

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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

Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	137		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Jeremiah 31:34; Hebrews 8:12, 10:17		
Date:	October 5, 2025 (a.m.)		

FORGIVENESS OF 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 forever. 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 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 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. Jeremiah 31:34 is cited twice in the Letter to The Hebrews (8:12 and 10:17). The

context has to do with God in establishing a *better* covenant through Christ. Hebrews 9 is the link between the two chapters.

I. ***THE OLD TESTAMENT CEREMONIES.***

NOTE: (1) The Law was given for two primary purposes:

- (a) To convict man of his sin; to show man his utter failure in pleasing a Holy God (Rom. 2:26; 3:19-20; 7:7-13);
- (b) To serve as tutor to lead to Christ; since under the law man is shown his hopeless condition, the law therefore serves as an instrument of the Holy Spirit in leading men to Christ (Gal. 3:24).

(2) The Tabernacle of Israel was a large object lesson of the person and work of Christ;

(3) Its importance is seen in that 50 chapters are devoted to it, while only two are devoted to creation.

A. ***The Sanctuary (Hebrews 9:1-5).*** Our author has in mind the wilderness tabernacle (cf. Ex. 25-31, 35-40) and not the Jerusalem Temple (with which indeed he may have had no first-hand acquaintance).¹⁰ He mentions the contents of the tabernacle, but states that he is not at liberty to go into detail presently because his emphasis is still on priesthood. Hughes observes the significance of the alignment of the brazen altar of sacrifice, the golden altar of incense, and the mercy seat, “though each was located in a different division of the tabernacle or its precincts, namely, in the courtyard, the holy place, and the holy of holies respectively, was undoubtedly an arrangement of the greatest significance. The straight line, which connected these three with each other, indicated clearly the line of propitiation and atonement by God. Accordingly, on the Day of Atonement the High Priest entered into the holy of holies bearing with him the blood of the spotless victim vicariously slain on the altar of sacrifice and also the incense from the altar of incense which, when sprinkled on the live coals, generated a sweet smelling cloud symbolical, as we have mentioned, of the prayer of the people as the atoning blood was applied to the mercy seat.”¹¹

B. ***The Services (Hebrews 9:6-10).*** The greatest day of the Jewish year was Yom Kippur (lit. the day of covering, or propitiation), which points onward to Calvary, the true Yom Kippur (cf. Jn. 19:30; Zach. 3:9).

1. ***The propitiation***, cf. Lev. 16:1-16, 20-22. We will do well to give considerable thought to this great Biblical word. “To propitiate,” says John Murray, “means to *placate, pacify, appease, conciliate*. And it is this idea that is applied to the atonement accomplished by Christ. Propitiation presupposes the wrath and displeasure of God, and the purpose of propitiation is the removal of this displeasure. Very simply stated the doctrine of propitiation means that Christ propitiated the wrath of God and rendered God propitious to his people.” Murray goes on to properly define the implications involved. (1) To love and to be propitious are not convertible terms. It is false to suppose that the doctrine of propitiation regards propitiation as that which causes or constrains the divine love. (2) Propitiation is not turning of the wrath of God into love. . . . It is one thing to say that the wrathful God is made loving. That would be entirely false. It is another thing to say the wrathful God is loving. That is profoundly true. But it is also true that the wrath by which he is wrathful is propitiated through the cross. This propitiation is the fruit of the divine love. (3) Propitiation does not detract from the love and mercy of God; it rather enhances the marvel of his love. For it shows the cost that redemptive love entails.¹²

2. ***The pardon***, cf. Lev. 16:5-10, 20-22. Aaron was to take two goats; one was to be slain as a sin offering for the people; and the second goat, called the scape-goat (Heb. *Azazel*),

Aaron was to lay his hands on and confess the sins of the people, and the *azaazel* was to be released into the wilderness, which signified the removal of their sins far away, both from the people, and out of God's sight, or from the place of His presence with Israel. A grand expositor many years ago wrote, "Nor must we fail to take in the blessed truth so vividly symbolized in the second part of the ceremonial (the scape-goat). When the blood of the sin offering had been sprinkled in the Holiest, the sins of Israel were then, by the other goat of the sin offering borne away. Israel stood there still a sinful people; but their sin, not expiated by the blood, was before God as if it were not. So does the Holy Victim in the Antitype, who first by His death expiated sin, then as the Living One bear away all the believers' sins from the presence of the Holy One into a land of forgetfulness."¹⁵

3. *The participation*, cf. Lev. 16:20-34; 23:26-32. It is stated that on that day, Israel was to be clean from all their sins before the Lord – and they shall have rest for their affected souls.

CONCLUSION: Charles Simeon (1759-1836) was a noted Evangelical Anglican preacher who J. I. Packer highly recommended. He wrote: "The annual repetition of the same sacrifices under the old covenant was intended to intimate to the people that their pardon was not final: had their guilt been perfectly removed by them, the Apostle observes very justly, that *they would then have ceased to be offered; because the worshipper would have had no more conscience of sins:* but, inasmuch as the sacrifices were annually renewed, they were, in fact, no more than *a remembrance of sins made every year.* But under the new covenant God engages to *remember our sins and iniquities no more:* they are not only *forgiven* by him, but *forgotten*; not only *cancelled*, but *blotted out as a morning cloud*; not only *removed from before his face*, but *cast behind his back into the depths of the sea.* His former people he put away, *though he was an husband unto them:* but to us his *gifts and callings are without repentance.* This is particularly marked by the prophet, in the verses following our text; and by an inspired Apostle, in his comment on the very words we are considering. He is shewing the superiority of Christ's priesthood to that appointed under the law; and he confirms his position from this circumstance; that the sacrifices offered by the Levitical priests could never take away sin, and therefore were continually repeated; whereas Christ's sacrifice, *once offered*, would *forever* take away sin, and *perfect for ever all of them that are sanctified.*"¹⁴ 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."¹⁵ 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."¹⁶

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 forever. 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 forever. He has cast it behind his back and will no 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 F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle To The Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1964), p. 182.

¹¹ P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1976), p. 313.

¹² John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Eerdmans, 1955).

¹³ S. H. Kellogg, *The Expositor's Bible*, ed. W. R. Nicoll (Scribner & Sons, 1892), vol. 1, p. 306.

¹⁴ Charles Simeon, *Expository Outlines On The Whole Bible* I (rpt. Zondervan, 1952), p. 241.

¹⁵ A. Kuyper, *The Death and Resurrection of Christ* (rpt. Zondervan, 1960), p. 43.

¹⁶ D. F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Eerdmans, 1994), p. 144.