

Being Forgiven by God

Habakkuk 2:4 “The righteous shall live by faith.” Paul used this line as the theme of Romans, in Romans 1:17. That line also is used in Galatians 3:11 and Hebrews 10:38. God forgives based on faith, not based on behavior. God knows who has His brand of faith; God does not forgive those who have the world’s type of faith or who have no type of faith.

To build a picture of God’s type of forgiving, it is best to look up all the passages between Acts and Revelation that contain variations of that word (forgive, forgiven, forgiving, and such like). There are only 17 of them. I would leave out the gospels at first because the audiences are Jews from before the Eternal Kingdom was established. Those passages have an added complexity built into the context because of that. Here are nine of the passages about being forgiven.

Acts 5:31	Repentance is connected to forgiveness
Acts 13:38 – 39	Faith leads to forgiveness
Acts 26:18	Understanding God leads to forgiveness
Romans 4:7	(See Psalm 32:1 – 5) Confession leads to forgiveness
Ephesians 1:7 – 14	Faith leads to forgiveness
Colossians 1:4 – 14	Faith leads to forgiveness
Colossians 2:8 – 15	Faith and baptism lead to forgiveness
James 5:15	Faithful prayer leads to forgiveness
1 John 1:9	Confession leads to forgiveness

Many have proposed a theory that forgiveness is a process we go through again and again:

1. We sin
2. We repent
3. We pray
4. God forgives.

Unfortunately, this process is not described in the Bible. If it were true, then we would be in and out of God’s favor frequently. The theory leads to the conclusion that, to use a silly example, if you were to stub your toe, say a bad word, and fall in front of a bus, you would go to hell. In this system, confidence (hope) is impossible.

Others have suggested that, after falling in front of that bus, God would forgive you because He knows that you would have repented if given the chance. First, that says that the future is fixed, so we do not make any real choices. Life is an illusion because we think we choose, but God already knows the outcome, so our choices do not really exist.

Others claim that, if there is not a sin-repent-pray-forgive method, it would mean that we could do anything we want. Paul ridiculed that position, “Shall we sin all the more that grace may increase?”

All the ideas about how we are forgiven on a sin-by-sin basis come from what I call the “justice economy.” Paul called it the law of sin and death under which all fall short of the glory of God and are condemned. God has redeemed us from that system (the ultimate bail-out). The law of sin and death is not a bad thing. We use it all the time to control society. All governments use the law of sin and death as the foundation for their legal systems, and that is a good thing. But, as Paul put it in 1 Timothy 1:8 – 9, “We know that the law is good if one uses it

lawfully, knowing this: that the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless...”

The righteous live by faith. “Live” has several meanings. I think Paul (and Habakkuk) knew that. The righteous shall live forever by faith. The righteous shall govern their lives by faith. The righteous will live before God by faith. I think all of those are in there.

God forgives if we have faith (the kind of faith that God calls faith). God’s version of faith results in behavior that God likes. But God judges the faith, not the behavior. If He judged the behavior, we would be hopeless. We have been redeemed from a hopeless system, the law of sin and death. We have been transferred to the faith economy: the law of faith (Romans 3:27), the law of liberty (James 1:25, 2:12), the law of the Spirit of life (Romans 8:2), the law of righteousness (Romans 9:31).

So, when we behave in ways we know God does not like, our response is not to repent (again) in order to be forgiven. Our response is to apologize for offending God, to learn from that mistake, praise God for having redeemed us from that hopeless justice system that would have sent us to hell for that sin, and seek to build our faith so that we won’t offend our Father again.