



# Lutheran<sup>®</sup>

## L I F E

WINTER 2021

*Inside this issue:*

*Forgiveness:  
what it is, who  
it's for, and how  
it changes lives.*



When Adam and Eve gave in to Satan's temptation to eat the forbidden fruit in the Garden, sin entered the world. At once, they felt shame, guilt, and a need to justify themselves by placing blame on someone else.

But the fall also gave birth to something else: forgiveness. That is, excusing an offense without exacting a penalty from the offender. Instead, God would exact that penalty from His own Son.

# What is Re

In fact, before God spoke words of consequence over Adam and Eve (because sin does bear consequences!), He breathed out hope for restoration to come through woman's offspring. Despite the multiplied pain Eve would now experience in childbearing, through her labor, a Savior would be born to make all things new (see Genesis 3:14–19). From the beginning, we witness God's reconciling power promised amid sin and fulfilled through forgiveness in Jesus.

The name-calling, finger-pointing, and pure ugliness of excusing our wrongs continue to plague humanity today. The need for God's promised forgiveness has never been timelier.

For Christians, recognizing sin at the root of interpersonal conflict is imperative. If we don't recognize sin's role in conflict, we could resolve a material issue without recognizing the eternal significance it carries. This is resolved through forgiveness.

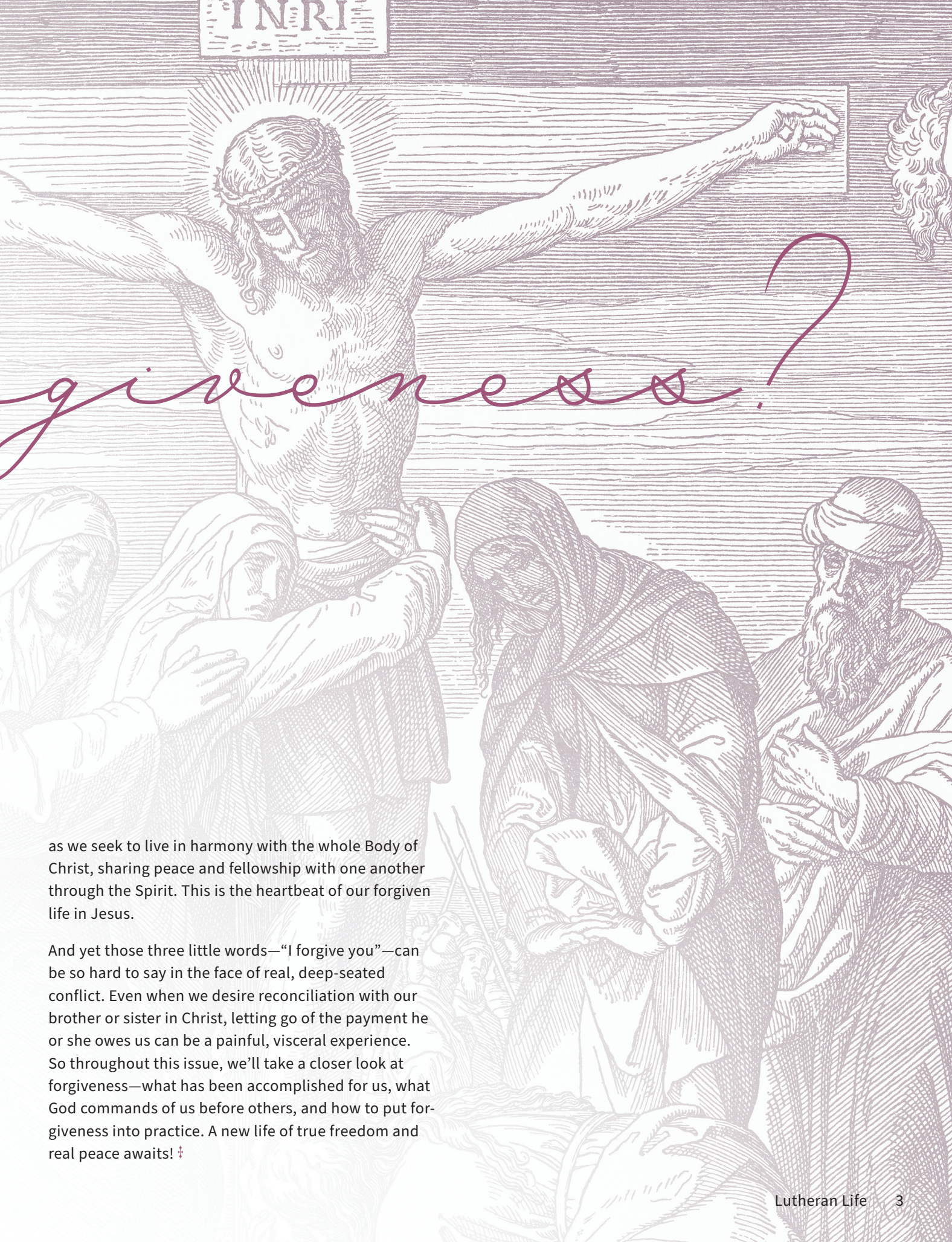
So thanks be to God that "[Jesus] Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2:24). In an email conversation for this article, author Donna (Pyle) Snow put it this way: "As He hung on the cross, Jesus asked God to forgive those who drove in the nails. When Jesus died, all of our sins were future sins. There is not a sin any of us commit that He cannot, did not, or has not already forgiven on Calvary. Forgiveness is a finished work. Receiving and extending that finished work means abundant life!"

