

THE UPWARD CALL

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but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,
I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God
IN CHRIST JESUS.*

(Philippians 3.13-14 NASB)

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FORGETTING WHAT LIES BEHIND [PART 3 –FORGIVENESS]

Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3.13-14 NASB)

This series is based on Paul's heart to forget what lies behind and press on toward the goal for the prize. To make this next point, we need to change gears, so to speak, and consider the matter of unforgiveness, which is one of the greatest hindrances to forgetting what lies behind, because unforgiveness is not letting go of the past.

Unforgiveness is one of the greatest sins that anyone can harbor in their heart. Why? Because it denies the very fact that God, through the death of His Son, has forgiven all mankind of their sin. Jesus is the Lamb slain for the sin of the world. On the cross, Jesus cried out to His Father: **Forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.** If God did this for us, how can we not forgive the sin or offense of another against us, even if it leads to our own death? Paul wrote that we should forgive each other as God in Christ has forgiven us (Ephesians 4.32). Consider the heart of Stephen, a man full of the Holy Spirit. As he was about to be martyred, Stephen cried out: **“Lord, do not hold this sin against them”** (Acts 7.60). This was a man who was being stoned and all he had in his heart was forgiveness for his murderers. Being full of the spirit of God will lead a believer in such a fashion.

The problem is that many do not forgive but instead allow a hurt or an offense to fester like a boil within their heart until it becomes so ingrained in the person that it becomes a bitter poison that eats away all that is good. Paul warned against bitterness.

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. (Ephesians 4.31 NASB)

See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.... (Hebrews 12.15 NASB)

The Greek word for *bitterness* is *pikria*, which means “acridity (especially poison).” In other words, it is like a poison that eats and destroys. Have you ever watched strong acids eat away at metal or even human flesh? Acids are so powerful that they cause irreparable damage to many things. Bitterness is like acid that eats away all that is good. This is what unforgiveness leads to if not reversed through a heart of forgiveness. Offenses can become something a person dwells on and, if not checked, can become an obsession that eats away at the heart of the person. It is not uncommon to watch news reports of bad situations and to hear victims rail against their assailant, even screaming that they hope the person will rot in hell. Divorces are often very bitter separations in which one or both partners become so consumed with hate and bitterness toward the other that they cannot settle their disputes without the courts intervening. Bitterness blinds a person. Pour sulfuric acid in the human eye and all vision will be lost. Pour bitterness due to unforgiveness in a person's heart and all spiritual vision will be lost. Simply, the person will not see beyond the hatred and anger that they harbor against another. What is the answer? It is to forgive one another, even your enemies. After all, we are told to love our

enemies and pray for our persecutors (Matthew 5.44), and to forgive others for their transgressions (Matthew 6.14-15); this requires a heart of love and forgiveness.

We see a beautiful example of forgiveness in the story of Joseph (a type of Christ) and his brothers, which is the first mention of forgiveness in Scripture. If there was a man who could have harbored unforgiveness leading to bitterness, it was Joseph; but he did not, for he saw that all that he went through was from the hand of God, and it was for good.

So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, “Your father charged before he died, saying, ‘Thus you shall say to Joseph, “Please forgive, I beg you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did you wrong.”’ And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.” And Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also came and fell down before him and said, “Behold, we are your servants.” But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid, for am I in God’s place? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.” (Genesis 50.16-20 NASB)

One of the Hebrew words for *forgive* and used in these verses is *nasa*, which means “to lift.” In other words, *to forgive* means to lift the weight of the offense, as if to remove it. When we forgive one another, we lift this thing that could become a heavy weight and an encumbrance to running the race and cast it aside. We forget what lies behind.

There are two sides to the matter of forgiveness.

First, you are to forgive one who has sinned against you, regardless of how the other person responds to you. You are to forgive from your heart, even if the other person never asks for your forgiveness. Peter asked Jesus: **“Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven”** (Matthew 18.21-22 NASB). Jesus was trying to teach Peter the principle of Jubilee, which requires all debts to be forgiven in the time of Jubilee. This is a very difficult lesson for many to learn. But how can we not have such a heart when we consider the many, almost countless, sins that we have committed against a righteous and holy God, and yet, He forgives them all by the blood of the Lamb. How can we not forgive others? We must!

Second, you are to ask for forgiveness when you know that you have sinned against another. This is the example that we have with Joseph and his brothers. Jacob charged the brothers to ask for Joseph’s forgiveness. Notice that it was a very specific request to forgive and an admission that they had done wrong. No excuses or defenses were offered. Often, we are tempted to defend ourselves in order to save face. This is pride that must be cast off. If the person whom you sinned against is weak, then bitterness might set in. It is best to approach the person asking very specifically for forgiveness. ***Will you forgive me for...?*** It is best to stay away from apologies or merely saying you are sorry. Make it very direct and to the point so that there is no room for doubt or argument. Saying too much or saying too little can lead to further controversy. However, you are not responsible for their response if you have approached the person with humility and contrition of heart.

Asking for forgiveness is closely aligned with the matter of reconciliation, which is taken up in the last issue of this series. Jesus has given us the principle: **“Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering”** (Matthew 5.23-24 NASB). In other words, it is up to you to go to your brother.