

FORGIVENESS



Reclaiming Its Power

in a Culture of Outrage

and Fear

Dr. Amy Orr-Ewing

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INTRODUCTION



While my grandparents lived through the Second World War, raising children during that horror and its aftermath, I have lived my life in relative peace, with educational and economic opportunities that previous generations worked hard for me to have. The blessings of liberty, a loving family, and a hopeful future are the canvas my life has been painted on.

But like you, I'm sure, I have also had to come to terms with really awful things: trauma, betrayal, loss. And that's just me. My husband is a survivor of horrendous abuse as a child. I know people whose loved ones were murdered. In light of such things, living out the teachings of Jesus to "love our enemies" and "forgive as Christ forgave us" isn't easy—especially when we have seen the concept of forgiveness used to sweep aside abuse and enable unjust systems and power dynamics to continue.

In our individual lives, our national life, and this cultural moment, many of us are particularly aware of loss, harm, injustice, and the trauma and damage they cause. We are a generation rightly crying out for justice. Justice movements recognize the harm inflicted on a human being when wrong is done. When we really think about the pain of such harm, the

word “forgiveness” can make us recoil. Forgiveness can sound a lot like *minimizing* harm.

We live in a world of outrage and fear. The dial has been turned up on animosity, acrimony, and division in our public discourse and family conversations. A lack of grace festers. We are conscious of the impact that trauma and anxiety have on our bodies and souls. Many of us are looking to therapists, self-care practices, and healthcare to give us the sanctuary, harmony, and safety we want for ourselves and our communities.

With this context as a backdrop, I want to explore the possibility that forgiveness can be a gift to any culture and of particular resonance in this moment.

I believe there is something beautiful, radical, and different in the Christian story. The Christian story acknowledges that wrongdoing is real and that there is real justice to be done. It challenges us to admit that all of us are flawed and need forgiveness. And it offers us a healthy way of forgiving those who have harmed us, freeing us from the burden of getting the vengeance that justice demands and from the toxic consequences of bitterness. This story offers us practical wisdom for resolving the division, conflict, and anxiety that haunt us. In this book, we will start to see why forgiveness—whether we receive it or find ourselves empowered to offer it to others—is the greatest gift the Christian faith can offer our age. Forgiveness is central to the historical Christian faith and yet is poorly understood and rarely practiced today.

I began thinking more deeply about forgiveness at a point in my professional life when I had begun to advocate for survivors of sexual abuse in connection with the justice system and in the organizations where the harm occurred. Alongside this advocacy work, I began to write articles and think about the interplay between forgiveness and justice. It struck me that various

forms of cancel culture were a way for young people to express understandable horror at harm and transgression but that these attempts to engage with justice had introduced a harsh and punitive tone into Western public debate. I was invited to speak to the Westminster Parliament at the 2023 Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast. There, I spoke on forgiveness as the greatest gift the Christian faith could offer our age. A few months later, I was invited to speak at the Alliance for Responsible Citizenship to make the case for the Christian faith on a similar basis. These two opportunities to publicly engage with the ancient idea of forgiveness set me on the path of writing this book.

Over the past two years, when friends or acquaintances asked me, “What are you writing about?” and I told them about this book, I received two different responses. Some responded with an immediate personal, practical riposte. “Oh no, I suppose I ought to read that. I have a long list of people I should forgive.” Others gravitated toward the potential magnitude of forgiveness that is serious about justice on a big-picture level, at a communal, national, and cultural level. Both responses are important. If forgiveness is real, it will mean something on multiple levels.

The British folk band Mumford and Sons sings, “Now let me at the truth that will refresh my broken mind.”¹ As we embark on this journey of recapturing a personal, communal, and national vision of the goodness and power of forgiveness, perhaps hope will rise at the possibility of healing for our outraged and fearful culture.

ONE

Forgiveness as a Radical Possibility for a Great Human Need

My grandfather was born in 1906 in Germany. As a university student in the 1920s, he laid the foundations of his career as a chemist. He was immersed in the atheism of his fellow scientists and remained committed throughout his entire life to the conviction that God does not exist. He once visited the Bonhoeffer house for food and discussion in Berlin, but he remained a materialist, believing that there is no supernatural dimension to life and that all we are as human beings is the sum of our biochemistry.

