

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory (Psalm 32:1, 2)		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	32		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Psalm 32:1, 2; Psalm 130		
Date:	November 26, 2017 (a.m.)		

THE VOICE OF THE APOSTLE PAUL IN THE PSALMS

Psalm 130 was one of Luther's favorite Psalms. He liked it so much that he set it to music. The great Reformer was once asked which of the Psalms was his favorite, to which he responded, "The Psalms of St. Paul." The Psalms of Paul? "Yes, indeed," said Luther, "for Psalms 32, 51, 130, and 143 all teach us Paul's doctrine of forgiveness."¹ Psalm 32, the first of the Psalms that Luther listed, contains one of the most beautiful beatitudes in all of Scripture – the blessedness of forgiveness.² Today, however, people expect God to forgive – after all, that is His job. "How many thousands," asks John Owen, "may we meet withal who take it for granted that forgiveness is to be had with God, that never yet had any serious exercise in their souls about the grounds of it, and its consistency with His holiness and justice!"³ The Bible uses a number of words to convey the manifold mercy of God in forgiveness: terms and phrases like grace, peace with God, not imputing or reckoning sin, taking away guilt, bearing and covering sin, making an end of transgression, not remembering sin, washing away the stain of sin, casting it into the sea or putting it behind as afar as the east is from the west, blotting sin out and, finally, pardoning the guilty. "When God pardons," wrote William Plumer, "he pardons all sins, original sin and actual sin, sins of omission and of commission, secret and open sins, sins of thought, word and deed. One unpardoned sin would destroy a soul for ever. A single transgression can rouse an enlightened conscience to the wildest fury. And 'every sin deserves the wrath and curse of God both in this life and that which is to come.' Yet to those who believe in Jesus, all is freely forgiven. Full pardon or none at all, is what God designs to give."⁴ Psalm 130 also accents the theme of forgiveness (v. 4), but in a very sober fashion. A Welsh preacher once rendered this verse as follows, "There is forgiveness with Thee – enough to frighten us!"⁵ We are told in 1 John 3:4 that "sin is lawlessness." We learn from Lamentations 3:42 that sin is "rebellion." It is an act of revolt, a neglect of obedience.⁶ It includes the idea of *perverseness* and *crookedness*.⁷ Because sin is like this, it produces not happiness, but misery.⁸ "The sinner," wrote Witsus, "wanders from this mark, proposing something else to himself as his end; or not taking his aim aright, as to the object towards which, or the manner in which, he should have aimed. He acts a part, too, contrary to his incumbent duty; for he cannot without crime neglect or contemn the end for the prosecution of which he was created; and he renders himself miserable, because he not only deprives himself of his proper good, which consists in attaining the end of his existence, but brings himself under obligations to restore to Him who is his Chief end and happiness, that glory of which he has robbed him."⁹ Sin is something that is part of everything we are and do. The General Confession of the Book of Common Prayer contains these words: "We have erred and strayed from thy ways, like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us." The major problem with sin is not just that it makes us miserable, but that it exposes us to the judgment of God (Romans 1:18). The Bible is very direct and graphic when describing the nature of sin and its consequences both in the present

and in the future. But the Bible also speaks with great clarity about the good news – that sins can be forgiven.

I. OUT OF THE DEPTHS (v. 1)

The Psalmist makes reference to deep waters to capture the seriousness of his distress and danger – it is a cry that borders on despair (cf. Psalms 69:1, 2, 15; 88:6, 16, 17). “What is clear in all such passages is that self-help is no answer to the depths of distress, however useful it may be in the shallows of self-pity.”¹⁰ The depths that the Psalmist alludes to do *not* refer to his outward circumstances. Rather, as the context makes plain, it was the deep, abiding sense of sin that oppressed him (cf. Psalm 88 where similar language is used). This is not to say that outward afflictions were not present. “The depths of affliction awaken the conscience to a deep sense of sin. But sin is the disease, affliction only a symptom of it: and in attending a cure, the *disease* itself is principally to be heeded; the *symptom* will follow or depart of itself.”¹¹

