

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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### REHEARSING THE MERCIES OF GOD (Part III)

Michael Horton in his exposition of the Apostles' Creed makes this observation: "It is more likely perhaps today, even in evangelical circles, to hear about the need to forgive ourselves than to hear about our need to find a forgiving God. Forgiveness, in our highly therapeutic culture, seems to have more to do with our own catharsis and psychic wellbeing (i.e., "getting it off our chest"), than with God."<sup>1</sup> I am personally of the opinion that much of the talk about forgiveness and the events of September 11, 2001, are along these lines rather than Biblical ones. Repeated appeals are made to texts like Matt. 6:12, 18:35; Eph. 4:32 and Col 3:13, all of which state very plainly that Christians are to be forgiving people. But the context of every one of the texts has to do with *personal* wrong. And as old Thomas Watson pointed out centuries ago: "That which man is required to forgive, is the wrong done to himself, but the wrong done to God, he cannot forgive."<sup>2</sup> The idea that we are to extend unconditional forgiveness (like the popular concept of unconditional love) to an enemy bent on destroying you and your family is, to put it bluntly, to court disaster! Unconditional forgiveness is laden (no pun intended!) with a lot of cultural baggage. It is wedded to the philosophy that says love and forgiveness should impose no values, expectations or changes in behavior and beliefs on another. As David Powlison has said: "It keeps company with teachings that say to people, 'Peace, peace,' when, from God's holy point of view, there is no peace (Jeremiah 23:14, 16f). If you receive blanket acceptance, you need no repentance. You just accept it. It fills you without humbling you. It relaxes you without upsetting you about yourself – or thrilling you about Christ. It lets you bask without reckoning with the anguish of Jesus in the garden and on the cross. It is easy and undemanding. It does not insist on or work at changing you. It deceives you about both God and yourself."<sup>3</sup> In short, this sort of forgiveness is glib and refuses to see sin's true character. In Galatians 3:21-22 Paul speaks of the Law being brought in alongside of the promise in order to define sin's true character – it is transgression (verse 21). The Law is meant to reveal to us the nature of our sin. The exceeding sinfulness of sin, along with its guilt and condemnation is made manifest by the Law. In order to more clearly see this biblical perspective, we are going to turn and examine Psalm 51. "This Psalm," writes Plumer, "is often and fitly called *the sinner's guide*...Athanasius recommends to some Christians, to whom he was writing, to repeat it when they are awake at night...Luther says, 'There is no other Psalm which is oftener sung or prayed in the church.' This is the first Psalm in which we have the word *Spirit* used in application to the Holy Ghost."<sup>4</sup> This is the Fourth *penitential* Psalm.<sup>5</sup> The historical framework for this Psalm is found in II Samuel 11-12. Old Matthew Henry summed up the essence of this Psalm when he wrote, "Though God may suffer His people to fall into sin, and to lie a great while in it, yet He will by some means or other recover them to repentance, bring them to Himself, and to their right mind again."<sup>6</sup>

## I. INVOCATION (Verse 1)

“Have mercy upon me” – is the Psalmist’s plea. He desires a gracious God (cf. II Samuel 12:22; Luke 18:13). The thought, notes Kirkpatrick, “suggests the free bestowal of favor rather than the exercise of forgiving clemency and is connected with the word rendered *gracious* in Exodus 34:6.”<sup>7</sup> Note that David appeals to two aspects of the mercy of God.

A. Your unfailing love. The thought of COVENANT love is what David rehearses.

B. Your great compassion. This literally refers to the abundance of God’s pity. The plea is thus based upon the revelation of God’s gracious character as depicted in His covenant faithfulness (cf. Isaiah 63:7; Lamentations 3:22).

**NOTE:** Three times the mercy of God is underscored. David entertained no thoughts of his own goodness as being the basis for God’s kindness toward him. There is no plea for *fairness* or *justice* and there is no *excuse* on David’s lips. David sought mercy. “When God forgives,” wrote Ray Stedman, “he forgives beyond our utmost imaginings. Here are a few of the figures of speech, which are used in the Old Testament to depict the forgiveness of God. ‘As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us’ (Psalm 103:12). How far is that? Well, how far do you have to go east before you start going west? You never come to ‘west.’ Then God says he will ‘cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.’ (Micah 7:19).”<sup>8</sup>

## II. CONFESSION (Verses 2-6)

The expression “I know” (verse 3) is strongly emphatic in the Hebrew. Note the personal pronoun: *my* iniquity; *my* sin; *my* transgression. Three different words are used to describe David’s act, the same three words we examined in our study of Psalm 32 (PESHA, transgression; CHATTAAH, sin; AVON, iniquity).

**NOTE:** David viewed his sin from every angle. He looks at his sin in light of the *character* of God. He did not seek to play God’s mercy against God’s holiness and righteousness.

## III. CLEANSING (Verses 7-12)

“Cleanse me with hyssop” and wash me” are both mentioned together in verse 2 and are repeated in verse 7 (cf. Exodus 32:33 and Isaiah 43:25).