What does it mean to be human? This could be one of the most important questions we ever ask and attempt to answer. Who am I? Why am I here? What does my life really mean? Does anything matter? These questions, which occur to us in the middle of the night or at critical junctures in our lives, remind us that being human involves self-reflection. We can call this

element of human existence “moral consciousness.” Reflecting on one’s meaning, values, and decisions does not require one to be a philosopher or religious leader; a person may have no religious sense at all. Yet it is an inescapable fact that human beings, at some point in their lives, wonder and question, and we set out to raise the next generation with an expectation of some moral intuition and purpose.

Where does our instinct for morals and meaning come from? And what vision of who we are do people hold? Here are four ways to answer these questions.

The Materialist Self

From the dawning of the Enlightenment to the twentieth century, it was proper to believe that a human is simply and only a material being. Our identity as people is no more and no less than the matter of our existence.

If a human being is a purely material being, then all thought, will, and faculty is the de facto outworking of biological, physical, and chemical mechanisms. Moral consciousness can then be explained in a couple ways.

On the one hand, our moral intuitions might be the result of people living together over millions of years and realizing that murder, rape, and other antisocial behaviors are not in our best interests. Certain behaviors are encouraged and others are penalized in order to advance human life. Morality is discovered through self-interest and enforced by community taboo and eventually law.

On the other hand, morality may be driven by hormones or chemicals acting in the interest of the survival of the host and then going on to adapt and shape human behavior, especially in the realm of relationships, with the ultimate goal

of self-replication and reproduction. But moral consciousness and a sense of self or personhood do not transcend the physical, material, embodied human existence. Philosopher Edward Wilson notes, “The brain is a product of evolution. Human behavior—like the deepest capacities for emotional response which drive and guide it—is the circuitous technique by which human genetic material has been and will be kept intact. Morality has no other demonstrable ultimate function.”¹

Human identity as material means that moral intuition is also materially driven either by survival in community or by the chemistry of the brain.

The Constructed Self

Other people view human identity as something we construct about ourselves. In a post-Christian landscape, human identity is not sacred or God-given. Rather, we determine who and what we are. A constructed identity is most clearly seen in the idea of the expressive self. Joanna Williams, head of education at the UK’s Policy Exchange, notes:

It can seem as if we live in an age of unprecedented personal freedom. The suburban conformity policed by net-curtain twitching neighbours has been consigned to the dustbin of history, alongside office dress codes and deference to those in authority. Today, tattoos, piercings, niche diets, music and media on demand allow us to express our individuality. Now we are free to bring our whole selves to work, we can dress down in jeans and trainers, or even choose to stay at home and work from bed instead. Not even biology stands in the way of our self-expression. . . . Our corporal bodies [can now be made to] match our mental self-image. . . . [And we have] the freedom to choose how and when to die.²

In the age of the expressive self, two contradictory things can be true at the same time. We have more freedom than ever before to express our individual identity, but freedom of conscience, when it goes against the zeitgeist on either end of the political spectrum, is held in scant regard at best and actively denigrated at worst.

This is where power needs to be exerted—moral consciousness is self-generated and individually asserted. Having your say and asserting your view require an exercise of power, and power is the currency that matters. If you can claim any sense of victimhood, your power, perspective, and voice must be adhered to. With the erosion of confidence in traditional sources of moral authority in society, such as the church, older generations, and the rule of law, the autonomy of the self and iconic authoritarian leaders are what we are left with. Morality is less communal or traditional and strangely more taboo-based. It is a black-and-white means of self-expression, a way of asserting power, domination, and status, with an emphasis on labeling the “other” as dangerous.

The Fragmented Digital Self

In the digital age, previous philosophical assumptions about the self as fixed are being displaced by a sense that human identity is fragmented and can be expressed in multiple digital personas. One researcher observes, “In the past, one’s identity was relatively stable, formed through face-to-face interactions, personal relationships, and lived experiences. In contrast, today’s digital landscape encourages individuals to present idealized versions of themselves online, often across multiple platforms, each with its own set of norms and expectations.”³

Advances in social media, AI, gaming, and virtual reality blur the boundaries between the present, physical world and

the virtual world. People behave online in ways they would never behave in the “real” world, yet their actions impact other people in tangible ways. Meanwhile, hyperreal experiences take on the same significance as or even greater significance than actual events.