When we are baptized and redeemed in Jesus, we become new creations. We can enjoy a restored relationship with God and extend forgiveness to others.

This is the central message of the Christian faith. Without God's forgiveness, won for us in Jesus, we're a people without hope. Our justified end is destruction; our glory is shame (see Philippians 3:19). But when we are baptized and redeemed in Jesus, we become new creations. We can enjoy a restored relationship with God and extend forgiveness to others.

This message is at the heart of our worship. Each week, we gather to once again confess our failings before God and man. Each week, we are once again reminded of God's great love for us in Jesus. We hear the pastor absolve us with God's forgiveness and proclaim to us the Gospel message of God's undeserved grace and mercy for us. We physically take in Jesus' forgiveness, paid for with His body and blood, as we eat and drink the sacramental bread and wine. We partake in this meal





# forgiveness?

as we seek to live in harmony with the whole Body of Christ, sharing peace and fellowship with one another through the Spirit. This is the heartbeat of our forgiven life in Jesus.

And yet those three little words—"I forgive you"—can be so hard to say in the face of real, deep-seated conflict. Even when we desire reconciliation with our brother or sister in Christ, letting go of the payment he or she owes us can be a painful, visceral experience. So throughout this issue, we'll take a closer look at forgiveness—what has been accomplished for us, what God commands of us before others, and how to put forgiveness into practice. A new life of true freedom and real peace awaits! †





# JESUS

## THE ATONING SACRIFICE

How often do you stop and deeply reflect on the meaning of Christ's death on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins?

This truth is so foundational to the Christian faith that it can become rote and lose its punch. After all, who is Jesus and why did He have to die? And how does the death of another person forgive sins that I commit?

I'm becoming increasingly convinced that telling an unbeliever, "Jesus died on the cross to forgive your sins," isn't the most helpful starting point when talking about faith. Not because it's not true or of crucial importance to share but because the concepts of sin and atonement for sin are so foreign that the meanings of them fall on deaf ears.

Even for the regular churchgoer, both confessing sins and hearing the Words of Absolution can ring hollow when the hearer doesn't consider the significance behind this Means of Grace.

When God gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, He also set up an intricate sacrificial system to create a way for imperfect people to once

again come into the presence of a perfect God. Without this system, no one could see God and live (see Exodus 33:20).

God explained to Moses, "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life" (Leviticus 17:11). He also summarized hundreds of years later, "Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Hebrews 9:22).

Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness.

And so the high priests would make atoning sacrifices to God on behalf of the people. An innocent, unblemished life—often a lamb or bird—would be offered as a substitute for the guilty, sin-stained lives of the people. In this way, God's people could be made clean before the Lord. Priests performed these rituals on a daily basis. God's people also performed regular rites and rituals themselves for cleansing.

Life revolved around this sacrificial system, so much so that the holiest day of the year was a day dedicated to



making amends for sin. The Day of Atonement, known today as Yom Kippur, is still considered the most important day of the Jewish faith when Jews fast, pray, and make sacrifices to God for sin.

When is the last time you thought about making a sacrifice before praying to God or going to church? Of course, we don't operate like this. Why not? Because Jesus' sacrifice is where God's justice and mercy meet. Jesus perfectly atones for our sin and declares us clean before the Father. Because of Jesus, we can approach the throne of grace.

Isaiah 53 perfectly describes Jesus, our atoning sacrifice:

Surely He has borne our griefs  
and carried our sorrows;  
yet we esteemed Him stricken,  
smitten by God, and afflicted.

But He was pierced for our  
transgressions;  
He was crushed for our iniquities;  
upon Him was the chastisement that  
brought us peace,  
and with His wounds we are healed.

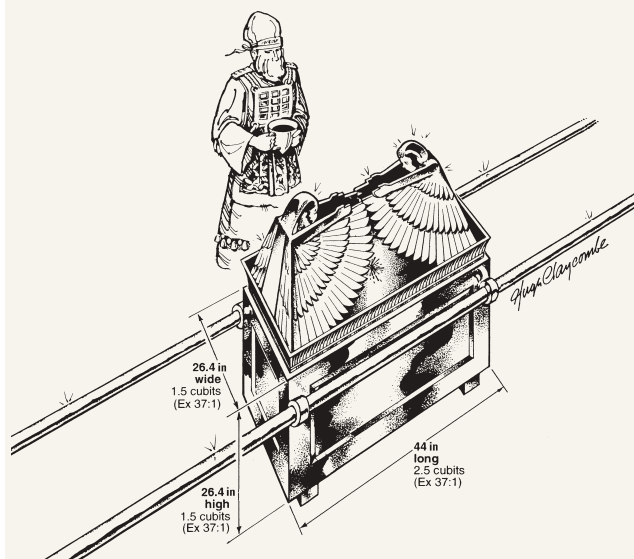
All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have turned—every one—to his  
own way;  
and the LORD has laid on Him  
the iniquity of us all.

(Isaiah 53:4–6)

Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness.

