

Can I Forgive God?

By Kyle Pope

The title of this article demands that I make a few points clear from the very beginning:

1. God Never Does Wrong! Sin by its very definition is the violation of God's law (1 John 3:4). As the Lawgiver, it is God who defines what's right and what's wrong. Any sense of moral righteousness that man possesses is due to the revelation of God, or His creation of a moral consciousness within us. In an absolute sense there is never anything God can do for which He needs our forgiveness. Moses declared, "**His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice, a God of truth and without injustice; righteous and upright is He**" (Deut. 32:4). Elihu said truly, "**Far be it from God to do wickedness, and from the Almighty to commit iniquity**" (Job 34:10, NKJV). Even so, it must be recognized that...

2. Man Cannot Always Understand All of God's Ways. An ant is not capable of understanding why humans do not want it invading our pantries. We cannot reason with it and bring it to a rational understanding that it must stay in its place. An ant, no matter how marvelous a wonder of God's creation, must be controlled whether it understands why or not. God in His makeup and power is infinitely greater than we are in comparison to an ant. He has given us more understanding than an ant, but we cannot begin to know why He does all of the things He does. While we can understand *what* He demands of us (Eph. 5:17), we may never understand *why*. Paul declared, "**Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!**" (Rom. 11:33). So, although we are told that God does not do wrong, since we cannot understand all of His ways, it is possible that...

3. Our Misunderstanding of God May Cause Us to Charge Him with Wrong. Job is praised for the fact that in spite of all that the Lord allowed him to suffer "**Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong**" (Job 1:22). We are not all as strong as Job. We want to understand. We want to make sense of it all. Yet, sometimes, when it doesn't seem to make sense, the unanswered questions lead us to blame God. The wise man reminds us, "**As you do not know what is the way of the wind, or how the bones grow in the womb of her who is with child, so you do not know the works of God who makes everything.**" (Ecc. 11:5).

What Do We Choose to Do With This?

In spite of the fact that God can never truly be charged with any wrong for which He needs our forgiveness, that may not change our perception. Many people come to feel that experiences He has allowed us to suffer or expectations He demands of us make them *feel* as if God has done them wrong. We can choose to respond to this in a number of ways. We can...

1. Harbor Resentment Against God. Many people live their lives with great bitterness towards God. They grit their teeth, shake their fists, and in anger demand to know "**WHY!**" When no answers satisfy this question they settle into a condition in which they must constantly hang onto the anger that leads them to say to themselves "I'll never serve a God like that!" The problem is that this resolves nothing. Resentment *of* God doesn't

change our accountability *to* God. **“It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment”** (Heb. 9:27). **“We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad”** (2 Cor. 5:10). Further, resentment demands great energy and attention. When you resent someone you must constantly remind yourself what he or she has done that caused the resentment. You must guard your actions lest you accidentally fail to treat that person with the distance and disdain that resentment demands. This is why some will seek to resolve their case against Deity by...

2. Trying to Avoid God. Empty pews and missed Bible studies don't always come from an intellectual rejection of the truth of the gospel. Sometimes we imagine that if we do not expose ourselves to reminders of who God is it changes our need to answer to Him. David recognized. **“Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?”** (Ps. 139:7). The inadequacy of these two approaches leaves us groping for better alternatives to settle our case against our Creator. Rather than bitterness and avoidance allow me to suggest two more practical solutions.

3. Choose to Trust God. What does it mean to *trust God*? Is it simply believing that He exists? Is it just a confidence that Jesus died for our sins? These things are important but there is more to it than just the intellectual acceptance of these truths. Trust is a confidence that even when we don't understand we assure ourselves that His commands are **“for our good always”** (Deut. 6:4). This is not a blind fog, oblivious to life's challenges. Christians recognize that this life is **“full of trouble”** (Job 14:1). Trust is choosing to believe, even when it's hard to see how, that **“all things work together for good to those who love God”** (Rom. 8:28). Does that mean we always smile through every dark day? No. Does that mean we never struggle with understanding why God allows certain things? No. Remember Job? He never charged God with wrong (Job 1:22), but he did maintain a hope and assurance that declared, **“Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him”** (Job 13:5). His very words show that He felt as if what God had allowed him to suffer was something God had done to him. Even so, he continued to say within himself **“I trust Him.”**

