



The
Wonder *of*
Forgiveness

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INTRODUCTION:

The wonder of forgiveness

Many struggle to find the blessings of the Truth because they don't understand forgiveness. Forgiveness is a power that can change our lives. Because of that, forgiveness is a wonder.



Chapter 1

The missing key

Most of us set out on our journey in the Truth full of hope, full of ideals, and full of good intentions. The principles of the Truth are relatively few and simple, and we want to live those principles as best we can to honour our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord. Besides, the Father has promised us through His Word a special relationship and special care. He is our Father; we are in a covenant relationship with Him, and we are a “peculiar (special) people” unto Him (1 Pet. 2:9). Within the covenant are blessings innumerable. His Word promises us so much! It assures us that it can change, or “transform” us, from the “old” to a “new man in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 12:2), and “perfect”, or spiritually complete us (2 Tim. 3:15–16). It promises satisfaction and fulfilment (Isa. 55:1–3). As part of the new relationship, prayer offers freedom from anxiety and an inner peace that surpasses comprehension (Phil. 4:6–7). The blessings of this relationship are incomparable!

The Lord declared, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28–30). There are no qualifications here: the Lord promised us relief from our burdens. Even though we understand that trials will still come,

the Lord's words imply that there would be a lightening of the load in some way. These promises are almost too good to be true, yet we believe them.

As we continue on our journey, we begin to see it is not quite so simple. For some the journey is something like what follows. You may be among them. On the other hand, you may not fit any of these scenarios; you may have found the answers to the questions raised, but it will be worth reading on to consider what is the struggle for many.

Scenario 1: I just can't live the life.

After a while, our sharp view of the Truth drifts out of focus. From time-to-time, the vividness of our understanding returns through a Bible study talk, a Bible school, or a special effort. But it quickly fades again once we're outside that environment. Our feelings for the Truth are dulled. Life's tedium and pressures generate a different "reality". Trials undermine our ideals and our endeavours to emulate the character of our Master. Cracks appear in our perception of the Word's assurances.

Where is the promised special relationship with God and His son? Theoretically we know it exists, but where is the practical reality of that relationship? As for the assurance of relief from our burdens, life's slog is only interrupted by blows that bruise and demoralise. So much so, that we wonder, does God really care? Or, have we missed something?

What about the Word's power to change us? What seemed wonderful principles to attain become burdensome "rules" and "laws". The Word of God imposes ideals that make life more difficult — nay, impossible! What's more, trying to apply these godly principles ourselves is hard enough, but when we impose them on our children who are being strongly pulled by other forces, it creates tensions within the home, between families in the Truth, then the ecclesia, and even between ecclesias.

So, some conclude: "Maybe I'm just not cut out for the Truth. I just can't seem to do it."

Perhaps we're brave enough to ask someone for help. Or, some caring brother or sister notices that we're struggling and sits down with us to chat about our battles. That's difficult, because it exposes us as not being a "first-rate Christadelphian". But then, what have we got to lose? So we open up. And we find some relief; at least we may find the answer to the problem and can start again. We ask: What's the answer? What can I do?

The standard reply in such situations will be familiar:

- Get your head into the Word
- Get down on your knees in prayer
- Get your hands involved in the work of the Truth.

So, our spirit is revived; someone has shown an interest in us, and the answers to our problems seem so obvious from the Word. So, we try again. We start our revived spiritual programme by doing our Bible Readings each day, perhaps even listening to some recorded talks, or a book recommended by the caring brother or sister. We pray each morning and evening. We offer to assist on an ecclesial committee. And all goes well — for a while. But no matter how hard we try, we just don't get from our Bible reading the same power as the brother on the recording. Our prayers fall into our usual monotonous "vain repetitions". We enjoy the company of others on the committee, but really, we feel a hypocrite alongside them.

We look about the ecclesia and see that other brothers and sisters are staunch, dedicated, and strong about the Truth, but they never seem to have any real problems in their lives — not like us. This builds further hurt, even resentment.

After a while we discover that there are others who share our own experience, and we find some comfort in that. But in the end it's no comfort at all, because we just feed each other's resentment towards those who somehow don't have the same experience. Sometimes, we discover that even those who are "model Christadelphians" are actually not "living the life" at all — it's just a facade! This fuels our dissatisfaction and builds contempt.

