

“Is Forgiveness Really Forever?”
By Rom A. Pegram (4/17/16)

Folks, let me begin today by sharing one of my favorite psalms with you—Psalm 130 (NLT), that speaks of God’s incredible gift of forgiveness...

From the depths of despair, O LORD, I call for your help. ² Hear my cry, O Lord. Pay attention to my prayer. ³ LORD, if you kept a record of our sins, who, O Lord, could ever survive? ⁴ But you offer forgiveness that we might learn to fear you. ⁵ I am counting on the LORD; yes, I am counting on him. I have put my hope in his word. ⁶ I long for the Lord more than sentries long for the dawn, yes, more than sentries long for the dawn. ⁷ O Israel, hope in the LORD; for with the LORD there is unfailing love. His redemption overflows. ⁸ He himself will redeem Israel from every kind of sin.

The fact is ... our *only* hope of redemption (being made right with God) is found in God’s forgiveness... And the psalmist certainly expresses that truth, too!

Today, we’re asking the question though: *Is forgiveness really forever?* We’re not talking about human forgiveness, now. That isn’t a forever kind of forgiveness. We are human beings. We are limited individuals and we offer limited forgiveness—partial forgiveness at best. When we’re hurt by others, we forgive. Then, we get hurt again, and we have to forgive again. It’s not something that’s a once-and-for-all kind of thing. It happens over and over and over again...

Not so with God. Today, we’re talking about God’s forgiveness. God’s forgiveness is *not* limited. It is complete. It’s also free ... to us (though it cost God a great deal). God’s forgiveness is eternal. You see, eternal forgiveness is an act of eternal love. The way God forgives ... is a part of God’s nature of LOVE...

Now, all that being said, I still get questions from folks, like this: *How can God really forgive us forever?* And then, these questions come to the surface: 1) How can I be sure that I have an eternal relationship with God? 2) How can I be sure I’m going to heaven when I die? 3) How can I know that I am saved ... and is my salvation really secure? So, these are the things we’re going to be talking about today. With that in mind, let me begin with some words from the Apostle John, as we find in his first epistle (letter) in the NT: Listen...

And this is what God has testified: He has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹² Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have God’s Son does not have life. ¹³ I have written this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life. ¹⁴ And we are confident that he hears us whenever we ask for anything that pleases him. ¹⁵ And since we know he hears us when we make our requests, we also know that he will give us what we ask for. – 1 John 5:11-15 (NLT)

So, you can KNOW that you’re a child of God. In your personal Bibles, at your earliest convenience, I want you to highlight or underline the word ‘know’ in this scripture.

'Know' in the original languages can mean a variety of things. The 'know' that we find in 1 John means this: *to know within your heart*. It means to know for certain, to know something that you'll never ever forget. It means to know something of extreme importance. And, like this, God says that he wants you to *know* ... that you're his child!

Also, the life God is speaking of here is not just about quantity—living for eternity. The sense of the language used here tells us that it's also about 'quality of life'. Ours, as a child of God, is to be a life that matters—a life of significance. It's also to be a life of peace and joy—a life God wants to give you as a gift...

Very much like the Prodigal Son, when you and I decide to return home to our loving Heavenly Father and receive his forgiveness, God gives us a number of gifts...

- The gift of eternal life...
- The gift of forgiveness...
- The gift of knowing in our heart-of-hearts that his word—including eternal forgiveness—is true...

So, a key to being able to experience the quality of life God has for you ... is knowing that God's love is eternal and God's forgiveness is eternal (as long as we choose 'home'—God's very best for us)! Today, I want you to know that you can feel SAFE with God. And folks, here's how we can know that we're eternally S.A.F.E. with God (acronym found in your sermon notes)...

SEALING MY ETERNITY 'IN CHRIST'. How do I know I'm eternally SAFE with God? It begins with sealing my eternity 'in Christ' and scripture uses that term over and over again... Can you think of things that can be 'sealed' today? We seal envelopes, don't we? We seal food items so they don't spoil; in Jesus' day, they sealed wine so that it wouldn't spoil over time...

There's no perfect illustration to describe this particular step, but let me give it a shot. Imagine Christ as a huge cosmic safe ... that he can put valuables in ... including you ... and including me. We can't open the safe; only Christ can. Only Jesus knows the combination. We can't seal ourselves in this safe; we can't earn our own way to heaven, in other words. We can't earn eternal forgiveness. We can only receive it as a gift from God/Jesus...

So, the key to sealing our life 'in Christ' for eternity is to place our lives in his hands; again, he's the only one who can put us in the SAFE and keep us SAFE forever! But, how do we do that? How do we place ourselves in Jesus hands or 'in Christ' as scripture talks about, so that we can know we're good with God forever? John 5 gives us some direction, beginning with V. 24 (MSG):

"It's urgent that you listen carefully to this: Anyone here who believes what I am saying right now and aligns himself with the Father, who has in fact put me in charge, has at this very moment the real, lasting life and is no longer condemned to be an outsider. This person has taken a *giant step* [italics mine] from the world of the dead to the world

of the living. ²⁵ It's urgent that you get this right: The time has arrived—I mean right now!—when dead men and women will hear the voice of the Son of God and, hearing, will come alive.”

