



Another Kind of Vision

Forgiveness in Genesis

Marilynne Robinson

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Marilynne Robinson argues that “we are not competent to judge [the] sufficiency or failure” of our role, or any other individual’s role, in God’s plan. How, then, should we analyze history? How does our “punitive bias, the legitimization of vengeance, in many cases the sanctification of it” override our “respect for the fact that God claimed it for Himself”? How might we analyze events and people from a place of humility instead of judgment?

2. How can Christians learn to treat each person as “absolutely consequential” in daily life? Can this extend to larger political schemas where violence and death are commonplace?

3. While Moses’ violent act jeopardizes his authority to lead the Hebrews, Joseph’s act of forgiveness allows the covenant between God and the Israelites to flourish. What parallels can you draw between these Biblical events and our contemporary politics? When have the actions of an individual either inhibited or catalyzed broader social or political change?

4. Robinson admits that in instances of great injustice, “some Spartan act of heroic rebellion would be satisfying.” Is there value in catharsis, even if it comes from violence? How has retribution shaped our personal and political frameworks for accountability?

5. Robinson discusses inter- and intra-communal forgiveness. What are some examples of interpersonal forgiveness and large-scale reconciliation in your community? How do these cases differ? How do frameworks like restorative justice help (or hurt) these efforts?

6. Robinson articulates the complexity of human nature: we rarely create laws “based on compassionate identification with those most vulnerable to abuse,” and yet, the human response to oppressive treatment can be “an ethic of justice and generosity” rather than resentment. What do we do when we’ve fallen short of this high standard of humanism? How can we better reflect this humanism in our laws and practices?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

- “Saving Calvin from Clichés,” Matthew Sitman, October 20, 2017: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/saving-calvin>
- “Imagination & Community,” Marilynne Robinson, March 9, 2012: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/imagination-community>
- “The Love of God,” Tzvi Novick, October 9, 2015: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/love-god>
- “None of Us Faces Judgment Alone,” Griffin Oleynick, April 13, 2018: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/none-us-faces-judgment-alone>
- “Must We Forgive?” *The Commonweal Podcast*, January 12, 2023: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/podcast/must-we-forgive>
- “Sermon on Mohandas K. Gandhi,” Martin Luther King Jr., March 22, 1959: <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/palm-sunday-sermon-mohandas-k-gandhi-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>