Jesus is the unblemished lamb whose blood was shed for the forgiveness of sins. As the writer of Hebrews explains, "[Christ] entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of His own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:12). As true God and true man, Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice, making perfect amends with the Father once for all. Through Jesus, forgiveness is absolute. Through Jesus, communing with God is possible. And through Jesus, forgiveness with one another is attainable. †

## THE ARK OF THE COVENANT



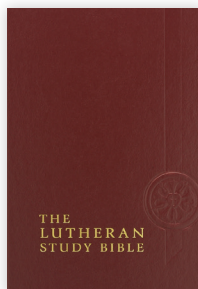
The ark of the covenant was the centerpiece of the Israelite tabernacle. The ark was a box covered with gold, 44 in. long by 26.4 in. wide and high, with carrying poles for the wilderness journey to the Promised Land. Centered within the tabernacle (portable temple), the ark was later placed within Solomon's permanent temple.

Once a year, the high priest entered the Most Holy Place to appear before the Lord (Lv 16:34). This part of the Day of Atonement ceremony included sprinkling of the blood from animals upon the cover of the ark of the covenant (Lv 16:14). Israelite people prayed over animals to be sacrificed, placing on them their own sin and guilt (Lv 16:21). Blood was a substance that embodied both physical and spiritual life, and it was sprinkled on the sacred space between the cherubim.

From *The Lutheran Study Bible* © 2009 Concordia Publishing House, p. 203.

Illustration © Hugh Claycombe

## THE LUTHERAN STUDY BIBLE



Enrich your understanding of Christ's sacrifice with study notes, diagrams, devotional commentary, introductions to books of the Bible, and much more. This study Bible will bridge the gap between reading the Bible and knowing the Bible. Find this title and others listed in this magazine at [cph.org/lresources](http://cph.org/lresources).





# FORGIVE AS WE ARE FORGIVEN

In the Fall 2020 issue of *Lutheran Life*, we considered the topic of prayer and specifically dove into the Lord's Prayer. Which petition do you think is most important?

While a case could be made for any of them, there is one petition Jesus repeats directly after teaching His disciples to pray. Listen to what Jesus says in Matthew 6:

*Pray then like this: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:9–15)*



Why do you think Jesus takes a moment to restate the idea of seeking and offering forgiveness? Perhaps because, as Rev. Jason Broge aptly states, “For Christians, forgiveness is central to understanding our relationship with God, with each other, and with the world around us.”<sup>1</sup> It is our literal lifeblood.

This Fifth Petition reminds us of our desperate need for a Savior as well as God’s desire for us to live at peace with those around us. “For we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment” (Small Catechism, Fifth Petition). We need God’s forgiveness, for “if God does not forgive without stopping, we are lost” (Large Catechism, Fifth Petition, 91). Without His forgiveness, we are not in right relation with the Father, and no prayer we make can be heard by Him. But in Jesus, we know that God has already forgiven us.

Hear these words of comfort from the Large Catechism:

“It is not as though He did not forgive sin without and even before our prayer. (He has given us the Gospel, in which is pure forgiveness before we prayed or ever thought about it [Romans 5:8].) But the purpose of this prayer is that we may recognize and receive such forgiveness” (Large Catechism, Fifth Petition, 88–89; brackets in original).

It’s easy to question the Gospel’s message in our lives. Does God really forgive *me*? Even for *that*? Yes and yes! Jesus completely atoned for every one of your sins and covers all of them—past, present, and future. And He died for all the sins of your neighbor too.

So Jesus teaches us to forgive as we have been forgiven. In doing so, we are reminded of the Father’s great love for us. Broge submits, “Refusing to forgive others suggests a lack of understanding of how great our debt to God was.”<sup>2</sup> We will never be asked to extend forgiveness farther than what God has already shown us in Jesus. For “as far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us” (Psalm

103:12). This sweet reminder of God’s undeserved mercy strengthens us to extend mercy to others.

“Forgiveness, then, is something that is already ours and is rejected when we refuse to forgive others.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus’ words on this are clear. Several chapters after giving the disciples the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus starkly teaches that God will apply forgiveness to us according to how we give it to others. If we demand payment for our neighbor’s wrongdoing, God, in turn, will also hold us to our due payment for sins (see Matthew 18:21–35).

This is not an easy teaching to hear nor a simple practice to live out, especially when our neighbor rightly owes us. But as we daily confess our sins to our heavenly Father, we are reminded yet again of His great grace for us. When we hear the Words of Absolution, we become confident that we are the ones getting the better end of the deal. Our neighbor’s sin, though significant, can never outweigh the forgiveness God grants us—and the freedom that is available when we choose to do the same.

Author Donna (Pyle) Snow wisely explains, “Offering forgiveness to our offender is primarily obedience to God’s command. Yet it is also a gift to ourselves of a life free from bitterness and anger.”<sup>4</sup>

Forgiveness brings with it the gift of peace—both with God and with others. So we pray all the more: “Father, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who’ve sinned against us. Amen.” †

<sup>1</sup> Jason Broge, *As We Forgive* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Broge, *As We Forgive*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Broge, *As We Forgive*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Donna Pyle, *Forgiveness: Received from God, Extended to Others* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 25.



# On Re

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. (James 4:1–2a)

We know fighting and quarreling all too well. In reading this passage from James, we recognize that conflict caused by sin isn't a new problem. Adam and Eve were only the beginning of quarreling as a way of life among humankind and with all of creation. We can say confidently: Wherever two or more sinners are gathered, conflict will occur. So how are we to deal with conflict?

