like Paul, be grateful to God for His mercy and love each time you encounter the scare of a past sin, such as a land mark or relic or an anniversary date. If you no longer feel pain when you remember a past sin, it is now a scar, no longer a wound. That is Paul’s message for us in today’s study.*

### **3. Conclusion: If God has forgiven and forgotten, why not you?**

You can imagine the state of mind of that woman that the people wanted to stone to death for adultery. When Jesus challenged her accusers to cast the first stone if they themselves had no sin, they all left one by one, and she found herself alone with Jesus. He asked her, “Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?” She replied, “No one, Lord.” Jesus said to her, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more” [**Jn 8: 1-11**].

**God has said, “Come now, and let us reason together...Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool” [Is. 1: 18-19]. All you are required to do is to confess your sins and go and sin no more. So, if God has forgiven you and remembers your sins no more, why have you not forgotten them yourself?**

Please, forgive yourself today- now!