

## THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

The word “forgiveness” commonly used in the New Testament is from the Greek verb “aphiemi,” made up of “apo,” from, and “heimi,” to send. Hence, “to send away,” which is the literal meaning of the word “remit.” The noun “aphesis,” used in relation to “sins,” means “a release, the letting them go as if they had never been committed, thus, forgiveness, a remission of their penalty.” In Leviticus 16:10,21, American Standard Version, the words “send him away,” used of the scapegoat upon which was symbolically placed the sins of the people, let go in the wilderness, never to be seen again by Israel, express this idea. In Luke 4:18 one reads of “deliverance...(or)...release to the captives.” The “deliverance” or “release” is from “aphesis,” and the underlying thought is that of releasing prisoners. “Aphesis” is translated “remission” in Acts 10:43 and “forgiveness” in 26:18. Hence, “remission of sins” equals “forgiveness of sins.” This is our subject: “The forgiveness of sins.”

In forgiving sins, it is with God that we have to do. “Who can forgive sins but God only?” (Mark 2:7). Sins speak of human failure, of man’s complete inability to measure up, not to others in the human race, but to the divinely appointed standard, that goal conformable to and fixed by God Himself. “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). In forgiving sins, God always adheres to an inflexible standard, and dispenses mercy without doing violence to that standard. He cannot just arbitrarily forgive sins on any grounds, or by any means. “He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins” (I John 1:9). He is true to Himself, and to the promises that He has made, and always acts accordingly.

The principle on which God forgives sins is, “apart from shedding of blood is no remission” (Hebrews 9:22, A.S.V.). God has had only one plan for forgiving sins, and it has always depended on Christ’s death, that “one sacrifice for sins for ever” (10:12). Since blood is essential to life (Leviticus 17:11), the “shedding of blood” indicates that death takes place. Christ’s death was unique in that He voluntarily gave up His life under the judgement of God in expiation of sin. “All have sinned” and “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 3:23; 6:23). Death, the penalty of sin, is divinely imposed and just. In remitting sins’ penalty, God always dispenses mercy on the basis of justice satisfied. Christ’s death, the death of one “without blemish and without spot...Who did no sin” (I Peter 1:18,19; 2:22) on behalf of “the unjust” (3:18), completely satisfied God’s righteous demands. He can and does therefore receive the one who does no more than believe on Jesus Christ because his sin was borne by a Substitute, and His indebtedness was paid by Another. Therefore, in forgiving sins, God is not only “just,” but also “the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus” (Romans 3:26).

The message designed of God to save sinners from the guilt and penalty of sin, namely the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is the same in both Testaments. And, the means by which the “remission of sins” obtains, namely by faith in Jesus Christ, is also the same in either period. The cross of Christ is the focus. Those living before the cross looked forward in faith to what would be accomplished thereon, and those living after it look backward in faith to what has been accomplished thereon.

If Christ’s actual death satisfied the just demands of God, then how could God declare righteous one who lived before the cross? How could He save anyone before justice was satisfied? The Old Testament was a typical system. Under it, animals meeting certain qualifications, as “without blemish” (Exodus 12:5), were appointed by God and offered by the people. Those sacrifices could not “take away sins” (Hebrews 10:4). They did identify the guilty with the innocent victim. They showed that any approach to God was impossible apart from their death by shedding blood. But, their inability to “take away sins,” necessitating repetition, guaranteed that in time One would come, meeting certain qualifications, who would actually die “once for all” (10:10,12,14), fulfilling the types. When one understood, and accepted the merit of the typical sacrifices, knowing that they necessitated that One accomplish what they could not, his faith was reckoned for righteousness.

The cross, however, is an eternal fact in the reckoning of God. Thus, Christ, who in time was identified by the harbinger of the Messiah as “the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), nonetheless has stood as “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8).

The absolute certainty of Christ’s death in time enabled God before the cross, in the divine anticipation of the actual expiation to be wrought thereby, to declare righteous all who accepted God’s saving plan through its “surety,” Jesus Christ (Hebrews 7:22). Therefore, it was said of one before the cross, “faith was reckoned...for righteousness” (Romans 4:9), and of another, “Thy sins are forgiven...Thy faith hath saved thee” (Luke 7:48,50). This salvation is an accomplished fact, not something in process, just as it is in Ephesians 2: 5,8,9, II Timothy 1:9,10, and Titus 3:5. The “forgiveness of sins” obtains in it, and speaks of the quality of the salvation. Let me illustrate this transaction before the cross as follows:

“Party A is the sinner. Party B is God the Father. And, Party C is Jesus Christ. A owes B a debt, and is completely unable to pay any part. C writes to B and states: ‘Put A’s debt on my account. And, at a time yet future, agreeable to both of us, I will pay it.’ B accepts the guarantee of C. The liquidation of the debt does not take place to B until C actually pays it. But the release of A takes place immediately on the transfer of the debt, and thus becomes operative to him.”

From the New Testament we learn several facts about the message of the Old Testament prophets and the means of receiving the “remission of sins.” In Acts 7:52 “the prophets...shewed before of the coming of the Just.” In that coming “the prophets...testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ,” and the message consisted of “the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you” (I Peter 1:10-12). According to I Corinthians 15:3,4 “the gospel” is declared to be, “how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures (that is, the prophetic message of the Old Testament scriptures)...and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.” Those “scriptures,” consisting of the threefold division of “the Law of Moses...the prophets, and ...the psalms,” foretold that “it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day” (Luke 24:44,46). And, “those things, which God before had shewed by the mouth of all his prophets, that Christ should suffer, he hath so fulfilled” (Acts 3:18). The Old Testament contains many things regarding Christ’s second coming that have not been fulfilled. But, “those things” related to His first coming “that Christ should suffer, he hath so fulfilled.” Therefore, on the cross, Christ triumphantly declared, “It is finished” (John 19:30).

