

## ARE YOU SERIOUS

*“Inconceivable!” Nehemiah 9; Mark 2; Ephesians 4*  
September 10, 2023

**INTRO.:** It is a privilege to welcome you this morning as we begin our new sermon series, *“Are You Serious?”* This a series on forgiveness and I gave it this title because forgiveness is not only difficult, I would also say apart from God, we cannot understand it or do it. In fact, this morning we are going to look at the idea of it being “Inconceivable” apart from God. Some of you may recognize this word that was used by one character over and over again in the movie, *Princess Bride*. At one point one of the other characters responds with, “I do not think that means what you think it means.” I think many would agree that we live in a very unforgiving society. Many are confused about what it actually means to forgive someone. I believe there are many misconceptions about forgiveness. I would also say that it happens rarely today in the way the Bible describes it.

Last month we had something occur in the night sky. What was it? It was what is called a “blue moon.” What exactly is a “blue moon?” Does the moon actually turn blue? I gathered the answers to these questions from a NASA website. The more recent definition of a “blue moon” is when there are two full moons in a calendar month. A full moon happens every 29.5 days and on a somewhat rare occasion there are two full moons in a month. This occurs on average every 2 ½ years. The moon does not actually turn blue, although in 1883 an Indonesian volcano exploded with the blast being compared to a 100-megaton nuclear bomb. The ash caused the scattering of the red light while allowing other colors to pass through making the moon seem blue.

Not only was the full moon a blue moon (occurring twice in August), but it was also a supermoon (when the moon is at or near the closest point of the earth). It appears to be larger than normal. The combination of the full moon, blue moon, and supermoon is much rarer, with the next one not appearing again until January 2037. I have a few pictures of this taken by my nephew (he put a blue filter over his camera for some of the shots).

So, the phrase, “once in a blue moon” came to mean something that was rare. I would put forgiveness in that category, both the understanding and practice of it. This morning we are going to build the foundation for forgiveness which begins with God. I firmly believe that apart from God, forgiveness makes no sense at all. Forgiveness is not something that is earned or deserved, it must be granted. What do we know about God that points to forgiveness? The three foundational things we are going to look at are: **HIS CHARACTER**, **THE SOURCE**, and **OUR PATTERN**. We are going to look at a different passage for each one of these points.

### **HIS CHARACTER**

#### **Nehemiah 9:16-21**

“his” is referring to God. The book of Nehemiah is the account of the rebuilding of the walls around Jerusalem. Nehemiah had heard that the walls were broken down and the gates had been burned with fire. The cause of this was Israel’s disobedience to God’s laws and commands. As God had warned them if they disobeyed Him, He scattered them in exile from the land He had given them. The condition of the wall was a national disgrace and caused quite a reaction from Nehemiah.

**Nehemiah 1:4** When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

His prayer was one of confession and repentance for him and his fellow Israelites. He was the cupbearer for the king he was responsible to make sure the drink and food was safe. Here’s what happened next:

**Nehemiah 2:2–5 (NIV84)** — **2** so the king asked me, “Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.” I was very much afraid, **3** but I said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?” **4** The king said to me, “What is it you want?” Then I prayed to the God of heaven, **5** and I answered the king, “If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it.”

The king allowed the journey, even providing a letter of protection. The walls were rebuilt in only 52 days, even with much enemy opposition. Many Israelites returned to the land from exile and Ezra read the law to the people. This led to them confessing their sin, worshipping and praising God. I want us to read together part of their prayer of confession. As we read it observe what it says about the character of God.

**Nehemiah 9:16-17a** “But they, our forefathers, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and did not obey your commands. **17** They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and

compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them, even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, 'This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt,' or when they committed awful blasphemies. "Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the desert. By day the pillar of cloud did not cease to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take. You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst. For forty years you sustained them in the desert; they lacked nothing, their clothes did not wear out nor did their feet become swollen.

What does this tell us about the people? They were arrogant, stiff-necked (not yielding to God's direction and commands), didn't listen to God, and forgot the miracles He performed on their behalf. They even attempted an insurrection to go back to Egypt.

