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DE PROFUNDIS
FIRST WORDS OF THE LATIN OF PSALM 130

A few years ago at the American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature conference, an annual gathering that tends to be more politically correct than religious or biblical, there was a session entitled "Biblical Authority and Homosexuality." All five of the speakers on the panel (as well as the moderator) were predictably pro-homosexual. No defender of the traditional biblical perspective on homosexuality had been asked to participate.[1] So much for diversity! The audience was told that scriptural prohibitions against homosexuality were purely cultural. "Scripture," one of the panelists stated, "contains no timeless, normative, moral truths." After some meandering discussion of moral relativism, a member of the audience stood up. "Wait a minute," he told the panelists. "I'm rather confused. I'm a pastor, and people constantly come to me, asking if something they have done is wrong and if they need forgiveness. For example, isn't it always wrong to abuse a child?" A female panelist issued this shocking response: "What counts as abuse differs from society to society; so we can't really use the word *abuse* without tying it to a historical context." To the relativist, what we think of as philosophical truth isn't the only brand of truth that is relative and culture-bound. Moral truth also varies from place to place – and so it too is relative. In other words, there are no all-encompassing, objective moral laws to which we must all submit. According to moral relativism, "morality arises when a group of people reach an implicit agreement or come to a tacit understanding about their relations to one another."[2] Morality is relative to our culture or to the particular chunk of history we occupy, and two people can believe contradictory ethical views and both still be correct. One culture's taboos and customs are as true as another's.[3]

Regrettably, many professing Christians have lapsed into this mindset. Noted sociologist James Davison Hunter has tracked this decline amongst Evangelicals. His findings are alarming. "All of this merely illustrates that the cultural tendency observable within the coming generation is unique, but occurs in concert with developments active in the larger Evangelical world. The process is one in which *sin* is being redefined. What had once been morally intolerable is now quite acceptable; what had previously been a cause for exclusion from Christian fellowship does not even call attention to itself. Clearly some norms have not changed. Evangelicals still adhere to prohibitions against premarital, extramarital, and homosexual relations. But even here, the attitude toward those prohibitions has noticeably softened. In brief, the symbolic boundaries which previously defined moral propriety for conservative Protestantism have lost a measure of clarity. Many of the distinctions separating Christian conduct from *worldly conduct* have been challenged if not altogether undermined. Even the words *worldly* and *worldliness* have, within a generation, lost most of their traditional meaning. When asked *what does it mean for a Christian to be different from the* ***world***, most did not invoke traditional understandings at all."[4] The Biblical understanding of sin stands in sharp contrast to the popular definition as espoused by many popular preachers, i.e., Joel Osteen, who avoids subjects like sin altogether.[5]

We are told in 1 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 contemn 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] 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 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. In the words of R. Kent Hughes, "the first and fundamental qualification for coming to Jesus: an awareness of one's condition."[10]

I. ***SUPPLICATION (verses 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.[11] "*From the depths I called You.* Repeatedly in Psalms, *the depths* are an epithet for the depths of the sea, which in turn is an image of the realm of death. Generations of readers, Christian and Jewish, have responded to the archetypal starkness of this phrase: the speaker, from the darkness of profound despair, on the verge of death, calls out to God. This psalm, of course, is a penitential psalm, focusing not on the evil of Israel's enemies, as does Psalm 129, but on the wrongs Israel has done. It resembles Psalm 129 in beginning with a first-person singular that turns into the expression of a collective plea, as the last two verses make clear."[12]

