

Forgiven . . . Forgotten

Father Abraham – Part III

Romans 4:7-8

Introduction

Throughout the history of humanity, a thousand different ways have been invented to deal with sin and guilt. One merely has to pick up a history book and begin reading to see this. If it is a history book that is more concerned with retelling true history than with denigrating European civilization, then you discover a remarkable effort by man to pay the penalty for his sins.

Indian tribes in America, had ancient practices of animal and human sacrifice. The Aztecs, who, in recent years, have been touted as an all-wise, spirit-saturated people, literally sacrificed thousands of human beings every single year, in accordance with their complex ritual calendar. The history of Chinese and Celtic cultures also includes the religious practices of child sacrifice.

Ancient Greece engaged in one form of child sacrifice called, “foundation sacrifices”. In this, the children were buried alive in the foundations of temples and other buildings to ensure the gods were satisfied and the buildings would remain standing over time.

If you go to India, you will see a highly developed system of animal sacrifice. You will also discover a history of India’s royalty sacrificing human beings as substitutes for their own imperfections and mortality.

The Bible records the practice of child sacrifice, as well as God’s promise of the death penalty for any of His people engaging in such a practice. In spite of that warning, several of Israel’s kings practiced it. Among the biblical examples are: King Ahaz, who,

in II Kings, chapter 16, was condemned for burning his son alive; the rebellious, pagan Israelites, who were condemned by the prophet Jeremiah for burning their sons and daughters (Jeremiah 7:31, 19:3-6, 32:35).ⁱ

In the Middle East, the practice of offering children to the god Molech was a cruel and gruesome practice. Molech was represented by a bronze statue on top of a low furnace. It had a human form and an ox’s head. It was hollow on the inside and was heated by the fire below, until it became terribly hot. The infant or the child would be put into the hollow middle of this statue and burned to death, while drums drowned out their screams.ⁱⁱ

As recently as through the last century, children have been thrown into rivers, such as the Nile River, in order to appease the gods.

Throughout the history of man, sacrifices have been offered to gods for sunshine, rain, harvest, victory in war, a barren womb, diseases, prosperity, and, most often, the appeasement of the angry gods over sin.

Making satisfaction before the gods is a fulfillment of what Paul wrote of in Romans, chapter 2. He said that unbelievers act on an intuitive understanding of the Law of God. Even without having a copy of the Bible, people around the world intuitively know that they have sinned against some sort of god and that they need to create a way to satisfy that god.

The Greek Orthodox church and the Roman Catholic church teaches a form of appeasement called, “the doctrine of purgatory”. Purgatory comes

from the Latin verb that means, “to cleanse”. The word never appears in the Bible, but appears once in the fictitious Apocryphal book called, II Maccabees.

These churches basically teach millions of followers that purgatory is a place where imperfect people go in order to make amends for their sins. They teach that a person cannot go directly to heaven unless they are perfect, and since no one is perfect, everyone, for the most part, spends some time in the tormenting fires of purgatory. They might stay there a few hours or a few thousand years, depending on how much sin must be burned away in the cleansing, purifying fire. The only hope of having their time in purgatory shortened is through the prayers of priests, who are still living, and through masses provided by relatives or friends on behalf of the deceased.

Every practicing Roman Catholic was offered an incredible opportunity during the year 2000. The Pope declared that year a Jubilee year. He offered that several cathedrals around Europe would be special sites. Any faithful churchgoer who participated in the mass at one of these places was given a guarantee that they would never spend any time in purgatory.

The doctrine of purgatory was reaffirmed at the Council of Trent in 1545. It was rejected by the leaders of the Reformation, however. They went directly to the New Testament epistles and taught, from the scriptures, that people are free from the penalty of sin through faith in Jesus Christ and they go straight to heaven upon their death. There is no intermediate place of tormenting purification.

The apostle Paul said, in II Corinthians, chapter 5, verse 8b,

. . . to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.

The point remains that millions of people around the world, in all sorts of religions, are basically attempting to appease their god, make atonement for their sin, and to somehow, earn their way to heaven. It is as if, in some way, God could be paid off by a few prayers and a few coins and any other puny effort on our part!