**Numbers 14:1-4** That night all the people of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. **2** All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, "If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! **3** Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?" **4** And they said to each other, "We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt."

The prayer turns to the character of God. Would you agree that so far, the people were terrible and greatly disobedient and ungrateful? They also had a bad memory about what captivity in Egypt was like. As the prayer turns to the description of God, we read this:

But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them, even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf

They were all these awful things: arrogant, stiff-necked, deaf to God, forgetful of God's work on their behalf, and rebellious. Then this comes in: **BUT GOD YOU ARE:** forgiving, gracious, compassionate, abounding in love. The first quality he mentions is : **FORGIVING**. This doesn't mean that He just glossed over sin. Remember, the Israelites were in exile because of their disobedience! God used ungodly nations to discipline them.

*"a forgiving God:"* literally: a God of "pardons" (this word is used here and in two other places)

**Psalms 130:4** But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.

**Daniel 9:9** The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him;

He didn't even abandon them when they made a golden calf. When God told Moses to leave the people and that God would not go with them, the people mourned and Moses said, "If Your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here." God continued to lead them with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He did punish them for their sin, striking them with a plague.

We need to be careful that we don't point a finger at the Israelites because I know, speaking for myself, all those words used of the Israelites could describe me at points in my life. Can anybody else here identify?

Were the actions of the Israelites at times stupid? Isn't that all of sin? Sin is dumb!! Yet, the word, "giving" is used 16 times in Nehemiah 9, for our God is indeed the "giving God." (Warren Wiersbe). God is a "forgiving God." This forgiveness doesn't come because we earned it or deserved it. Yes, there are consequences for our sin because we serve a holy and righteous God. Jesus Christ went to the cross, to pay the eternal penalty for our sin.

Forgiveness was not our idea!!!

Mervyn Breneman, "Despite our sin, God is gracious; despite God's grace, we continue to sin; despite our continuing sin, God continues to be gracious (Rom 5:20). God's forgiveness is something no human could devise but can experience."

So, how could we ever understand forgiveness without knowing God whose character is forgiving? The second thought is closely tied to the first thought. Forgiving is part of His character, but we also see:

**THE SOURCE**

**Mark 2:1-12**

This is the account of four men who brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus, hoping He would heal him. Jesus had healed a man with leprosy a few days prior to this event. People were coming to Him from everywhere. When Jesus entered Capernaum, word got around, and the house was packed. There was no way these men were going to get their friend to Jesus. So, they went up on the roof.

The Palestinian houses were low, usually with an outside staircase to reach the roof. The roof was most likely made of wood beams, cross-laid with branches and packed with a thick layer of grass, mud, and clay. So, they made a hole in the roof and lowered their friend down. Let's read together the account of what happened after they lowered their friend down to Jesus.

**Mark 2:5-12** When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...." He said to the paralytic, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

What is the first thing Jesus says after seeing their faith?

"Son, your sins are forgiven."

*"forgive:"* present, passive tense

When were his sins forgiven? Right then and there. The verb is also in the passive, which means somebody else besides the man himself is doing the forgiving. It is Jesus!!!

Jesus deals first with his sin. This man's most pressing problem is not that he was paralyzed. His most pressing problem was his sin. This is the case of every person who has ever come into this world. Many of you have loved ones, who don't know Jesus, facing some very serious health problems. We pray for healing for sure, but the main problem for them isn't their health but their spiritual state. Without our sins being forgiven we are headed for eternity separated from God. This life is short, but eternity is long.

Many who do not believe that Jesus is God the Son say that He never claims to be God. The reaction of the teachers of the law shows us that they knew that Jesus was claiming to be God. Their reaction was that Jesus was committing blasphemy, the exact same charge that was used to get Him crucified.

**Mark 14:64-65** "You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" They all condemned him as worthy of death. **65** Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, "Prophecy!" And the guards took him and beat him.

They knew that only God can forgive sin, and by Jesus declaring the man had been forgiven of his sins, Jesus was claiming equality with God.

