

Born to Win

The Sin Unforgiven

by Ronald L. Dart

Every so often someone asks me about the *unpardonable sin*. It's a disturbing idea, that—that there might be something I could do that could *never* be forgiven. I know it's a common question because, when you do an internet search on that specific expression—"unpardonable sin"—you get 154,000 hits. And since I've had this question just in the last day or so, I thought that maybe I should tell you what I know about the unpardonable sin.

It is, I think, rather more complicated than a set of a few prooftexts that are commonly quoted and explained. Let me start with what God is *really* like. The image people carry around in their heads about God often bears little resemblance to the *real* God of Creation in the Bible. To some, God is kind of a grandfather in the sky. Not a father, because a father is immediate, judgmental. A father watches what you do, and if it isn't good he may tell you about it. No, a grandfather is better because they let you get away with more stuff. I might despair of *really* understanding God if it weren't for some revealing statements in the Bible, one of which is contained in the ninth chapter of Jeremiah. Jeremiah, quoting God, says this in verse 23:

Jeremiah 9

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²³ Thus says the LORD, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches:

²⁴ But let him that glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, says the LORD.

That's really wonderful. For one thing, it tells us that we *can* know and understand God. That's encouraging. The problem is, we need to understand him as he *is*, not as we *wish* he were. Now, lovingkindness, for example, is good; that fits well with the grandfather image. And I have good reason in *my* life to be thankful for God's lovingkindness. But it's that *second* attribute that can make your skin crawl. He says, "I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness *and judgment*." Now, just what does that mean? I could perhaps give you a definition, but I can do better than that. I can tell you a story to illustrate what that means.

When Israel went down into Egypt, it was to escape a famine. But when the famine was over, they made a fatal mistake: They didn't go home, they took up residence in Egypt. The Egyptian population at the time was somewhat effete, and the growing strength of the Israelites—not only in numbers, but physical strength—was worrisome. They had more babies, and because they were outdoor types and farmers and herders, they were generally stronger than the Egyptians, who had most of their work done by servants. So in time, the Israelite population came to be viewed as a threat. The Egyptian solution was to enslave them and to do their best to *work them to death*. Didn't work. The more they afflicted them, the stronger and more populous they became. So, Pharaoh adopted a policy that's been variously applied at different times in human history—the policy of infanticide. He called in the Hebrew

midwives and instructed them to kill all the male children being born and to save the females alive. The midwives, as soon as they saw the gender of the child...brand new baby coming out of the birth canal, (and the Hebrew women tended to use what is called a “birthing stool”)...as soon as they saw the gender of the child, they were to crack the heads of the little boys on the birthing stool and kill them. It’s essentially the same procedure used today called “partial-birth abortion”. It’s too late to be an abortion. It’s actually government-approved *infanticide*. Well, the Hebrew midwives weren’t having any of that, so they pulled a deal on Pharaoh and pretended. They said, “We just can’t do it. The Hebrew women give the babies birth before we get there.” So Pharaoh then adopted a more drastic solution. He said...(You’ll find this in Exodus, first chapter, verse 22):

Exodus 1

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²² And Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, Every son that is born you shall cast into the river, and every daughter you shall save alive.

Now, it’s strange how a *whole population* could be dragged into this terrible crime, but they were. He charged “all his people” to do this. Any Hebrew baby that was a boy was taken to the river bank and thrown to the crocodiles. It’s hard to imagine the *hardening* effect this would have had on a person’s conscious—to take a little baby boy and throw him in the river to drown. It would have been a *debasement* experience for the population.

Now, pause at this point and ask yourself what God’s response to all this might be. Can he just let this go? Can he come down into Egypt and deliver the Israelites without any further loss of life—just get them out of there? But what about that second word in God’s own description of himself—the word “judgment”? Because after all, God is a *judge*. The death of the firstborn of all of Egypt on the night of the Passover is disturbing. What about that?

