

CAN YOU TRULY FORGIVE AND FORGET?

Today's Text: Ezek. Chap. 25

Extracts:

Thus says the Lord God: “Because of what *Edom* did against the house of Judah by taking vengeance and has greatly offended by avenging itself on them,” therefore thus says the Lord God, “I will also stretch out My hand against Edom, cut off man and beast from it, and make it desolate from Teman; Dedan shall fall by the sword. *I will lay My vengeance on Edom* by the hand of My people Israel, that they may do in Edom according to My anger and according to My fury; and they shall know My vengeance,” says the Lord God [Ezek. 25: 12-14]

“Eye for an Eye” is a reality courtroom drama that airs on some American television stations [www.eyeforaneyetv.com]. Instead of monetary awards, successful litigants are given the privilege to choose what punishment to mete out to the guilty party in order to assuage their hurt. Guilty parties have had their heads shaven or the windows of their cars smashed or an abusive husband used as a punching bag in a women's self-defence class! That the programme is still on the air since its first airing in January 2004 shows that it has a sizeable audience.

As the name of the show implies, it is based on vengeance or payback. It plays on people's desire to hurt immediately and in equal measure those who have hurt them. It feeds on their frenzy for vengeance and instant justice. However, when you smash the car of someone who has damaged your car, how much satisfaction does that give you? When a wife gets her abusive husband beaten up by other women in a gym, how much justice has she derived from that?

Some of us can never forgive (i.e., choose not to avenge a hurt). Some of us claim that they can forgive but that they cannot forget (i.e., take the hurt off their memory). However, the word of God is clear that vengeance (that is, playing judge) is His, not ours. So, can we forgive but refuse to forget? Can we forgive without forgetting? How can we truly forgive and forget?

Those and more are the issues that we shall examine in today's lesson.

1. Background: Esau's descendants refuse to forget!

To develop a clearer understanding of today's bible passage taken from the 25th chapter of the book of Ezekiel, let us go back in time. You will recall that Esau and Jacob were the twin-sons born to Isaac (the heir to Abraham's blessing) and his wife, Rebekah. When she had a troubled pregnancy, she inquired of the Lord and God told her, "Two nations are in your womb, two peoples shall be separated from your body; one people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger." Esau came out first, closely followed by Jacob [Gen. 25: 20-25]. Therefore, the blessings of Abraham were bound to pass on to Jacob. So, when the time came for Isaac their father to do so, he looked at it in flesh, expecting the blessings to go to the first-born. He invited Esau to prepare him his favourite meal from his game. Rebekah overheard the conversation and helped Jacob to obtain the blessing by deceit, that is, by disguising himself as his brother, Esau [Gen. 27: 1-40]. As soon as Esau discovered what his brother had done, he purposed in his heart, "(when) the days of mourning for my father are at hand; then I will kill my brother Jacob." He could have said it aloud because his mother heard it and obtained her husband's permission to send Jacob to her own people in Syria for protection. He was to return after his brother's anger would have cooled off [vv. 41- 45].

So many years later, after Jacob had raised a large family in Haran (in Syria), God gave him permission to return to his father's country. However, he needed to pass through Esau's territory, the nation of Edom in the land of Seir [Gen. 32:3]. Another name for Esau is Edom [Gen. 25: 30] and his descendants were called Edomites [Gen. 36: 9]. Jacob expected his brother to avenge the loss of his birthright. As soon as he came close to his brother, Jacob (or Israel by his new name after wrestling with the Angel of God the night before) "bowed himself to the ground seven times until he came near to his brother." By that gesture, he had humbled himself and apologized for whatever offences he had committed against his brother. What followed was very touching: "Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept" [Gen. 33: 1-4].

That suggests that the two brothers had been reconciled, that Esau had *forgiven* his brother, Israel. But did he also forget? Later developments suggest that he did not. For example, Jacob's descendants later became the nation of Israel born out of the womb of Egypt. After their deliverance from bondage in Egypt, they needed to pass through Edom, the nation of the descendants of Esau on their way to the Promised Land. Moses requested the King of Edom to allow them passage through his territory. They would not hurt their vineyards or livestock or even drink their water. All they were asking for was to use the King's Highway that passed through Edom. The King of Edom refused and raised a strong army to fight the children of Israel if necessary. Consequently, the children of Israel had to turn back and use another route [Num. 20: 14-21]. Even after the children of

Israel had settled down, Edom waged wars against them [1 Sam. 14: 47; 2 Chron. 20: 10] or encouraged other enemies to do so [Ps. 137: 7].

