

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Website: www.churchredeemeraz.org

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Pastor/Teacher
Gary L. W. Johnson

The Reformation's Central Theme: Christ-Trusting Christianity

In 1539 the distinguished Roman Catholic cardinal, Jacob Sadolet (1477-1547), who had been a disciple of Erasmus (and like Erasmus, did not hold to an Augustinian view of sin and grace¹), tried to win back the Genevans to Rome by writing them an open letter in which he attacked Protestants for violating the unity of the Church, and even criticized the motives and characters of Calvin and Farel. Calvin responded with his now famous Reply by John Calvin to the letter by Cardinal Sadolet to the Senate and People of Geneva. One of the chief problems Calvin detected in Sadolet was 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.”² Here Calvin underscores what lies at the heart of the Reformation's concerns – How can a sinner stand before a holy God? The Reformers emphatical emphasis on *Sola Fide*, *Sola Gratia*, *Solus Christus* underscores the fact Christianity is first and foremost a Christianity distinctively for miserable sinners. “Naturally,” as Warfield remarked, “therefore, to those who are not preoccupied with a sense of their sinfulness, ‘miserable-sinner Christianity’ makes very little appeal. It would indeed be truer to say that it excites in them a positive distaste. It does not seem to them to have any particular fitness for their case, which they very naturally identify with the case of men in general. It appears to them to foster a morbid preoccupation with faults which are in part at least only fancied. It does scant justice, as they think, to the dignity of human nature, with its ethical endowments and capacities for self-improvement. It presents, as they view it, insufficient and ineffective motives for moral effort, and tends therefore to produce weak and dependent characters prone to acquiesce in an imperfect development, merely because they lack the vigor to go forward. Men turn away from it in proportion as they are inclined to put a high estimate on human nature as it manifests itself in the world, and especially upon its moral condition, its moral powers, and its present and possible moral achievements. It is a gospel for sinners, and those who do not think of themselves as sinners find no attraction in it.”³

Psalm 130 was one of Luther's favorite Psalms. He liked it so much that he set it to music. (See Hymn 554 in the Trinity Hymnal, “From Depths of Woe I Raise to Thee.”) 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.”⁴ 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. 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!”⁵ 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.”⁶ Psalm 130 also accents the theme of forgiveness (v. 4), but in a very sober fashion.

I. OUT OF THE DEPTHS (vv 1-4)

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.”⁷ 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.”⁸

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.⁹ He is unrighteous, and if God judges him according to strict justice, he is undone.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

II. AMAZING GRACE: DE PROFUNDIS (vv 5-8)

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 steadfast resolution to forsake sin, which is the principal 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.”¹² Forgiveness is always connected to redemption. 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.

- 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 NASÁ 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.¹³
- 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. Hugh Martin wrote, “Why should not God remit the sins of men without an Atonement? For, when the inspired writer affirms that without shedding of blood is no remission, it is as if he had said: -- You may imagine a forgiveness without shedding of blood, if you will; you may conjecture, or conjure up, some other scheme or principle of pardon; you may conceive of God as dealing with the sinner, and delivering him from the punishment due to his iniquities, without these iniquities being expiated,--without the penalty incurred by them being exacted,--without the law of which they are transgressions being relieved from the stain of dishonour which they had cast upon it,--without any costly sacrifice, any solemn propitiation, any priceless ransom. But whatever this transaction concerning sin might be, it would not be *remission*. Granting that it were quite possible for God to let the sinner off; to wipe out, by a mere arbitrary decree, and without any satisfaction to divine justice, the debt which the sinner had contracted; to cease from His anger towards His enemies, and return to a state of friendship; to say, your sins be forgiven you, you have nothing now to fear;--all this, ‘without shedding of blood,’ without any sacrifice, or atonement, or expiation: still, all this, whatever it might amount to, does not amount to *remission*. Call it what you please; be it what it may; it is not remission. It may be held up as an equivalent for it; it may be in room and lieu of it; it may be all that multitudes care to inquire after, or have ever felt the need of, or troubled themselves to seek. But, however possible it might be on God’s part, however satisfactory it might be on their part, it is not *remission*. It may look like it. It may seem to carry with it all that the unenlightened have any thought of when thinking of remission; but real remission it is not. Without shedding of blood it is not remission.”¹⁴
- C. Expectation 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

- D. **Exhortation** 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: 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.¹⁶ It includes the idea of *perverseness* and *crookedness*.¹⁷ Because sin is like this it produces, not happiness, but misery.¹⁸ "The sinner," wrote Witsius, "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 condemn 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."¹⁹ 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). To the Psalmist and to all who come to see the gravity of their sin, *nothing* is more important than securing pardon from God. "In this Christianity, accordingly, the sinner turns to God first of all as the pardoning God; and that not as the God who pardons him once and then leaves him to himself, but as the God who steadily preserves the attitude toward him of a pardoning God. It is in this aspect that he thinks primarily of God and it is on the preservation on God's part of this attitude towards him that all his hopes of salvation depend. This is because he looks to God and to God alone for his salvation; and that in every several step of salvation – since otherwise whatever else it might be, it would not be salvation. It is, of course, only from a God whose attitude to the sinner is that of a pardoning God, that saving operations can be hoped. No doubt, if those transactions which we class together as the processes of salvation are our own work, we may not have so extreme a need of a constantly pardoning God."²⁰