Can you imagine, after a church service, pulling out of your parking space, racing through the parking lot, attempting to get to the restaurants before the Presbyterians do, and accidentally smashing into the side of someone’s parked car? Or even worse, smashing into someone’s pick-up truck? Particularly a light blue, Chevy pick-up truck, that has just been

washed?! And, you do this as I just happen to be walking out to get in and drive away.

What if you got out and said, “Stephen, I’m so sorry for doing that! It’s all my fault. Those Presbyterians made me do it. I’ll give you everything I’ve got on me. Well, all I have is one dollar. Here, take it. It’s all I’ve got.”?

Would I be satisfied? A dollar is not going to take care of it. A life of servitude, maybe, but not a dollar.

Imagine breaking the commandment of God, while He is standing there watching, and then saying, “God, I’m sorry about that. Look, I’ll burn a candle for You. I’ll give You some money. I promise I’ll go to church faithfully.”

Do you realize that, over the course of a lifetime, the average person will spend three years in meetings, nineteen years sleeping, six years eating, and five years waiting in line or in traffic? If that same person never missed a Sunday morning worship service in their entire life, they would have spent five and a half months in church.

That is right. Five years waiting in line and five months in church. Is God impressed?! If you never miss a church service, you will still spend eighteen more years sleeping!

Justification By Faith Alone – In the Life of a Sinner!

The question remains, “How do you satisfy God regarding sin? Is it through sacrifices and self-abasement? Is it through penances and spending time in purgatory?”

What does the Bible say brings justification to man and satisfaction to God?! That is the question that Paul has begun to answer.

In Romans, chapter 3, he described the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Now, in Romans, chapter 4, he illustrates the doctrine of justification by faith alone. In Romans, chapter 3, it is proposition; in Romans, chapter 4, it is personality. In other words, Paul will show what justification by faith alone looks like in the life of a sinner!

David – Illustration of undeserved forgiveness

In our last study, we looked at the history of King David’s sinful life. David lived a life of outward obedience to the laws of God, but a hidden life that included coveting his neighbor’s wife, adultery,

deception, murder, lying, and hypocrisy. And, he covered it all up!

Paul will use David, in Romans, chapter 4, as an illustration of undeserved, unmerited grace and forgiveness, because David's case was hopeless. David did not deserve to be forgiven by God.

Paul quotes from Psalm, chapter 32, which is a Psalm that David penned confessing to his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Uriah. In verses 7 and 8, Paul quotes David's opening lines of that poem that shout with a great shout of joy. Let us look at those verses.

Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.

Three key words – describing a sinner's justification and God's satisfaction

There are three key words, used in these two verses, to describe the depths of our justification and God's satisfaction. I recommend that you underline them. They are:

- “forgiven,” in the middle of verse 7,
- “covered,” at the end of verse 7, and
- “account,” at the end of verse 8.

Forgiven

1. The first word is, “forgiven”. David says, as quoted in the first part of verse 7,

Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven . . .

The word, “forgiven,” is from the Greek verb, “aphiemi,” which means, “to send away,” or “to take away”.

This was John the Baptist's message when he introduced Jesus Christ as, according to John, chapter 1, verse 29b,

. . . the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

Jesus bears our sin away.

David was, no doubt, thinking of the practices of the Old Testament atonement for sin. Once a year, the high priest, according to Leviticus, chapter 16, would bring two male goats before the altar. One would be put to death and his blood shed. Then, as Moses writes in Leviticus, chapter 16, verses 20

through 22, the high priest would place his hands on the other live goat and,

. . . confess over it all the iniquities of the sons of Israel, and all their transgressions in regard to all their sins; and he shall lay them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness . . .

It was William Tyndale who invented the word “scapegoat” for this goat which bore the sin of the people. He put the word in his sixteenth century translation of the Old Testament in Leviticus, chapter 16.

To this day, when we talk about a “scapegoat,” we are talking about someone who took the blame for something that someone else did. We would say, “He was the scapegoat for that business failure,” or “She was the scapegoat for that crime.”

To be the “scapegoat” means that the person was innocent, but took the penalty for what they were accused of.