And then we see others genuinely lost; those who are trapped

in an environment, a lifestyle, a course of destruction — even self-destruction. Drunkenness, drugs, promiscuity, homosexuality, pornography — no longer can these be hidden away as things that happen only in the world. What's more, these issues are not limited; they are widespread and common practice. Abuse — verbal, physical, and sexual — used to be covered up, but no longer. Just as in the world, more and more cases are coming to light, and their abusers are often found to be victims themselves. How far back does it go?

Our lives appear to be no different to anyone else's life in the world. Is there an explanation for this? An answer?

Scenario 2: Do we really change?

It is an awful realisation after some years in the Truth that we have not really changed.

If we're honest, we have all seen brothers and sisters many years in the Truth who diligently do their daily Bible Readings, who study their Bibles, who pray every day, and who are dedicated attendees at ecclesial classes and activities, but who are exactly the same people who went into the waters of baptism. There's no difference to their characters, personalities, and often their lifestyle. Perhaps you know that this is true of yourself.

We may have given up many worldly vices, we may spend our time on more profitable things, and we do reap the benefits of the lifestyle that the Truth provides. But, essentially, we are the same person, with all the foibles, inhibitions, weaknesses, and inclinations that went into the waters of baptism. We unwittingly nurse many of the same habits, interests, and tendencies we had previously. Our personalities remain the same: the moody remain moody, the calm and serene remain calm and serene, the caring still watch out for others, the industrious still busy themselves, the ambitious continue climbing ladders, the loving are still warm-hearted, the innovative keep innovating, the quick-tempered still fire up with little provocation.

What's the problem? Where is the power of the Truth to bring change in our lives?

Many are asking these questions. Maybe God will one day strike some kind of a light like Paul on the road to Damascus, and it'll all become clear and I'll be changed. It never comes. So we, like many Christadelphians today, start looking for answers elsewhere — or give up. There *is* an answer, but it's not where these are looking.

Scenario 3: Is the Ecclesia really a haven?

It comes as a shock to many that the ecclesia of “called out ones” is often not the haven it's frequently painted to be. As ecclesias wax and wane, as worldly pressures come upon the brotherhood, as rumour, scandal, and strife rack families, ecclesias, and the brotherhood, faith has often been shattered. Brothers and sisters expecting higher behaviour among Christ's disciples get disheartened when the reality of human nature insinuates itself upon ecclesial life.

Ecclesias regarded as “strong ecclesias” (I don't believe there is such a thing) falter. Shepherds within the ecclesia are found to be merely human. Brothers often vaunted for their spirituality and wisdom, perhaps not by the individuals themselves, but in the minds of the flock, have fallen, leaving members of the flock scattered, bewildered, broken. Stories — rumoured and proved — of abuse of all kinds, even criminal offences (they are all crimes before God), covered up and not faced by shepherds and ecclesias have disheartened the lambs.

Understandably, they ask, “If the stalwarts of the Truth fall, what chance have I got for overcoming the issues that I'm struggling with?” If brothers, renowned for being students of the Word, who understand the atonement in its finer details, who are revered for their wisdom in the Word — if these brothers fall, then what hope have we got?

Shaken brothers and sisters and young people are left asking, “Is this the ecclesia of God?”

Where can we find the answer?

Something is missing. The satisfaction and fulfilment in life that the Truth promises don't appear to be in all this. The relationship with God and Christ seems illusionary — at least within Christadelphia. Where is God in all this?

For some, that's just the way it is; for others, there's got to be another answer somewhere. So, where do we go for an answer?

For some, the answer is to busy themselves even harder in the work of the Truth as a focus that can suppress the doubts and pain. Some find a sense of purpose and self-fulfilment in the challenge, simplicity, and adventure of mission work. Others simply console themselves with the thought that this is going to be a lifetime struggle with the impossible this side of the kingdom; we've just got to put up with it and endure.

Some need to find blame. So they blame their upbringing, or they blame their ecclesia and its particular "brand" or "take" on things. They blame the older generation for the state of the ecclesia today. They seek "answers" in an alternative way to how they were brought up, or to the orthodox Christadelphian approach. They initiate or join a "reformation" or "revolution" with new and "liberating" practices. Revolutions are always exciting and adventurous, but, ironically, they produce the same sense of "right-is-on-our-side" that the would-be-reformers hate so much in those they challenge. The excitement of a revolution provides a sense of purpose — that "we are working with God and He with us", at least for a while.

