

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	40		Gary L.W. Johnson
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The Forgiveness of Sins

21. Lord's Day

Question 56. What believest thou concerning "the forgiveness of sins"?

Answer: That God, for the sake of Christ's satisfaction, will no more remember my sins, neither my corrupt nature, against which I have to struggle all my life long; (a) but will graciously impute to me the righteousness of Christ, (b) that I may never be condemned before the tribunal of God. (c)

(a) 1 John 2:2 And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. 1 John 1:7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. 2 Cor. 5:19 To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. 2 Cor. 5:21 For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. (b) Jer. 31:34 And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. Ps. 103:3 Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases; Ps. 103:4 Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies; Ps. 103:10 He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. Ps. 103:12 As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our sins.

Psalm 130 was one of Luther's favorite Psalms. He liked it so much that he set it to music. 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."¹ 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.² 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!"³ 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 far 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.”⁴ Psalm 130 also accents the theme of forgiveness (v. 4), but in a very sober fashion. A Welsh preacher once rendered this verse as follows, “There is forgiveness with Thee—enough to frighten us!”⁵

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.⁶ It includes the idea of *perverseness* and *crookedness*.⁷ Because sin is like this it produces, not happiness, but misery.⁸ “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.”⁹ 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 the good news—that sins can be forgiven.

I. OUT OF THE DEPTHS

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.”¹⁰ 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.”¹¹

II. THE CRY OUT OF THE DEPTHS

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. He is unrighteous, and if God judges him according to strict justice, he is undone.¹² 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.

III. AMAZING GRACE: DE PROFUNDIS

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 stedfast 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."¹³ Forgiveness is always connected to redemption. "Without the shedding of blood there is not forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). This biblical truth has perhaps been best captured by Augustus Toplady in his great hymn, "Rock of Ages," when he penned these words: "*Not the labors of my hands can fulfill Thy law's demands; Could my zeal no respite know, Could my tears forever flow, All for sin could not atone; Thou must save and Thou alone.*"

CONCLUSION: Abraham Kuyper once wrote, "The cross of Christ has nothing which appeals to the eye but everything which appeals to the heart. There is no appearance; everything is sheer essence. Nothing could be more revolting to the eye than the spectacle of the cross; nothing more laden with significance to the soul than the meaning of it. The cross is offensive to man; to God it is precious."¹⁴

David F. Wells about how the holiness of God is so essential to our understanding of the Gospel. "Without the 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 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 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."¹⁵

ENDNOTES

- ¹ 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 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.
- ² We confess before God, said Luther "*GRATIA EST, NON MERITUM, REMISSIO NON SATISFACTIO*" (it is of grace, not our merit, that we have forgiveness).
- ³ *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).
- ⁴ 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." Norman Shepherd and his followers in the Federal Vision contend that justification [which has at its center the forgiveness of our sins] can be lost. This is a position that has more in common with Arminianism than with any element in the history of Reformed theology.
- ⁵ As cited by G. Campbell-Morgan, *Notes on the Psalms* (Revell, 1957), p. 260.
- ⁶ 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).
- ⁷ *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."
- ⁸ The Hebrew word *HATA* proper 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; 44:3; Isaiah 1:4; 65:20).
- ⁹ Herman Witsius, *The Apostles' Creed* II (rpt. P&R, 1993), p. 388.
- ¹⁰ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150: A Commentary* (IVP, 1975), p. 446.
- ¹¹ Owen, op. cit., p. 331.
- ¹² 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."
- ¹³ *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.
- ¹⁴ A. Kuyper, *The Death and Resurrection of Christ* (rpt. Zondervan, 1960), p. 43.
- ¹⁵ D.F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Eerdmans, 1994), p. 144.