

God and Forgiveness

By Susan Gammage

Asking God for Forgiveness

I don't know what your concept of God is, but mine is that He is:

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| God of Grace to the wicked | The Help in Peril |
| My Beloved | The Helper |
| My only Hope | The Helping One |
| My Sanctuary | The Incomparable Friend |
| My sole Desire | The Kind to all |
| The All-Forgiving | The Life-giving One |
| The All-Knowing Counselor | The Lord of Joy |
| The All-Merciful | The Loving |
| The Beloved | The Merciful |
| The Beloved of my soul | The Most Compassionate |
| The Benevolent | The Most Merciful One |
| The Best Lover | The One alone Beloved |
| The Bestower of favours | The Physician |
| The Bestowing One | The Pitier of the downtrodden |
| The Bountiful One | The Protector |
| The Brightener | The Refuge of the fearful |
| The Bringer of Delight | The Restorer |
| The Comforter | The River that is life indeed |
| The Compassionate with all | The Satisfier |
| The Everlasting Father | The Shelter to all |
| The Forgiving | The Source of everlasting life |
| The Friend | The Succorer of all |
| The Generous | The Supreme Companion |
| The Great Giver | The Supreme Helper |
| The Haven for all | The Sustaining One |
| The Healer | The True Physician |

Does that sound like the kind of God that would condemn anyone for all of eternity? Yet many of us are afraid to turn to Him, fearing His wrath, condemnation, judgment and punishment. Beneath the fear is that we are going straight to hell for the things we have done or failed to do. This is a lot of negative thinking to overcome!

The truth is that despite the fact that we're told to fear God, nowhere in the Writings does it refer to God as the:

- All-Wrathful
- The Ever-Unforgiving
- The Never Forgiving

- The All Condemning
- The All Judgemental

God forgives our sins every Riḍván!

He, of a certainty, is the Ever-Forgiving, the Most Generous. Verily, all created things were immersed in the sea of purification when, on that first day of Riḍván, We shed upon the whole of creation the splendours of Our most excellent Names and Our most exalted Attributes. This, verily, is a token of My loving providence, which hath encompassed all the worlds. (Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 47)

When I read: "all created things were immersed in the sea of purification", I read it as "Susan Gammage is immersed in the sea of purification". I also remembered that in The Kitáb-i-Íqán (p. 255) Bahá'u'lláh reminds us that "Every knowledge hath seventy meanings," ... He also saith: "We speak one word, and by it we intend one and seventy meanings; each one of these meanings we can explain." So I thought why can't the purification happen to individuals every Riḍván?

There's no sin that's unforgiveable. God even forgives covenant breakers!

It is important to note that should a Covenant-breaker recognize his mistakes, become conscious of his transgressions against the Cause of God and find the urge to repent, the Centre of the Cause, when satisfied he is sincerely repentant, will forgive his past deeds and restore his credibility and status as a Bahá'í in good standing in the community. (Adib Taherzadeh, The Child of the Covenant, p. 240)

God forgives anyone who asks because His mercy exceeds His fury! Once you've been forgiven, your sins are washed away!

Wherefore, hearken ye unto My speech, and return ye to God and repent, that He, through His grace, may have mercy upon you, may wash away your sins, and forgive your trespasses. The greatness of His mercy surpasseth the fury of His wrath, and His grace encompasseth all who have been called into being and been clothed with the robe of life be they of the past or of the future." (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, LXVI, p. 130)

It's like being born anew:

Say: Be not despondent. After the revelation of this blessed verse it is as though thou hast been born anew from thy mother's womb. (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 77)

He's assures everyone who responds to His call of His forgiveness, and doesn't want us to be afraid or sorry.

Fear not, nor be Thou grieved, for indeed unto such as have responded to Thy Call, whether men or women, We have assured forgiveness of sins, as known in the

presence of the Best Beloved and in conformity with what Thou desirest. Verily His knowledge embraceth all things. (The Bab, Selections from the Writings of the Bab, p. 55)

He wants us to be proud of this bounty:

We have attired his temple with the robe of forgiveness and adorned his head with the crown of pardon. It beseemeth him to pride himself among all men upon this resplendent, this radiant and manifest bounty ... Say: Thou art free from sin and error. Truly God hath purged thee with the living waters of His utterance in His Most Great Prison. (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 77)

And we know that all sins are forgiven in 'Akká.

