Biblical Concepts of Forgiveness
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I begin this teaching on forgiveness with a nod toward Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity. Pretend it’s the early 20th century. You’re reading a book on, say, energy sources; and hidden within a couple of disparate discussions you come across brief, almost throw-away statements. Each, in its context, seems unremarkable, because it’s not necessarily addressing the major topic of the surrounding paragraphs. These statements say essentially, “By the way, energy and matter are interchangeable.” You can read the statements fifty times without really noticing them. You respond with “Yes, yes, OK, etc.,” because you’re focusing on the primary argument of the particular chapter or subsection.

But at some point your eyes are opened and your response becomes, “WOW! Hold on! Energy and matter can be changed into each other? That’s absolutely counterintuitive! That goes against everything we’ve known to be true for thousands of years! If it’s true, it’s a game-changer!” But, of course, it is true. E = mc² and all that. It doesn’t contradict Newtonian physics—the kind that deals with objects in motion, and so on—but it goes beyond it. It’s in a sense more comprehensive, because it deals with fundamental realities that our standard, everyday observations just don’t address. But it’s true. And it is indeed game-changing!

I want you to hold this idea in the back of your mind as we investigate biblical concepts of forgiveness. I use the plural concepts because there clearly is no single understanding that encompasses all biblical statements on the subject. The first point I want to make, and it is very important, is that we must go beyond any simplistic ideas that “forgiveness” is in itself a “thing” about which scripture speaks. That’s just not true. There are hundreds of passages in the Bible where we use the English translation forgive or pardon simply because context demands it. In English the word forgive has a quite singular meaning—unlike the word kill, for example, which requires context before it can be understood. I might do something to cause you to be biologically dead rather than alive, thus killing you. Or I might kill your dreams and aspirations. I might kill a volleyball or tennis ball by hitting it so hard and fast that my opponent cannot return it; on the other hand, if I’m playing soccer I might do the opposite—I kill the ball by stopping it! Or I might kill a bottle of beer, that is, chug the entire thing. And when I say my feet are killing me, I in no way mean, of course, that my feet are killing me! And when you tell a really great joke, I might say “You kill me!” and of course the verb has a very positive connotation, not a negative one. When we encounter the English word forgive, however, we know within rough limits what is meant, without needing to pay a great deal of attention to context.

That’s a disadvantage in studying biblical concepts of forgiveness, because most biblical words—Hebrew or Greek, Old or New Testament—that lend themselves to being translated into English as forgive or forgiveness have multiple meanings that in most cases look nothing like what we think of when we speak of forgiving someone. Translators must look at the context of a Hebrew or Greek sentence in order to decide whether to translate these various words as forgive or as something quite different. And that has enormous implications for any attempt to get at what was in the mind of biblical writers when they used a word that we decide to translate as forgive.

I want first to explore what biblical writers appear to have meant when they used the Hebrew or Greek words that English translators interpreted as forgive. But after doing our more scholarly homework, I want to go further by asking the question, “OK, we have a better grasp of the meaning of various Hebrew and Greek terms now, but how does that knowledge relate to spiritual reality? So far as our relationships with God and with each other are concerned, what can we now say? Underlying the human intellectual concept that we call forgiveness, what is the eternal reality? What is that touch that arises from the very heart of God?” And in addressing these questions, I believe we’ll find some game-changing statements in scripture that are just as astounding as any early claim that matter and energy happen to be interchangeable.

The Scholarly Stuff

Old Testament

There are two primary Hebrew words that, judging from context, clearly imply something strongly akin to what we think of when we speak of forgiveness. A third Hebrew word also qualifies—it’s a word generally translated as “atone for”; but
since the connotations of that term differ somewhat from those of our two primary Hebrew words, and because we have limited time, and because delving into the nuances of this third Hebrew word (kāfar) would add nothing significant to our discussion, I will address only the two Hebrew words that are, in most cases, quite appropriately translated as forgive or forgiveness (or the equivalent, e.g., pardon) in the Old Testament.

**Salaḥ**
The first Hebrew word is salaḥ, and this verb is the exception to everything I just said about these Hebrew or Greek words’ having multiple meanings. Every time salaḥ is used, it clearly means something like forgive. Here are some examples:

NRS Exodus 34:9 [Moses] said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance."

In Leviticus, there is a plethora of passages that read essentially the same: “The priest shall make atonement on a person’s behalf, and that person shall be forgiven” (e.g., 4:20,31; 5:10,18; 6:7, 19:22).