II. ***CONSOLATION (verses 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. Christopher Ash points out that, "The vocatives *O Lord* and *O Lord* echo Psalm 130:1. The common verb *mark* (*shamar*) means to keep or to watch over (the same root as *watchmen* in 130:6). The verb is used in Genesis 37:11 of remembering something (lit., *His father kept the word/saying)* and is distinct from simply seeing something (e.g., *He sees many things, but does not observe [lit., keep] them,* Isa. 42:20). Perhaps the closest parallel to the use of the verb in Psalm 130:3 is Job 14:16 (lit., *You will not keep/guard/watch over my sin*). For God to **mark** our sins would mean that he remembers them, keeps note of them, guards and watches over them, preserves them, rather than, for example, throwing them into the sea (Mic. 7:19). The question **Who could stand?** (cf. our idiom *in good standing*) reminds us that all we may by nature hope for is *the sinking down of the guilty from anguish and the fearful expectation of the things which are coming upon* us (cf. Gen. 6:5; 8:21; Ezra 9:15; Pss. 24:3; 79:8; 90:8; 143:2; Nah. 1:6; Mal. 3:2). As John Calvin puts it, *All the children of Adam . . . from the first to the last, are lost and condemned, should God require them to render up an account of their life."*[13]

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 (2Chronicles 30:18; Deuteronomy 21:9; 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.[14]

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.

Note: The expression "there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared) is important, as the old Puritan Sir Richard Baxter comments, "But this is not a mistaking in David to say, There is mercy with God, that he may be feared; all as one to say, There is severity with him, that he may be loved, for if we cannot love one for being severe, how should we fear him for being merciful? Should it not, therefore, have been rather said, There is justice with thee, that thou mayest be feared, seeing it is justice that strikes a terror and keeps in awe; mercy breeds a boldness, and boldness cannot stand with fear, and therefore not fear with mercy But is there not, I may say, an active fear not to offend God as well as a passive fear for having offended him? And with God's mercy may well stand the active fear, though not so well, perhaps, the passive fear which is incident properly to his justice. There is a common error in the world, to think we may be the bolder to sin because God is merciful; but, O my soul, take heed of this error, for God's mercy is to no such purpose; it is to make us bold, but to make us fear: the greater his mercy is, the greater ought our fear to be, for there is mercy with him that he may be feared."[15]

III. ***EXPECTATION (verses 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; 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."[16]

IV. ***EXHORTATION (verses 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, for which the Psalmist cried out, 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."[17]

ENDNOTES

[1] See Paul Mankiowski, "What I Saw as the American Academy of Religion," *First Things* (March, 1992), p. 36-41.
[2] Gilbert Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended," Jack Meiland and Michael Krausz, eds; *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral* (Notre Dame: University Press, 1982), 189.
[3] This section is taken from Paul Copan, "*True For You But Not For Me:"Deflating the Slogans that Leave Christians Speechless* (Bethany House, 1998), p. 43.
[4] J. D. Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 62.
[5] This change among Evangelicals on homosexuality, like mega church pastor Andy Stanley has been recently documented by Megan Basham in her book *Shepherds For Sale: How Evangelical Leaders Traded the Truth For a Leftist Agenda* (Harper Collins, 2024), pp. 203-209.
[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'* 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☹; 44:32; Isaiah 1:4; 65:20)."
[9] Herman Witsius, *The Apostles' Creed* II (rpt. P&R, 1993), p. 388.
[10] R. K. Hughes, *Are Evangelicals Born Again? The Character Traits of Faith* (Crossway, 1995), p. 112.
[11] This was the complaint Calvin made to the Roman Catholic Cardinal Jacopo Sadoleto: "Hence, I observe, Sadoleto, 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: Sadoleto's Letter to the Genevans and Calvin's Reply,* (J. C. Olin, ed. (Baker, 1966), p. 78.
[12] Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: The Writings III, A translation with Commentary* (Norton, 2019), p. 302.
[13] Christopher Ash, *The Psalms: A Christ-Centered Commentary* IV (Crossway, 2024), p. 435.
[14] cf. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* II, R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, Jr., B. K. Waltke, eds. (Moody, 1980), p. 626.
[15] As cited in C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David: An Expository and Devotional Commentary On the Psalms* VII (rpt. Baker 1978), p. 80.
[16] John Calvin, *Commentary On the Book of Psalms* V (rpt. Eerdmans, 1945), p. 133.
[17] *The Mediator* (Westminster, 1957), p. 451.