*O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those He redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.* *Some were sick through their sinful ways and because of their iniquities endured affliction; they loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and He saved them from their distress; He sent out His word and healed them, and delivered them from destruction. Let them thank the Lord for His steadfast love, for His wonderful works to humankind. And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices and tell of His deeds with songs of joy.* Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

*You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, doing the will of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else, but God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which He loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ, by grace you have been saved, and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace, you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what He has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them.* Ephesians 2:1-10

 *One beautiful Sunday morning, Reverend Barnard announces to his congregation, 'My good people, I have here in my hands three sermons.*

 *A $100 sermon that lasts five minutes, a $50 sermon that lasts fifteen minutes, and a $20 sermon that lasts a full hour.*

 *Now, we'll take the collection and see which one I'll deliver.'*

Alive In Christ

1. When Paul speaks of God’s grace, he clearly implies that we were forgiven of our sins, only because of that grace. It is for the same reason there is so much written about forgiveness in the Scriptures. When Adam and Eve realized that they disobeyed God, sin was introduced to the world, and ever since guilt accompany us through the whole life. Because of their disobedience, Adam and Eve not only lost the close relationship with God, but also this wonderful, and peaceful harmony that only Eden could provide. With guilt overshadowing them, peace and joy of the relationship with God has vanquished. When God approached them, and called them by name, and they eventually came out of the bushes, Adam and Eve were overwhelmed by guilt and shame. Millenia’s have passed since then, and yet, nothing has changed in people’s attitude toward God. As a society we keep on sinning and disobeying God and do not want to see the consequences of this. As Christians, we need to be not only reminded of God’s presence in our lives, but also encouraged to remember that it is because of His forgiveness through His grace we are saved. This is exactly why the message of forgiveness is so important.

2. Through the blood of the cross, Jesus restored our relationship with God, broken by Adam and Eve, and allowed us to come into His presence once again, and once again do it with joy and hope. Every year at Christmas season, we celebrate the day of Jesus’ birth, and through this festive time and celebration we truly rejoice, because His birth, His coming to this world, was to serve only one purpose, to reestablish the broken relationship between God and mankind, and to offer the restoration of the relationship broken in Eden. This restoration however, has occurred not in Bethlehem, but in Jerusalem, 33 years after the birth of Jesus, on the lonely hill known only as *“the Skull,” “the Golgotha,” or “the Calvary.”* This restoration occurred through the unselfish act of forgiveness, offered us by God in an act and a gift of mercy. Forgiveness could not, and still cannot be purchased, or earned. It comes through the grace of God, and through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This is what crucified Jesus’ offered us, but to be forgiven we must accept His great gift.

3. Restoration of the broken relationship with God, which forgiveness guarantees, gives us also a chance for something else, a chance to worship and the chance to rejoice. This happens when we come together, and praise our Savior in the time of worship, just like today. If He wants us to lift up our voices with joy and with happiness, this is because the time of worship is the time of victory, victory over death. For this reason, so much is being written about forgiveness in the Bible, and for this reason God wants us to remember that forgiveness is the essential theme of every worship service. Forgiveness is the most important theme in the Scriptures. Consider this, the Early Church celebrated the Lord’s Supper every time they met. Why? Because they wanted to remember what Jesus has done for them. But there is more. Our worship of God does not consist of only this one hour of *“service”* every Sunday morning. Our worship and praise of God is inseparable from our daily life and everything we do.

4. Forgiveness is also inseparably connected with *“confession.”* We are forgiven of our sins, but to accept this forgiveness we must also accept our guilt, and only when we confess our guilt to God, we may be forgiven. Every year as we begin our Lenten journey, on the Ash Wednesday, with the imposition of ashes, we often hear these powerful words: *“Repent, and believe in the Gospel.”* Confession is the result of repentance, a result of acknowledgment one’s own guilt and sinfulness. Forgiveness is offered to us freely by God, but to receive it, we must admit our need for it. Consider the book of Jonah, when the people of Nineveh repented, God has forgiven them and did not destroy the city. Every year, forty days before Easter Sunday, we begin our annual Lenten journey, but what is this journey? Some people pledge to refrain from eating or drinking something, or doing something in those days but the true reason for Lent is to be able to meditate on why Jesus had to experience His crucifixion, and our role in His execution. Only when we accept that He was crucified for *“our sins,”* we may truly repent, confess them to God, and be forgiven. As Christians, we need to be reminded of this, and we also have to share this message with those around us.

5. We also may often do not truly realize that forgiveness requires of us to do the same, to be able to forgive others. This is probably more difficult than to confess. Without God in human heart, it is impossible to forgive. Human’s attitude is that of: *“I’ll forgive, but I’ll never forget.”* Do you remember Jesus’ words in the Lord’s Prayer: *“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us,”* the words we say every Sunday?Listen to the words Paul writes later on in the same letter to the Ephesians 4:32: ***“****Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”* Even if we experienced some sort of suffering through the actions or words of others, whether they were deliberate or accidental, we are called to forgive them. After all, we must not forget, God has forgiven us! I know that it might be very difficult, yet, as we grow and mature in Christian life, it is possible. A few years ago, I already shared with you a story of Corrie ten Boom, who recalled the day when she had forgiven a brutal concentration camp guard responsible for her sister’s death, saying that in doing this it felt like: *“dropping the boulder into the greatest depths of the Atlantic Ocean.”* What we must also clearly understand, is that to forgive does not mean to condone or to permit something that is sinful and wrong to continue. To forgive means to get rid of our own desire for retaliation. To forgive does not prevent us from seeking justice, but to reject the temptation for vengeance. This is difficult to achieve, but not impossible. Dying on the cross Jesus spoke these unforgettable words: *“Forgive them, for they do not know what they do!”*

6. What Paul writes in his letter is not only comforting but reassuring. Because of His great love and mercy, God made us alive in Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions. Paul writes that God not only show His love to us through the death of His Son, but God showed His love by raising us up with Christ.

We are now Christ’s new apostles confronting the powers of darkness present here on earth, and we do it with the power of the Holy Spirit offered us on the day of Pentecost. We know that we will have the ultimate victory over evil, but in the meantime, we have a great responsibility to confront, and not to join with the powers of darkness, even though sometimes it seems as this is impossible, because the grip the evil has on today’s society. Paul writes his letter to encourage the Ephesians and consequently us, to remain faithful and steady in our ministry. There are many temptations we do, and will face in life. Some may convince us to take up the sinful ways of past times, others come through the persecution we witness. He says that we may face conflicts coming not only from the outside world but sometimes even from within the Church. Paul wants to assure us however, that we have the resources to win all these attacks, and we have it in God’s love and knowledge that He is only One God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

7. There is one more aspect that must be clarified when we speak of God’s forgiveness. Forgiveness is offered to those who are willing to seek Him with all their hearts. Forgiveness comes when one is willing to turn away from the life of sin and destruction, and willing to trust God for guidance and for protection. Forgiveness comes when people change their attitude toward God and seek Him, not for the comfort in distress only, but as their guide and help in everything. It is important to understand this because a classical human response when we face any sort of fear or distress, is to seek God believing He is the only One who can help, but unfortunately, in most cases, when the fear is gone, people’s feeling of need for God is lost. So, Paul’s words to the Ephesians, and consequently to us, are to always remember, we are forgiven because of God’s grace, not because we have done something. We need God in our lives, and not only in the moments of fear, desperation and distress, but also in the joyful and peaceful moments of daily life.