Peter affirmed, “To Him (Jesus Christ) give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins.” The prophets lived and died before Christ came. How then did they “witness” to someone whom they had never seen? Keep in mind, the Old Testament was a typical system pointing to Christ. It is described in such words as “a shadow of good things to come” (Hebrews 10:1), “a copy and shadow of the heavenly things” (8:5, A.S.V.), “a figure (or parable) for the time then present” (9:9), “like in pattern to the true” (9:24, A.S.V.), “a figure” (11:19), “ensamples,” or “types” (I Corinthians 10:11), etc. “All the prophets” did bare “witness” to Christ through the shadows, figures, symbols, and types pointing to Him.

I am thus reminded of the great story of the Passover in Exodus 12:1-13, and how it pointed to Christ’s death (I Corinthians 5:7). The “lamb...without blemish” was “slain” (Exodus 12:5,6) corresponding to the truth of I Peter 1:18,19. The blood was then applied (Exodus 12:7), answering to appropriation by faith. And, the blood applied, without anything in addition, constituted a perfect deliverance from the plague of death (12:12,12,23). The blood of Christ is sufficient (Romans 5:9), and all under its shelter know its value, “when I see the blood, I will pass over you” (Exodus 12:13).

I am also reminded of the serpent of brass incident, pointing to Christ’s death, and the salvation of alien sinners (Numbers 21:5-9; John 3:14-18; 12:32,33). In both cases, death threatens as punishment for sin. In both cases, the remedy was provided by God Himself. In both cases, the remedy involved something lifted up in public view. And, in both cases, those who in simple faith looked upon that which was publicly displayed were completely healed. The lifting up of Christ in death is a “must” (3:14) because it is the only remedy for the sin sick soul. Brass was a symbol of divine judgement (Deuteronomy 28:15,23). The serpent speaks of the curse which sin entails (Genesis 3:1, 14-19; Revelation 20:2). Therefore, “the serpent of brass” is a fit picture of the redemptive work of Christ who, in death under the judgement of God, was “made a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13).

Christ said, “Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad” (John 8:56). Isaac was a son of promise, uniquely born (Genesis 17:15-19). And, so was the promised Messiah who would come through that line (Matthew 1:1,16, 18-25). In the record of Genesis 22, Isaac neither actually died, nor was he actually resurrected. The verb tense of Hebrews 11:17 indicates that Isaac was actually dead in the reckoning of Abraham. But, because of the promises made to Abraham concerning his son, he made up his mind that God could and would raise the dead. Abraham’s faith anticipated the death and resurrection of the child of promise. Thus, we read of him, “accounting that God is able to raise up, even from the dead; from whence he did also in a figure receive him back” (11:19, A.S.V.). The word “figure” is translated “parable” in other places. The word means, “to throw alongside.” A parable is simply an illustration thrown alongside a truth in order to explain it. Since Abraham already considered Isaac dead, then the giving back of the offering to the offerer was in parabolic act a resurrection.

The types are endless, and through them “all the prophets” bare witness to Christ, and “whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins” (Acts 10:43). Since the cross we find one sent “that they may receive forgiveness of sins” (Acts 26:16-18). This obtained “by faith...in me,” Christ speaking (26:18), just as in Acts 10:43. The message Paul preached was “none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say “concerning Christ’s death and resurrection (26:22,23), and:

“He that believeth on Him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (John 3:18).

Here, there are two states: One, “condemned,” the other “not condemned.” The line of demarcation is “believeth on him.” The verb believe is synonymous with the noun faith, as John 20:27 shows. The “believeth” is an unmodified verb just as it is in John 3:15,16,36; 6:40,47; Acts 10:43; Romans 1:16, etc. It is efficacious, not because of its fervor, but because of its Object, Jesus Christ. It does not include works, but is contrasted to works in Romans 4:5. The words “is not condemned” shows that such a state can and does obtain in this lifetime. To be “not condemned” is to be justified. Since “he that believeth on him is not condemned,” and one who “is not condemned” is justified, then “through this man...all that believe are justified.” And, “the forgiveness of sins” obtains in this justification (Acts 13:38,39), just as it does in the “saved” of Luke 7:48,50, the “redemption” of Ephesians 1:7, and the “quickened,” or made alive of Colossians 2:13.

The sinner is saved, not because he implores God to withhold from him the blow of judgement that is due him for his sin, but because he believes that that blow has fallen on his Substitute. “He that believeth on him IS not condemned...IS passed from death unto life...HATH everlasting life...and SHALL NOT come into condemnation” (John 3:18; 3:36; 5:24; 6:47). God has done everything necessary to save you from the guilt and penalty of sin. The work is finished. Your part is to receive it “through faith...not of works” (Ephesians 2:8,9).

God is holy, and “a consuming fire.” Do not leave this life without shelter, refuge, shield, or surety. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house” (Acts 16:31). Only ignorance or reprehensible inattention to the right division of the scripture related to salvation will attempt to intrude some form of human merit into that which only God can and has done for you. God has paid the penalty. His mercy is offered on that basis alone. You should, by faith, trusting and resting on Christ, appropriate the offer. “And this is the will of him that sent me,” Christ speaking, “that every one which seeth the Son (in the sense of “the bread of life” presented, verses 35,48,51), and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:40).

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