Il Chronicles 7:14 If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land

Psalm 103:2-3 Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits— who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases

Isaiah 55:7 . . . let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon

*Salaḥ* appears 45 times in the Old Testament, and every instance means, approximately, forgive or pardon. That’s the easy word.

**Nasa’**
The other Hebrew word translated appropriately as forgive is nasa’. Out of the 513 times it appears in the Hebrew Bible, in only about 30 instances—approximately 6%—does it mean something like forgive.

The basic meaning of nasa’ is to carry or lift up or bear. This is what it tends to mean in those more than 90% of cases—around 480 of them—where the word clearly has nothing to do with forgiveness.

*In Genesis 7, the waters “bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth.”
*In Exodus 10 the wind lifted the locusts and drove them into the sea.
*Dozens of passages talk of Levites carrying the ark of the covenant using its poles.
*Dozens of passages use the idiom “to lift up ones eyes”; for example, in Genesis 18:2 when Abraham looks up and sees three men—the Hebrew is literally, he “lifted up his eyes.”
*The lepers in II Kings 7 carried off silver, gold, and clothing from the Syrian encampment.
*In Isaiah 40 we read that “every valley shall be lifted up.”
*Isaiah 60 says that camels from many countries will carry gold and frankincense to Zion to honor Yahweh.

Here are some of those passages where nasa’ means something like forgive:

NRS Genesis 18:26 And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.”
NRS Genesis 50:17 . . . Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.

NRS Exodus 34:7 . . . keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty. . .

NRS Psalm 25:18 Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins.

NRS Psalm 32:1 Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

Note, however, some intriguing uses of nasa' that are intimately related to those passages where it clearly means forgive, for the underlying meaning in these statements is that a certain person—usually the offender him- or herself—will bear or carry the sin or the evil that has been done.

In many places throughout Leviticus we are told a person who has done bad things will “carry/bear his evil/guilt/punishment/sins/iniquity (however you want to translate it)” Here are but a few examples:

RSV Leviticus 5:1 If any one sins in that he hears a public adjuration to testify and though he is a witness. . . yet does not speak, he shall bear his iniquity.

RSV Leviticus 5:17 If any one sins, doing any of the things which the LORD has commanded not to be done, though he does not know it, yet he is guilty and shall bear his iniquity.

RSV Leviticus 19:8 (concerning a person who eats a peace offering on or after the third day on which it was sacrificed, which is forbidden) . . . and every one who eats it shall bear his iniquity . . .

The same language spills over into the vocabulary of atonement:

RSV Leviticus 10:17 (addressing the priests who had not correctly followed the law) Why have you not eaten the sin offering in the place of the sanctuary, since it is a thing most holy and has been given to you that you may bear the iniquity of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the LORD?

So we see in this case that one person can bear or carry the sin of another—a highly significant concept!

RSV Leviticus 16:22 (concerning the so-called “scapegoat” on the Day of Atonement) The goat shall bear all their iniquities upon him to a solitary land. . .

And as you might suspect by now, nasa’ is the verb used in Isaiah 53 when we are told, concerning the Servant of Yahweh, that

NRS Isaiah 53:4 Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases. . . [A better translation might be that he has borne our sicknesses and carried our sorrows.]

Note that the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was the Bible of the early church—reads “He has borne our sins. . .” That translation is perfectly understandable in light of verse 53:12, which says in both Hebrew as well as Greek, that . . .

NRS Isaiah 53:12 . . . he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.
Finally, there is a very interesting statement in Numbers 14:19, suggesting that both Hebrew verbs, *salaḥ* and *nasaʾ*, were essentially equivalent in the mind of the writer:

[trans BCM] Numbers 14:19 *Forgive* (*salaḥ*) the evil of this people according to the greatness of your love, just as you have *forgiven* (*nasaʾ*) this people from Egypt until today.

**An Interlude for Theologizing**

Even though *salaḥ* is more commonly used to directly indicate the concept of forgiveness, if we add to the tally for *nasaʾ* those passages in Leviticus that use *nasaʾ* to refer to the bearing of sin/evil/guilt/punishment, and if we take note of that fascinating statement in Numbers 14:19 where *salaḥ* and *nasaʾ* are rather clearly used as synonyms, I think by now we can present an overview of the basic concept of forgiveness in the Old Testament. It must be emphasized that there is no single theology of forgiveness (or of almost any other concept) because the Old Testament was written over many centuries. But I think an overall picture emerges of biblical thought that stands in rather stark contrast to traditional Christian beliefs that have prevailed since the early centuries of the Christian era when, thanks to influential people such as Augustine, Christians began to think much more in Roman and Greeks terms than in biblical terms.

