

Forgiveness

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The Great Salvation

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Foreword.

The Scriptures themselves speak of the "great salvation," which has reached us through the Gospel. We, who have experienced the saving grace of God, know something of its greatness, but it is only as we search the Scriptures and investigate its details that the magnitude of what God has brought to pass begins to dawn upon us.

In these pages the main details are taken up one by one. If all be put together, the great salvation of God is before us; and it is important to remember that each is but one part of a great whole. They are considered separately in order that we may gain a fuller understanding of each part, and thereby more fully understand the whole.

We can no more apprehend the whole Divine plan at one moment than we can see all four sides of a building from one viewpoint. We have to content ourselves with one thing at a time. If this book helps any Christians to a deeper appreciation of the wonders wrought of God through the Gospel, not only will they be spiritually helped but God will be glorified.

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Forgiveness.

When the first stirrings of the Spirit of God took place within us, the effect in almost every case was that we became conscious of our sins and of the guilt that attached to them, and consequently we became seekers after forgiveness. We wanted to be forgiven, and to know it.

The reader has, we trust, the knowledge of forgiveness, yet it may be well if we begin by surveying the teaching of Scripture on this subject, and thus aim at obtaining an orderly understanding of this great, fundamental blessing of the Gospel.

First of all then, let us observe that when sin entered into the world by the transgression of Adam, and the human race consequently lapsed into an utterly fallen and sinful condition, its effects were manifold and went far beyond the incurring of guilt. Yet the first and most obvious effect was that Adam became a guilty and conscience-stricken man. As men multiplied it had to be said that, "all the world" was "guilty before God" (Rom. 3: 19), and this means, since guilt is an intensely individual matter, that every individual composing the world, every one of us, is guilty.

But the Scripture speaks of, "them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth" (Rom. 2: 8). Many such are to be found, who are by no means disposed to acknowledge their guilt, but rather challenge the foundations on which rests the very idea of being guilty before God. They assert on the contrary the innate goodness of all men, who are, so they say, always struggling upwards. Some of these contentious folk go so far as to deny all fixed standards of right and wrong. Good and evil are words of only relative force, since to them "good" is that which is approved by the most enlightened sections of humanity in any given age, and "evil" is that which their mind repudiates. It therefore follows that "right" and "wrong" are values which fluctuate according to the fashions of the age in matters of morality. The human mind is left the whole arbiter of such questions, and consequently the only guilt they know is that which may be incurred before men as the result of flouting the standards erected by the most enlightened and advanced amongst them. The utmost verdict that they can approve of is therefore, **guilty before men.**

The epistle to the Romans, on the other hand, begins with GOD, and we do not have to travel far into its contents before we arrive at the verdict against us of, "**guilty before God.**"

In its opening chapter we read of,

"The Gospel of God"

"The Son of God"

"The power of God"

"The righteousness of God"

"The wrath of God"

"The glory of God"

"The judgment of God"

and God, whose power and righteousness and wrath and glory and judgment are revealed, is "the Creator" (Rom. 1: 25). At once therefore we leave the quagmire of human standards and opinions for the sure rock of divine truth, and we find ourselves standing in the presence of the Creator, who is marked by fixed and unalterable righteousness.

Much may be needed indeed before the conviction of guilt is driven home effectually into the consciousness of the individual sinner. This may not be so difficult a matter with peoples who have lapsed into the barbarism that so frequently accompanies heathenism. Such are in view in Romans 1: 18-32, and they stand without excuse, and consequently their mouths are shut. The mere recital of the enormous evils into which they had fallen, as a result of turning away from the knowledge of God, is sufficient. In their case no reasoning is necessary in order to convict and silence.

But at different times in the world's history, nations, though pagan, have evolved amongst themselves systems of natural culture and civilization. Such were the ancient Greeks, and to these Romans 2: 1-16, is addressed. In their case the dark cesspool of iniquity was partly covered up by fine systems of philosophical thought and ethical teaching. They condemned the poor, unlettered barbarian yet they themselves did the same things in a more refined way. They too are pronounced to be "inexcusable," yet some very pointed reasoning, coupled with sharp home-thrusts of the keen blade of truth, is necessary before the conviction of it can be driven home. In the course of reasoning they are reminded that, "The judgment of God is according to truth;" that the day is coming for the revelation of "the righteous judgment of God;" and that "there is no respect of persons with God."