The award-winning musical *Hamilton* follows the life and career of American founding father Alexander Hamilton. Among other things, we learn with great historical accuracy of the “Ten Duel Commandments,” a (terrifying!) conflict-management technique among men of the time. Following the European *Code Duello*, the two men in conflict would follow a formal process for handling a dispute that, if still unresolved, ended in a duel. The conflict was then “resolved” by gunfire; the last man standing declared the victor. While

disputes were often resolved without any shooting, we see examples of how devastating a duel leading to a shootout can be as a means for satisfaction. While a winner is named, it hardly seems that any real resolution is accomplished in this way. The person in conflict may be gone, but the entrenched emotions, unresolved sin, and now newly added guilt remain.

How often is this our approach to conflict today? Whether by acts of violence or damning words, we seek vengeance on our offenders to uphold our reputation and have the last word at all costs. But does that really resolve the situation?

While revenge may feel justified in the moment, it is not the way for Jesus' disciples. The goal for those who follow Christ is always forgiveness. 2 Corinthians 5:17–19 clearly states that every person who has been made a new creation in Baptism is called to be an ambassador of reconciliation. “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18). Seeking reconciliation is a call for all Christians. And while restoring a relationship may not always be appropriate (especially when physical, sexual, or emotional abuse is involved), forgiving the offender is.





In this light, the only death we ought to pursue is putting to death our own sinful flesh and its desires. After all, forgiveness feels like dying. Author Donna Snow explains, “The cost of forgiveness is death. *Just ask Jesus*. Yet it is a death that leads to resurrection.”<sup>5</sup> It’s a death that leads to freedom and new life.

How do we live out the ministry of reconciliation? Jesus’ well-known words in Matthew 18 provide a practical guide. Similar to what’s described in *Hamilton*, the first step is to bring the offense directly to the offender, one-on-one. How often do we not even get this first step right? Rather than going directly to the offender to handle the matter privately, we seem to go just about anywhere else to gossip about the situation and slander the offender’s name. Imagine the number of relationships that would have a fighting chance toward reconciliation if we got this first step right instead of publicly airing dirty laundry.

If talking one-on-one isn’t fruitful, then Jesus instructs Christians to take one or two people along to witness the conversation. If it’s still unresolved, the conflict is taken before the church. If the offender refuses to confess his or her sin and seek forgiveness among the church, then, and only then, does Jesus say the

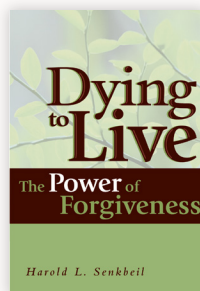
offender should be treated as an outsider. The goal is never permanent excommunication or a broken relationship. It’s always to seek forgiveness and restoration.

So we seek the Holy Spirit, who gives us a spirit of “power and love and self-control” (2 Timothy 1:7), to help us put aside violence and in humility ask for forgiveness from one another—and receive it as well. In doing so, we witness to our Savior: “For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). †

<sup>5</sup> Pyle, *Forgiveness*, 20.

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## DYING TO LIVE: THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS



See how God’s Word and Sacraments shape Christians and how these same Sacraments point toward forgiveness. This conversational book will help you forgive, even when forgiveness feels difficult. Find this resource and more at [cph.org/lresources](http://cph.org/lresources).



# Forgiveness

## Human vs. Divine

“I forgive you—I just don’t want to have anything to do with you!”

How would you feel if that was how God responded to your confession? You would likely protest: *Not fair! That’s not forgiveness!*

You would be correct if you are talking about how God forgives. With His forgiveness, He wipes away our sin and restores our relationship with Him. “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Ephesians 2:13).

Yet, isn’t that how we sometimes treat someone who sins against us? *Yes, I’ll forgive you. But I don’t want to have anything to do with you.*

Unbelievers view forgiveness differently than Christians. How can unbelievers forgive as the Lord forgave when they don’t believe that they are forgiven by God?

Unfortunately, it’s not only unbelievers who fail to forgive as God forgives. Christians sometimes reflect more of their sinful human nature than their saintly nature when forgiving.



## Distinguishing Biblical Forgiveness from Human Forgiveness

Misconceptions about biblical forgiveness often evolve from human practices. Note these differences:

- **Forgiveness is simply excusing.** Phrases such as “That’s okay” or “No problem” minimize sin. To unbelievers, it may seem that forgiveness is just another way to excuse an offense. My sins are not excused. God’s justice required blood. “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Hebrews 9:22). But shedding my blood would be futile. God provided the perfect sacrifice. “The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7).
- **I’ll punish you by withholding forgiveness.** You deserve my judgment and condemnation. My sins need to be punished, and without Christ, I am condemned! Jesus paid the full price for my sins so God doesn’t punish me by withholding forgiveness. “But He was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).
- **I won’t forgive you until you deserve it or earn it.** Someone once told me she wouldn’t forgive her husband until he proved his contrition with the fruit of repentance. Thanks be to God He doesn’t treat me that way! My forgiveness is *not* dependent upon the depth of my remorse or my works to prove that remorse. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9).
- **I will never let you forget what you did!** My past sins will not be brought up and used against me. God promises not to remember my sins or torture me with my past. “For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” (Jeremiah 31:34).

