

As Far as the East is from the West

Psalms 103 (NIV)

Of David. ¹ Praise the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. ² Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits— ³ who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, ⁴ who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, ⁵ who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. ⁶ The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed. ⁷ He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel. ⁸ The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. ⁹ He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; ¹⁰ he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. ¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; ¹² as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. ¹³ As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; ¹⁴ for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. ¹⁵ The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; ¹⁶ the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. ¹⁷ But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children— ¹⁸ with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts. ¹⁹ The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all. ²⁰ Praise the LORD, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word. ²¹ Praise the LORD, all his heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will. ²² Praise the LORD, all his works everywhere in his dominion. Praise the LORD, my soul.

What Bible book, chapter, and verse will you find the passage: "Forgive and forget"? And if you are thinking to yourself right now, "I know it's in there, but I can't remember quite where," I don't blame you. It seems like it's a quote from the Bible, but the first writing that contains this phrase is actually from *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes. So, is this a biblically founded truth that we are to live by: forgive and forget or is it just a memorable literary phrase?

Forgive. Someone wrongs you, they say that they're sorry, and instead of saying, "Don't worry about it" or "It's okay," you say, "I forgive you." You forgive them because they did something wrong. They did hurt you – whether they did it knowingly or willingly or ignorantly or accidentally. You were wronged, and that's not okay. It's concerning. But by forgiving them, you are choosing to not hold this wrong against them – like a debt that is wiped out, paid in full, never to be collected on again.

We forgive because God taught us to in our second Bible reading today, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32) We forgive people not because they will make it up to us, not because we want to let it go, not because we see potential in this person. We forgive because God forgave us in Christ. We even pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." And there is nothing that Christ has not forgiven us.

How about forget? Are we supposed to forget how we were wronged, sinned against, or even our own grievous sins?

Imagine being Joseph, as we heard about him in our first Bible reading today. At one time, Joseph's brothers hated him so much that they plotted to kill him but instead settled for selling him into slavery. Through God's care and providence, he placed Joseph in a prominent position in Egypt years later where he saved his family from starvation. But the brothers remembered what they did to Joseph. When their father, Jacob, died, they figured Joseph would finally take his revenge. They worried that Joseph had never forgotten their sin against him, just as they haven't. Joseph made it clear that he had forgiven his brothers, but did he ever forget? If you were Joseph, would you have ever forgotten family members doing such horrible things to you as Joseph's did?

It probably doesn't take a whole lot of imagination to picture yourself in Joseph's place. No doubt you have been wronged more times than you can count. Every time you see that person or think about them, their sin comes to mind. It's nearly involuntary. You've forgiven them (hopefully), but you cannot forget what they've done to you. And this isn't just with other people. We do this to ourselves. With our own sins and sins committed against us, it's as if we tie a string to the sin and attach it to our arms so that it follows us wherever we go. We cannot separate ourselves from our sins.

That's us and the sins we know about. Imagine being God. He knows all things that we do – every action and every thought. Anything we do wrong, we are ultimately wronging God. You turn a blind eye to your neighbor's needs, and you're not just wronging that person but you are also wronging God who made that person and who commanded you to look after your neighbor. You cheat on a test at school, and you're not just sinning against your teacher or your school, but also against God who gave you those things for your benefit. God sees all the wrong we do and think, and he does not have a faulty memory like we do. With our constant

imperfection, with our perpetual sinning, there is no way that we can ever repay the debt of sin that we have racked up against God. Can God look at us with anything except contempt as he sees all our sins tied to us, following with us and hanging on to us?

So, what does God do with all our sins following us through life? David tells us, “The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” (verses 8-12) God has chosen to not just forgive our sins and wipe out our debt against him and everyone else, but also to remove them from us. He cuts the strings we have tied to keep our sins with ourselves and with others. All our sins float away, as far as the east is from the west. You might say that eventually east and west meet, but think about this practically. If you start traveling east and continue going east the entire time, do you ever travel west? No. This is how far God has removed your sins from you, from each person. You never meet up with them again. They’re totally gone.

Why does he do this? Because he knows we can’t handle them or because he is some nice old grandpa who says, “Boys will be boys,” and winks away our wrongdoing? Does he do this because he sees potential in us and that we are worth a second chance? Quite frankly, no. The Lord removes our sins from us as far as far as the east is from the west, never to meet them again, because of Christ. Christ suffered every ounce of pain and torment that our sins deserved, paying every cent that our mountain of debt incurred against God and against others. Christ paid the whole price. The strings that attached us to our sins have been cut and all tied to Christ. By his sacrificial suffering and death, God has removed our sins as far as the east is from the west, never to meet you or be with you again. In Christ, your sins will never come back to you, never be reattached to your life or your name. In Christ, your sins are forgiven and forgotten.

Now live as someone who has his sins removed from him as far as the east is from the west, never to be with you again. Every time your memory tries to tie a string to one of your sins and bring it back to you or you want to keep a sin someone committed against you attached to the person who did it, remember that Christ cut that string. It’s gone. Think of others and yourself as God does. In Christ, God accepts you and treats you as one who has never sinned, one who has never done anything wrong.

This changes how we interact with others. Being human, we may never be able to forget what someone has done wrong against us, but in Christ we can and do and will forgive them. We forgive others who have wronged us because Christ has paid the price for their sins. He has cut the strings that tie their sin down to them just as he did for us. So, if your brother or sister in Christ sins against you 7 times or 77 times or 77,000 times, you forgive and forgive and forgive every single time. You choose not to tie this sin to them, never to use it against them, never to exact payment from them for how they have wronged you, and never to identify them by their sins. No, we identify as being forgiven because we forgive all others as we have been forgiven in Christ. We will need help with this because we want to bring up the sins and hold them against ourselves and others. So, every time we want to grab our own sin or the sin of another and tie it to them, we look to the cross and remember that Christ has removed this from them as far as the east is from the west. Christ has made it so that their sin, my sin, is completely removed. In Christ, our sin will never follow us ever again.

God has removed our sins as far as the east is from the west. And so we do not identify each other by the sins we have committed, but as someone who sins are removed and are completely gone – forgotten by God. So we sing like David: “Praise the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits— who forgives all your sins.” (verses 1-3a) In Christ, your sins are forgiven and forgotten, never to be with you again. The Lord has removed your sins from you as far as the east is from the west. Amen.