Peter wrote, in I Peter, chapter 2, verse 24,

. . . He Himself, bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live unto righteousness

This was the prophecy of Isaiah concerning Christ, when he wrote in chapter 53, verses 4 through 6,

Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried . . . He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him . . . the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.

In other words, Jesus Christ is the ultimate and final scapegoat of atoning law. He carried our blame for us, even though we are the guilty ones and He was innocent.

So, David is not simply writing, “Blessed is the one who has had his sins taken away,” he is actually saying, “Blessed is the one who has had the blame for his sins placed on the scapegoat and he himself, though guilty, is allowed to go free.”

Another illustration of cleansing from guilt is in regard to the lepers. We often think of leprosy as being a very contagious disease and yet, it is not. There are many kinds of leprosy. I have found at least three different kinds of leprosy in my studies. Perhaps you have read in the Bible, the account of a leper who was white with leprosy. When Miriam

rebelled against Moses, she was turned white with it. That kind of leprosy began as small scales on the flesh. They would then grow and spread, until the person was covered with white scales. In other words, Miriam was given, in one moment from God, an advanced, terminal case of leprosy.

Throughout the Old Testament, leprosy was considered an act of God's judgment. It was indeed, one of the things God used to discipline His sinful, unrepentant people.

Unfortunately, the church in the early centuries, failed to distinguish Israel from the New Testament church and therefore, applied much of the Old Covenant with Israel to the New Testament believer. One of the more tragic results of that form of interpretation, popularized today as Covenant theology, was in relation to lepers. The church just assumed that leprosy was still the sign of God's judgment.

In the middle ages, in fact, the church would have a burial service for a person with leprosy. The priest would walk into the sanctuary, holding a crucifix and wearing a stole, and behind him, would come the leper, dressed in black. The leper would follow the priest to the altar and the priest would read the burial rights over him. He was living and yet, he was considered dead.

The church would cut a little slat into the wall of their sanctuary, called the "leper's squint". The lepers would come and peer in through the "leper's squint" and be forced to try to worship God from their point of isolation.

In the Old Testament, the leper who decided to repent and offer a sacrifice for the sin that was the root of his disease, brought two birds to the high priest, as prescribed in the book of Leviticus. The priest would kill one bird and shed his blood in a little basin. He would sprinkle blood from that bird onto the leper to signify that the innocent animal had died on behalf of the leper's sin. Then he would take the living bird and sprinkle blood on it and let that bird go free. That bird signified the carrying away of the leper's guilt.

The point is that we are all covered with the leprosy of sin. And, we all have a terminal case. But Jesus Christ not only died on behalf of our sin, He carried the guilt away.

Donald Grey Barnhouse said, "Just as that free flying bird flew into the heavens, so Christ, ascending into the heavens, signified that our guilt was carried away."ⁱⁱⁱ

Ladies and gentlemen, this is unearned freedom; this is undeserved spiritual health; this is unmerited grace, and it is received with great joy!

Covered

2. The second key word in David's song, is the word "covered". Look again at the last part of verse 7.

Blessed are those . . . whose sins have been covered.

Again, this is an Old Testament concept dealing with the day of atonement. The high priest took the blood of a bull and sprinkled it on the mercy seat inside the holy of holies. It covered, so to speak, the contents of the ark of the covenant – that wooden box that was over-laden with gold. Inside that box were the tablets of stone upon which God had inscribed the Ten Commandments. The people of Israel had broken every one of those laws. Now, however, blood was covering, as it were, the broken Law and thus, God saw the broken Law as atoned for. In other words, God looked at His tablets of Law through the blood that had been shed on behalf of His people.

By the way, every year that this was done, simply looked forward to that coming sacrifice which would, once and for all, do away with sin, as Hebrews, chapter 10, verses 10 through 12, tells us. The Old Testament believer's sin was covered temporarily, until Christ paid for it finally. David's ticket to heaven would be paid for in the future. Your ticket to heaven was paid for in the past.

Every sin David committed was paid for in Christ. That means that every sin you, and I, have committed was also paid for in Christ. That means that your sins of the future have already been paid for by Christ in the past.

