

Three Prayers of Forgiveness

by Bayless Conley

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Hey, everybody. Hi. Hi out on the plaza as well and to everybody watching online around the world. We are grateful that you have joined us. Some of you may go back with us long enough to remember this. We did a series, which was either seven weeks or ten weeks, in which I brought some older and fairly well-known ministers from across the country. I gave each of them a Sunday night and said, “Give us your life message. If you had one message to preach before you left planet Earth, what’s the most important thing that you would want people to know out of everything that you’ve learned and out of everything that the Lord has shared with you?” I remember the night that we had Pastor Jack Hayford here from The Church on the Way in Van Nuys. He preached a simple message on the power of forgiveness. It wasn’t clever or deep necessarily, but it was profound. In fact, just the fact that he chose that as the most important thing that he felt needed to be conveyed, I’ve never forgotten it. It marked me. The truth is, there will be some here, some who are listening to me, that some of the blessings God has wanted to bring into your life have been blocked because of unforgiveness. Jesus said, “When you stand praying, forgive.”

He talked a lot about it, and I’m going to share with you today three prayers that all deal with forgiveness. They’re very, very similar, but prayed by different individuals. I just really want to encourage you, because if you’ll lean out and really listen, I believe that the Holy Spirit can give you something today that could change your life, perhaps even revolutionize your life. God’s Word does have the power to do that. Even though it’s a subject that gets touched on often, you may hear some things, perhaps in a way that you haven’t heard them before. So, we’re going to look at three prayers, and why don’t we just start by praying?

Heavenly Father, we give place to Your Word in our hearts. We take it as the final and utmost authority on all issues of conscience and living. Even as the psalmist of old prayed, “Lord, I consider all of Your precepts concerning all things to be right.” So, we just settle our hearts down, and we listen. Holy Spirit, teach us today. May the Lord Jesus Christ be glorified. Amen.

The first prayer we’re going to look at is the prayer of Paul. In 2 Timothy 4:14–16 NKJV, he writes these words.

¹⁴ Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm. May the Lord repay him according to his works. ¹⁵ You also must beware of him, for he has greatly resisted our words.

¹⁶ At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me. May it not be charged against them.

Another translation says, “May God not count it against them.” Now, this is not Paul just expressing some wishful thought, but it’s a reiteration of a prayer that his heart had uttered to God. When he stood before the Roman authorities to give a defense for his life, no one stood with him. Everyone forsook him and abandoned him, and he prayed, “God, don’t count it against them.” Now, it’s quite a contrast to what he said just before that regarding Alexander, the coppersmith. He said, “Look, Alexander, the coppersmith has done me much harm. May the

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Lord repay him according to his works.” Then, he said, “Hey, nobody stood with me, everyone abandoned me. May it not be counted against them.” How do you reconcile those two things? Why didn’t Paul pray that Alexander’s sins would be remitted?

Why didn’t he pray that the Lord would not hold against Alexander his sins? Well, Alexander the coppersmith and his attacks against Paul in the gospel were not done out of ignorance or fear. It was premeditated, malicious, and evil. He understood the gospel message but rejected it. But not only that, he willingly became the devil’s tool to oppose the gospel message. Paul said, “May the Lord repay him.” Now, in the Greek language, that expresses no desire. It does not express a wish. In the Greek language, it’s just a simple statement of a future fact. This is what is going to happen. It’s interesting because the apostle Paul himself, having previously been known as Saul of Tarsus, did as much as Alexander had done, and perhaps worse. Listen to his own words. He talks about his life before Christ. Acts 26:9–11 NKJV.

⁹ “Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. ¹¹ And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.”

What’s the difference between that and Alexander? Paul says this, 1 Timothy 1:13 NKJV, again speaking of himself. He says,

¹³ ...although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.

