

# CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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## REHEARSING THE MERCIES OF GOD

Martin Luther was once asked, "What are your favorite Psalms?" – To which he responded, "The Psalms of Paul." This was Luther's way of declaring the O.T. foundation for so much of Paul's theology, especially as found in the "Penitential Psalms." There are seven of these: Psalms 5, 32, 37, 51, 102, 130 and 143 – Psalms that portray a deep sense of sin and a heart-felt experience of forgiveness (Ps. 32:1, 2 cited by Paul in Rom. 4:6). In light of the events of Sept. 11, 2001, we have been hearing quite a bit about forgiveness. We are told, for instance, by many well-meaning religious folk that we owe the terrorists (and their co-conspirators) forgiveness. We have been further instructed by the psychology crowd to "release" our anger and "receive" forgiveness for harboring attitudes of vengeance. John MacArthur astutely observes, "it is not at all uncommon these days to hear all kinds of people talking about learning to forgive themselves. But the terminology is misleading. 'Forgiveness' presupposes an acknowledgement of guilt. Most people nowadays who speak of forgiving themselves explicitly repudiate the notion of personal guilt...an admission of guilt today clearly is considered incompatible with the popular notion of 'wholeness' and the need to protect the fantasy of a good self."<sup>1</sup> Does forgiveness imply that we overlook or dismiss the ghastly crimes of Sept. 11, 2001? Do we pardon such acts by simply uttering the words "I forgive?" Can forgiveness in and of itself actually eradicate or exterminate the evil that was done? Psalm 32 is the first of thirteen Psalms that bears the heading MASCHIL. The meaning is somewhat obscure. It could mean "a didactic Psalm," that is, "Psalm," one that required delicate and artistic musical ability. In any case, the emphasis is on understanding, and attention to its parts is stressed. Chronologically this Psalm was written after the great confession of Psalm 51; II Samuel 12:14ff provides the historical setting for both Psalms.

### I. DAVID'S COMMENDATION (32:1, 2)

The blessedness of forgiveness – the Psalm begins with a beatitude ASHREY, lit. "Oh, the happinesses or blessednesses," the Heb. Word is in the plural. "He who is not acquainted with God's holiness and purity, who knows not sin's desert and sinfulness, knows nothing of forgiveness."<sup>2</sup>

- A. Sin. Vv. 1, 2 set forth the objective facts. Three different words are used to describe sin:
1. PESHHA – "transgression," the Septuagint has ANOMIA – "lawlessness." The word means apostasy, rebellion, a breaking away from God, expressed by outward defiance of God's revealed will as stated in the Law.
  2. CHATAAH – "sin," Bk. HARMATIA – erring from or missing the mark, a deviation from the path (compare Rom. 3:12).
  3. AVON – "iniquity." This word describes the inward pervasion of our nature – the depravity of our being, manifesting itself in outward wrongdoing. "At first our conscience becomes awakened to the guilt of some *act* of transgression, but as the terrible question presses itself more and more upon our attention, we are finally landed in the painful conviction that behind the isolated acts of transgression, and

in the manifestation of sin, there is INIQUITY, the natural depravity of our being.”<sup>3</sup>

Cf. David’s remark in Psalms 51:5.

- B. Atonement. Three words are used to describe forgiveness, and all with “atonement” in mind.
1. NASA – “forgiven” – literally it means to “bear away,” in the sense that a burden is removed (cf. Exodus 34:7; John 1:29).
  2. KASAH – “to cover, to hide.” This word and KAPHAR are cognate. It is in the sight of God that sin is covered (cf. Isaiah 38:17, 43:25, 44:22).
  3. LO-CHASHAV – “not reckoned or imputed” – refers to canceling the account after payment has been paid.

NOTE: These three terms can only be understood in light of Leviticus 16 and the great Day of Atonement, which typify the “Lamb of God,” the suffering servant of Jehovah depicted in Isaiah 53. Compare the term used there.

- C. Sincerity. “...in whose spirit there is no guile;” that is, no deceitfulness. There is open honesty with oneself and with God; there is no attempt made to cloak or hide the facts (cf. Proverbs 28:13). “God only thus forgives and justifies one who, with all truth and sincerity of heart, confesses his sin, making no reservation, no excuses, no attempts to still hold fast and hide some darling lust.”<sup>4</sup>

## II. DAVID’S CONFESSION (32:3-5)

The way of restoration. Having stated the objective truth, David now illustrates the doctrine from his own experience.