II. THE CRY OUT OF THE DEPTHS (v. 2)

The Psalmist’s request arises out of a deep sense of personal urgency. It is a sharp cry of penitence. His conscience has been awakened. The enormity of his sin overwhelmed him and brought him face to face with his guilt and deserved condemnation. His prayer is at once a plea for mercy and a confession. He recognizes the awful situation he is in before a holy God. He is unrighteous, and if God judges him according to strict justice, he is undone. The Psalmist cannot assume that God will be merciful. The language of the Psalmist is one of anguish. This arises from his deep sense of his sinful condition that only grows more alarmed at the thought of God. “I remembered you, O God, and I groaned; I mused, and my spirit grew faint” (Psalm 77:3). People who never consider their sin in the light of God’s holiness will never understand the Psalmist’s travail.¹² Recently R. C. Sproul wrote, “The reality is that God does mark iniquity, and He manifests His wrath against it. Before the Apostle Paul unfolds the riches of the gospel in his epistle to the Romans, he sets the stage for the need of that gospel: ‘For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men . . .’ The human dilemma is this: God is holy, and we are not. God is righteous, and we are not. To be sure, it is openly admitted in our culture that ‘No one is perfect.’ Even the most sanguine humanist grants that humanity is marred. But, on balance . . . ah, there’s the rub. Like Muslims, we assume that God will judge us ‘on balance.’ If our good deeds outweigh our bad deeds, we will arrive safely in heaven. But, alas, if our evil deeds outweigh our good ones, we will suffer the wrath of God in hell. We may be ‘marred’ by sin, but in no wise devastated by it. We still have the ability to balance our sins with our own righteousness. This is the most monstrous lie of all. We not only claim such righteousness; we rely on such righteousness, which righteousness in fact does not exist. Our righteousness is a myth, but by no means a harmless one. Nothing is more perilous than for an unrighteous person to rest his future hope in an illusion. It was against such an illusion that Paul stressed by citing the Psalmist: ‘For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. As it is written: There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one’ (Rom. 3:9-12). Good is a relative term. It is defined against some standard. If we establish what the standard is, we can congratulate ourselves and take comfort in our attainment of it. But if God establishes the standard, and His standard includes outward behavior (that our actions conform perfectly to His law) and internal motivation (that all our acts proceed from a heart that loves Him perfectly), then we quickly see that our pretended ‘goodness’ is no goodness at all. We then understand what Augustine was getting at when he said that man’s best works are nothing more than ‘splendid vices.’”¹³

III. CONSOLATION (vv. 3, 4)

The Psalmist's cry for mercy (v. 2) has to do with his sin (note the plural). No one who is guilty can *stand* before God. On the contrary, the impression gained from texts like Psalm 76:7; Nehemiah 1:6; Malachi 3:2 is that of sinking down under the heavy burden of divine judgment. The Psalmist is acknowledging the absolute hopelessness of his situation if God takes his sin into account. The expression, "kept a record of sins," is used of God "observing sin" (Job 10:14; 14:16-17) and of "keeping" anger (Jeremiah 3:5; Psalm 103:9). Psalm 90:8 captures this as well: "You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence."

- A. **Forgiveness: What Is It?** There are three Hebrew words translated in English with words like "pardon" or "forgive." The first is *kipper*, which means to "cover" in the sense of to atone (2 Chronicles 30:18; Deuteronomy 21:8; Psalm 78:38; Jeremiah 18:23). The second, *nasa*, means to lift up and carry away (Genesis 50:17; Exodus 10:17; 32:32; Psalm 25:18; 32:5). The final word is *salach*, which means to "let go" or "send away" (cf. Numbers 30:5, 8, 12; Psalm 103:3; Jeremiah 31:34). This word is used solely of God. Never does this word refer to people forgiving each other.¹⁴
- B. **Forgiveness: On What Grounds?** Contrary to widespread popular opinion, God does *not* forgive simply because we ask Him to, or because He is naturally inclined to do so. "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Hebrews 9:22). Forgiveness is always grounded in redemption. God, and I say this in light of the teachings of Christianity, cannot forgive sins apart from the cross of Christ.

IV. EXPECTATION (vv. 5-6)

The Psalmist speaks of waiting for the Lord. To what does this refer? The Scriptures, especially the Psalms, often speak of waiting on God (Psalm 25:3, 5, 21; 27:14; 33:20; 37:7, 9, 34; 39:7; 40:1; 52:9; 59:9; 62:1, 5; 69:3, 6; 104:27; 123:2). The Psalmist's *attitude* is that of patient reliance upon God's promises. "Were the promises taken away," says Calvin, "the grace of God would necessarily vanish from our sight, and thus our hearts would fail and be overwhelmed with despair."¹⁵

V. EXHORTATION (vv. 7-8)

The Psalmist now bids the reader to "hope in the Lord." Hope in the Bible is never simply a vague, wishful desire. Rather, it is a glad certainty. It is rooted and grounded in the character of God and in His Word (cf. Romans 5:5; 8:24; Hebrews 6:19). Note how this is underscored. Our God is merciful. With Him (the "with" here is used to express a quality in one as a disposition or nature) is lovingkindness and plenteous redemption. This includes not only the forgiveness of sins which the Psalmist cried out for, but also the breaking of the power of sin, and setting the captive free from its bonds (cf. John 8:36; Romans 6:18, 22; 8:2; Galatians 5:1).

CONCLUSION: Forgiveness with God is all the Psalmist desires and needs. Sorrow for sin and even repentance will not, by themselves, cause God to be merciful. It is God's peculiar prerogative to forgive. He is not obligated to be merciful. "A flood of repenting tears, an effusion of our blood, are of too low a price to make any satisfaction to God, to deserve a return of his favour. The most sincere love of holiness and stedfast resolution to forsake sin, which is the principle part of our repentance, can be no satisfaction for our past offences, for it is the natural duty of man before the commission of sin; repentance is only a vital qualification in the subject that receives the pardon."¹⁶ Forgiveness is always connected to redemption. "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). This biblical truth has perhaps been best captured by Augustus Toplady in his great hymn, "Rock of Ages," when he penned these words: "Not the labors of my hands, can fulfill Thy law's demands; Could my zeal no respite know, Could my tears forever flow, All for sin could not atone; Thou must save and Thou alone." John Owen, in another one of his works, wrote,