“I did it ignorantly.” Alexander was not ignorant. Some of you may recall me talking about sort of an ongoing incident that happened for quite a while. At our previous location, we only had like 200–250 parking spaces. So, we had numerous remote locations where people would park, and we had shuttle buses that came every five minutes and would bring them. One of our locations was Oak Junior High School, just down the road. I would park there and give up my parking space at the church, and I generally would walk. Whenever I’d walk by this one guy’s house early in the morning, he’d be out in his yard. Most of the time, you could tell he’d been drinking pretty heavily, and he would curse, taunt, and yell at me or anybody else who happened to walk by. One morning, I was walking by, and he’d been drinking. He said, “Oh, if you were a real Christian, you’d take my garbage cans out.” I said, “Where are they?” He said, “They’re out back.” So, I opened up his gate, went back, got the first one, put it on the curb, went back, got the second one, put it on the curb, and he was stunned. I just said, “Have a nice day,” and I went on to church. Two weeks later, after service, he comes up to me, and he’s sobbing. He says, “I didn’t know. I didn’t know you were the pastor.” He said, “Please forgive me.” He said, “I yelled at people all the time.” He says, “But it’s because I was afraid. I was afraid. Oh, God, forgive me.” I said, “Of course,” and led him to the Lord right there in the front of the church. He did what he did out of weakness, fear, and out of ignorance. But that wasn’t the case with Alexander, the Coppersmith.

As hard as it is for some people to understand, there are people in this world who are genuinely wicked. They’ve understood and rejected the truth, and they’re actively fighting against it. They want to see the gospel muzzled. They want to see legislation passed that will protect and encourage evil while punishing what is good and just. They love darkness more than light, and their coming judgment is inevitable. They will be repaid according to their works. Jesus talked

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about people who love darkness more than they love light. Now, let's move from that to talk about Paul's prayer for those who had forsaken him in his hour of need. He said, "At my first offense, no one stood with me. May it not be charged against them." He was talking about fellow believers. It started when he was arrested in Jerusalem and was taken into custody 50 miles away to the port city of Caesarea, where he was being held. I want to read to you about that from Acts 24:24–27 KJV, where he speaks to the governor, whose name was Felix. It says this,

²⁴ And after certain days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, which was a Jewess, he sent for Paul, and heard him concerning the faith in Christ. ²⁵ And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee. ²⁶ He hoped also that money should have been given him of Paul, that he might loose him: (In other words, release him from custody.) wherefore he sent for him the oftener, and communed with him. ²⁷ But after two years Porcius Festus came into Felix' room: and Felix, willing to shew the Jews a pleasure (or do them a favor), left Paul bound.

Now, if you require a bribe to do the right thing, you will take a bribe to do the wrong thing. But that aside, consider this. Paul is there in chains and in custody for two years. All it would have taken was an amount of money to get him out. Everyone at the church of Jerusalem is a two-day journey away. Everyone knew he was there. Everyone knew why he was there. In fact, he had gotten in trouble and got arrested initially because James, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, had asked him to do something. Paul complied, did it, and got arrested. So, for two years, all they had to do was take up an offering. They could have gotten him released. Paul's is the most important ministry in the body of Christ. The most significant voice in the church, and they leave him for two years. You know that had to sting. They could have gotten him out, but they never did. So, he appeals to Caesar, and off to Rome he goes. The church at Rome already knew of him. They'd already received his letter, which we know is the book of Romans. They were very familiar with him and with his ministry.

In fact, in Acts 28, still in custody, when he's not far from Rome, a delegation from the church comes to meet him and to encourage him. The Bible says Paul was greatly encouraged. He thanked God, and they're to be commended for doing that. However, shortly after that, Nero, the Roman emperor, ramped up his persecution against Christians. He was having them seized, doused in pitch, tied to a stake, and lit on fire. He was actually lighting the streets of Rome with Christian torches. As they burned to death, that is, their flesh burned away; it was the result of Nero's persecution. So, now it's not just unpopular to be associated with Paul. It's perhaps quite dangerous to be associated with him. At his first trial, or at his preliminary trial, no one could be found. The entire church in Rome abandoned him. No one stood with him. No one spoke a word on his behalf. The whole church forsook him. Now, they weren't being malicious or mean-spirited. They were afraid, but their cowardice was still a sin, a sin that Paul prayed would not be held against them.