Some find an answer in charitable works that make them feel good about themselves and God. Others, in their bid to experience a sense of relationship with God and Christ, turn to emotionally stimulating "solutions" such as rousing modern "Christian" music. They want to feel God. Others again go further and "find" closeness with God and His son in one of the various forms of holy spirit possession — the "missing key" they can't find in orthodox Christadelphianism, they say. Sadly, the truth eventually dawns, that these avenues are simply emotionalism — God is not here either, and so they give up.

There is another kind, mainly among our young, who find their stimulus in a combination of the things already mentioned. These use the ecclesia as a safe place to be associated with the promises of the coming kingdom, but also as a kind of social networking club — to get the "most" out of this life in the meantime. They feel no responsibility

or commitment towards their ecclesia and its activities, but frequent the cafés, clubs, and places of entertainment; they flirt with alcohol, drugs, and fornication, justifying what they do with ignorance, blame, or self-delusion. They play on the edge of what is right and wrong, and enshroud it in the name of *love* and *freedom in Christ*.

Some eventually conclude that they just can't "do it", or "live the life", and must face up to their hypocrisy, and so they leave the ecclesia and abandon the Truth to find their sense of satisfaction in a life of worldly vice without God.

All of these things are distractions — illusionary and vain "answers" to a search for satisfaction and fulfilment for which we all crave. God is not in any of this. He is not where so many of us are searching.

Forgiveness is the key

But God can be found. And there is an answer. It's not magical, but it has power. It's not mystical, but it's the key to a special relationship with God and His son — and the fulfilment we all seek. It's not by special revelation, but it is revealed in the same Word we all have.

It is so fundamental that it is within the grasp of each one of us, as one of the first principles of the Truth. It is so fundamental that we tend to treat it as academic and deprive it of performing its powerful work.

Forgiveness is this key — the answer. Forgiveness has power for change. Forgiveness provides not *self*-fulfilment, but a sense of fulfilment beyond self, and beyond compare. It provides a new way of looking at things — at God, at Christ, at the Word, at our selves, at our ecclesias, at our fellow human beings. It's a true "paradigm shift" and works a wonder, if we allow it.

Forgiveness works a wonder

That forgiveness performs a "wonder" is apparent in several passages of Scripture. Let's have a look at a few of these and we'll see how important, how powerful, and how marvellous forgiveness is in God's scheme of things.

We begin with **Exodus 34**. Israel had sinned a grievous sin, Moses appeals for forgiveness in verse 9, and Yahweh accepts that appeal in verse 10 in these words:

“Behold, I make a covenant: before all thy people I will do **marvels**, such as have not been done in all the earth, nor in any nation: and all the people among which thou art shall see the work of the LORD: for it is a terrible thing that I will do with thee.”

Forgiveness is seen here in terms of a *covenant*¹ where Yahweh would perform marvels with Israel. The expression, “do marvels”, is the little Hebrew word, *pala*’, which means, “do wonders, marvels, or something extraordinary”. God says that the covenant He will keep with Israel requires Him to perform marvellous and extraordinary things with them. He will save them, and will perform His promises to the fathers unto this people and bring them into the promised land — despite their failings. Such things had not been done in all the earth, or to any other nation. Notice that these *marvels* are synonymous with “the work” that Yahweh would “do with thee” (Israel), which work will be viewed as being “terrible” (or, awesome) by the nations. The *wonder* is the *work* of Yahweh’s *forgiveness*.

These words have an ultimate fulfilment picked up by Micah, who makes the point more clearly. He declares in **Micah 7:15–20**:

“According to the days of thy coming out of the land of Egypt will I shew unto him **marvellous things** (Heb. *pala*’). The nations shall see and be confounded at all their might: they shall lay their hand upon their mouth, their ears shall be deaf. They shall lick the dust like a serpent, they shall move out of their holes like worms of the earth: they shall be afraid of the LORD our God, and shall fear because of thee. Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy. He will turn again, he will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities; and

1 Forgiveness is closely associated with covenant (e.g., Rom. 11:27).

thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea. Thou wilt perform the truth to Jacob, and the mercy to Abraham, which thou hast sworn unto our fathers from the days of old.”

Once again, Yahweh is going to (lit.) “show marvels” (Heb. *pala*) unto His people Israel. Micah refers to the Second Exodus, which will take place at the return of Christ. The nations, once again, will witness and “stop their mouths” at this “wonder”: a people once cast off, a people once steeped in sin, but a people now changed. How has this wonder come about? Micah says in verses 18–19 that God:

- › “pardoneth (their) iniquity”
- › “passeth by (their) transgression”
- › “retaineth not his anger”
- › “will turn again”
- › “will have compassion” upon (them)
- › “will subdue (their) iniquities”
- › “casts all their sins into the depths of the sea”.

