

## **CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER**

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### **REHEARSING THE MERCIES OF GOD (Part II)**

“Honesty,” sings Billy Joel, “is hardly ever heard.” One reason is because we are uncomfortable with it. Oh, there is a level of honesty that we expect and without which we could not survive as a society. But the kind of honesty I am speaking of is laid out in Ps. 32:2. In fact, honesty is a fitting synonym for what the Bible calls repentance. Honesty is a truth telling about our experience that has given up on strategies of flight, appeasement, or confrontation. “Honesty,” writes Paul F. M. Zahl, “means facing up to a tragic situation.”<sup>1</sup> This type of honesty is set forth by the Apostle Paul in Phil. 3:4-8. If we are seeking to establish our standing before God on the basis of works righteousness, we will never be honest, either with God or ourselves (cf. I John 1:8). This was David’s experience in the Penitential Psalms (5, 32, 37, 51, 102, 130, 143). “Why should we dwell on the wretched story? Because it teaches us, as no other page in the history of God’s church does, how the alchemy of Divine love can extract sweet perfumes of penitence and praise out of the filth of sin; and therefore, though we turn with loathing from David’s sin, we have to bless God for the record of it, and for the lessons of hope that come from David’s pardon.”<sup>2</sup> Honesty before God; what a strange statement – does He not know everything there is to know about us? Indeed He does; but like prayer, we are not informing God about things he is unaware. Rather, we are acknowledging and unmasking ourselves before Him (cf. Heb. 4:13). This honesty is necessary. As A. W. Pink has written, “The inward experience of a believer consists largely of growing discoveries of his own vileness and of God’s goodness, of his own excuseless failures and of God’s infinite forbearance, with a frequent alternation between gloom and joy, confession and thanksgiving.”<sup>3</sup> Phrases such as “nobody’s perfect” and “to err is human” are often used to excuse our moral failures. It is another way of minimizing our sin. David Wells observes the disappearance of sin in the modern world is not, of course, an actual disappearance. It is not sin that has vanished. What has been lost is our capacity to understand our life as being sinful. So what has happened? We should begin by noting that this is not a problem of recent vintage. “By 1900,” Andrew Delbanco writes, “it was impossible to reattach the word “sin” to its original sense, because the target of the violation – God – was gone.” He had ceased to be a reality to be reckoned with in the culture. Churches nevertheless continued to use the word, but in the windowless world in which the language was heard, it ceased to have meaning. Its use created the same kind of dilemma that a promissory note might today where the financial accounts of the person making the promise is discovered to be empty. The promissory situation has continued down to the present. While we deplore the fracturing of life, its robberies, and rapes, its abuses and cruelties, its assaults and catastrophes, we can no longer measure its darkness in the presence of God. All we do is weep. We cannot make confession. There is no one to whom to confess. We cannot bring our sin before God, because he is gone. In our failures, we are not able to penetrate the real character of our sin,

because we cannot take its measure, see its nature, in relation to God. We cannot say, as did David after his adultery, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight, so that thou art justified in thy sentence and blameless in thy judgment" (Ps. 51:4). All we can do is wipe each other's noses.<sup>4</sup> We need to recognize that sin is first and foremost, transgression of God's standards, not society's. The Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q. 10) captured it well. What is sin? A. Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God. (I John 3:4). The Gospel is glad tidings or good news. But the words of Jesus in Luke 13:3 appear to be stern and severe: "Except you repent, you shall all perish." Is that command to repent really part of the Gospel? To answer that question, we must first discover the Biblical meaning of repentance. Question 87 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism reads: "*What is repentance unto life?*" Answer: "*Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.*" We need to be careful how we understand the term *repentance*. The word can be used in three specific ways.

**(1) NATURAL REPENTANCE** This is something that is the common experience of mankind, regardless of their various religious convictions. "Natural repentance is that natural feeling of sorrow and self-condemnation, of which a man is conscious for having done that which he sees he ought not to have done, and which arises from a discovery of the impropriety of it, or from reflecting on the disagreeable consequences of it to others, and especially to himself. This feeling of regret frequently occurs. When a man, especially a proud and vain man, is convinced of his having been guilty of some glaring instance of improper conduct, either against, or in the presence of a fellow creature, it is sometimes very keen and painful."<sup>5</sup>

**(2) LEGAL REPENTANCE** "Legal repentance is a feeling of regret produced in a legalist by the fear that his violations of the Divine law and especially his gross sins do expose him to eternal punishment. This regret is increased by his desire to be exempted on the ground of it from the dreadful punishment to which he knows he is condemned for them. He is extremely sorry, not that he has transgressed the law, but that the law and the justice of God are so very strict that they cannot leave him at liberty to sin with impunity. His love of sin and his hatred of holiness continue in all their vigour. And yet under the dominion of his legal temper he presumes to expect that such repentance as this will in some measure atone for all his crimes against the infinite Majesty of heaven."<sup>6</sup> In summation, Robert Reymond writes, "The Scriptures are clear that men may feel remorse over their sins for any number of reasons. But unless their sorrow for sin is their response to their sense of not only the danger of, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of their sins as contrary to the holy nature and righteous law of God with full purpose and endeavor to walk with him in all the ways of his commandments, it must be judged as mere 'worldly sorrow that produces death.' Godly sorrow, the sinner's response to the Spirit's regenerating work in his soul which normally accompanies the evangelical preaching of the doctrine of repentance, produces 'repentance leaving no regrets and leading unto salvation.'<sup>7</sup>