This view of the human person as fragmented has impacted our sense of morality, creating two phenomena. First, digital alter egos behave in ways that physical persons never would, often using verbal aggression or other kinds of intimidation. Just speak to any woman with a high-profile public life, and she will tell you of online rape threats, verbal sexualized aggression, and in many cases promises to murder her. At the same time, the digital world engenders moral scrupulosity. Moralism governs what words people are allowed to use and what people are allowed to think. Everything said and done online is policed by people who may well take out their grievances with verbal harassment or seek to punish alleged offenders in other ways. The thrill of crushing alternative viewpoints abounds, pushing people into more and more extreme positions.

The Sacred Self

Genesis 1 attests that “God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (v. 27). Since the earliest days, civilizations that have sought to base themselves on the Bible have envisaged human personhood as in some way sacred. To be human is to be made in the image of God, the *imago Dei*. Psalm 139:13 speaks of every person being divinely “knit together” in their mother’s womb.

Within Christian thought, the *imago Dei* is the basis for moral consciousness. Human life has a transcendent source:

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has made each and every person to know their Creator and to discern right from wrong. The fall of humanity, described in Genesis 3, profoundly impacts every living person and is the basis of sin, death, alienation, deception, and confusion, leaving us all in desperate need of redemption. The value of every human life remains undiminished and the love of God for this world undimmed, yet the reality and pervasive power of evil, darkness, and sin are also accounted for.

Every human being contains both the sacred value and potential of a God-imagining creature and the potential to sin. Timothy Keller puts it succinctly: “We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.”⁴ Moral consciousness is the intuition in the heart of each person that we were made for relationship with a holy God, our Creator, that the decisions we make matter, and that we will be held to account for how we have lived by an authority beyond ourselves. The Christian faith tells us that there is a Savior who can redeem and restore us when we have harmed and been harmed.

Within this view of sacred human identity and ethical potential, the seeds of redemption germinate. Power plays, biochemistry, and moral scrupulosity are not soil in which grace, forgiveness, redemption, and reconciliation can grow. But before we go too far, we should ask, Why do humans long for redemption in the first place?

Hope for Redemption

Despite different accounts of human identity and regardless of religious affiliation, hope for redemption persists in every

human community and place in time. The novelist Flannery O'Connor put it this way: "There is something in us, as storytellers and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored."⁵

In professional sports, talk of redemption is common when an individual or team misses the level of performance that fans expect. After the US men's basketball team shocked the world and its own nation by failing to win the gold medal at the 2004 Olympics, a redemption narrative was baked into its Olympic campaign four years later. In 2008, the team was nicknamed the "Redeem Team." We like redemption stories because they connect with our desire for justice and hope and mirror back to us the familiar themes of struggle and recovery in our own lives.⁶

Some of the most popular movies in recent decades have reflected this desire for justice and hope. *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) introduces us to Andy Dufresne, a man wrongfully convicted and imprisoned for murdering his wife and her lover. He befriends fellow inmate Ellis "Red" Redding and ultimately escapes to start a new life. Red, after decades of incarceration, reflects on his past crimes and gains hope for redemption after his release.

Atonement (2007) tells the story of Briony Tallis, a young girl whose false accusation of a crime irrevocably alters the lives of her sister Cecilia and Cecilia's lover, Robbie Turner, in 1930s England. After the lovers are separated due to Briony's lie and the events of World War II, Briony grows up grappling with guilt and attempts to make amends for her actions. In a poignant twist, the story reveals that her efforts to atone for her past come through her writing, where she imagines a happier ending for Cecilia and Robbie, though in reality their lives are tragically cut short, suggesting that redemption has limits.