By the combination of these three facts their escape from the judgment of God is rendered impossible. If His judgment were sometimes according to mere outward appearances, or if it occasionally lapsed from strict righteousness, or deviated because of favouritism or other personal considerations, then there might be some chance of escape. It is however "**according to truth,**" and hence the exact reality of things will be dragged into the light of day. It is "**righteous,**" and hence absolute and inflexible justice will prevail. There is "**no respect of persons,**" hence nothing will turn God from a judgment of absolute righteousness in the light of absolute truth. This must shut the mouth of the most civilized and the most cultured, and convict them too as "guilty before God."

Lastly there were the Jews, a people brought under a culture which was not merely natural but divine. Romans 2: 17 - 3: 20, is addressed to such, and in this passage we have not merely reasoning but the decisive evidence of their own Scriptures. Their indictment is couched in terms culled from their own law, and at the close the weight of this Scriptural evidence is driven home into their consciences by the fact that "what things soever the law saith, **it saith to them who are under the law;**" that is, to the Jews. The sweeping accusations and condemnation of the law was aimed therefore, not at the barbarian nor the Greek, but at the opinionated and self-righteous Jew, that even his mouth might be stopped, and thus all the world become "guilty before God."

Guilt being established, forgiveness becomes an urgent necessity. Hence we find it placed in the very forefront of the instructions given by the risen Lord to His disciples. In Luke 24: 45-48 He told the eleven that "remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations." In Acts 26: 16-18 we have the apostle Paul's account of how in a heavenly vision he heard the voice of the Glorified One, sending him to the Gentiles, "to open their eyes . . . that they may receive forgiveness of sins." How these commissions were carried out the Acts bears witness. To the multitude in Jerusalem, who on the day of Pentecost were pricked in their heart, Peter spoke of "the remission of sins" (Acts 2: 38). Before the council he again testified of "forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5: 31). Again to the Gentile Cornelius and

his friends he proclaimed that "through His name whosoever believeth in Him shall receive remission of sins" (Acts 10: 43). To the mixed crowd in the synagogue at Antioch Paul declared, "Be it known . . . that through this Man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins" (Acts 13: 38).

In each case, of the six quoted above, the same Greek word occurs in the original, though translated both as remission and forgiveness in the Authorized Version. It signifies simply "a sending away" or "a release" and this is just what a guilty sinner needs as regards his sins. Let them be **sent away** or **dismissed** by the One against whom his guilt has been incurred, and what a happy **release** is his! Now this is just what every child of God is entitled to enjoy. "I write unto you little children" said the aged apostle John, "because your sins are forgiven you [are dismissed and sent away] for His name's sake" (1 John 2: 12).

It is in the epistle to the Romans, as we have seen, that the Holy Ghost pronounces the verdict of "guilty before God" against the whole human race. We might naturally have expected therefore that immediately following this we should have found a full unfolding of forgiveness. As a matter of fact however the word for forgiveness only occurs once in the whole epistle, and that when the Apostle cites David's words from Psalm 32. The blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness without works is described by David saying, "Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven" (Rom. 4: 6, 7). This shows us however that the imputation of righteousness — i.e justification — is in this passage practically equivalent to forgiveness.

The words that are so much used in the early chapters of Romans are **righteousness** and **justification**, and they are on the whole words of great fulness. One cannot have one's sins forgiven without being justified, nor **vice versa**; yet in the main the force of forgiveness is negative — we lose our sins: the main force of justification is positive — we gain righteousness.

It has been asserted that everybody is forgiven. Is there any sense in which such a statement is true?

No. It is of course a wonderful fact that, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them" (2 Cor. 5: 19). Hence the Lord's words to the sinful woman, "Neither do I condemn thee" (John 8: 11). God's overtures of mercy, in Christ present upon earth, were however rejected. It is also a wonderful fact that, His overtures being rejected, He has taken advantage of the death and resurrection of Christ to send out a world-wide message of forgiveness, so that in the Gospel today forgiveness is preached to all, and He is presented as a forgiving God. (See Luke 24: 46, 47).

