

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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The Lord's Prayer: The Fifth Petition (Part II)

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.¹ It includes the idea of *perverse*ness and *crookedness*.² Because sin is like this, it does not produce happiness; it produces misery.³ "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 toward which, of 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: he renders himself miserable, because he not only deprives himself of his proper god, which consists in attaining the end of his existence; but he brings himself under obligations to restore to Him who is his Chief end and happiness, that glory of which he was robbed him."⁴ For 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 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 consequence 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. 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" (Psalm 77:3). People who never consider their sin in the light of God's holiness will never understand the psalmist's travail.⁵

II. CONSOLATION (vv. 3,4)

The Psalmist's cry for mercy (v.2) has to do with his sins (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?

Many people (including Christians) equate forgiveness with "apologizing." But this is, as Jay Adams has noted, unscriptural. He adds, "When apologizing, someone says, 'I'm sorry'. What has he done? Literally, all he has done is tell you how he feels. He *has not asked you to do anything*. When someone says, 'I sinned; will you forgive me?' he is asking you to make a promise to bury the matter once and for *all*. Om apologizing, no commitment is made, the matter is not resolved, and the one who was wronged is not required to put the matter to rest. He is probably glad for the fact because in apologizing, the wrongdoer has not even admitted his wrong. He has simply said he feels sorry about what happened. The principal difference between the two is simply this: God requires a commitment on the part of both parties that brings the matter to a satisfactory end. The world requires no such thing."⁶ 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 atonement (II 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.⁷

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 sin 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 speaks of waiting on God (Psalm 25:3,5,21; 27:14;37:7,9,34; 39:7; 40:1; 52:9; 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 overwhelmed⁸ with despair.”

IV. **EXHORTATION (vv. 7, 8)**

The Psalmist now bids the reader to “hope in the Lord.” Hope, in the Bible, is never simply 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 His (the “with” here is used to express a quality as a disposition or nature) is lovingkindness and plenteous redemption. This included not only the forgiveness of sins, which the Psalmist cries out for, but also the breaking of the power of sin and setting the captive free from his 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.”⁹

ENDNOTES

¹¹ 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)

² 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.”

³ The Hebrew word HARA 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).

⁴ Herman Witsius, *The Apostles’ Creed* II (rpt. P&R, 1993), p.388.

⁵ 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.59

⁶ J. Adams, *From Forgiven to Forgiving: Learning to Forgive One Another God’s Way* (rpt. Calvary 2003), p.59.

⁷ cf. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* II, eds. R.L. Harris, G.L. Archer, Jr., B.K. Waltke (Moody, 1980), p. 626.

⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary ON the Book of Psalms* V (rpt. Eerdmans, 1945), p. 133.

⁹ *The Mediator* (Westminster, 1957), p. 451.