A. Cleanse me with hyssop. Hyssop was used in Levitical ceremonies (Leviticus 14:4ff and Numbers 19:18). It was a plant used as a sprinkler, usually with blood.

B. Wash me. This also is a reference to a ritual cleansing ceremony (Leviticus 14 and Numbers 19). The word for *wash* is CABAS, which actually means to treat or trample upon. The thought is of pounding and vigorously rubbing an item in order to really clean it. It refers not to a surface washing, but to one that goes deeply (used in Jeremiah 4:14 of cleansing the heart).

C. Let me hear joy and gladness. David seeks restoration (cf. Isaiah 22:13; 35:10; 51:3, 11). In verse 8 David remembers the misery his sin had bought him.

D. Hide your face from my sin and blot out all of my iniquity. This refers to expiation,<sup>9</sup> the blotting out of sin (cf. verse 1).

## IV. RENEWAL (Verses 10-12)

David seeks not only forgiveness, but also inward renewal. His wayward acts stem from his wayward bent.

A. Create in me a pure heart. The word *create* is BARA (cf. Genesis 1:1) and refers to God’s creative power. The parallel line (common in Hebrew prose) *renew* means to remake – a radical renovation.

B. Do not cast me from your presence. Against the Hebrew parallel is “take not your Holy Spirit from me” – to what does this refer? David is speaking as the covenant King – and he does not want God to remove him as He did Saul (I Samuel 16:13-14).

C. Restore me the joy of your salvation. The emphasis is on the *joy*. Sin had robbed David of his joy in God. Note how much David’s sin had cost him!

## V. RESPONSE (Verses 13-17)

David now makes a vow – one made out of gratitude. One who has experienced the blessedness of forgiveness will not be content to go about life as before.

A. **Testimony.** “Then I will teach transgressors (like myself) your ways. “The parallel line is “and sinners will turn back to God.”

B. **Praise.** “O Lord open my lips” to proclaim God’s mercy. David never forgot the serious nature of his sin. He used the expression “blood guilt” (in the intensive plural) to describe graphically his sin of murder. He could rejoice in God’s forgiveness, but he never completely forgot his sin (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:9).

**CONCLUSION:** David is an example of how God’s people should respond to God’s grace. Anyone who claims to have been forgiven and who does not seek to proclaim to others the grace of God has a very poor estimate of what forgiveness really is – and what it really costs. David valued God’s forgiveness because he clearly saw how serious his sin was in God’s sight. Until a person comes to see the true character of their sin, they will not come to see their great need for Christ’s saving work. Only people, who see themselves as real sinners, will seek the Savior and take refuge in Him and in Him only. We confess in the Apostles’ Creed that we believe in the “forgiveness of sins.” Most people will affirm this tenet of the creed. The Christian belief in the forgiveness of sins is rooted in Christ’s death. It is a common, but decidedly erroneous, opinion that forgiveness of sins is to be expected from God unless we are partakers of Christ’s death and resurrection. “Justification involves sanctification as a necessary consequence because the believer, who is a sharer in the atonement, is united to Christ and must enter also into the sanctified life which union with Christ involves. This is the great truth, which underlies Paul’s whole argument and connects justification with sanctification. It is the *union with Christ* which makes it possible for a justified man to live in sin as his element.”<sup>10</sup> We began this message by pointing to the need for *change* that is the common quest of people the world over. The change that occurs when we come to saving faith in the Gospel of Christ is genuine change. “If anyone be in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). A radical transformation has occurred, and even though the believer still knows the reality of an on-going struggle with remaining sin, there has been a change. This is what the Bible means by the term “Christian.” A Christian is someone who has been changed, transferred from bondage in *Adam*, to freedom in *Christ*.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> M.S. Horton, *We Believe; Recovering The Essentials of the Apostles’ Creed* (Word, 1998). p. 200.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Lord’s Prayer* (rpt. The Banner of Truth, 1978) p. 215.

<sup>3</sup> D. Powlison, *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* (Vol. XII, No. 3. Sept. 1994) p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> William S. Plumer, *Psalms: A Critical and Expository Commentary with Doctrinal and Practical Remarks* (rpt. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), p. 555.

<sup>5</sup> There are seven penitential psalms (5, 32, 37, 51, 102, 130 and 143). They all portray a deep sense of sin and a heartfelt experience of forgiveness.

<sup>6</sup> *Matthew Henry’s Commentary* III (rpt. McLean, VA: MacDonald, 1975), p. 429.

<sup>7</sup> A.F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), p. 288.

<sup>8</sup> R.C. Stedman, *Folk Psalms of Faith* (Regal 1973) p. 187.

<sup>9</sup> Propitiation and expiation are two entirely different concepts. Propitiation (the word is used by Paul in Romans 3:25, where the NIV has the expression “a sacrifice of atonement,” cf. the footnote). Propitiation refers to something done *to a person* (Christ propitiated God by bearing His wrath against sinners.) Expiation refers to something done *to particular sins or acts* (they are removed or cancelled). In order for expiation to take place, propitiation must first occur.

<sup>10</sup> Floyd E. Hamilton, *The Epistle to the Romans* (P & R, 1958), p. 99.