Now we know from the account that God did not *slay* Job—Satan was behind it all (Job 1:12; 2:7), using the sinful choices of the Sabeans (Job 1:15) and the Chaldeans (Job 1:17), together with his own manipulation of natural laws (1:16, 18; 2:7).^{*} It was Satan that *slew* him! We must never confuse God's allowance of something with His direct action. The remarkable thing about Job is that even though He didn't distinguish God's allowance from His direct action he did not let the sins of others compromise His trust in God! We often do that. Because others fail us we refuse to trust God. Job understood that **“God is faithful”** (1 Cor. 1:9; 10:13; 2 Cor. 1:18). This was a choice Job made even at a time when it was difficult for him to fully understand. This is a choice we also can make, but to do so we may first need to...

^{*} Job 1:16 does state that **“The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants”** but this may simply be referring to lightening. We must remember that God told Satan **“all that he has is in your power”** (Job 1:12), so it was Satan that used this **“fire of God”** whatever its nature.

4. Choose to Forgive God. The Bible uses a number of different terms that we translate with the English word “forgive.” While these terms can apply to one’s legal need for pardon due to the violation of God’s law, they can also apply to things that may not involve sin. In this sense these words call upon one party to release another party from something held over them. For example, when Nabal showed David great disrespect, his wife Abigail had not done anything wrong. In her wisdom, however, she went to David and said two things: 1) **“On me, my lord, on me let this iniquity be!”** (1 Sam. 25:24), and then she begged him, 2) **“Please forgive the trespass of your maidservant”** (1 Sam. 25:28). In asking David to *forgive* her Abigail used the Hebrew word *nasa’* (נָשָׂא) meaning “to lift, bear up, carry, take” (BDB). She had done nothing wrong but she called upon David, to *bear* the insult of her husband (which she sought to take upon herself). We might put it that she asked him to just “take it” without revenge.

In the New Testament the most common word that is translated “forgive” is the Greek word *aphiemi* (ἀφίημι) meaning “to send away” (Thayer). This word is used in the parable of the unmerciful servant, of what the king did to the man who owed him 10,000 talents—he **“made him free of the debt”** (Matt. 18:27, BBE). It can apply generally to releasing or letting something go. This can be used positively, as in the case of the apostles having **“left all”** to follow Jesus (Mark 10:28) or the fever *leaving* the nobleman’s son when Jesus healed him (John 4:52). It can even be used negatively of the Pharisees **“laying aside”** the commandments of God by their traditions (Mark 7:8) or the brethren in Ephesus having **“left”** their **“first love”** (Rev. 2:4). Even so, this is the same word used of God’s forgiveness of our sins (Jas. 5:15; 1 John 1:9), He dismisses them—He *sends them away*. This is what we are commanded to do to others. We are to pray **“forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors”** (Matt. 6:12). We must be willing to “let it go.”

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Let me make it clear again that I am not saying that God has ever truly wronged us. What I am talking about is our own difficulty to understand things about God that may trouble us. We should strive to understand and trust what God has revealed to us about Himself, but when the struggle stirs in our hearts what will we do? The best choice to make, in the face of our inevitable accountability before God, is in trust to choose to *let it go*—this is forgiveness. Even in English, the definition of our word “forgive” is to “stop feeling angry or resentful toward (someone) for an offense, flaw, or mistake” (*New Oxford Dictionary*). If we don’t understand something about God, we need to “stop feeling angry or resentful toward” Him and choose not to hold our misunderstanding against Him.

Our hope in obedience to the gospel is that God will forgive us of those things in which we have *truly* wronged Him. If we hope that God will “send away” our sins, we must be willing to trust that (even if we don’t understand it) God has never wronged us. We can choose to *bear* the uncertainty. We can decide to *let it go*. We can choose to dismiss our resentment. We can ask ourselves in those things we may not understand, **“can I forgive God?”**