Christians traditionally think of forgiveness in legal terms. When you sin against me, my forgiving you means that I declare you not guilty, or perhaps not subject to punishment, or whatever. I *acquit* you, as in a court of law. This kind of thinking comes ultimately from Roman thought in the early centuries of the Christian era. Christians focus a lot on guilt, or on being declared not guilty. We tend to picture God as a judge in a court of law. The concept of God’s *imputing* righteousness to believers comes from this same universe of Roman/Greek vs. Old Testament influences.

The Old Testament viewpoint was different. If I sin, that means I have done something destructive, something that causes hurt or pain or injury to another human or to God. Forgiveness is not so much a question of declaring me not guilty or not condemned, or of sovereignly declaring me (contrary to clear observation) righteous rather than unrighteous. Rather, it is an acknowledgement first of all that I have caused destruction—or, to use different vocabulary, I have incurred a debt. Forgiveness in the minds of many contemporary Christians means that my debt is cancelled, or that I am simply declared debt-free. But in Old Testament thought, I believe, that’s only part of the story. Someone has to *pay* that debt; or, to use the terminology detailed a bit earlier, *every instance of evil/sin/iniquity will be borne or carried by someone*. The Levitical law speaks frequently of individuals’ bearing their own evil/sin/iniquity. A few passages describe how, through atoning acts, the priests or the “scapegoat” (that’s *not* a biblical term, incidentally) will bear the sin instead of the individual or instead of the entire nation. These are the occasions when it seems appropriate to use the English word *forgive*. If you forgive me of something I have done to you, of the debt I have incurred toward you, you are saying that *you* will *bear* or *carry* the cost. The dominant idea is *bearing*—not adjudicating or pronouncing sentence. Sin is always costly. If you forgive my sin, you are saying that you will incur and pay for my debt.

When used in a sense that means *forgive*, both *nasaʾ* and *salaḥ* are similar to the English word *forgive* in that they can refer to the sin or to the sinner. In English, we speak of forgiving sin as well as forgiving the sinner. The Hebrew is similar: Both Hebrew verbs sometimes refer to the sin, sometimes to the sinner, and sometimes to both in the same sentence. If I have wronged you, I have detracted from you, I have incurred a debt to you. You may decide to carry or bear *my* sin, and at the same time to carry or bear *me*.

As already noted, a third party can do the bearing or carrying. There is the common language in Leviticus about people *carrying/bearing their own sin*, and in a few instances the priests *carry/bear the sins* of the congregation. Most significantly, there’s the reminder in Isaiah that the Servant of Yahweh will *carry/bear the sin* of many people. The Good Samaritan in Jesus’ parable *carried/bore* the stranger’s debt, paying all that was necessary out of his own pocket—and he even carried the individual, literally, to a place of refuge.

Knowing the background concepts from the Old Testament, we can more easily appreciate New Testament passages such as
RSV 1 Peter 2:24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

RSV Hebrews 9:28 . . . Christ, having been offered once to bear our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

The verb in both these statements is the standard Greek word for carry; and as you might guess, it is the word used in the Greek translation of nasa’ in Isaiah 53:12, that describes how the Servant of Yahweh carried the sins of many.

**Important passages ~ avnafe, rw**: (cf. Leviticus passim, Is. 53:4, Is. 53:12)

NRS Numbers 14:33 And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness for forty years, and shall suffer [lit., they shall bear your fornication] for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness.

RSV Isaiah 53:11 he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous; and he shall bear their iniquities.

In understanding God’s forgiving our sins, I believe it is appropriate to focus on the fact that we created destruction and pain through our actions; and to understand that God chooses to bear the cost, the consequences, of those sins. Forgiveness certainly includes something on the order of judicial acquittal, but I think the more important concept is one of God’s deciding to bear the consequences of our sin himself.

It’s less a formal courtroom scene with a judge declaring guilt or acquittal, and more a somewhat grubby street encounter where Someone sees the destruction and pain we have wrought; and he says, as did the Good Samaritan, “I’ll pay for it all, however much it costs; and I’ll carry these guys to a place of refuge and healing.”