## What Else Distinguishes Biblical Forgiveness?

With God’s forgiveness, I have been declared *not guilty*. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

My sins have been washed away. God no longer views me as sinful but as holy. “For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Counselors tell clients that forgiving others brings inner peace. They advise forgiving for personal healing. Although forgiveness benefits the forgiver, the primary reason a Christian forgives is not for personal therapy. He forgives because he has benefited from Christ’s forgiveness. Peace does not come from our own actions but from Christ. “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1).

The world may lead us to believe that to forgive is human. But that’s inconsistent with Scripture. To forgive as God forgives is a divine gift, a privilege reserved for those forgiven through Christ.

Forgiven children of God are called to *forgive as the Lord forgives* (see Colossians 3:13; Ephesians 4:32). We have been given a divine gift. And this gift is not meant for us to withhold or dole out according to our personal whims.

God empowers us to perform divine gifts through the gift of His Son. “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, *that we might die to sin and live to righteousness*. By His wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24, emphasis added).

So, brothers and sisters, forgive—not as the world does, but as the Lord has forgiven you! †



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# Have I Truly Forgiven?

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Reading through this issue, you might ask yourself if you've truly forgiven someone who created a difficult situation in your life. "The truth about forgiveness is that it is not a one-step, one-stop process. The deeper the hurt, the longer the process. Yet God specifically uses forgiveness to transform us into the likeness of His Son. Jesus forgave. He set the example that we are commanded to follow."<sup>6</sup>

Forgiveness is sometimes more of an ongoing process than a one-time action, but it is worth pursuing. For God applies to us the same forgiveness (or lack of forgiveness) we offer to others. This is both a warning and a gift. In Jesus, God has already forgiven every sin we have committed or will ever commit. Yet if we choose to pursue justice for someone else's offense instead of showing mercy, God reminds us that our debt against Him is far greater. Therefore, we seek to forgive as we have been forgiven and commit to the process of forgiveness for as long as it takes.

Reflect on your own journey with forgiveness as you read these helpful excerpts from *Forgiveness: Received by God, Extended to Others* by Donna Pyle.

Several years ago, one of my pastors preached a sermon that beautifully clarified the sign of genuine forgiveness. He said, "You know you have forgiven when you are more sad at who that person has become than what they have done." (pp. 65–66)

Sometimes the opportunity to extend forgiveness takes a long time as people are separated by time and place. Yet if we have been offended, we stand ready to forgive and live our life as if forgiveness has already taken place.

Our key motivation is focusing on how God uses our tribulations to grow our faith. When our offender asks for forgiveness, we step forward to extend it and share how God used the incident for good.

There are four litmus tests you can take to determine whether you have forgiven your offender:

- 1. General thoughts test:** Can you think positive thoughts about this person? You've likely been in a close enough relationship with him or her to suffer such injury. Is there anything good about this person you can come up with? *If not, continue asking God to work forgiveness in you.*
- 2. Failure test:** When someone injures you, you can often wish harm upon him or her. Have you stopped looking for this person to fail? Forgiveness here means you would like this person to succeed or at least do better in life. *If not, continue asking God to work forgiveness in you.*
- 3. Revenge test:** Do you still think about ways to get even with this person? There may be consequences of his or her action that you must wait for, but even after those consequences occur, do you still desire to somehow make them pay for hurting you? *If so, continue asking God to work forgiveness in you.*
- 4. Opportunity to help test:** Would you help this person if you knew he or she were in trouble and you had the means and ability? I'm not suggesting that you subject yourself to further abuse or harm, but would you want this person to prosper or see him or her come to harm? *If harm, continue asking God to work forgiveness in you.*

Joseph passed all four of these litmus tests as he heard his brothers' genuine repentance [in Genesis].

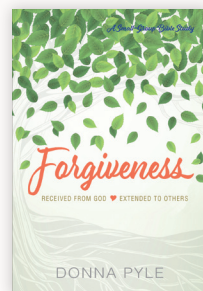
If you are trying to determine whether you have canceled the debt of the person who hurt you, ask yourself those four test questions. (p. 71)

Be honest with yourself so God can move you forward through the forgiveness process. (p. 72) †

<sup>6</sup> Pyle, *Forgiveness*, 28.

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## FORGIVENESS: RECEIVED FROM GOD, EXTENDED TO OTHERS



Donna Snow has more to teach about Jesus' forgiveness for you. Read through her study about how His life-altering forgiveness can soften your heart. Then, learn how to extend that same forgiveness to others. Find this resource and more at [cph.org/llresources](http://cph.org/llresources).



# CONFESSION & ABSOLUTION

Pastor: If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

Congregation: **But if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**

*(Lutheran Service Book, Confession and Absolution, p. 151)*

So goes our common liturgy based on 1 John 1:8–9. To confess is to “say the same thing.” Rev. Harold Senkbeil explains, “When we confess our sins, we ‘say the same thing’ as God. We take an honest look at our sin and in His presence call it exactly what He calls it: death.”<sup>7</sup> Despite how uncomfortable or shameful confessing sin can be, it accurately reveals our true standing before God as a sinner in need of forgiveness. “No matter which words you use, confession always amounts to the same thing: the truth.”<sup>8</sup> And this confession of sin brings good news—the assurance of forgiveness, as spoken in the Words of Absolution.