When we were in court all of those years, when the city's redevelopment agency had tried to steal our property, the local media and the national media, I mean, from The Wall Street Journal to The New York Times to every paper here on the West Coast and everywhere in between, there were continuous articles about us filled with misinformation, filled with lies, sometimes satirical cartoons about the church being in the paper. A couple of our friends stood with us, but most of our friends headed for the hills. I understood they didn't want to be targeted by identifying with us. They didn't want to be painted with the same unflattering brush that the media was using to paint us. And just to give you an idea of how bad things got, I got a call one day, and it's from the owner of the most significant PR firm in California. These are the big, big

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boys. They are the ones that, if you don't want an airport built in your county, you talk to them. Through their PR, there would be no airport built. They've done things that still affect us every day as Californians. This guy's PR firm got those things passed and got those things done.

I recognized a number of the things when I was speaking to him that his firm had accomplished. He said, "Pastor Conley, I just want to tell you, the city's redevelopment agency has just called me, and they tried to hire me to slander the church," his words. He said, "Now, I'm not a Christian, but my wife is. I told them they were on the wrong side of this thing." He says, "I just want you to know what they're up to, and I want you to know I'll work for you for free." Now, we never took him up, although I was very grateful, we never took him up on that offer. But you understand, it gives you some idea of the environment that existed then. Our friends, many of them pastors, weren't opposing us. Just out of weakness or fear, they didn't want to associate with us. Once we won in court, and the truth came out, they all came running to congratulate us and to get their photo taken with us. Somebody says, "Are you mad at them?" No, not at all. I understand that what they did, they did out of weakness and out of fear, and I pray that it not be counted against them when they stand before the judgment seat of Christ. I also pray that in a similar situation, I would prove to be a better friend.

Have you been disappointed by people in the church? Have you let that disappointment turn to bitterness? Are you holding a grudge because you've been let down by fellow believers? I spoke with a lady one day. She and her husband were believers but no longer attended church. They were mad at church. I knew the church they went to was a large, good Bible-teaching church. So, I asked her, "Why don't you go to church anymore?" She said, "Well, my husband and I are upset." They hadn't been in a long time. I said, "Why?" She said, "Well, my husband got sick, no one called, and no one visited us." I said, "Well, were you part of a small group, a home group in your church, and connected that way?" She said, "No." I said, "Well, did you or your husband volunteer? Were you connected that way?" "No." I said, "Were you involved in any smaller circle within the church?" She said, "No." I said, "Well, in a big church, if you just sit in a different place one week than you did the last week, people don't know if you're there or not. It's easy to miss you unless you get connected in a smaller circle of people." But she didn't want to hear it. She felt justified, and her husband felt justified in being bitter, holding a grudge, and, therefore, not coming to church at all. She felt completely justified. Listen to these verses. Second Corinthians 2:10–11 NKJV.

¹⁰ To whom ye forgive any thing, I forgive also: for if I forgave any thing, to whom I forgave it, for your sakes forgave I it in the person of Christ; ¹¹ lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices.

When you don't forgive, you give an advantage to the devil. He gets an advantage in your life; that's one of his devices. He wants to keep people in unforgiveness and wants them to feel justified about harboring a grudge. Listen to this in Ephesians 4. This is from the Living Bible, beginning in verse 26.

²⁶ If you are angry, don't sin by nursing your grudge. Don't let the sun go down with you still angry—get over it quickly; ²⁷ for when you are angry, you give a mighty foothold to the devil.