Now some may protest and declare that they believe because "*God is Love*" His forgiveness is free for the asking to which Warfield responds, "The love of God cannot be apprehended in its length and breadth and height and depth – all of which pass knowledge – save as it is apprehended as the love of a God who turns from the sight of sin with inexpressible abhorrence, and burns against it with unquenchable indignation. The infinitude of His love would be illustrated not by His lavishing of His favor on sinners without requiring an expiation of sin, but by His – through such holiness and through such righteousness as cannot but cry out with infinite abhorrence and indignation – still loving sinners so greatly that He provides a satisfaction for their sin adequate to these tremendous demands. It is the distinguishing characteristic of Christianity, after all, not that it preaches a God of love, but that it preaches a God of conscience."²¹ At the time of the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church taught people to trust Mother Church and her sacramental system; to trust the Virgin Mary and the saints and especially to trust their penance and resolve. The Reformers insisted that salvation from sin is received by trusting *only* in Christ *alone*. 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—but *only* through faith alone in Christ alone.

ENDNOTES

¹ Cf. Martin Luther most famous work The Bondage of The Will (translated by J. I. Packer and D. R. Johnston, Revell, 1957), which was written in response to Erasmus and his book Discussion Concerning Free-will.

² This letter can be found in Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters I, eds. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet trans. by H. Beveridge (rpt. Baker Book House (1998) p. 52. It was later reprinted in a single volume, A Reformation Debate: Sadoletto's Letter to the Genevans and Calvin's Reply, ed. J.C. Olin (Baker, 1966), p. 78.

³ The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield VII (rpt. Baker Book House, 1981) p. 132.

⁴ 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

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- 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. Ewald Plass (Concordia, 1959), p. 326.
- ⁵ 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).
- ⁶ 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.”
- ⁷ Derek Kidner, Psalms 73-150: A Commentary (IVP, 1975), p. 446.
- ⁸ Owen, op. cit., p. 331.
- ⁹ “Without this holiness of God, sin has no meaning and grace has no point, for it is God’s holiness that gives to the one its definition and to the other its greatness. Without the holiness of God, sin is merely human failure but not failure before God, in relation to God. It is failure without the standard by which we know it to have fallen short. It is failure without the presumption of guilt, failure without retribution, failure without any serious moral meaning. And without the holiness of God, grace is no longer grace because it does not arise from the dark clouds of judgment that obscured the cross and exacted the damnation of the Son in our place. Furthermore, without holiness grace loses its meaning as grace, a free gift of the God who, despite his holiness and because of his holiness, has reconciled sinners to himself in the death of his Son. And without holiness, faith is but a confidence in the benevolence of life, or perhaps merely confidence in ourselves. Sin, grace, and faith are emptied of any but a passing meaning if they are severed from their roots in the holiness of God.” David Wells, God in The Wasteland (Eerdmans 1994) p. 144.
- ¹⁰ 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.”
- ¹¹ Old Thomas Adams wrote, “There can be no repenting, asking forgiveness, or desiring a change, upon a general confused apprehension of our unworthiness. We can only come to Christ with a catalogue of our sins in our hands: and if the Holy Spirit does not assist in drawing it up, we shall omit a hundred times more than we set down. Till we have a full belief and apprehension of the scripture doctrine of the remission of sins, we are under a kind of necessity of denying, extenuating, and explaining away the guilt of them; and this seals up in blindness, impenitence, and hardness of heart.” Private Thoughts on Religion (rpt. International Outreach Inc. 2000) p. 78.
- ¹² The Complete Works of William Bates II (rpt. Sprinkle, 1990), p. 13. In similar language J. C. Ryle wrote: “Will you trust in your own *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.
- ¹³ Cf. Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament II, eds. R.L. Harris, G.L. Archer, Jr., B.K. Waltke (Moody, 1980), p. 626.
- ¹⁴ H. Martin, The Atonement (rpt. Knox Press Edinburgh 1976) p. 173.
- ¹⁵ John Calvin, Commentary On the Book of Psalms V (rpt. Eerdmans, 1945), p. 133.
- ¹⁶ The Hebrew word PĀSHĀ 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).
- ¹⁷ ‘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.”
- ¹⁸ The Hebrew word HĀTĀ 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; 44:32; Isaiah 1:4; 65:20).
- ¹⁹ Herman Witsius, The Apostles’ Creed II (rpt. P&R, 1993), p. 388.
- ²⁰ Warfield, op. cit. p. 130.
- ²¹ The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield IX (rpt. Baker Book House, 1981) p. 296.