Well, if you’ve seen the movie presentations of the Exodus, you probably know what the first plague was that God visited on Egypt. The special effects weren’t all that great when Charlton Heston played Moses, but we still got the point. Aaron touched the river with his rod and turned the river Nile into *blood*. Why the river? Why blood? Well, because that’s where the Egyptians—all of them—participated in throwing little Israelite boys to drown. Nothing Moses could have done would have been more symbolic of this act. So why didn’t Pharaoh say that he and the Egyptians were sorry, and then let the Israelites go? And right here we have another very troubling idea. The Bible tells us that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart and didn’t allow him to repent. Now, I’m often asked about this; because the very idea of hardening a man’s heart seems to run contrary to what *think* we know about God and about man. The idea of God as a judge is more than a little bit frightening, but we need to understand what’s taking place here. In the seventh chapter of Exodus, verse three, God says this:

Exodus 7

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³ And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt.

⁴ But Pharaoh shall not listen to you, that I may lay my hand on Egypt, and bring forth my armies, and my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great judgments.

Don’t lose track of that last word. Egypt had *enslaved* the Israelites. They had treated them with great *cruelty*. They had built their entire economy on Israelite slave labor, and killed the sons of the Israelites to boot. God was determined that Egypt had to *pay* for that. Israel couldn’t just walk away and leave Egypt as it was. So God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and would not allow him to repent, so he could *destroy* Egypt’s slave-built economy...and so he could avenge all those little babies the Egyptian people—all of them—had thrown to the crocodiles. What we have here is a classic example of an

unpardonable sin—a sin so grievous that God could not *allow* a nation to repent, but had to make them go through the consequences of their sin. It was the hardened heart that prevented repentance and, in turn, denied forgiveness. And it left the Egyptian economy in a shambles and the firstborn of every Egyptian family dead.

Now, I know most people who ask about the unpardonable sin are not thinking about *temporal* judgment. And the judgment that fell on Egypt was temporal, not eternal. But you can't take temporal judgment out of the equation.

As we continue, keep in mind that there are two kinds of judgment: temporal, which has to do with this world and this life; and eternal. The apostle Paul, when he wrote to the Romans, was at some pains to chastise those people who brushed God aside and lived their lives as if there was no judgment forthcoming. “There’s no God. Nothing’s going to happen. One code of conduct is as good as another; we just have to judge it by how well it works.” That’s the way they lived. In the first chapter, he speaks of the results of denying God; and he shows the corruption that was rampant in the Roman Empire from the suppressing of the truth about God. He rolls off a list of the sins and corruption that was *plain* to their eyes. And having invited his readers, Paul... I almost suspect him of a little duplicity here—of setting his readers up—because, having invited his readers to really judge these sinners as worthy of divine retribution (and I can hear them saying, “Amen, give it to them, Paul!”), he then asks them to look at themselves. Chapter 2, verse 1:

Romans 2

AKJV

¹ Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are that judge: for wherein you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you that judge do the same things.

Oh, wow! What a *powerful* thing to say. I mean, to make a person realize...you’re sitting around here judging people for all these things. You’re saying, “Yes sir. Amen. Give it to those terrible sinners.” And he says, “Look, *you do the same things.*”

Romans 2

AKJV

² But we are sure that the judgment of God is according to truth against them which commit such things.

“We’re just fine with that. We believe it’s *good* for God to judge those people who do these things.”

Romans 2

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³ And do you think, O man, that judge them who do such things, and do the same, that you shall escape the judgment of God?

“Or maybe it’s this: Maybe you...”

Romans 2

KJ2000

⁴ [...] despise you the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?

What Paul is saying to them is, “Look you can judge these people all you want; you do the same things. And the *only reason* you are any different is because God took you by the hand (or maybe by the nose)

and led you to repentance.” Now, this has some *very strong* implications for what happened to the Egyptians. It implies that a man must be led to repentance by God or he will never get there. And it’s the *Spirit* of God that convicts a man of sin, and softens his heart, and leads him to repentance. Paul goes on to say, “Do you despise the riches of his goodness? Do you not know that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?”