Now, I've shared this story many times, but it's powerful to me. I'd been on a Sunday night preaching about the power of forgiveness, and a lady came to me. It was either the next Wednesday night or the following Sunday. I don't recall. But she shared this story. She said, "Pastor, I was so convicted last Sunday night, and I knew I needed to forgive my father." She

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said, "I went home last Sunday night, and I called my dad." She said, "I have not spoken to him in years and years and years. I've been bitter against him. I called him and told him that I forgave him, and I genuinely did it." She said, "What you don't know is that I've had a migraine headache for 15 years without one moment of freedom from pain. Not one moment." She said, "I forgave my father Sunday night. I woke up Monday morning, and there was no pain in my head." When she said those words, she began to sob. I'll never forget it. She said, "You have no idea what it's like to have pain in your head for 15 years and suddenly, have it gone." She said, "I've had not any pain in my head since I woke up Monday morning." The advantage, the foothold that the devil had in her life, had to back off when she forgave. He lost that advantage. Whatever that advantage might translate out to or look like in your life, you just don't want to give him an inch. Give him an inch, and he will try and take a mile.

We come to a second prayer. It's the prayer of Stephen. The context is the church is brand new. It's a fledgling church, but there's strife in the church. Imagine that. It's basically about people who are being served food and some people who are being overlooked when the food is being served. So, they choose seven men full of the Holy Spirit and full of wisdom to appoint over this business. Stephen is one of those who is appointed to serve food. But it turns out he had other gifts as well. God used him to work signs, wonders, and miracles. He had an amazing preaching gift on his life, and some of the Jews began to dispute with him. We read in Acts 6:10 NKJV, it says,

¹⁰ And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.

So, they stirred up the crowds against him, got false witnesses to come and tell lies about him, and he was dragged before the Jewish council. We read this in Acts 6:15 NKJV. It says,

¹⁵ And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.

Stephen begins to preach to them and recites the history of God's people, concluding with the fact that Jesus was their Messiah and they murdered Him. Listen to the result. Acts 7:54–56 NKJV,

⁵⁴ When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. ⁵⁵ But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, ⁵⁶ and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

Did you know every other time we read about Jesus in heaven that, He is seated at the right hand of God? But here, He's standing. My friend, this is almost too sacred to touch. I think Jesus was giving Stephen a standing ovation. This saint is going to be the church's first martyr, and he's ready to come home to glory. Something about his courage, his boldness, and his faithfulness made the Lord Jesus Christ stand to His feet. It's hard to get the heart around something like that. We read on in verses 57–60 NKJV, it says,

⁵⁷ Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; ⁵⁸ and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. (who would later become known as the Apostle Paul.) ⁵⁹ And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud

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voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

What a prayer. "Lord, don't charge them with this sin." The one whose face shone like an angel spoke like an angel as well, but they wouldn't listen. They cried out. They stopped their ears. It says, "They cried with a loud voice." They cried with a loud voice to drown out reason. They cried with a loud voice to drown out conscience and to drown out truth." And you'll find that generally, in an argument, the one with the least to substantiate their position, they usually raise their voice the most. I remember reading a story once about a successful attorney. He was asked, "How have you been so successful? How have you won so many cases?" He says, "I do three things." He says, "Number one, I find a law that covers the case. If there is a law that covers the case, for my client's benefit, I always present the law." He says, "I win 100% of those cases." He says, "If I can't find a specific law that covers the case, I gather all the facts, and I present the facts." He said, "I win a lot of those cases." He said, "If I can't find a law, if I can't find any facts, I just beat my fist on the table, and I make a lot of noise." He says, "I occasionally win some of those cases."

We're living in a generation of people who are calling out with a loud voice and stopping their ears. They try to drown out reason, try and drown out truth, and even drown out the voice of conscience. They're not interested in the facts, not interested in the truth, and not interested in perhaps an opinion that varies from the one that they are clinging to so tightly. So, Stephen, we see him. When he is called to public service, the Scripture says, "He was filled with the Holy Spirit." When he was called to martyrdom, he was filled with the Holy Spirit. My friend, the Holy Spirit will help you live right, and He will help you die right. But think of it, Stephen's ministry has just begun. There have been miracles. He has an amazing communication gift. He is loved by the church. His gifts have just been recognized, and he's being robbed by these murderers. Think what could have been. He was full of the Holy Spirit, but they were full of the devil. Now, some people, if they would have prayed, they would have said, "Lord, never forget what they've done to me and throw them into hell." But he prayed a powerful prayer of forgiveness that actually became a sermon in and of itself. We read that those who stoned him took off their outer garments and laid them down at the feet of Saul, either so they could have an unrestricted throw as they murdered Stephen or so they wouldn't get his blood on their clothing. That was at the end of Acts 7, the very first verse of Acts chapter 8 says,

¹ Now Saul was consenting to his death.