This dying and rising nature of Confession and Absolution should sound familiar. It reflects our baptismal identity, which is daily renewed as we drown the old Adam so that the new Adam can rise. And this new life is the life of Jesus (see *Dying to Live*, p. 88).

So we confess our sins together each week as a body of believers, awaiting the good news of absolution our pastor brings as he speaks on behalf of God Himself. And while corporate confession is a beautiful part of the life of the Church, it was never meant to replace the gift of individual confession between one person and a confessor. When we only practice corporate confession, we miss out on the immeasurable gift of hearing the words of forgiveness named specifically for you regarding the specific sin that troubles you.

Participating in individual Confession and Absolution can bring feelings of vulnerability and shame. This is a natural response to exposed sin. But consider that it is Adam, not God, who feels shame when his sin is

discovered. “God is not ashamed of the nakedness of our sin. Remember, Jesus Christ joyfully embraced our shame on the cross so that He could remove it forever. And so there is no shame in sin confessed, no matter how ugly it may be. The only real shame is in trying to live with all that ugliness inside.”<sup>9</sup> When we ignore sin, pretending it doesn’t exist or it doesn’t affect our lives, that ugliness manifests itself and destroys us. But the sweet promise of sins forgiven awaits us as we lay our sins bare and our hands open at the foot of the cross.

Pastors have been trained and called to hear confession and give absolution in strict confidentiality, so whenever we are deeply troubled by the guilt of a particular sin, we should go to our pastor. †

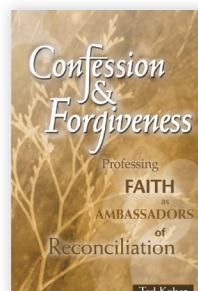
<sup>7</sup> Harold L. Senkbeil, *Dying to Live: The Power of Forgiveness* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994), 87.

<sup>8</sup> Senkbeil, *Dying to Live*, 87.

<sup>9</sup> Senkbeil, *Dying to Live*, 87.

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## CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS



Read more about individual confession and how you can reach out to your pastor with certified Christian conciliator Ted Kober. You’ll learn that this third sacrament, as Luther called it, is important and necessary for a strong Christian livelihood. Find this resource and more at [cph.org/llresources](http://cph.org/llresources).





# WITH DONNA SNOW

A soul-stirring speaker, author, and Bible teacher, Donna Snow has a passion for studying and teaching God's Word—especially on the topic of forgiveness. Here she shares thoughtful reflections on how forgiveness has transformed her life before God and among others.

**Q: What do Christians often misunderstand about forgiveness from God?**

**Snow:** Sometimes we view God's forgiveness through the lens of whether or not we think we deserve it or have asked for it enough. Perhaps when we remember the hurt our careless words or thoughtless actions have caused, we translate that self-condemnation into God's unforgiveness.

The truth is that God's forgiveness has nothing to do with us. It has everything to do with His grace, love, and mercy. He promises to remove our transgressions as far as the east is from the west and remember them no more (Psalm 103:12). Because Jesus volunteered to pay the wages of our sin, God has forgiven us.

**Q: What do Christians often misunderstand about giving and receiving forgiveness to and from one another?**

**Snow:** When hurt runs deep, holding grudges can feel good. It gives us a focal point for the hurt we harbor underneath the anger. We tend to extend forgiveness only when someone asks for it and receive forgiveness from others only when we believe we deserve it. Both tread on spiritually dangerous waters. God commanded us to forgive as He forgave (Colossians

3:13). He did not hinge His forgiveness on whether or not we've begged for it wholeheartedly or deserve it unequivocally. Forgiveness means sharing the unmitigated grace we have already received.

One of the most harmful myths that many of us believe about forgiveness is that holding onto unforgiveness gives us power or control over our offender. Nothing could be further from the truth. Withholding forgiveness is a self-made jail cell. Christ died to liberate us. Unforgiveness stagnates our relationship with God in sinful disobedience. No one's transgression against us or wound we have sustained exceeds our transgressions against God. Yet He has completely forgiven us.

**Q: What's your response to the common phrase "Forgive and forget"?**

**Snow:** I cringe when I hear anyone say, "If you haven't forgotten, you haven't forgiven." That destructive lie makes people believe that they have the power to erase their own memories. When someone hurts us, it creates a heart wound. A heart scars. Much like a cut on your forearm with a knife, each time you see that physical wound's scar, you will remember who inflicted it. The same is true for our hearts.





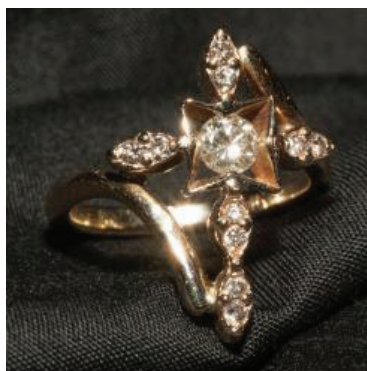


# Forgiveness in Jesus moves us to abundant life.

When we buy into the forgive-and-forget lie, we end up berating ourselves when we remember those heart wounds. We get frustrated and down on ourselves. We spend time and energy trying to make ourselves forget again. What a useless, unproductive cycle! When someone hands us a wound, we have three options: hand it back, internalize it, or hand it up to Jesus. When we hand our wounds up to Jesus, we take them out of circulation. The wounds do not have an opportunity to fester in us or spread to others. Taking the wound out of circulation stops the cycle.