**New Testament**

Two Greek words account for the vast majority of New Testament statements translated as forgive or something like that concept. They are aphieími and charizomai.

In order to understand the underlying meaning of any Greek word in the New Testament—that is, to get the best possible handle on what the writer had in mind when he wrote it—it’s necessary to study the Greek Old Testament. The Septuagint, which was the most widespread Greek translation of the Old Testament, was by and large the Bible of the early church, *not the Hebrew Old Testament!* Time and again, if you check the source of a quote from the Old Testament in a New Testament passage, it’s clear that the person was quoting from the Septuagint, that is, the Greek Old Testament, not from the Hebrew Old Testament. Therefore it is necessary to check out how these two Greek words, *aphieími* and *charizomai*, are used in the Old Testament in order to get a handle on what the New Testament writers had in mind when they used the words.
The underlying meaning of *aphiēmi* is to *let go*, to *leave*, to *abandon*, to *leave behind*, to *let*, to *permit*. It appears 49 times in the Old Testament in its more generic sense, and 28 times in contexts that rather clearly require a translation on the order of *forgive* or *pardon*.

Here are some examples of *aphiēmi* in the more prosaic sense:

NRS Genesis 42:33 Then the man, the lord of the land, said to us, 'By this I shall know that you are honest men: *leave* one of your brothers with me, take grain for the famine of your households, and go your way.

NRS Exodus 9:21 Those who did not regard the word of the LORD *left* their slaves and livestock in the open field.

NRS Exodus 22:5 When someone causes a field or vineyard to be grazed over, or *lets* livestock loose to graze in someone else’s field, restitution shall be made from the best in the owner’s field or vineyard.

NRS Judges 16:26 Samson said to the attendant who held him by the hand, "*Let me* feel the pillars on which the house rests, so that I may lean against them."

NRS 2 Samuel 15:16 So the king left, followed by all his household, except ten concubines whom he *left behind* to look after the house.

NRS Ecclesiastes 10:4 If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not *leave your post*, for calmness will undo great offenses.

Here are examples of *aphiēmi* in sentences where it clearly means something like *forgive*:

NRS Genesis 18:26 And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will *forgive* the whole place for their sake"

NRS Exodus 32:32 But now, if you will only *forgive* their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written

NRS Psalm 32:1 Happy are those whose transgression is *forgiven*, whose sin is covered

Note that in each of these statements, the Greek *aphiēmi* is translating the Hebrew *nasa‘*, whose underlying meaning is to *carry* or to *bear*.

Here are some other examples of *aphiēmi* being used to denote *forgive*, and in each of these verses the Greek word is translating the Hebrew *salaḥ*, which always means something on the order of *forgive*.

RSV Leviticus 5:13 Thus the priest shall make atonement for him for the sin which he has committed in any one of these things, and he shall be *forgiven*. . .

This is one of a large number of similar passages regarding sacrifices that use essentially the same vocabulary. Other passages where *aphiēmi* translates *salaḥ*:
NRS Numbers 15:26 All the congregation of the Israelites shall be forgiven, as well as the aliens residing among them, because the whole people was involved in the error.

NRS Isaiah 55:7 let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

There are many other passages, which I won’t take time to discuss, where ἀφιέμι translates miscellaneous other Hebrew verbs.

It’s easy to see how this word came to mean, in certain contexts, something that Bible translators decide to render as forgive. The basic meaning of release, or let go, etc., could even be substituted, albeit rather awkwardly, for New Testament passages that use ἀφιέμι. I want to do that now, using passages with which you are familiar but substituting a more generic meaning of ἀφιέμι for the word forgive:

NRS Matthew 6:12 And release us from our debts, as we also have released our debtors.

NRS Matthew 9:2 And just then some people were carrying a paralyzed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are left behind."

NRS Matthew 18:27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and let go of his debt.

NRS Acts 2:38 Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be left behind; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

NRS Ephesians 1:7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the release of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.

The English is clumsy, but I think these statements can help us do a mental end run around entrenched but partially misleading ideas about the judicial nature of forgiveness.

charizomai
Another Greek term occasionally translated forgive is charizomai.

This word is used 18 times in the New Testament. Seven of these imply forgiveness or something like it—all in the writings of Paul with the exception of a single instance in Luke 7 in Jesus’ parable about a creditor who forgives the debts of two different debtors. Eleven other New Testament passages seem to have a different meaning. It is used only once in the Old Testament, in the book of Esther, and 11 times in the apocrypha, but outside the New Testament it never has the sense forgive.