One thing I am sure about is this: When we become Christians ('little Christs'), it will be because we—at some point in our lives—have made a decision (taken a step) to listen to God and give our lives to Christ so that we can then be sealed 'in Christ' for eternity! *This actual step is where it has to begin!*

For example, I can't give you the exact date, but I can tell you what grade I was in, where I placed my life 'in Christ', and who I was with at the time. *It's that big of event when it happens, folks!* Some tell me, 'Well, I've just always been a believer!' But, don't kid yourselves. *No one's riding into heaven on the shirttails of their ancestors;* it's a decision we have to make for ourselves ... and, believe me, when it happens ... *you'll know and you'll be able to tell others about it too.*

So, becoming a Christian simply means that *you made a spiritual decision to take your life and place it 'in Christ'* that he might seal up your relationship for eternity. Next, in order to know you're SAFE with God, you need to...

ADMIT YOUR SINS REGULARLY. What we're talking about here is ... *CONFESSION*. Now, there's a lot of confusion around what 'confession' is these days, probably because we're busy mixing church traditions more than we realize. Originally, confession—the way God's word teaches it—is a conversation between you and God (and this can now happen because the curtain in the Temple has been torn in two).

Biblically, confession is not something you go to; it is not somewhere you go; it is not something you partake in. Confession is a conversation between you and God ... and it's necessary because, even though we're forgiven for sin, sins still get in the way of our fellowship with God and can have consequences. 1 John 1:9 (NLT) talks about our need to confess in this way:

“But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.”

So, to confess means to go to God—to tell God about what we've done that we know God wouldn't be pleased with, because if we don't ... it'll affect our relationship, kind of like this...

Jane and I've been married almost 38 years. Yeah, I know, she's a saint for having hung on this long. I will be the first to admit that I've made my share of mistakes during this time—probably being stupid more than once. When we married, we committed to stay married—to tough it out no matter what ... and by God's grace, we've been able to. But, that doesn't mean it's always been easy. When I've made mistakes, there've been consequences. It affects the 'fellowship' of our marriage in significant ways! And it's not

until we've 'cleared the air' and I've apologized (it can go either way, but in our case it's usually me apologizing), that the rift between us is healed...

Folks, it's the same with God. We may have given our lives to Christ and our intention is to walk in his ways, but sometimes sins (plural) get in the way of our fellowship with God. *This is why confession is so necessary.* That's the second step, and then we have to move on to this: You need to...

FAITHFULLY OBEY YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER. It's not obedience, folks, that helps us to be 'in Christ' (like we could earn our salvation); obedience is a by-product of being 'in Christ'. Once we've turned our lives over to Christ to be 'in him' and SAFE for eternity, we still need to keep working on our relationship (just like in marriage). We need to confess our sins ... and be obedient to what God asks of us ... *and we can!* Let me talk about this for just a second...

Those who have placed their lives 'in Christ' now have an inner desire to do as God asks. That doesn't come naturally; that comes when we place our lives 'in Christ' and receive God's gifts to us, including the Holy Spirit that empowers us to live Christian lives. God—through his Spirit—places that desire in all who are truly 'in Christ'...

Christians who are SAFE with God for eternity have what I like to call 'a holy inclination toward obedience'. There is a 'want-to' desire in their hearts to obey God. You know, they feel bad when they don't, but they *want* to! We may mess up from time to time (because we're human beings), but do we really *want* to obey God in our hearts? That's the question...

And that's the question God will be asking too... Are you my child (1 John 3:1); did you have the desire to obey my will? As Christians, it's a great freedom we're given to be called God's children; and it's a great responsibility too. We need to faithfully obey our Heavenly Father, in order to know that we're SAFE with God for eternity—that his forgiveness is forever! And finally...

ENJOY YOUR SECURITY AS GOD'S CHILD. We're back to the quality of life again—what God wants for us...

As a teenager, I remember a time when my family was on vacation in Florida and we decided to visit a neighboring church on a Sunday morning. I don't remember the name of the church or the pastor, but I do remember the message ... and was somewhat disturbed by it. The title of the sermon may as well have been 'Homesick for Heaven', because that's all the pastor talked about that morning. Even then, I knew this wasn't quite right. What about this life? What about enjoying the life God's given us as a gift right now? (And he whined, folks, 'homesick for heaven' ... so, I hope I don't ever whine from the pulpit like he did!)

That's not what God has in mind! You can enjoy the fact that you are SAFE with God 'in Christ' ... and God wants you to enjoy the life he's given you. God doesn't want you to

just endure life; God doesn't want you to feel like you're 'in a safe' and pull away from the good things in life! No, God wants you to enjoy life ... to the fullest, knowing that you're SAFE with God for eternity...

One of your 'next steps' today is a bit of a long scripture verse, but a great one to memorize or be very familiar with: Romans 8:37-39 (NLT) tells us,

No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.
³⁸ And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. ³⁹ No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I want to invite you to take action on this verse today. Take a step today to tell God that you are SAFE in your relationship with him for eternity! God's forgiveness is forever, folks. Our part is to focus on 'home'—God's very best. And God will have the rest covered. I want you to know that *you* can be SAFE with God for eternity. God's forgiveness truly can last forever...