Another clear indication of the deity of Christ is that he knew what they were thinking. Jesus's response is in the form of two questions:

1) Why are you thinking these things? (you would have thought they would be stunned that Jesus knew what they were thinking)

2) Which is easier to say to this paralyzed man:

Your sins are forgiven

Or

Get up, take your mat and walk

Jesus then tells them what He wants them to know:

But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...." He said to the paralytic, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home."

*"know:"* that they would know presently and continue to know

*"has:"* present tense (I currently have)

*“forgive:”* present tense (Jesus forgives sin now and ongoing)

Only God can forgive our sins!

Among these Jews there suddenly turns up a man who goes about talking as if He was God.... What this man said was, quite simply, the most shocking thing that has ever been uttered by human lips.... I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him. “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon, or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 54–55).

If you haven’t read this book, I would highly encourage you to do so!

Forgiveness is part of God’s character. Jesus Christ is the source of forgiveness. If we have not come to Christ for forgiveness of sin, how can we possibly begin to forgive anyone else? Lastly, as our introduction of the topic of forgiveness we see:

### **OUR PATTERN**

### **Ephesians 4:29-5:2**

Earlier in the fourth chapter of Ephesians Paul instructs the believers that their lives were to be different from what they were before coming to know Christ. The old self was to be put off and the new self put on. They were not to lie but tell the truth; not give the devil a foothold with their anger but instead not to let the sun go down on their anger; stop stealing but use their hands for doing something useful, don’t let any unwholesome (foul, putrid, decaying, or rotten) talk come out of your mouth but only that which will build others up, benefitting those who are listening.

I want us to read together what Paul tells us to get rid of and how we are to be toward one another. Remember, he is talking to believers.

**Ephesians 4:30–5:2** And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. **31** Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

When you and I disobey God we grieve the Holy Spirit. We are instructed to get rid of (take away, remove) all bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, and malice. These are all related to our interactions with one another. These are some of the fruits of unforgiveness in our lives, which will also be part of this series. Your prayers for this series would be greatly appreciated because the enemy does not want these truths to be taught and his lies exposed. Instead of all those things we are commanded to be (present tense):

\*kind

\*compassionate

\*forgiving: present tense

*“just as in Christ God forgave (past tense, accomplished fact) you”*

This is our pattern! We’re not to look at how others treat others, or how others treat me (even Christians), but instead how God has treated us when it comes to our sin.

Walter Liefeld, “Forgiveness is not merely dismissing something out of mind, trying to forget it or overlooking it. A great deal of harm can be done not only when Christians perpetuate resentful attitudes against those who have wronged them but also when they sweep these wrongs “under the carpet,” where they stay unresolved. We must face our own attitudes as well as the wrongs of others. If we truly forgive another that means putting an end to the matter by forgiving just as God has forgiven us, acknowledging the wrong and its effect on us, and then dismissing it, no longer pressing judgment and never calling it back to mind. Jesus taught that it is the person who has been forgiven much who loves much (Lk 7:47). It helps us to forgive others to remember how much God has forgiven us and the price that was paid.”

Our goal is expressed in Ephesians 5:1, “*be imitators of God....*” This is where we get the word “mimic” from. A good mimic imitates everything that the other person does. If you want to know what forgiveness looks like, then get to know God, the great forgiver.

**Colossians 3:13** Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

### **SO WHAT???**

I want to welcome you on this journey. We will be looking at:

\*Explain: what is forgiveness

\*Really: Why forgive

\*I Can't Imagine: How to forgive

\*I'm Mad: Anger & Bitterness

\*Let Me Tell You: Gossip

Before we can ever forgive anyone, even ourselves, we must have experienced the forgiveness of God.

\*His Character: God is forgiving!

Do I know Him personally?

\*The Source: We can only be forgiven through what Jesus has accomplished on the cross

\*Our Pattern: Am I getting to know God better through His Word?

Take some time to study the passages I listed on the outline in your bulletin

What do Numbers 14:13-25; Nehemiah 9:16-21; Psalm 130:1-8; Matthew 6:9-15; Mark 2:1-12; and Ephesians 4:29-5:2 tell me about God and forgiveness?