The underlying meaning of charizomai is to give freely, to grant a favor, to be gracious to.

Hence

NRS 2 Corinthians 2:10 Anyone whom you forgive, I also [forgive]. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ. [Or, paraphrased, “If you give grace to someone, I also will give grace to that person.” Read the following passages in a similar way.]

RSV Colossians 2:13 And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses.
RSV Colossians 3:13 forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also [must forgive].

Charizomai is used in rather consistent ways in the New Testament when it isn’t implying forgive. The suggestion is always related to giving or handing over—as you probably guessed, this is the root from which we take the word charismatic.

NRS Luke 7:21 Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind.

NRS Acts 3:14 But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given [in sense of handed over or released] to you

NRS Acts 25:16 I told them that it was not the custom of the Romans to hand over anyone before the accused had met the accusers face to face and had been given an opportunity to make a defense against the charge.

NRS Philippians 2:9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name

Summary of Biblical Concepts of Forgiveness
After all this technical discussion about the meanings of words, here is a summary of what we have learned:

The basic Old Testament idea of what we call forgiveness does appear to contain within it some idea akin to the notion of no longer holding a person guilty for his or her offenses, which is something like what salah seems to imply. But the even more profound picture in the Old Testament seems to be, following the meaning of nasa’, that forgiving a person means bearing or carrying that person’s debts, or taking responsibility for the evil the other person perpetrated.

The basic New Testament idea is one of releasing or sending away or leaving behind a person’s offenses. It includes the Old Testament concepts of bearing or carrying, since in several instances the major New Testament words are the same Greek terms used in the Greek Old Testament to describe such bearing or carrying.

The overall biblical picture is NOT predominantly of a judicial proceeding, which is probably the favorite picture modern-day Christians have of the context of forgiveness. Rather than being a mere question of judicial acquittal, forgiveness in the biblical sense implies that the forgiver accepts the costs, the consequences of sin. God, in other words, sees sin less as something to adjudicate in terms of guilt/innocence, condemnation/acquittal, but more as a cosmic calamity that God has decided to bear, to carry, himself. In the process of doing so, he will engage in something not unlike judicial acquittal, which tends to be our favorite image, but that’s by no means the primary description of what is going on. The entire cosmos is broken, is wrapped in darkness, is infused with pain, is crying out in anguish. The Creator does not merely decide that he will declare individuals not guilty so that they can be clean and live forever with him. Rather, he chooses to bear the darkness, the pain, the anguish in his own being, to incur and pay the debt himself, to carry the sin, and then to release it into the fiery depths of his own devouring love.

Final Theologizing
The breadth and depth of God’s forgiveness are the game-changers, the concepts to which God’s people through the centuries have generally been blind because the ideas were too far removed from human experience. They were simply unbelievable. It has been easier to use fallen human categories in describing God’s actions—to claim, for example, that God is so angry at sin that his wrath overflows into cosmic destruction, and only the opportunity to hurt someone in an infinite way will calm his wrath sufficiently to allow him to forgive human beings; and so Jesus volunteers to be the brunt of that wrath. And there are innumerable variations on this pagan philosophy. Inevitably, these human categories demand
an in-group that God accepts and an out-group on whom God gets to vent his eternal revenge. And inevitably, these human categories manage to devise “spiritual principles” that describe how one person’s response to God will be accepted while another’s will not because that person is simply too evil. That is, if I make it “in” it’s because of something I did that was right—even if that action on my part is as simple as believing the appropriate doctrine.

But let me present some statements that, in my opinion, are game-changers, just as those cryptic remarks about matter and energy might have been game-changers many decades ago—statements that believers for centuries have either passed over or watered down or explained away; statements that I believe should elicit a response something like, “WOW! Hold on! It says that!? I never noticed that! That’s absolutely counterintuitive! That goes against everything we’ve known to be true for thousands of years! If it’s true, it’s a game-changer!”

NRS John 1:29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world [Greek: kosmos]”

NRS John 3:16-17 For God so loved the world [Greek: kosmos] that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

NRS John 12:31-32 Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

NRS Acts 2:20-21 The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

NRS I Corinthians 15:22 . . .for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.