“This, I say, is required in the person to be justified, in order of nature antecedaneously unto the faith whereby we are justified; which we shall prove with the ensuing arguments: -- For, [1] Without the due consideration and supposition of it, the true nature of faith can never be understood. For as we have showed before, justification is God’s way of the deliverance of the convinced sinner, or one whose mouth is stopped, and who is guilty before God – obnoxious to the law, and shut up under sin. A sense, therefore, of this estate, and all that belongs unto it, is required unto believing. ‘The flight of a penitent sinner unto the mercy of God in Christ.’ And there is, indeed, more sense and truth in it than in twenty others that seem more accurate. But without a supposition of the conviction mentioned, there is no understanding of this definition of faith. For it is that alone which puts the soul upon a flight unto the mercy of God in Christ, to be saved from the wrath to come. Heb. vi. 18, ‘Fled for refuge.’¹⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ When the Reformer wrote this hymn at the close of 1523, confessing sin no longer meant to him what it formerly had. To be sure, the Scriptural understanding Luther had attained did not make sin less damnable. But now he could smile through his tears when he said: “I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord”; for he could add with the Psalmist, “Thou forgavest me the iniquity of my sin” (Ps. 32:5). Cf. *What Luther Says I*, ed. Eswald Plass (Concordia, 1959), p. 326.

² We confess before God, said Luther, “*GRATIA EST, NON MERITUM, REMISSIO NON SATISFACTIO*” (it is of grace, not our merit, that we have forgiveness).

³ *The Works of John Owen VI* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1967), p. 395. He also said, “He who is not acquainted with God’s holiness and purity knows not sin’s desert and sinfulness, knows nothing of forgiveness” (p. 394).

⁴ W. Plumer, *The Grace of Christ* (rpt. Odom Publications, 1989), p. 201. He adds, “Nor is this gift ever revoked by God. When he forgives, he forgives for ever. He who is once pardoned never again comes under the curse of the law. Upon new provocations, men sometimes revive old controversies. Not so God. Sin once pardoned by him is done with for ever. He has cast it behind his back and will not return to search for it. Forgiveness of sins that are past is a sure pledge that future sins shall not have a condemning power.” Norman Shepherd and his followers in the Federal Vision contend that justification [which has at its center the forgiveness of our sins] can be lost. This is a position that has more in common with Arminianism than with any element in the history of Reformed theology.

⁵ As cited by G. Campbell-Morgan, *Notes on the Psalms* (Revell, 1957), p. 260.

⁶ The Hebrew word *pasha*’ is used repeatedly in the Old Testament of rebellion against God’s law and covenant. It points to a breach of relationship, a casting off of allegiance, of going beyond the limits established by God (cf. Isaiah 1:28; 48:8; Ezekiel 2:3; Hosea 8:1).

⁷ *Awel* is the Hebrew word that denotes an act or deed that is against what is right. It points to behavior that is the opposite of righteousness (cf. Isaiah 26:10; 59:3-6; Psalm 37:1; 39:22; 125:3). In Philippians 2:15, the Apostle Paul refers to Christians living in the midst of a “crooked and depraved generation.”

⁸ The Hebrew word *hata* properly signifies “wandering from the mark”; its basic concept is that of “failure” and is the principle word for sin in the Old Testament (Leviticus 4:2; 5:16; Genesis 43:9; 44:3; Isaiah 1:4; 65:20).

⁹ Herman Witsius, *The Apostles’ Creed II* (rpt. P&R, 1993), p. 388.

¹⁰ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150: A Commentary* (IVP, 1975), p. 446.

¹¹ Owen, op. cit., p. 331.

¹² This was the complaint Calvin made to the Roman Catholic Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto: “Hence, I observe, Sadoletto, that you have too indolent a theology, as is almost always the case with those who have never had experience in serious struggles of conscience.” *A Reformation Debate: Sadoletto’s Letter to the Genevans and Calvin’s Reply*, ed. J. C. Olin (Baker, 1966), p. 78.

¹³ R. C. Sproul, “If the Lord Marks Iniquity, Who Should Stand?” *Ligonier Ministries* (Nov. 20, 2017).

¹⁴ Cf. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament II*, eds. R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, Jr.; B. K. Waltke (Moody, 1980), p. 626.

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary On the Book of Psalms V* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1945), p. 133.

¹⁶ *The Complete Works of William Bates II* (rpt. Sprinkle, 1990), p. 13. In similar language, J. C. Ryle wrote: “Will you trust in your won *repentance* and *amendment*? You are very sorry for the past. You hope to do better for time to come. You hope God will be merciful. Alas, if you lean on this, you have nothing beneath you but a broken reed! The judge does not pardon the thief because he is sorry for what he did. Today’s sorrow will not wipe off the score of yesterday’s sins. It is not an ocean of tears that would ever cleanse an uneasy conscience and give it peace.” *Old Paths* (rpt. James Clark, 1972), p. 185.

¹⁷ Owen, V, p. 7.