**(3) EVANGELICAL REPENTANCE** "Evangelical repentance is altogether different from either of these. It is a gracious principle and habit implanted in the soul by the Spirit of Christ, in the exercise of which a regenerate and believing sinner, deeply sensible of the exceeding sinfulness and just demerit of his innumerable sins is truly humbled and grieved before the Lord, on account of the sinfulness and hurtfulness of them. He feels bitter remorse, unfeigned sorrow, and deep self-aborrence for the aggravated transgressions of his life, and the deep depravity of his nature; chiefly, because by all his innumerable provocations he had dishonoured an infinitely holy and gracious God, transgressed a law which is 'holy, and just and good,' and defiled, deformed and even destroyed his own precious soul. This godly sorrow for sin and this holy abhorrence of it arise from a spiritual discovery of pardoning mercy with God in Christ, and from the exercise of trusting in His mercy. And these feelings

and exercises are always accompanied by an unfeigned love of universal holiness, and by fixed resolutions and endeavours to turn from all iniquity to God and to walk before him in newness of life. Such, in general, is the nature of that evangelical repentance, to the habit and exercise of which the Lord Jesus calls sinners who hear the Gospel.”<sup>8</sup> Repentance that is biblical *always* stems from a biblical understanding of sin. We are told in I 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.<sup>9</sup> It includes the idea of perverseness and crookedness.<sup>10</sup> Because sin is like this, it produces, not happiness, but misery.<sup>11</sup> “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.”<sup>12</sup> 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 good news – that sins can be forgiven.

### **I. SUPPLICATION** (vv. 1, 2)

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.” Ps 77:3 has a similar refrain. People who never consider their sin in the light of God’s holiness will never understand the Psalmist’s travail.<sup>13</sup>

### **II. 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.

**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.<sup>14</sup>

**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.

### **III. 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."<sup>15</sup>

#### **IV. 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 loving kindness 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:** Wisely did the noted Swiss theologian Emil Brunner once say: "The more seriously guilt is regarded, the more it is realized that *something must happen*, just because forgiveness is not something which can in any way be taken absolutely for granted. The more real guilt is to us, the more real also is the gulf between us and God, the more real is the wrath of God and the inviolable character of the law of penalty; the more real also the obstacle between God and man becomes, the more necessary becomes the particular transaction, by means of which the obstacle, in all its reality, is removed. The more serious our view of guilt, the more clearly we perceive the necessity for an objective – and not merely subjective – Atonement."<sup>16</sup> This is the only hope for sinners seeking forgiveness. "God also sees our sins as "covered" and "not reckoned" because of the blood of Christ (Romans 4:7-8). Thus, paradoxically, he sees our sins as both *guilt-bringing* (and thus producing grief and anger) and *guaranteed-of-pardon* (though not yet pardoned in the sense of his response to confession and the actual removal of his fatherly displeasure). What is it that distinguishes God's *judicial wrath* toward the unbeliever's unconfessed sin from God's *fatherly displeasure* toward the believer's unconfessed sin? The difference is that the believer is united to God in Christ by a new covenant. The promise of this covenant is that God will never turn away from doing good to us and will never let us turn away from him, but will always bring us back to confession and repentance. "I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I *will not turn away from doing good to them*; and I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me" (Jeremiah 32:40, RSV, emphasis added)."<sup>17</sup>

#### **ENDNOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> Paul F. M. Zahl, *Who Will Deliver Us? The Present Power of the Death of Christ* (Seabury Press, 1983), p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Maclaren, *The Life of David as Reflected In His Psalms* (rpt. Baker, 1955), p. 209.

<sup>3</sup> A.W. Pink, *The Life of David II* (rpt. Reiner Publications, 1974), p. 54.

<sup>4</sup> D.F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Eerdmans, 1998), p. 181.

<sup>5</sup> "Men may be outwardly reformed, as the Pharisees were, and yet not repent of their sins, as they did not, Matthew 21:32 and 23:28 and after such an external reformation, men may return to their former sinful course of life, and their last end be worse than the beginning; besides, there may be true repentance for sin where there is no time and opportunity for reformation, or showing forth a reformation of life and manners, as in the thief upon the cross and others, who are brought to repentance on their deathbeds; and reformation of life and manners, when it is best and most genuine, is the fruit and effect of repentance, and a bringing forth fruits meet for it, as evidences of it, and so distinct from that itself." John Gill, *A Body of Divinity* (rpt. Sovereign Grace, 1971), p. 715.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Lewis Dabney carefully notes that legal repentance "means a genuine sorrow for sin, including both fear of its dangers, and conscience of its wrongness, and also loathing of its odiousness, with a thorough justifying and approving of God's holy law; a sorrow wrought by the Holy Ghost, but wrought by Him only

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through the instrumentality of the convincing Law, and unaccompanied with conscious hopes of mercy in Christ." *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (rpt. Zondervan, 1972) p. 653.

<sup>7</sup> R. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nelson, 1998), p. 725.

<sup>8</sup> These theological distinctions are commonly recognized. The definitions I have listed are drawn from the introduction to John Colquhoun, *Repentance* (rpt. The Banner of Truth, 1965), pp. 9-10.

<sup>9</sup> 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).

<sup>10</sup> 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."

<sup>11</sup> 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; 44:32; Isaiah 1:4; 65:20).

<sup>12</sup> Herman Witsius, *The Apostles' Creed II* (rpt. P&R, 1993), p. 388.

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> cf. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament II*, ed. R.L. Harris, G.L. Archer, Jr., B.K. Waltke (Moody, 1980), p. 626.

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

<sup>16</sup> E. Brunner, *The Mediator* (Westminster, 1957), p. 451.

<sup>17</sup> John Piper, *A Godward Life: Savoring the Supremacy of God In All of Life* (Mulnomah, 1999), p. 105.