Literally, he consented to it with delight. But later on, on the road to Damascus, when Saul of Tarsus met the Lord Jesus, Jesus said, "Saul, Saul, it's hard for you to kick against the goads." In other words, something had been goading him. Something had been goading his conscience, and he was trying to resist against it. What was it that was pricking his conscience and bothering his conscience all this time that he'd been trying to knock away? I believe it was the words of Stephen as he died. "Lord, forgive them for this sin." Saul of Tarsus had to think, "Who would do such a thing? Where did that come from? Where did a man get a spirit like that, that he could forgive his murderers as they were killing him unjustly?" I think when Paul saw the glory of God on that Damascus road, he described it as a light shining brighter than the sun. I think it was the same glory that shone on Stephen's face as he was before the council. Yeah, that prayer of forgiveness became a powerful, powerful sermon that no doubt resulted, at least to a degree, in the conversion of Saul.

There was a man at Cottonwood. He and his wife were friends of mine. I got a call one day from some of his relatives. They said, "Pastor, you need to come now. So and so's wife has been

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killed.” So, I got in my car and drove as fast as I could to their home. I got there, and there were cop cars everywhere. They had the whole front of the house cordoned off. I couldn't find my friend anywhere. I said, “Where'd he go?” They said, “Well, his wife is in the entryway. She's been shot and killed. He just arrived about 30 minutes ago, and the police wouldn't let him come in because it was a crime scene.” They said, “He went berserk. He was going to go to his wife's body, and he took out a couple of the cops. It took three or four of them to finally restrain him because he was going to go in where his wife was. They had to handcuff him, and they took him off to the police station.” I said, “Okay, I'm going.” So, I got to the police station, and he was in a holding room.

I walked into the room, and he looked at me and the glory of God was on that man's countenance. He said, “Hi, Pastor.” I said, “Hi.” He looked at me and says, “The Lord showed me I need to forgive the person who has done this.” He said, “Will you pray with me, Pastor?” I said, “I will.” We sat down, and we prayed for the person to be caught, but he prayed the most beautiful prayer of forgiveness. “Lord, You've forgiven me so much. You've washed my sins away, and I didn't deserve it. I released this person, and as far as I'm concerned, God, I'm forgiving him.” How is that possible? I want to show you the source and the fountain where that ability and that kind of a spirit comes from. We come to our third prayer. It's the prayer of Jesus. Jesus has been betrayed, arrested, and put through a mock trial. He's been beaten repeatedly. He's been taunted, whipped, and crucified. Luke 23:33–34a NKJV,

³³ And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left. ³⁴ Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.”

That's where Paul, that's where Stephen, and that's where my friend got that spirit from and that ability. The Spirit of Christ was residing in them. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them. They don't know what they do.” What was the people's response to His prayer on the cross? Verse 35,

³⁵ And the people stood looking on. But even the rulers with them sneered, saying, “He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God.”

It says, “They stood looking on.” It literally means they stood looking on calmly and leisurely. They had no care for what was being done to Him. The rulers sneered and mocked, and the next verse tells us that the soldiers mocked as well. Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them. They don't know what they do.” Do you think perhaps that some who have wronged you haven't actually known what they were doing? They maybe didn't realize how their actions have affected you or have affected others? Perhaps even from their point of view, they were justified in what they did. Back in the early days of the church, there was a guy I had appointed to a leadership position, and he caused me so much grief. Honestly, I think I had not matured to the level that I knew how to respond to it, and it affected me deeply to the point that I got physically sick over it. One day, I was praying, and there's really no way to describe how much it affected me, his actions, and the things that he said.