Instead of the rejection of Christ being followed by a declaration of war, and the hurling of Heaven's thunderbolts against a rebellious world, God has, as it were, established a lengthy armistice, during which time an amnesty for all rebels is being proclaimed. If any rebel humbles himself and turns to the Saviour in faith, **he is forgiven**. It is true therefore that **there is forgiveness for everybody**; but in no sense is it true that everybody is forgiven.

In His parable of the two debtors in Luke 7, the Lord did teach however that both were forgiven by the creditor. Was not Simon, the self-righteous Pharisee, as much forgiven therefore as the repentant sinner?

"He frankly forgave them **both**." Both therefore **were** frankly forgiven. The two words "frankly forgave" are the translation of one Greek word — not the usual word for forgiveness but a word

meaning, "to show grace to." The Lord Jesus therefore in His parable represented God as acting in a forgiving spirit and showing grace towards men, no matter what the depth of their sin. This is exactly God's attitude to-day.

Later in the story the Lord did utter the usual word for forgiveness. He said of the woman, "her sins, which are many, are forgiven." To her He said, "Thy sins are forgiven." **Her** sins, then, were definitely dismissed, for she believed in the Saviour and came to Him.

Grace was indeed shown even to proud Simon, and he was not brought instantly and summarily into judgment for his sins. In that sense he was "frankly forgiven," but the Lord never told him that his sins had been definitely dismissed. Only the repentant sinner is thus forgiven, in the ordinary meaning of the word.

Is it a fact that when a sinner repents and believes he receives forgiveness once and for all?

Certainly it is. In the argument on the subject of sacrifice, contained in Hebrews 9: 1 - 10: 18, that fact is one of the main points. In that great passage it is affirmed no less than six times that the sacrifice of Christ was one and offered once. It is also asserted that those who approach God as worshippers on the ground of His sacrifice are purged once, and consequently draw near with perfected consciences (Heb. 10: 1, 2). The perfection of which the first verse speaks is "pertaining to the conscience" (Heb. 9: 9), and founded upon the one perfect cleansing, or purging, that has reached them. We stand before God in an eternal forgiveness.

To this it is objected by some, that if a believer is taught that at his conversion he obtained complete forgiveness, it is sure to provoke him to carelessness and license. Might it not be better to say that all is forgiven up to the point of conversion?

No one would object in this way but those who deny, or at least overlook, the fact that we are not converted without being born again and thereby becoming possessed of a nature that hates evil. Once give this fact its due weight and the whole case wears a different aspect. Further, not only are we born again and forgiven but we receive the Holy Spirit of God to dwell in us, and we come under the teaching of grace, of which Titus 2: 11-14, speaks.

We must remember that though forgiveness is ministered to us when we believe, yet it was procured for us by the sacrifice of Christ; and all our sins not only those up to the point of conversion — were future, when He died and rose again.

We must remember also that God, as Father, does deal with us, His children, as and when we sin. Upon confession we are forgiven and cleansed, for "we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 1: 9 - 2: 1). But this is the Father's forgiveness, restoring us to communion, and not the eternal forgiveness, which we receive at the outset from Him as Judge of all.

What then is meant by, "the remission of sins that are past," which we read of in Romans 3: 25?

All depends upon what is the fixed point, in relation to which the sins are past. If verse 26 be also read, it will be apparent that the contrast is between what God did as to sins in the past time and what

He does "at this time;" the great event dividing the two times being the first advent of Christ. It is evident therefore that in speaking of "sins that are past" the apostle Paul referred to the sins of the believers who lived in the past dispensation. His words had no reference to certain sins of a believer being past, if viewed from the standpoint of his conversion.

The sins of these pre-Christian believers were remitted by God. "Remission" here is not the ordinary word for forgiveness, but one which means, "a passing by." The meaning of the passage is, that when the propitiatory work of Christ became an accomplished fact, it at once showed forth that God had been righteous in passing by the sins of Old Testament believers, just as it also vindicates His righteousness in this Gospel age in justifying the believer in Jesus.