In pop music, reflections on the possibility of redemption persist. Taylor Swift’s hit “Back to December” reflects on a past relationship, acknowledging her wishful thinking when she muses, “If we loved again, I swear I’d love you right.”⁷ Mistakes in a relationship are the context for expressing a desire for redemption and a second chance. Adele’s ballad “Hello” explores a similar theme: “I must’ve called a thousand times to tell you I’m sorry for everything that I’ve done.”⁸ Here, the hope of redemption and the possibility of a new start crackle in the background.

Psychologist Dan McAdams explains that redemption stories move from suffering or negative experiences to personal or communal growth. His study of generativity—the human need to support, care for, and pass something of substance on to a younger generation—has led him to conclude that generative narratives tend to be about “a deliverance from suffering to a better world.”⁹ His research highlights that individuals who can tell redemptive stories about their own lives tend to exhibit greater well-being and resilience.

But the question remains: Why do we long for redemption? Can redemption meet the psychological and philosophical human needs we seem to carry? Might forgiveness be an integral part of this dynamic? And do our conceptions of human identity cohere with the possibility that forgiveness is a driver of well-being?

Let’s return for a moment to the question of human identity. If we and our moral intuitions are nothing more than biochemistry, then redemption has little meaning. When chemicals go wrong, the rational answer is to dispose of them safely or to intervene with pharmaceutical solutions. Another option when things go wrong might be to just “let it go” and seek detachment from pointless regret.

If human identity is constructed and moral consciousness is a kind of power play, then forgiveness is weakness for the one who's been harmed. Grievance is a form of power, as is moral superiority, if we have been wronged. To forgive is to surrender that power. Forgiveness can also be a kind of domination if we extract it for ourselves when we have been the aggressor. Forcing others to "let it go" and to restore us in some way is a subtle triumph, a clever exertion of power. This is why forgiveness needs to be carefully examined and considered in relation to power. In the wrong hands, forgiveness can be withheld or demanded as a means to subjugate others.

When human identity is fragmented and digital alter egos are in play, moral consciousness can be expressed as scrupulosity or the pressure of the mob to conform to the latest social norms. Often in public digital space, forgiveness is taboo, the mob demands vengeance, and there is very little kindness.

If, however, life is sacred because humans are made in the image of God, then our longing for and intuition about redemption make sense. Both perpetrator and victim have value and worth, the cost of forgiveness is accounted for, and intervention from outside is required. We need help from the Creator and source of life, and the form of that help will need to connect with us in a visceral way. Some kind of divine incarnation and sacrifice is called for. The thrilling and intriguing potential of redemption is very far from the banal perceptions of religiosity that have been rejected by so many in the West.

Australian musician Nick Cave has been on a spiritual journey, one that his album *Wild God* opens to our view. In a press briefing about the album, he quipped, "I would say I'm in the process of conversion."¹⁰ Cave finds himself unexpectedly drawn to the surprising beauty of the Christian faith.

In an interview with historian Tom Holland, Cave spoke vulnerably about how, in the structure and liturgy of a twelfth-century church, he discovered a place that could hold his “existential sorrow.” He shared how he and his wife Susie, while grieving the death of their son, were quietly prayed for by an old woman at a Communion service and experienced “a deeply, deeply moving movement from a kind of inner despair to a sort of relief.”¹¹ For Cave, worship immerses him in something ancient, something beautiful, something that evokes a profound humility. The Christian story pulls everything into focus, connecting with our human quest for meaning, our need for redemption, and the radical possibility of forgiveness.

TWO

Forgiveness as a Welcome Challenge to a Punitive World

At a dinner for female public intellectuals in London, I had the opportunity to talk with a woman whose story I had followed closely in the press. She had been working as a consultant for a global firm when a complaint was made against her due to views she had expressed about biological sex and the protection of women's rights. Her case went to tribunal, which she initially lost, and her views were labeled "not worthy of respect in a democratic society."¹

Ultimately, the legal decision was overturned, and she received compensation, but the impact on her and the scores of women working to protect women's rights and safe spaces was huge. The attempts to cancel her and the threats she received didn't surprise anyone in the room.

A few weeks later, I sat next to a woman on a flight who works at an Ivy League university in the United States. She spoke about the life-saving cancer research that she and her colleagues were collaborating on. She then shared that she feared