I was praying, and God showed me this man from heaven's point of view, and I was stunned. He was actually ignorant to a large degree of all the trouble that he caused. He'd done what he'd done out of weakness, out of ignorance, and to a degree he even felt that he was right. I never would have guessed that in a million years. I thought the guy was in league with the devil and that he'd done what he'd done out of pure spite. But it wasn't the case at all, and it sort of changed everything for me that day. So, the people stand, and they watch the sky turn

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dark. There's an earthquake. Jesus says, "It's finished." A Greek word for paying off a debt. We read this in verses 47–48 NKJV.

⁴⁷ So when the centurion saw what had happened, he glorified God, saying, "Certainly this was a righteous Man!" ⁴⁸ And the whole crowd who came together to that sight, seeing what had been done, beat their breasts and returned.

Their conscience was startled. They realized their guilt, and they beat their breasts. Just like Jesus told the story in Luke 18 of the tax collector in the back of the temple, he wouldn't even lift up his eyes to God, but he beat his breast. He said, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." So, their conscience is stirred. They realize their guilt, but they didn't say, "Be merciful to me, a sinner." It says, "They beat their breasts, and they returned." They returned home. They returned to their way of life. They didn't let the truth change them. I wonder how many, whose conscience has been startled, moved, but they return. They return to their sin. They return to their life without God. Even in Caesarea, when Paul was in captivity, he preached the gospel to Felix. He reasoned about self-control, about judgment to come, and about faith in Christ, and the Bible says, "Felix trembled." But that's all. He trembled. His conscience was awakened. He was alarmed. But he said, "I'll get back to you on this. Let's wait for a more convenient time."

Do you know the apostle Paul, on the road to Damascus, when confronted with the truth of the gospel, it says that he trembled? The Philippian jailer, when confronted with the truth of the gospel, it says that he trembled. But in both cases, it resulted in their conversion because both Paul and the Philippian jailer said, "What must we do?" But Felix delayed when his conscience was pricked. From there, he grew calloused and hardened to the message, because we read that he often conferred with Paul after that, but only to try and get a bribe. The gospel had no more effect on him after he pushed it off. I think many are greatly moved by the gospel and by the working of the Holy Spirit. They may even tremble or weep, but they postpone, and their state of alarm passes, and their hearts grow dull.

My friend, when it comes to the state of your soul, delays are dangerous. "Well, when I'm older..." "I just want to achieve my goals in business first." "A more convenient time..." I'll tell you what will happen. The conviction on your heart will fade, and you will be hardened in your ways. More than likely, Felix has been in the torments of hell for the last 2,000 years, and don't you know, he wished that he'd responded to God when the Lord was dealing with his heart. Old-timers used to say, "You have to hit the iron while it's hot." Some of us in our culture don't understand that unless you maybe watch the show Forged in Fire. You get the bladesmiths, and they take this piece of metal, and they put it in the fire of the forge. They heat it up, and then they pull it out. It's glowing hot, it's malleable, and it's soft while the metal's hot. They begin to strike it. They can form it and fashion it into that which they're trying to create. But if they let the metal cool down, it becomes rigid and hard, and it can no longer be fashioned. My friend, don't let your heart cool down. Today, if you hear His voice, don't harden your heart, the Scripture says. Jesus died as your substitute. He was raised from the dead on the third day. Your debts have been paid. What will you do with the message?

I was in a local market here one day. The lady in line in front of me, we were both checking out, and she didn't have enough money to pay for her groceries. She was really embarrassed and flustered. I just told the checker, "Don't worry about it. I got her groceries." The lady was stunned. As I paid for her groceries, she thanked me and went on her way. It's really not a big deal. But Jesus didn't just pay our grocery bill. He paid a debt that we didn't have the ability to pay. It was insurmountable. Something that you could spend a whole lifetime of good works and personal sacrifice, and you wouldn't even come close to paying the debt. Jesus, on Calvary's

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tree, paid our sin debt, took it out of the way, and now, we have access to God if we will but come. Jesus said, "Anyone who comes to me, I will not turn away, I will not cast out." If God is dealing with your conscience, my friend, wherever you are, on the plaza, in your home, in your apartment, sitting in a pub somewhere, wherever you might be, this moment while your heart is warm to the gospel, is the time to respond.