Romans 2

AKJV

⁵ But after your hardness and impenitent heart [...]:

Do you hear the echo in these words in what happened to the Egyptians? God *hardened* their heart. But the implication of this is that what God did was to *refuse* to grant repentance to them. And since he didn’t grant it to them, they couldn’t have it. Think about what happened in Egypt. God sent a plague and Pharaoh relented. This is one of the really interesting stories as you make your way through that whole long series of plagues. A great plague will come upon them and Pharaoh, in the depth of the plague, will relent; he’ll actually say, “Okay, Israel can go.” Then God took away the plague, and Pharaoh returned to his natural state and wouldn’t let them go. How did God harden Pharaoh’s heart? Well, Pharaoh’s heart was hard to start with. He hardened his heart by removing the plague.

The truth is, God grants repentance to you and me through his Spirit; and often as not it is *our own kind of plague* that brings us to the point of repentance, calling out to God, and the recognition of a need for God. We may not ever find relief from our plague in this life, because it is the *pain* that brought us to repentance in the first place. Where would we be if God took away the pain? Paul said,

Romans 2

AKJV

⁵ But after your hardness and impenitent heart treasure up to yourself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God;

And I will tell you, you *cannot* understand and know God unless or until you understand and know him as *judge*. “The day...”

Romans 2

AKJV

⁵ [...] of the righteous judgment of God;

⁶ Who will render to every man according to his deeds:

⁷ To them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life:

⁸ But to them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath[.]

You ought to think about that. I know we believe that salvation is by Jesus and nothing else—that it is strictly his grace and his power that rescues us—but listen to what Paul says: “To those who by patient continuance in *well doing*, he will give eternal life.” Also, it’s worth noting in this thing that God does not seem to be very concerned about how comfortable we are. He’s playing for higher stakes than that. Paul, who wrote these words, understood better than most that the way of the repentant heart is not smooth. He said in chapter 12 of Second Corinthians:

2 Corinthians 12

AKJV

² I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or

whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knows;) such an one caught up to the third heaven.

³ And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knows;)

⁴ How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

Now, commentaries...and, really, you'll see it yourself if you read through this: Paul is talking about himself in the third person. He is the man. And this happened to him before the vision of John described in Revelation, but it's similar. John also heard words that he was forbidden to write down [Revelation 10:4]. Paul said,

2 Corinthians 12

AKJV

⁵ Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in my infirmities.

Now, that's interesting. Paul said that, "The only thing I can glory in are my *infirmities*."

2 Corinthians 12

AKJV

⁶ For though I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool; for I will say the truth: but now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he sees me to be, or that he hears of me.

"I don't want to try to tell you, 'Well, I had this heavenly vision and therefore you should follow me.' I'm not telling you that. What you see me to be and what you hear from me is all I expect you to consider."

2 Corinthians 12

AKJV

⁷ And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.

We don't know what that was. Paul did not feel it necessary to explain it any further than that. He said, "I just had to have a thorn in the flesh, because if I hadn't have had it I would have become exalted in my own eyes."

2 Corinthians 12

AKJV

⁸ For this thing I sought the Lord thrice [*three times*], that it might depart from me.

⁹ And he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. [...]

What an answer. "You don't need...I'm not going to take this thorn away from you. My grace is enough for you. My strength is made *perfect in weakness*." Paul said,

2 Corinthians 12

AKJV

⁹ [...] Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest on me.

¹⁰ Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

Wow! What a thing to say. It finally dawned on Paul that it was the *pain* that led him to repentance; and to some extent it was the pain that kept him there. A man who has no sense of need will never come to God. It is the *needy* who come and the *needy* who stay. Our prosperity? Our prosperity may be a curse.