NRS II Corinthians 5:15-19 [Christ] died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. . . God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, . . . has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

[trans. BCM] Romans 3:23-24 . . .For all have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory; and all are freely justified by his grace through the redemption that is in Jesus the Messiah. I used my own translation here in order to bring out the clear meaning of the Greek text. The word all is the subject of all three verbs (sinned/fallen short/justified), but Paul didn’t repeat the word; and most translators, moved I suspect by an inability to fully believe what Paul is saying, prefer not to emphasize the clear grammatical meaning that all have sinned and all are justified.

NRS Romans 5:18 . . .just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.

NRS Romans 11:32 For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

NRS Ephesians 1:9-10 . . . he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

NRS Colossians 1:19-20 For in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

NRS I Timothy 2:5-6 For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all.

NRS Titus 2:11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all
NRS I John 2:2 . . . he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

As if this collection of game-changing statements is not sufficiently staggering, the following two passages should help us set aside those human categories that cloud our understanding of our Lord’s forgiving heart:

I Peter 1:20 [Christ] was destined before the foundation of the world but was made manifest at the end of the times for your sake.

[Trans. BCM] Revelation 13:8 All who live on the earth will worship it—everyone whose name is not written in the book of life of the lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world. [This is the way the text literally reads, and it is my strong opinion that translations that do not have something like the italicized portion of this sentence are informed more by theology than by the Greek syntax.]

Cosmic Forgiveness Beyond Imagination

As I understand the grand picture of forgiveness as described in scripture, God decided to give radical free will to the creatures he was about to make; but he knew that, with such a free, creative nature—they would, after all, be very much like him—they had an innate capacity for incredible mischief and evil. So he said to himself, as it were, “I am not willing to have creatures who are any less free and creative than myself. That would be very dull. But these creatures will be so free, they will have the capacity for very great evil. Therefore I am committing, before I speak a single creative word, to take the fall for whatever evil they do. I will bear it. I will carry it. The cost will be immeasurably great and painful, but I myself will pay the debt, will absorb the pain, of the entire creation.

This is indeed a game-changing concept if we’re able to wrap our minds and our hearts around it.

God’s commitment from the very beginning was to personally bear the sin of the cosmos. That is the ultimate reality informing biblical ideas of forgiveness. Forgiveness is the underlying matrix of all creation. For God made that commitment to forgive, to carry, to bear—or to use other terminology, the Lamb was slain—before creation even began. And the commitment was for all. For the entire universe.

We Are Called to the Same Level of Graciousness

And that is why, to add a quick change-subject-at-end-of-essay footnote regarding human behavior, forgiveness is the number one item on God’s list for human beings to emulate. We love to focus on more obvious sins, specializing perhaps in sexual activity. But that’s not where Jesus’ focus was when he indicated that failure to forgive was the most grievous of sins (see Matthew 6:12-15, Matthew 18:35, Mark 11:25, Luke 6:37). Yet how many times have you heard, for example, of a preacher being fired for having unresolved resentments against someone in the congregation? We all know what sins preachers are fired for, and it’s not for committing a lack of forgiveness.

There’s a wonderful passage where Jesus meshed together concepts of forgiveness and free will. I’ll first give you my understanding of what he was really saying, and then I will end with Jesus’ words.

“You have the privilege of deciding the rules,” Jesus is saying. “That’s how radically free the Father created you to be. I urge you to choose to be like the Father, choosing to forgive, to give grace, to bear the evil that another has caused, in all circumstances. But in no way will your freedom be abrogated—you may set the bar for forgiveness as high or as low as you like! The Father set the bar right on the ground, demanding nothing in return for his grace. If you want to set the bar very high, you may do so. But remember, the freedom and spiritual authority you have been given are irrevocable: Wherever you set the bar, that’s where it will be set for you. It’s your choice.”
NRS Matthew 7:1-2 Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.

Further study
Several documents, in .docx format, are available to anyone who would like to review the entire collection of biblical passages that use words based on the roots of salaḥ, nasa’, aphiēmi, and charizomai. They generally run around a dozen pages except for the nasa’ study, which is nearly 80 pages. Each document contains every verse in the Old and/or New Testament where a given word is found—in English (generally NRS, but sometimes the RSV or my own translation), Greek, and Hebrew, as appropriate. The biblical languages are in original fonts, not transliterated into the Roman alphabet. You will need to have the appropriate Greek or Hebrew fonts installed on your computer before you will be able to read the original-language texts. If you would like for me to email one or more of these reviews to you, email me at briancm@post.harvard.edu, and please be patient. If you haven’t received anything within a couple of weeks, please forgive my forgetfulness and email me again.