- A. His Affliction (3, 4). He kept silent, and three things kept him company:
1. His bones waxed old – decay.
  2. God’s hand was heavy upon him – depression.
  3. His life dried up – drought.

As one of the old divines has wisely said, “He who will not speak his sin to God has to groan.”<sup>5</sup> The Psalmist suffered and complained, but did not confess (compare Hosea 7:14). Verse 4 closes with a SELAH, meaning, “stop and be thoughtful.” Richard Sibbes’ comments are pithy and to the point: “God keeps his children many times a long while on the rack before he speaks peace unto them in the forgiveness of sins, because he would not have them think slightly of the riches of his mercy. It is no easy manner to attain it, that we may walk in the comforts of the Holy Ghost. The difficulty of obtaining or recovering the sense of forgiveness may be seen in David after his fall. Did he easily obtain a sense of pardon? Oh no! God held him on the rack a long time, ‘He roared all the day long, his moisture was turned into a drought of summer,’ Psalms 32:3-4. But when he had resolved a thorough, and no slight, confession; when he had resolved to shame himself and glorify God; then saith he, ‘And Thou forgavest my sin.’ But till he dealt thoroughly with his soul without all guile, he felt no comfort. So it is with the children of God. When in the state of grace they fall into sin, it is no slight ‘Lord, have mercy upon me’ that will serve the turn; but a thorough shaming of themselves before God, and a thorough confession, resolving, and determining to be under another government; to have Christ to govern them as well as to pardon them. God will no otherwise do it.”<sup>6</sup>

- B. His Confession (5). Stated in a threefold manner:
1. *I will acknowledge* – “make known” literally “I will begin to make known.” The tense of the Hebrew verb graphically represents the confession as being made or being in the ongoing act of confession.
  2. *I will confess* – prefaced with “I said.” Calvin observed, “While the wicked are dragged by force, just as a judge compels offenders to come to trial, he assures us

that he came deliberately and with full purpose of mind; for the term, 'said' just signifies that he deliberated with himself."<sup>7</sup>

3. *I hid not* – literally I did not cover; same word as in verse 1. Only God is allowed to cover sin.

NOTE: The essentially correlative bond of repentance and the experience of pardon does not exclude the fact that David's remorse has had a profound effect on him. G. C. Berkouwer pointed out: "After silence comes oppression, and after confession, forgiveness. At the same time, the blessedness of sin's being covered and forgiven is celebrated in verse 1; so too the 'deliverance' of God in verse 7, and being found by him in verse 6."<sup>8</sup>

- C. His Forgiveness (5). And THOU forgavest – The "Thou" is emphatic in the Hebrew text, and the form of the sentence expresses the immediateness of God's pardon. Another SELAH follows.

### III. DAVID'S CONFIRMATION (32:6, 7)

He based this admonition upon his own experience – "For this reason" is instructional. Note to whom it is addressed:

- A. Everyone Who is Godly – that is believing, one who actually seeks after God, who does not ignore God. The Hebrew word for 'godly' is CHASSID, one who loves God.
- B. Everyone Who...Prays – thus, who seeks after the true and living God (compare Hebrews 11:6).

NOTE: "...in a time while you may be found" implies that there is a time when God may not be found (cf. Proverbs 1:28 and II Corinthians 6:2), a time when only judgment is found. The expression, "flood of great waters," describes judgment, a hearkening back to the time of Noah (Genesis 6) and the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 14). Compare also Isaiah 28:2, 17, 30:28 and Nahum 1:8.

- C. His Appropriation (7) – David applies his own admonition, "Thou art my secret hiding place." Again the "Thou" is emphatic. Shouts of joy and deliverance accompanied the redeemed. Compare with verse 11 – SELAH.

### IV. GOD'S COMMUNICATION (32:8, 9)

At this point the language of the Psalm points to God as the speaker, who declares what He will do and what His people are not to do.

- A. The Affirmation (8) – "I will instruct...teach...guide." Note the triple assurance. All of this involves an intimate relation with the living God.
- B. The Admonition (9) – "Be not" like horse and mule, that is without understanding. God desires willing obedience, but His will is not hampered by man's will; God can and does put bit and bridle upon men (cf. Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel 4; and Pharaoh, Exodus 5-14).

