

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

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THE GREATEST BLESSING (Part II)

Campegius Vitringa (1659-1722) was a very accomplished Dutch theologian who deserves to be better known than he is. He wrote a remarkable book on The Spiritual Life, which is in a class by itself. He noted that: "Natural life is subject to various sicknesses, infirmities, indispositions, and a wide variety of diseases whose symptoms disturb or often even destroy it. Some people seem to enjoy a vigor that wards off sickness. But there are many types of disease (the precise knowledge of which can escape even the physicians), and no one enjoys the health and strength to ward off every illness and bodily weakness. The same principle operates in the spiritual life. Just as in God's providence no one's physical life is constantly robust, so our life as believers is exposed to a variety of internal sicknesses, infirmities, and diseases. When believers are healthy, they are strong, vigorous, full of hope and faith. They glory in divine grace and are able to defy Satan and all his infernal temptations. But when they feel cast down, anxious, lacking consolation, and are full of fear, then they complain bitterly and moan like the turtledove. As physical diseases and complaints afflict the lives of the most robust and healthy people, likewise no attainments in the spiritual life ever free us from the experience of spiritual diseases and afflictions. There is no man in Christ (no matter how mature, how masculine the strength he has achieved through long exercise, or how developed his spiritual sensibilities) who dare boast that his condition is so strong that he is beyond falling into any illness. I assert this as a foundational principle for my views on the spiritual life. And I expect that everyone who is a participant in this spiritual life has learned it by experience. But if there is someone who has not yet understood it experientially, he can be convinced by the Word of God, the true looking glass of the spiritual life, where the different conditions of the spiritual life are painted in their true colors. I have in mind particularly the psalms of David and the odes of the saints in the Psalter, which were bequeathed to the church for this purpose: so that both the church as a whole as well as each of its members might observe all the variations of their own condition in these complaints, that they might compare their own affections and weaknesses with the sentiments and ailments of the saints of ancient times, and that they might obtain for themselves the remedies for the healing of the same spiritual infirmities. In this book of the Bible you will see believers explain at length the inequalities and variations of their spiritual states. In Psalm 30:7-8, for example, the holy man, when he found himself confirmed in the state of grace, had said about his prosperity, *I will never be moved* (Ps. 30:6); but then, *when God hid His face, I was troubled* (Ps. 30:7). Psalm 23:3-4 shows the mind of a holy person liberally supplied with gracious influences and divine consolations. He explains his confidence about his condition and status with certainty, even though he may walk through darkness and the shadow of death. On the contrary, in Psalm 42:7 we see a soul thirsty for divine grace, devoid of consolation, and crying out under the heavy trials to which it is exposed: *All the waves and breakers of God have gone over this person*. Psalm 88:15-16 presents us with a touching picture of a saint who describes himself as afflicted, laboring under evils, fainting in spirit, and near to death unless the powerful help of divine grace intervenes. This is the same experience as Psalm 119:25, *My soul clings to the dust; enliven me according to Your word*, and as Psalm 138:7, *When I walk in the midst of anguish and troubles, You make me alive* – a portrait of a soul, sick and exposed to death,

needing a strong influence to give it life and health. In Psalm 73:2, a godly person is set forth who was exposed to a violent temptation that he only overcame with difficulty. He said he was reduced to a state where his *feet almost slipped and his steps nearly strayed*. He teaches us how he had been sustained and fortified. Finally, note Psalm 147:3, which, in a way similar to Psalm 103:3, says that God *heals the broken in heart and binds up their griefs.*¹

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. **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.²
- 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.³
 - 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, 9, 34; 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.”⁴
- 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 lovingkindness 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.”⁵ 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).”⁶

ENDNOTES

¹ Campegius Vitringa, *The Spiritual Life*, trans ed. Charles K. Telfer (Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), p. 77.

² 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.

³ cf. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* II, ed. R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, Jr., B. K. Waltke (Moody, 1980), p. 626.

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary On the Book of Psalms* V (rpt. Eerdmans, 1945), p. 133.

⁵ E. Brunner, *The Mediator* (Westminster, 1957), p. 451.

⁶ John Piper, *A Godward Life: Savoring the Supremacy of God In All of Life* (Multnomah, 1999), p. 105.