I bring you tidings of a city ... which is called 'Akká Verily, he that entereth therein, longing for it and eager to visit it, God will forgive his sins, both of the past and of the future. (Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 178)

The Prophet - may the blessings of God and His salutations be upon Him -- is stated to have said: "In 'Akká are works of supererogation and acts which are beneficial, which God vouchsafed specially unto whomsoever He pleaseth. (Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 180)

If we have the bounty of going on pilgrimage we can go to Akká and recite these verses:

And he that saith in 'Akká: 'Glorified be God, and praise be unto God, and there is none other God but God, and most great is God, and there is no power nor strength except in God, the Exalted, the Mighty,' God will write down for him a thousand good deeds, and blot out from him a thousand evil deeds, and will uplift him a thousand grades in Paradise, and will forgive him his transgressions. And whoso saith in 'Akká: 'I beg forgiveness of God,' God will forgive all his trespasses.

...

The Apostle of God -- may the blessings of God and His salutations be upon Him -- hath also said: "He that looketh upon the sea at eventide, and saith: 'God is Most Great!' at sunset, God will forgive his sins, though they be heaped as piles of sand. And he that counteth forty waves, while repeating: 'God is Most Great!' -- exalted be He -- God will forgive his sins, both past and future." (Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, pp. 180 - 181)

And even if we never make it there, we can do it in our imaginations, since God accepts intention:

Every act ye meditate is as clear to Him as is that act when already accomplished. (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, LXXVII, p. 150)

Every spotless action, every sincere intent of ours will win the commendation of the True One, will be exalted and magnified by Him, and requited with a bounteous recompense. (Shoghi Effendi, The Compilation of Compilations vol II, pp. 351-352, #2086)

We can't sit back and assume we don't have to ask for forgiveness ever again, though, since God has already forgiven our sins. Unless we die during Ridván or on pilgrimage, we can be certain that we'll have committed some new sins that have to be forgiven. I'm sure that's why God asks us to call ourselves to account each day:

Bring thyself to account each day ere thou art summoned to a reckoning; for death, unheralded, shall come upon thee and thou shalt be called to give account for thy deeds. (Baha'u'llah, The Arabic Hidden Words 31)

My Process:

Once I understood that God loved me and created me perfect, I realized I had to forgive the lies emanating from my lower nature about my being unworthy and unlovable. They weren't God's truth, therefore why would I make them mine?

With the hands of power I made thee and with the fingers of strength I created thee; and within thee have I placed the essence of My light. Be thou content with it and seek naught else, for My work is perfect and My command is binding. Question it not, nor have a doubt thereof. (Bahá'u'lláh, The Arabic Hidden Words 12)

Then I had to look at the veils that had come between me and God as a result of my lack of forgiveness (anger, pride, self-pity, mistrust); and ask God for His forgiveness. I knew that I was forgiven because I started to feel lighter and happier, and because of quotes like this, I found myself doing more good deeds than ever before:

Thy generous Lord will ... forgive thee thy sins and change them to good deeds. Verily the Lord is the Forgiving, the Merciful. (Tablets of Abdu'l-Bahá v1, p. 89)

The more I grew in my understanding of God's forgiveness, the more I realized that of course God has forgiven all of us! He did so a LONG time ago!

God hath forgiven what is past. Henceforward everyone should utter that which is meet and seemly, and should refrain from slander, abuse and whatever causeth sadness in men. Lofty is the station of man! (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 219-220)

God has given us prayers we can use when asking for His forgiveness:

Behold me, then, O my God, how I have fled from myself unto Thee, and have abandoned my own being that I may attain unto the splendors of the light of Thy Being, and have forsaken all that keepeth me back from Thee, and maketh me forgetful of Thee, in order that I may inhale the fragrances of Thy presence and Thy

remembrance. Behold how I have stepped upon the dust of the city of Thy forgiveness and Thy bounty, and dwelt within the precincts of Thy transcendent mercy, and have besought Thee, through the sovereignty of Him Who is Thy Remembrance and Who hath appeared in the robe of Thy most pure and most august Beauty, to send down, in the course of this year, upon Thy loved ones what will enable them to dispense with any one except Thee, and will set them free to recognize the evidences of Thy sovereign will and all-conquering purpose, in such wise that they will seek only what Thou didst wish for them through Thy bidding, and will desire naught except what Thou didst desire for them through Thy will. Sanctify, then, their eyes, O my God, that they may behold the light of Thy Beauty, and purge their ears, that they may listen to the melodies of the Dove of Thy transcendent oneness. Flood, then, their hearts with the wonders of Thy love, and preserve their tongues from mentioning any one save Thee, and guard their faces from turning to aught else except Thyself. Potent art Thou to do what pleaseth Thee. Thou, verily, art the Almighty, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting. (Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 336-337)

Cast, then, upon me, O my God, the glances of Thy mercy, and forgive me my trespasses and the trespasses of them that are dear to Thee, and which come in between us and the revelation of Thy triumph and Thy grace. Cancel Thou, moreover, our sins which have shut off our faces from the splendors of the Day-Star of Thy favors. Powerful art Thou to do Thy pleasure. Thou ordainest what Thou willest, and art not asked of what Thou wishest through the power of Thy sovereignty, nor canst Thou be frustrated in whatsoever Thou prescribest through Thine irrevocable decree. No God is there save Thee, the Almighty, the Most Powerful, the Ever-living, the Most Compassionate. (Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh, p. 339)

O God, my God! Have mercy then upon my helpless state, my poverty, my misery, my abasement! Give me to drink from the generous cup of Thy grace and forgiveness, stir me with the sweet scents of Thy love, gladden my bosom with the light of Thy knowledge, purify my soul with the mysteries of Thy oneness, raise me to life with the gentle breeze that cometh from the gardens of Thy mercy -- till I sever myself from all else but Thee, and lay hold of the hem of Thy garment of grandeur, and consign to oblivion all that is not Thee, and be companioned by the sweet breathings that waft during these Thy days, and attain unto faithfulness at Thy Threshold of Holiness, and arise to serve Thy Cause, and to be humble before Thy loved ones, and, in the presence of Thy favoured ones, to be nothingness itself.

Verily art Thou the Helper, the Sustainer, the Exalted, the Most Generous. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, pp. 4-5)

O Thou forgiving Lord! Thou art the shelter of all these Thy servants. Thou knowest the secrets and art aware of all things. We are all helpless, and Thou art the Mighty, the Omnipotent. We are all sinners, and Thou art the Forgiver of sins, the Merciful, the Compassionate. O Lord! Look not at our shortcomings. Deal with us according to Thy grace and bounty. Our shortcomings are many, but the ocean of

Thy forgiveness is boundless. Our weakness is grievous, but the evidences of Thine aid and assistance are clear. Therefore, confirm and strengthen us. Enable us to do that which is worthy of Thy holy Threshold. Illumine our hearts, grant us discerning eyes and attentive ears. Resuscitate the dead and heal the sick. Bestow wealth upon the poor and give peace and security to the fearful. Accept us in Thy kingdom and illumine us with the light of guidance. Thou art the Powerful and the Omnipotent. Thou art the Generous. Thou art the Clement. Thou art the Kind. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 176)

I beg of God to forgive thy sins and to illumine thy face with the light of forgiveness, so that thou mayest conquer the self which desires the earthly world and prevent it from its wishes and appetites. (Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá v1, p. 80)

And here's an easy mantra we can memorize and repeat often:

Forgive me, O my Lord, my sins which have hindered me from walking in the ways of Thy good-pleasure, and from attaining the shores of the ocean of Thy oneness. (Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh, p. 29)

Be not despondent! We are free from sin. He's already forgiven you and now it's time to forgive yourself and move on!

We have attired his temple with the robe of forgiveness and adorned his head with the crown of pardon. It beseemeth him to pride himself among all men upon this resplendent, this radiant and manifest bounty. Say: Be not despondent. After the revelation of this blessed verse it is as though thou hast been born anew from thy mother's womb. Say: Thou art free from sin and error. Truly God hath purged thee with the living waters of His utterance in His Most Great Prison. We entreat Him—blessed and exalted is He—to graciously confirm thee in extolling Him and in magnifying His glory and to strengthen thee through the power of His invisible hosts. Verily, He is the Almighty, the Omnipotent. (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 77)

Asking God to Forgive Others

Coming to forgiveness can be a process! Sometimes there's something someone has done to us that seems so big, and so bad, that we can't imagine ever being able to forgive.