In today's lesson, God pronounced judgment against the nations of Ammon and Moab (descendants of Lot, Abraham's nephew), Edom and Philistia for avenging themselves against the children of Israel. The vengeance was demonstrated in the following ways:

- *They celebrated their enemy's downfall or misfortune.* They said "Ahah!" when God's sanctuary (in Jerusalem) was profaned and when Israel was "desolate" and the house of Judah "went into captivity" [Ezek. 25: 3]. They "clapped (their) hands, stamped (their) feet, and rejoiced in heart with all (their) disdain for the land of Israel" [v. 6]. The word of God says, "do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles; lest the Lord see it and it displease Him, and turn away His wrath from him" [Prov. 24: 17]. It is a form of vengeance.
- *They withheld kindness from their enemy.* By refusing to give passage to Israel during their flight from Egypt, as earlier mentioned [Num. 20: 14-21], and by not relieving their grief and hardship during the Babylonian siege, God counted it as vengeance by Edom and the other nations against Israel [Ezek. 25: 12-14].
- *They refused to forget!* They "took vengeance with a spiteful heart, to destroy because of the *old hatred*" [Ezek. 25: 15]. In another part of the book of Ezekiel, God calls it "perpetual hatred" [Ezek. 35: 5]. If hatred against Israel was old or perpetual, it suggests that the offence for which they sought vengeance had occurred a long time ago. It (that is, memory of hurt) had been kept alive from one generation to another.

So, if Esau had embraced his brother, Israel, and both had wept on each other's shoulders, indicating forgiveness and reconciliation, why were Esau's descendants avenging themselves against the descendants of Israel several centuries later? A plausible explanation is that Esau had forgiven his brother but had not forgotten the hurt inflicted on him by the offence. He had passed the memory of it to his descendants. So, *by not forgetting, he (through his descendants) had not forgiven Israel.* That was why God called it vengeance. How many people have you forgiven and yet deep down in your heart you still nurse and nourish the hurt? Have you truly forgiven and forgotten?

2. What it takes to truly forgive and forget

From the judgment that God meted out to Edom and other nations that had avenged themselves against Israel [Ezek. 25: 4-5, 7, 11, 13-14, 16-17], we know that it is spiritually dangerous to withhold forgiveness from those that have hurt us. For example, God will not forgive us our sins if we refuse to forgive others their trespasses against us [Matt. 6: 14-15]. Therefore, the issue here is not if we

should forgive but how to know that we have in deed forgiven others. *The true test lies in the extent to which we can forget the hurt!*

In order to understand this concept of forgetting, let us examine several circumstances that we could face.

a) *The offending party genuinely repents*

The easiest situation is where the offending party admits fault and apologizes or repents. Such a posture can disarm the aggrieved party. For example, Saul (later known as Paul) had persecuted the early Christians for professing faith in Jesus. He had gone from city to city, visiting the disciples with threats of murder or imprisonment [Acts 8: 1-3; 9: 1-2]. He was the one who stood guard over the clothes of those that stoned Stephen to death [Acts 7: 58]. So, the disciples had been forced to flee to other cities and districts to escape from his persecution [Acts 8: 4]. Then, Saul had an encounter with Jesus on his way to Damascus and became a follower himself. What did the disciples do? There is evidence that they forgave him because they accepted him as one of them and helped him to escape death in the hands of the Jews by letting him down through the wall of Damascus in a large basket [Acts 9: 21-25]. Did they forget his past? In Jerusalem, “he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, *and did not believe that he was a disciple.*” However, soon after Barnabas had demonstrated to them how genuine Paul’s conversion was, they fully accepted him as one of them and “he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out” [vv. 27-28].