## **Q: What's your favorite Bible verse or saying on forgiveness?**

**Snow:** Colossians 3:13 holds special meaning for me. It is inscribed on the inside of what used to be my wedding ring. After my divorce, I asked a local jeweler to transform my wedding ring into the shape of a cross that I wear on my right hand. It serves as a reminder to continue extending forgiveness not to just one person but every person who hurts me. Forgiveness is a daily—sometimes hourly—process. The deeper the hurt, the longer the process.



Countless strangers have asked about my ring when they notice it. I simply say, “It used to be my wedding ring, but I had it transformed into a symbol that reminds me to forgive as God forgives me.” God has used that ring to open doors to share the love, forgiveness, and grace of Jesus. Isn’t it amazing how your deepest hurt, healed by God, can be the source of your greatest ministry? Only God can do that.

## **Q: What does it mean that you are forgiven in Jesus?**

**Snow:** Jesus is the reason we receive God’s forgiveness. Throughout the Old Testament, God demanded sacrificial bloodshed to seek His forgiveness through burnt offerings (among others). Sin requires blood atonement—that is, someone or

something’s death. When Jesus volunteered to shed His perfect blood and died for imperfect us, it was the once-and-for-all sacrifice for all people of all time to receive God’s forgiveness for every sin—past, present, and future. Being forgiven in Jesus frees us from the narrative of hate and missions of revenge. It liberates us from our prisons of anger and bitterness. Forgiveness in Jesus moves us to abundant life, enabling us to extend the Gospel of grace toward others.

**Q: What encouragement would you give someone struggling to forgive?**

**Snow:** I've been there, and it nearly ruined my life and the relationships with those whom I love most. Picture unforgiveness as a giant pink elephant in the middle of your living room. No one talks about it, people tiptoe around it, but everyone wishes it would disappear. Days are filled with anxiety, anger, and bitterness. Your mom refuses to talk with her sister over a decades-old hurt, so you are banned from talking to your cousins. Lives and families can be torn asunder through unforgiveness.

**Q: Anything else you'd like to share about forgiveness?**

**Snow:** Forgiveness does not always result in reconciliation. Some people believe that when you forgive someone, you have to become BFFs. Not true at all. Forgiveness is commanded by God, but reconciliation is only possible if the other person seeks true reconciliation. Though in most cases we should do our part toward reconciliation, in the case of abusive, unsafe relationships, we are free to stay away and it is probably wisest to do so. †





A photograph of a man and a young man working on a wooden project outdoors. The man, wearing a grey long-sleeved shirt and dark pants, is leaning over a workbench, using a pencil to draw on a piece of wood. The young man, wearing a blue t-shirt with a graphic, stands next to him, looking on. In the background, a white SUV is parked on a driveway in front of a house with a tiled roof and a garage. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

*Family*

*Confession*

*and*

*Forgiveness*

“I didn’t do it!”  
David insisted when I confronted him with evidence of his wrong. My son was a junior in high school. I wasn’t in the mood for his denial.<sup>10</sup>

My response? Anger. I raised my voice, accusing him again. He adamantly claimed innocence. We both lost control. We launched into a yelling match. My wife was in tears. David and I had never fought like this before.

Finally, exhausted from battle, we both sat down in silence. I thought to myself, *Now, how should you have handled this as a Christian father? My answer? He deserved it! He's broken the Fourth Commandment. He knew this was wrong.*

What do you call that kind of thinking? Rationalization. Self-justification. Self-righteousness. *But wasn't my thinking true? David broke God's commandments, disobeying his parents. I'm his father. I have a responsibility to raise him as a child of God.*

And there's the rub—child of God. How does a godly father raise such a child? Certainly not with yelling, screaming accusations, and calling him names. Rather with love, kindness, and gentleness, even when disciplining (see Galatians 6:1).

I reflected back on my confirmation instruction. Pastor said when we became parents, we needed to absolve our children. I knew what absolution was, but no one showed me how to do it *in my family*. I told my son that perhaps we could handle this in a different way. We could use the form from the hymnal for private confession and forgiveness. I would change the words since I wasn't a pastor, but that form would guide us.

As my son got to the place where it says "what troubles me particularly," he admitted his sin. By faith, he knew what to do. No longer arguing with his dad, he was confessing to God. When he was done confessing, by faith, I knew what to do. I proclaimed God's forgiveness to him. Then I forgave him personally. Praying together Psalm 51, we cried in a family hug. We delayed talking about consequences until the next morning when we were rested.

A year later, another incident occurred with my son. (Amazing how these things occur when you have teenagers!) I confronted David with the evidence. Once again, he denied it. But this time I kept my big mouth shut. Finally, he said, "Yeah. I did it. But you don't have to tell Mom, do you?"

"No, David, that's your privilege. Your mother and I will wait downstairs until you're ready to talk."

After several minutes, he came to admit his wrong. I said, "David, you're becoming an adult, and soon you will be leaving our home. How do you want to handle this?"

"Dad, can we go through that form for confession and forgiveness?"

Tears filled my eyes as I realized how much my son yearned to hear that comfort, "You are forgiven!"

Some weeks later, my wife was cleaning house and ran across one of our son's school papers. Entitled "Someone I Appreciate," David wrote about his parents. "I appreciate my Mom and Dad because I know no matter what I say or do, they will always love me and forgive me."