### V. DAVID'S CONVICTION (32:10, 11)

God can and will deal with man, whether man wishes to deal with God or not. David confirms this in verse 10. Here he contrasts the mercy shown to the righteous with the misery of the rebellious; all of the saints are to rejoice and shout for joy. Note the final triplet – "rejoice," "exult" and "shout in triumph." David understood his forgiveness only in the light of his atonement – "without the shedding of blood there is NO forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). Note the words of John Owen, "To see into the mystery of the love of the Father, working in the blood of the Mediator; to consider by faith the great transaction of divine wisdom, justice, and mercy therein, - how few attain unto it! To come unto God by Christ for forgiveness, and therein to behold the law issuing all its threats and curses in his blood, and losing its sting, putting an end to its obligation unto punishment, in the cross; to see all sins

gathered up in the hands of God's justice, and made to meet on the Mediator, and eternal love springing forth triumphantly from his blood, flourishing into pardon, grace, mercy, forgiveness – this the heart of a sinner can be enlarged unto only by the Spirit of God.”<sup>9</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** Forgiveness is *not* granted automatically or simply because we desire it. God's forgiveness is directly tied to the work of Christ in making atonement for sins (Romans 3:21-26; Colossians 1:13-14). “Divine forgiveness,” declared Berkouwer, “is never in Scripture, an indifferent love or a matter of God's being blind.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise when we extend forgiveness it is not given so as to excuse or ignore the nature of the offense. In the case of September 11, 2001, forgiveness is *not* to be extended to the people responsible for those horrible acts of violence given the fact that these same people would, if the opportunity presented itself, do the same thing (or worse) again. And, I might add, there are no general grounds for believing that *any* act of contrition would allow them to escape unpunished from earthly justice. Finally, and most importantly, forgiveness in the Biblical sense of the word *always* has reference to sin, but as Dick Keyes has written: “Belief in the idea of sin, as taught in the Bible, is deeply implausible today – in part a necessary result of the three points we have just made. If no transcendent God as Judge exists who has revealed good and evil to us, then who can say what sin is or who it is against? If our ideas about God and ultimate moral truth are merely human constructions, then why should they have any authority over us? In this setting, the idea of sin is seen to encourage joylessness, uptightness, inhibition, manipulation, self-righteousness, cruelty, disdain for culture, and lack of self-esteem. Who wants all that? The implausibility of sin is also strengthened by modern views of human nature. Strong voices from within the human sciences claim that sin is an archaic notion. The reality of human choice itself is under heavy fire from psychology, sociology, neuroscience, evolutionary psychology, and computer science. And claims from within these fields hold that human attitudes and actions are at least potentially explainable by biological factors that we are not aware of, let alone able to control. The idea of being held morally accountable to God is therefore seen as barbaric and dependent on obsolete and negative moral categories. But sin is not a peripheral Christian teaching, it is the biblical diagnosis of the most basic human problem, to which Jesus is the solution in his atoning death on the cross – and the only reason why he had to go to the cross at all.”<sup>11</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> J. MacArthur, The Vanishing Conscience: Drawing The Line in a No-Fault Guilt-Free World (Word, 1994) p. 18.
- <sup>2</sup> John Owen, “An Exposition Upon Psalm 130,” in Works, IV (rpt. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974) p. 394.
- <sup>3</sup> David Baron, Types, Psalms, and Prophecies: Being a Series of Old Testament Studies (rpt. Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1981), p. 91.
- <sup>4</sup> J. J. Stewart Perowne, The Book of Psalms (London: George Bell and Sons, 1883), p. 121.
- <sup>5</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, The Treasury of David, II (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), p. 101.
- <sup>6</sup> The Works of Richard Sibbes II (James Nichol, 1862) p. 314.
- <sup>7</sup> John Calvin, Commentary on the Book of Psalms, I (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) p. 101.
- <sup>8</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, Studies In Dogmatics: Sin (Eerdmans, 1971) p. 341.
- <sup>9</sup> Owen, op. cit., p. 407.
- <sup>10</sup> Berkouwer, op cit. p. 355.
- <sup>11</sup> Dick Keyes, Chameleon Christianity: Moving Beyond Safety and Conformity (Baker, 1999) p. 63.