Perhaps the idea of forgiveness might seem intellectually worthwhile; but at a heart level, we aren't yet ready to let go and forgive. It's at these times we can ask God to forgive the person for us.

That's what I had to do with my parents. As a child I was the victim of their sexual, physical and ritualistic abuse, for which they ultimately had their rights of parenthood removed. I knew from reading the writings that the standard was that I must "instantly forgive", and I wanted to be obedient. I just didn't know how. Coming to that place

required a lot of little steps; and a LOT of understanding of the Bahá'í Writings on the purpose of life; the nature of tests and difficulties; justice etc.

When I took my question to the House of Justice they said:

As a devoted believer you are urged to strive to develop forgiveness in your heart toward your parents who have abused you in so disgraceful a manner ... (Universal House of Justice to this author, 9 September, 1992)

You'll note the date of this letter was 1992; and it wasn't until 2010 that I was finally able to let it go and forgive them completely. In the meantime, I was comforted knowing that I could "strive to develop forgiveness in my heart".

The heart is the place where God resides, and He wants us to sanctify it for His descent. In the Hidden Words alone, there are 37 references to the heart which teach us something about God's desire to live there. A couple of my favourites are:

All that is in heaven and earth I have ordained for thee, except the human heart, which I have made the habitation of My beauty and glory; yet thou didst give My home and dwelling to another than Me; and whenever the manifestation of My holiness sought His own abode, a stranger found He there, and, homeless, hastened unto the sanctuary of the Beloved. Notwithstanding I have concealed thy secret and desired not thy shame. (Bahá'u'lláh, The Persian Hidden Words 27)

Ponder awhile. Hast thou ever heard that friend and foe should abide in one heart? Cast out then the stranger, that the Friend may enter His home. (Bahá'u'lláh, The Persian Hidden Words 26)

In the first one, Baha'u'llah tells us He's given us everything except our hearts, which He made for His beauty and glory. He sees that we've given it to other things, including our hurt and anger, and whenever he found them there, He left, concealing our secret and desiring not our shame! Because of this, we may never recognize that while we harbour unforgiveness, we can't have God's love too.

In the second one, Baha'u'llah says friend and foe can't dwell in the same heart – or in this case, our love for him, and bitterness towards those who have hurt us. He's asking us to cast out one, so we can have the other.

All of this is helpful in advancing us along the process of forgiveness. I was also comforted to learn from the Báb that I could pray for my parents.

Thousand upon thousand of what thou hast asked for thy parents shall be thy recompense! (Selections from the Writings of the Báb, p. 94)

Obviously I wanted forgiveness for myself; so I recognized I had to ask forgiveness for them, and I did. God can see our sincerity. He knows what's in our hearts, and when we

take one step towards becoming more in line with His teachings, He will take it from there; and start the healing and forgiveness process.

Here are two prayers you can use to ask God to forgive others:

O God, my God! Lowly, suppliant and fallen upon my face, I beseech Thee with all the ardor of my invocation to pardon whosoever hath hurt me, forgive him that hath conspired against me and offended me, and wash away the misdeeds of them that have wrought injustice upon me. Vouchsafe unto them Thy goodly gifts, give them joy, relieve them from sorrow, grant them peace and prosperity, give them Thy bliss and pour upon them Thy bounty. Thou art the Powerful, the Gracious, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting! (The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá,, p. 19)

O Lord! In this Most Great Dispensation Thou dost accept the intercession of children in behalf of their parents. This is one of the special infinite bestowals of this Dispensation. Therefore, O Thou kind Lord, accept the request of this Thy servant at the threshold of Thy singleness and submerge his father in the ocean of Thy grace, because this son hath arisen to render Thee service and is exerting effort at all times in the pathway of Thy love, Verily, Thou art the Giver, the Forgiver and the Kind! ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Lights of Guidance, p. 230, #770)