The most valuable gift you can give anyone, especially those in your family, is forgiveness. First, we have the privilege of proclaiming God's forgiveness, based on Scripture's promises: "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2:24).

Then, as God has forgiven us, we can forgive. "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32). †

<sup>10</sup> I have my family's permission to share this story with my commitment to not share the details of my son's sin.

After that first incident above, I developed a form for use in the family. You'll find it in the book *Confession and Forgiveness: Professing Faith as Ambassadors of Reconciliation*. You can also acquire a version called "Proclaiming God's Forgiveness" ([aorhope.org](http://aorhope.org); select Resources, then Free Downloads).

Learn more from the book *Confession and Forgiveness*, with answers to such questions as these:

- What about consequences?
- When should I forgive?
- What is the difference between proclaiming God's forgiveness and granting personal forgiveness?





# F O R G I V E N E S S

## THE ROCK OF OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

“Forgiveness is our diamond of engagement with God. It is the heart of our relationship, the one essential we must have with Him.”<sup>11</sup> This gift of forgiveness is as solid as a diamond with facets that we appreciate more over a lifetime. Let’s explore the idea of forgiveness as this rock of our relationship with God.



If you just got engaged to be married, would you want to know how much your fiancé paid for your engagement ring? I've asked several of my Concordia University Wisconsin students that question. Many women said, "No!" Just having the relationship would be enough. Of course, that's true, but yet some women said, "I want to know—after all, I'm wearing this for the rest of my life." True again, and perhaps there's a story he's waiting to tell about how he earned the price of that beautiful stone.

So, do you want to know the price of the diamond of God's forgiveness? I expect the answer is both yes and no. Can we ever count or know the cost? No. Peter reminds us of that cost, saying, "You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Peter 1:18–19). We couldn't count the cost in silver and gold, so how could we measure the Father's love and the Son's obedience shown by His blood? Forgiveness is a gift that leaves us in awe saying, "This must have cost a fortune." And the Father could say, "Yes, more than you can imagine."

And yet we can grow in our wonder over that price. Certainly, as we mature, we're struck by the repetition of God's forgiveness. It is one thing to give us this gift once, but God reminds us of the gift of forgiveness and our need for it every day. Isn't it a marvel that God doesn't tell us that our sins have exceeded the payment on the cross? We live in the awe that His one sacrifice can indeed stand for all time. It is a diamond of such size and brilliance that it never fails to stun us. It is never overshadowed by another. This gift of forgiveness claims us as His. "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

The stunning price of forgiveness then points toward His astonishing patience. Every relationship needs patience. But even when patience is stretched, the engagement and wedding rings stay on. Your spouse might have forgotten to take out the trash or get the mail or dry the dishes. You might wring your hands in frustration, but the rings stay on. So, God continues to hear us ask each day, "Forgive us our trespasses," and He patiently reassures us that He has already forgiven us. The ring of His forgiveness continues to encircle us.

And that's the power of the diamond of forgiveness. In forgiveness, God powerfully announces His lasting love and commitment to save us without end. Because God has forgiven us, we know His promises to remain with us are true. Because the price of forgiveness has already been paid, we can trust the words of Hebrews 13, "For He has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' So we can confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?'" (Hebrews 13:5b–6).

The rock of our relationship with God is this diamond of forgiveness. It is a gift that never diminishes. Hold up His forgiveness and see its facets, the amazing price, the patience of a lifetime, and the power to endure with us. †

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Paavola, *Flowing from the Cross: Six Facets of Forgiveness* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2020), 2.

## About This Issue's Authors



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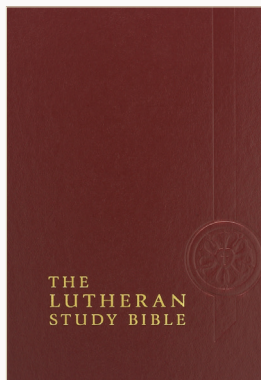


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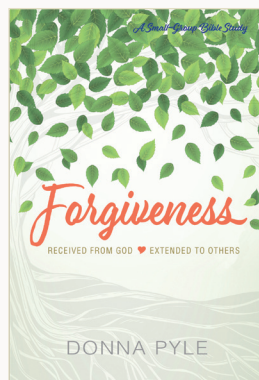
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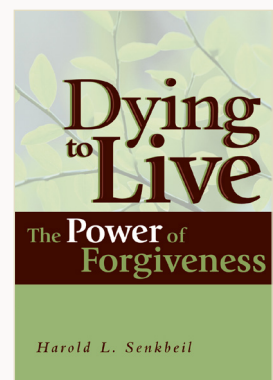
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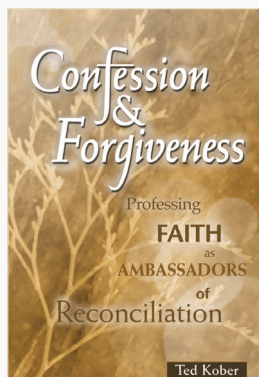
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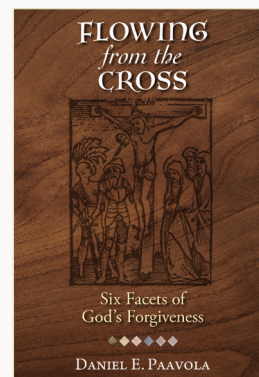
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