

CHAPTER ONE

THE DIVINE ANSWER



*Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.*

*Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

*While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.*

*For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.*

*Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;*

*I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.*

Psalm 32:1-5

Forgiveness

To all of the customers of the local florist who got sneezing powder in their flowers last Tuesday, I apologize. You were really not the intended victims. I just wanted to make you angry at the florist, my stingy employer. I wasn't trying to hurt you. Bill

I'm sorry. You were waiting for the car to get out of the parking place so you could back in. I slid in forward—I *had* to do this because I was *desperate* to get into the store so I could use the men's room, and there were *no other spaces*. My apologies. I hope you read this and understand. Driver of gray Honda.

To all my high school classmates, I am so sorry for those mornings when I came to school without brushing my teeth. I don't know where I got the idea that if I didn't eat, I didn't need to brush. I know you tried to hint, but I didn't "get it."

For all the things that happened to you as a kid that I never knew about. Maybe you were told not to tell me, but I should have been there for you, and you should have been able to tell me anything. For the fact that you weren't and I wasn't, I am truly sorry. Mom

Recently, I discovered several websites on which people can anonymously post apologies like those above. Some who post on these sites apparently don't know how to reach those they have wronged. In the case of others, the person wronged is deceased. Still others seem unwilling or not yet prepared to apologize directly to the individuals. Some of the postings are humorous; some are far more weighty. I think all of us can find a part of ourselves in one of them.

In a sermon called "To Whom Much is Forgiven," twentieth-century existentialist theologian Paul Tillich offers a perspective that speaks to people such as the above, and to all of us. Tillich wrote, "Forgiveness is an answer, the divine answer, to the question implied in our existence" (*The New Being* [New York: Scribner's, 1955]).

I would suggest that there are at least three questions "implied in our existence," to which forgiveness is God's answer. For example, in the apology of the mother, if you are the child who has been wounded, who perhaps experienced abuse when you were little, and whose mother

did nothing to stop it, the question implied is *How do I keep bitterness, anger, hate, or the desire for revenge from consuming me?* If you are the mother who feels great guilt because you didn't step in to stop the abuse, there are perhaps two questions implied: *How can I be reconciled to the one I wronged?* and *How can my burden of guilt be removed?*

Every one of us asks questions like these, and God's answer to each of them is forgiveness. While abuse may not have been a part of our story, at some point we've been wronged, at some point we've failed to intervene to stop someone else from being wronged, and in one way or another we've all wronged others. If we are not to spend our lives stumbling in the dark as wounded, angry human beings, we must know and carry with us the answer—God's answer: forgiveness.

MAKING SENSE OF SIN

Making sense of forgiveness means talking about *sin*, a word certain to make some people cringe. It brings to

mind preachers who use the word to beat people down, or to frighten and intimidate children, applying it to all sorts of acts that aren't really sin, from going to the movies to learning to dance. But understood correctly, the concept of sin is one that serves a very useful purpose in any discussion of forgiveness.

The Greek and Hebrew words most often translated as *sin* in the Bible refer to “missing the mark” (think archery and an arrow that misses the target) or “straying from the path” (picture someone wandering off a trail and getting hopelessly lost). The implication is that there is a mark, an ideal, or a path that we are meant to follow in order to have a proper relationship with others and with God. We are meant to love. We are meant to do justice. We are meant to care for people and put their needs before our own. We are meant to tell the truth, to be faithful, to do the kind and loving thing. If we did these things all the time, there would be no need for forgiveness.

I suspect that all of us, whether we have any religious

faith or not, could agree that there is a way we're meant to live, an ideal path we should take. We know, too, that most of us struggle in walking that path. We stray at times. In fact, it seems to be the human condition that we stray too often and too easily. We use the word *temptation* to describe those things that draw us away.

The Bible opens with a story of temptation, one that is the archetype or pattern for how we human beings have struggled and succumbed ever since. In the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, God offered paradise if this first couple would obey a simple rule: don't eat from one tree. They could eat anything else they wanted, but, essentially, God said to them, "This one tree will bring harm to you and your offspring. This is the path: enjoy everything, and be fruitful and multiply. Just avoid that tree right over there." But, of course, that was the one tree they came most desperately to desire.

Some readers take the story literally, some figuratively, but nearly all agree that it points to our struggle

with rules, with limits, and with the path. The story also points to the truth that, from the beginning, God gave humanity a profound, wonderful, and dreadful gift—freedom to walk in the path, or stray from it.

Sometimes, our straying from the path is inadvertent. I think of the last time I was pulled over for speeding. (Yes, it has happened more than once.) I truly did not mean to be going so fast. I told the officer as I handed him my license, “I’m sorry. I wasn’t paying attention.” That actually did not help my cause. Rather, he suggested that my comment was worthy of a second ticket!

On other occasions, we know the path but make a conscious decision to stray from it. We realize the path calls us to be honest, but being honest might lose us the deal, or cost us more taxes, or embarrass us. So, we step off the path, hoping no one finds out and planning to get back on somewhere down the way.

Yes, Adam and Eve’s story is our story. Healthy autonomy turns to unhealthy ego. *I* become the most

important thing in my life, the thing around which the entire universe revolves. I live my life with blinders on, thinking only, “How can I be happy? How can I be safe?” I begin to care less and less about you as I go after what benefits me. I ignore your feelings while seeking to avoid suffering myself. I fail to do the right and loving thing, and sometimes do the hurtful thing in my relationships with others. The more that happens, the further I get from the path. And when I hurt you, you may well hurt me, meaning we both move further from the ideal, and the gap between us widens. The distance between where we are and where we are meant to be, along with the things we have done to create that distance and the hurt it has caused for others, is all part of what we call sin. We feel sin as a wall around us, or a gulf between us and others. When we decide at last to close that gap, to heal the breach, we must seek out the answer God has provided: forgiveness.

But what is it we are actually looking for when we seek forgiveness? We are not asking the other person to

excuse what we've done, but rather to pardon us. We are looking for reconciliation, for the restoration of our relationship. We are asking for that person to release the right to retaliate. When my wife LaVon and I have conflict, often the result of something insensitive I have said or done, my request for forgiveness is a plea that she not hold my sin between us, separating us from each other, but that she break down the wall, so I might be in right relationship with her again.

In seeking and finding forgiveness, we experience pardon and restoration, which offer a new beginning, and we return to the path.

THE BURDEN OF GUILT AND SEPARATION FROM GOD

There is another party who is affected by any sin that we commit against another. When our action or inaction hurts someone, we're also wounding our relationship with God, for it is God's path we stray from. It may

take time, but at some point, that additional breach begins to make itself known. As our sins pile up and the gap increases between the ideal and the actual, we begin to feel further and further removed from God. We pray, but our prayers don't seem to go anywhere. We no longer feel God's presence. After a while, we may wonder if God even exists. We struggle. Life becomes harder and harder, because we're not on the path God intended human beings to walk. The psalmist reflected the spiritual impact of our straying from God's path in the seven so-called Penitential Psalms. You can feel the angst the psalmist felt at being separated from God, and you can feel the weight of that sin. It is a weight we call guilt. In Psalm 32, part of which opens this chapter, the psalmist describes the feeling of alienation from God:

For day and night your hand
 was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as
 by the heat of summer.