They brought a man to Jesus who was...

Matthew 12

AKJV

²² [...] possessed with a devil, blind, and dumb: and he healed him, so that the blind and dumb both spoke and saw.

²³ And all the people were amazed, and said, Is not this the son of David? [*Which meant he must be the Messiah.*]

²⁴ But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, This fellow does not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils.

Now, this represents a common explanation of the unpardonable sin—that is, the attribution of the work of the Spirit of God to the devil, which is what they were doing. Which leads me to be pretty careful about what I say about miracles out there.

Matthew 12

AKJV

²⁵ And Jesus knew their thoughts, and said to them, Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand:

²⁶ And if Satan cast out Satan, he is divided against himself; how shall then his kingdom stand?

He then says a little later,

Matthew 12

KJ2000

³⁰ He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathers not with me scatters abroad.

³¹ Therefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit shall not be forgiven unto men.

Well, after all, it is the Holy Spirit that makes repentance possible. Drive the Holy Spirit away and you're *done for*; because you will not be able to repent, not be able to find repentance, and not be able to hold on to it.

Matthew 12

KJ2000

³² And whosoever speaks a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, nor in the world to come.

So, what are we dealing with? Two level of judgments: temporal and eternal. Peter may have been driving at this question of temporal judgment in his first letter—First Peter, chapter 4, verse 16. He says,

1 Peter 4

NIV '84

¹⁶ However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

So, you kind of have to face up to it. Judgment is begun *now*. There is a temporal judgment on the household of God, which means that we are going to have to deal with our sins, our mistakes and our stupidity—right here, right now.

Now, having said that, I want to turn to the figure that bothers people the most in the Bible—the man, Judas. We consider this man with some dread because, if he could do this, what's to keep us from going down that road? Can Judas be forgiven? Or is he lost forever? At the Last Supper, Jesus said something... well, something somewhat disturbing. He said, "There's one here that shall betray me." The disciples were really worried by that...

Matthew 26

KJ2000

²² [...] and began every one of them to say unto him, Lord, is it I?

²³ And he answered and said, He that dips his hand with me in the dish, the same shall betray me.

²⁴ The Son of man goes as it is written of him: but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born.

Wow! It's better to not to even have been born than to face what Judas faced. You know, what he's saying here, I think, is there are some crimes that are simply too terrible ever to forgive. Consider this: God has said that he will forgive us and remember our sins no more. That's a *great* relief. But here's the problem: We *do* remember our sins; we *know* what we have done. The human mind is like a closet you can never clean out—everything goes in there and stays there *forever* and becomes a part of who you are. Without repentance, washing, and forgiveness, you will stay guilty forever. But when repentance and baptism lead us back to God, we become a sinner forgiven. We become witnesses for the grace of God. Judas could not live with his sin, so he took his own life. The difference between you and Judas can be that the grace of God has led you to repentance. In *your* closet the memory of the sin is there, but the *grace* of God is there to cover it.

I think a lot of Christian folk get confused between the temporal penalties for sin (or temporal consequences) and the eternal penalty for sin. If you get drunk and drive your car into a tree and lose your arm, God will forgive you of the sin, but you will live the rest of your life without your arm. If you have premarital sex and lose your virginity, God will forgive you, but you will never be a virgin again and you will never know you did not do that. The greatest danger, I think, to Christians who sin, is that they may *lose hope*. Jeremiah addressed this on one occasion. He said,

Jeremiah 18

AKJV

¹¹ Now therefore go to, speak to the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying, Thus said the LORD; Behold, I frame evil against you, and devise a device against you: return you now every one from his evil way, and make your ways and your doings good.

¹² And they said, There is no hope: but we will walk after our own devices[...]

“We’ll just go ahead and live the rest of our lives the way we’ve done it up to now.” What a foolish mistake, because there is *always* hope.

Until next time, I’m Ronald Dart.

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