In so doing, He brings about the promises to the fathers (the covenant), in verse 20. Forgiveness is at the heart of the covenants of promise to the fathers — and therefore the Gospel.

The *wonder* of forgiveness is also found in **Psalm 107**. This is a psalm devoted not only to the work of God in redeeming His own people Israel, but also to individuals from the nations. The redeemed are from the four corners of the earth (v. 3), and from four situations symbolic of redemption from sin and its consequence:

1. The lost in the wilderness of life (vv4–9)
2. The captives in prison (vv10–16)
3. The sick (vv17–22)
4. Those who toil upon the sea of nations (vv. 23–31).

After each of these symbolic episodes the psalmist exhorts:

“Oh that men would praise Yahweh for his goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men” (vv. 8, 15, 21, 31).

“Wonderful works” in this refrain is the same word, *pala*, used in the previous passages. In this psalm it is used in parallel with

“goodness”, *chesed*,² Yahweh’s covenant mercy, which forgives sin (Ex. 34:6,7). Yahweh’s redemptive work, then, is a marvel or wonder.

Forgiveness has the power for change

The wonder of Yahweh’s forgiveness has the power for change. The motivation for change is both logical and emotional. **Psalm 130:3–4**:

“If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.”

Surely, here’s a motivation for change! If God were to hold our sins against us there would not be a man or woman left standing, for “all men have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). The consequence of sin is death, from which humans have no escape. But God has the antidote. The psalmist describes the antidote as, “there is forgiveness with thee (God)”. Like one bitten by a poisonous snake, all humans have desperate need of that antidote. Can we just demand the antidote? Can we just ignore our plight and hope it goes away? Some think that they can do either of these things. But God is to “be feared” in that if we don’t want sin marked against us, then we must turn to Him in humble reverence and acknowledgement of our need for His grace in providing the antidote.

A change in thinking, then, is required: the sinner must humble himself and defer to God. Without a willingness to humble our selves the wonder of forgiveness cannot begin its work.

A genuine comprehension of our need for God and His ability to provide the antidote is the beginning of a new and close relationship with God. Forgiveness is at the heart of this relationship. Baptism brings us into this relationship, or, into the “new covenant” mentioned by Paul twice in Hebrews (8:8–12 and 10:16–17). In both these passages Paul cites Jeremiah Chapter 31. Now, read **Jeremiah 31:31–34** very carefully, and we may make a profound discovery:

² *pala* and *chesed* are frequently used in parallel (Neh. 9:17; Pss. 17:7; 31:21; 88:10–12; 106:7; 107:8,15,21,31; 136:4). The marvellous works of Yahweh are associated with all the attributes of the Name: Ps. 111:4.

“Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD: But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

Jeremiah explains how this new covenant works. It puts Yahweh’s law into the hearts of His covenant people so that they *know God* — intimately. They won’t need to exhort their neighbour or brother with the need to “know Yahweh” — everyone will know Yahweh. Notice the reason for this intimate relationship: “*For* I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.” Jeremiah is telling us an important truth:

**We come to know Yahweh by the experience
of having our sins forgiven!**

The deepest understanding of God is the experience of having our sins forgiven! There is something in forgiveness, then, that goes beyond merely saying sorry. There is something about forgiveness that gives us an experiential knowledge of Yahweh that goes beyond academic study of the Bible. This is a knowledge that writes the covenant in our hearts in a meaningful and powerful way. Forgiveness is the catalyst for change in our lives. Forgiveness shapes the way we think about God, Christ, our brethren, ourselves, our life, our trials — everything.

Forgiveness was at the heart of God’s purpose

since the fall

Christ prayed, “And this is life eternal that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou has sent” (John 17:3). Eternal life is bound up in knowing God. As we’ve seen, *knowing God* is founded upon the experience and appreciation of forgiveness. In the end, salvation, life eternal, the promises, covenant relationship, God’s purpose since the fall, Christ’s very existence³ are all founded upon one thing — the forgiveness of sins. That’s exactly what Christ commissioned the apostles to preach:

Luke 24:47

“And that **repentance and remission of sins** should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”

And that’s what the apostles did preach...

Acts 5:31

“Him (Jesus) hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, **for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins**”.

