

Were You Ever Pardoned?

Every Thanksgiving, the President of the United States pardons a turkey. The bird, which would otherwise have been slaughtered and served up at a table, goes unharmed. It's just an amusing little ceremony.

Other pardons have been more significant. Some people would not exist today if President Lincoln had not pardoned one of their ancestors. Obviously, the power to pardon involves a great deal of responsibility. Presidents and governors have advisors who help them to make decisions on this matter.

Most serious of all is the need to receive a pardon from God,ⁱ the judge of all the earth. And this need affects all of us, *"for all have sinned, and come short of glory of God"* (Romans 3:23). We cannot appeal to a higher court because the highest court is God, and He is the offended party. So we are in double trouble. Maybe we are in triple trouble because no human advocate can plead our case before God.

Does God Himself offer a way out for us? Yes, He offers a pardon, what one might call a "conditional pardon." You and I may receive it if we meet the conditions.

God's plan begins with the fact that gave his Son to live among humans, to walk about among them doing good, to teach them, and finally to let Himself be crucified by His ungrateful creatures. And here comes the mystery. Why did God decide that this was the answer, that this would open the door to our pardon? That question has fascinated many people.

Some assume that God, instead of pouring out His wrath on us, poured it out on His Son. John Bunyan himself, who wrote the classic *Pilgrim's Progress*, had the idea "that Jesus Christ was not only to die a natural death, but also that he should undergo the pains and torments of the damned in hell."ⁱⁱ Sorry, brother John, the Bible does not say this. It simply says, *"For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God"* (1 Peter 3:18). He suffered—oh, how He suffered—but it is going too far to say that the Father punished Him instead of us.

What did happen then on the cross? It would be interesting to keep on digging into the subject, but finally we come to the point where we admit we do not understand it all.

Whatever the understanding was between Father and Son, and however the transaction was made, it was made. God now offers to pardon us. And what are the conditions?

"Repent—Believe—Obey—Christ is the way" would never win a prize for literature, but it is at least a good memory device.

Repent: We must stop doing the things we have been doing wrong, along with the things we discover along the way that we are still doing wrong. Repentance is never a thing of the past. *"Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts..."*

Believe: We must trust God to forgive us. “. . . and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy on him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon” (Isaiah 55:7).

Obey—Christ is the way: We must follow the Lord’s directions from now on. Jesus asked, “*Why call ye me Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?*” (Luke 6:46). We also need to find help from godly people who are searching out how to obey the Lord in this present evil world.

This kind of pardon is considerably better than the pardon that lets a turkey go back to his old turkey life. It is better than the legal pardon a governor or president can grant to a condemned prisoner. This is moral forgiveness from God Himself, a pardon that completely wipes away not only the penalty but also the stain of guilt. It restores our innocence and prepares us for a perfect place where we will never again need to be pardoned.

~David L. Martin

ⁱ The New Testament uses the words forgiveness and justification.

ⁱⁱ John Bunyan, *Doctrine of Law and Grace Unfolded* (Choteau, Mont.: Old Paths Gospel Press, n.d.), p. 106).