You don't want to be like Felix, who said, "Well, at a more convenient time, I'm going to tend to this." No, his heart got hard, and as he continued to commune with Paul and hear more of the gospel, it had no effect on him whatsoever. I want to give an invitation. If you're a prodigal son or a prodigal daughter, who, at one time, your heart burned brightly for Christ, but for whatever reason, now you might even be a preacher's son or a preacher's daughter, and you saw huge inconsistencies from what was portrayed in the pulpit to what was lived out in your home, and it's affected you. Maybe you got hurt in church. I remember, in fact, one of my dearest friends was telling me—well, first, his wife was coming to church. She said, "Will you ever go golf with my husband?" I said, "Yeah." She said, "He's not interested in church or anything." So, I'm golfing with him, and I think, like, by hole number two, he just laid in on me. He said, "In my business, there are people who claim to be Christians. They cheated me." I said, "Yeah," I won't say the word that I shared. I said, "It blanks me too." He was surprised at that, and I had the privilege to baptize him. He ended up giving his life to Christ, but there are people who have had people who claim to be followers of Jesus who have done unjust things.

Listen, take your eyes off of them. Put your eyes on Jesus. Whatever reason that you're away from God, if you once loved Him, it's time to come home, prodigal son. Time to come home, prodigal daughter. You may just have some embers barely burning in your heart right now. I made a big fire in the backyard last night. I sat out there and prayed all by myself. I stayed until there were just a few embers. Some people's hearts are burning brightly. For others, there are just a few coals in there, but it can be reignited, my friend, if you just will. You may be here, and you've never made your peace with God. God forbid this should happen, but if you took in your very last breath, you expelled that breath, and you stepped out of your body into eternity, and you're not sure you're ready to meet God. You can be sure. The Bible says, "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. If you believe in your heart God raised Jesus from the dead, confess Him with your mouth as Lord, you'll be saved." Jesus won't turn you away if you come to Him. It doesn't matter what you have done or what you failed to do that you should have done. He nailed all of your sins to the cross, paid in full, paid in full. But a gift that's given does the recipient no good if that recipient refuses to receive it. He stands before you, arms open wide, welcoming you to come if you just will.

If it helps you to bow your heads and close your eyes, maybe do that. Let's each get alone with God. I'm going to ask you to do something in a moment. I'm just going to count to three, and if you want in on this prayer, you're that backslider coming home or maybe somebody in truth giving your life to the Lord for the very first time today. I'm just going to count to three. When I get to three, I'm going to ask you to lift your hand. No one's looking around but me, and I ask you to do it for a couple reasons. First, it'll give me the opportunity to see you. Secondly, the Bible teaches us in the book of James that faith is expressed through corresponding actions, and I believe even an act as simple as lifting a hand can help your faith begin to move in the right direction. Your heart is reaching up to God. Your hand is just a reflection of that. I'll acknowledge any hands that are up. Then, you can put them down. I'm going to lead everyone in a simple prayer that if you'll tie your heart around the words and speak them sincerely to God, He'll meet you. One, it's your day, friend. It's not a coincidence we're together, out on the plaza or to anybody watching me online or wherever you might be. Two, are you ready? Are you ready to pray? Three, just lift your hand up. Right where you are. Just lift it up. Lift it high. We

Three Prayers of Forgiveness

have people in every section here. It's good. You're responding. God's dealing with your conscience. You're responding. It's a marvelous thing. Go ahead and put your hands down. Just maybe put a hand on your heart, and let's pray. Say,

Dear God, with all of my heart, I believe Jesus Christ is Your Son. I put my trust in Jesus alone to save me, to wash me clean, and to ultimately bring me to heaven. Jesus, thank You for paying my debt. I believe You were raised from the dead. I ask You now to come into my life. I confess You as my Lord. From this moment forward, I will follow You. It's in Your name, I pray, amen. Amen.

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