Acts 13:38

“Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you **the forgiveness of sins.**”

Acts 26:18

“...the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, **that they may receive forgiveness of sins**, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.”

At the very heart of the *good news* promised unto Abraham and preached by the apostles was “in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed”. That blessing was the forgiveness of sins: “Unto you first God, having raised up his son Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities” (Acts 3:25–26, cf. v. 19).

Brother John Carter says in *Delight in God’s Law*:

Forgiveness is a vital part of the disciple’s experience of life in

3 1 Tim. 1:15, Matt. 1:21.

Christ ... the effect of forgiveness is not only the sense of freedom from the past; it is a power for the future.⁴

Forgiveness works beyond the taking away of our sins. Forgiveness works a wonder. It changes the way we think; it governs the direction of our walk; it generates sincerity in our worship, and is essential for our life in Christ.

Who is this book for?

I have written this book for the lost sheep as well as the ninety-nine. Both are in need of repentance and forgiveness; the lost find this easier than the ninety and nine.

There is another class: those who have truly repented and have come to know God through the wonder of His forgiveness. If you are one of these, you will readily identify with the processes, principles, and exhortations outlined in this book, and it should provide a means for self-examination in areas perhaps not considered before.

The question is, which class are you? As I show, we are probably more like the ninety-nine than we realise. For this reason, this book can be confronting in an attempt to see our true selves.

How this book works

The book is purposely designed to be easy to read. It is not heavy exposition, although it is a study of God's Word and solidly founded that Word. It allows the Word of God to lead you through the process.

Overview

The book follows the scriptural process required for the forgiveness that brings change. Each stage is a key to unlocking the next step in the process. The process is:

1. **The problem of sin**

To understand the true nature of our problem we must examine ourselves, something we find difficult to do. But when we peel back the layers to see ourselves as God sees us it can be

4 J. Carter, *Delight in God's Law*, p120.

depressing. But it is actually liberating in that it brings us to the reality of the helplessness of our case; we are vulnerable and desperately need God's antidote.

2. **God's answer to our problem of sin**

God's antidote is not a quick-fix solution like taking painkillers to get rid of a headache. God's elaborate plan meant that He became involved with our problems at cost to Himself. The antidote resides within His own being; it requires the fullness of His character — His love. He has gone to great lengths to demonstrate this, including the dramatic spectacle of His own son's crucifixion to publicly declare His righteousness and love. This declaration provides us with both reason and motivation to believe and commit ourselves to the next step.

3. **The experience of forgiveness**

God's declaration and commitment provides motivation for us to become involved in the forgiveness process. As Paul says: God's "goodness leads us to repentance". Repentance is an education process that brings us on a path of change and into a new relationship with God. We will look at two case studies from Scripture to see how it works.

4. **The power of forgiveness: God's love multiplied**

The blessings resulting from forgiveness are multiple and effective, providing freedom from the past and a power for the future. But its power extends beyond our self. Herein lies a dynamic that shows the wonder of the process God devised. Forgiveness is an expression of God's love to its greatest extent, and it reaches beyond the forgiven sinner unto others. Forgiveness is a wonder!

Change is possible in every one of us — change from what we are into what God wants us to be. This is God's work; it involves His Son, His Word, His providential involvement in our lives. But it needs our co-operation. There is, therefore, an important prerequisite.

The need for honesty

David described the wonderful experience of forgiveness this way:

“Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile.” (Psalms 32:1, 2)

Forgiveness is truly a blessed state. But notice the short statement at the end of verse two, “...and in whose spirit there is no guile”. “Guile” means “deceit”. In other words, the blessed state of forgiveness can only be found if we are prepared to be honest. We must be prepared to harness our pride and be brutally honest — and that’s harder than you may think!

No one is going to admit to being deceitful — especially to his or her self. We are going to find that the reason why so many don’t “find God”, or have a relationship with Him and His son, and don’t find the secret to real change in their lives, is because, first, they don’t give it the time, and, second, they aren’t honest, and therefore not dealing with the real problem. Most of us use palliative measures in dealing with sin — a Band-Aid, when it really needs surgery.

We will start by looking at sin and what that means in our lives. It is not a cursory or academic look. It’s a real look at sin; a real look inside ourselves.

So, let us begin.

“Forgiveness works beyond the taking away of our sins. Forgiveness works a wonder. It changes the way we think; it governs the direction of our walk; it generates sincerity in our worship, and moderates our relationship with God and man.”