The forgoing suggests that *forgetting is facilitated by the offender’s ability to consistently demonstrate to the offended party the genuineness of his or her repentance.* For example, we have no evidence that believers ever avenged Paul’s persecution against them. Everywhere he went, it was rather the Jews (who felt that he had betrayed their faith) that hounded him. The early Christians forgave Paul and forgot his past misdeeds to the extent that Peter would refer to him as “our beloved brother Paul” [2 Pet. 3: 15]. That is true forgiveness.

b) *The forgiven offender keeps offending and asking for forgiveness!*

Some people are habitual offenders even though they repent each time. In fact, true believers are in this category! Each new day, they admit before God that they are sinners. They confess their sins and ask for forgiveness. The following day, they do the same thing and ask for forgiveness again. If we expect God to forgive us, we are also expected to forgive those who relate to us the same way. When Peter asked Jesus, “how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Jesus replied, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times

seven” [Matt. 18: 21-22]. In another place, Jesus told His disciples, “if your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you *seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him*” [Lk 17: 3-4].

We can easily relate to the forgiving part, that is, not counting the offence against the offender. How about forgetting? Each offence reopens old wounds. It is like somebody giving you a stab wound that has healed. The pain has gone but the scar remains to remind you of the old wound. As long as the offender does not do it again, you may soon forget that s(he) once injured you. But, if the person were to keep coming back to reopen the wound, would you put your foot forward and tell the person to go ahead? No way!

Some of us deal with such situations by completely avoiding the offender under the guise of “once bitten, twice shy!” But to do so is a clear indication that you have not forgiven. Therefore, it is a good idea for you to re-examine yourself, to see how you are “provoking” the attack. The likelihood is that when you behave wisely, that is, please the Lord (by forgiving while hurting), even your enemies will be at peace with you [Prov. 16: 7]. If we avoid offenders or refuse to help them because they have continued to hurt us, then, we have not forgiven them even when we profess to have done so.

c) *When the offender refuses to repent or apologize!*

This type is the most difficult to deal with. The offender does not admit that s(he) has offended. Therefore, apology or repentance does not arise or follow. What do you do?

One possibility is that the offender may not know that s(he) is offending others. For example, it could be your success that is attracting envy. When you are testifying in your church about God’s blessings in your life or family, some listeners may think that you are flaunting it and feel offended. Since you do not know that you have hurt them, how can you apologize to them? In general, however, some people deliberately hurt others and feel too proud to apologize.

In the Scriptures, there is no record of where God forgives those who have not repented. He does not forget their sins either! That was why, at every turn, when He sent prophets to the stiff-necked children of Israel, He always reminded them of how He had delivered their ancestors out of bondage in Egypt [e.g., Num. 14: 20-48]. However, we are not God! He alone has the authority to avenge because vengeance is His [Deut. 32: 35]. Therefore, whether those who have offended us apologize or not, we are

duty-bound to forgive them as a condition for receiving our own forgiveness from God.

As for forgetting the hurt, the temptation is strong to nurse it! That is when people who purport to love us carry rumours between your camp and the other, whipping up anger and hurt and resentment on both sides. If you find yourself in that situation, know for sure that you have played into Satan's hands! You are interfering with God's vengeance plan on your behalf. You have not yet forgiven because you have not yet forgotten!

3. Conclusion: To forgive is to act as if you have forgotten!

What would you do with the sword in your hand if your foot were on your enemy's neck? You could choose to strike when you *remember* how the enemy had hurt you. However, to do so would mean that you were taking the laws into your hands. Moreover, what makes you believe that killing that enemy could make up for the hurt that you had suffered or still felt? Therefore, it might be better for you to throw away the weapon and hand the enemy over to the authorities. In spiritual matters, God is the authority. When you leave your enemy in His hands, He will avenge you beyond your imagination.

You may still be licking battle wounds of lies and betrayals, discrimination and injustice or undeserved persecution. As long as your memory is sharp, there is no way that you can forget them. The real issue is what you do with that memory. As long as you use your advantages and discomforts to benefit even those that are hurting you, then you have forgiven and forgotten. As long as you can send blessings and good wishes in the direction of your enemy, then you have forgiven and forgotten. Jesus was writhing in pain on the cross when He cried out, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" [Lk 23: 34]. Therefore, **to truly forgive is to act as if you have forgotten the enemy's hurt against you.**

You too can do it!