Do you know what that means? That means that God knew what sin you would commit tomorrow and Christ died for it two thousand years ago. Every sin you will commit has already been paid for by Christ.

Do you know what that means? That means that God, who had His Son pay the penalty for your sins in the past, who calls you to live a holy life, even knowing that you will not, and, in fact, knowing the exact sins you will commit, not only placed those sins on Christ, but does not strike you dead! In other words, God the Father knows the sins you will commit, placed those sins on His Son, and allowed Him to pay the penalty for them. Then, He watches you commit those sins, knowing the agony His Son

went through because of it, yet He still loves you in spite of it!

You had better believe,

Blessed are those . . . whose sins have been covered.

Covered by Christ! What an incredibly gracious God!

Account

3. The third word that David uses is a word that Paul spends a lot of time on and that we will see appear throughout Romans, chapter 4. It is the word “account” or “imputed”. Let me touch on it briefly. Paul writes, in verse 8,

Blessed is man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.

Each one of these words has a different nuance. This word, in the phrase, “take into account,” is one Greek word, “logizomai”. It is an accounting word that could be rendered, “He does not put it into His ledger.”

We have a phrase that comes from this word. We talk about someone having a “clean slate”. That is the idea in this verse. The ledger has been wiped clean of any debt of sin.

The same word appeared in verse 3 of Romans, chapter 4, in a positive way,

. . . Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.

In other words, in Abraham’s ledger was written the word, “righteousness”. It was “credited” or “reckoned,” as used in many translations, to him.

That word “reckoned” will appear several times in chapter 4. Paul “reckoned” this and “reckoned” that. This tells us that Paul was originally from North Carolina! He “reckoned”.

The word is used positively in verse 3 and negatively in verse 8. According to verse 8, nothing of sin was reckoned to the account of David’s ledger.

In other words, the believer’s ledger of life has had every sin erased and the word “righteousness” is embossed on each page. You cannot remove it, it is permanent. Your record is clean.

It is amazing to me to hear and read of things people do in order to “clear their name”. I read recently, that Jay Leno, the host of the television show, *The Tonight Show*, spent an incredible amount of money to have his record cleaned up. If you can

believe it, when he was in high school, thirty years ago, he was suspended for “burning rubber” in the school parking lot. Apparently, thirty years ago, that kind of action resulted in suspension and Jay Leno was suspended from school for three days. It seems that Jay wanted that incident stricken from his high school records. He recently donated two hundred fifty thousand dollars worth of computer equipment to his high school in exchange for having that black mark removed from his school records. Two hundred fifty thousand dollars for a clean slate.^{iv}

That is nothing! There will come a day when every human being would give everything he owned; everything he had; everything he wanted to have in exchange for his slate being cleansed of sin.

How blessed is the man or woman who has trusted the work of Christ on their behalf; those who will one day stand before a holy God and hear Him say, as Jeremiah tells us in chapter 31, verse 34b,

. . . I will forgive [your] iniquity, and [your] sin I will remember no more.

He will also say, according to Psalm, chapter 103, verse 12,

As far as the east is from the west, so far [have I already] removed [your] transgressions from [you].

In other words, God will say to you, “I distinctly remember forgetting your sins. They are forgiven and forgotten.”

Conclusion

What hope did David have? His case was hopeless! What hope do you have before a holy God? Your case, and mine, is equally hopeless.

You and I have a horrible record of sin. There is not a single person among us who has not done many things that they are ashamed of – not one of us!

Only you know the depths of the battle you fight over the memories of your sin; only you know the current struggle you face daily against the filth of your flesh.^v

None of us could ever merit, or earn, or deserve the grace of God. We have simply, by faith, handed our filthy ledgers to God, believing God’s redemptive work on our behalf through Christ alone. And, God has handed them back to us, eternally wiped clean. How magnificent is the grace of God!

One author wrote, “The files of heaven are filled with stories of redeemed rebels.”

How blessed is the one whose sins have been forgiven . . . and forgotten.

This declaration of joy, that David wrote, is reflected in the poem of another songwriter, by the name of Horatio Spafford, who wrote:

My sin – O, the bliss of this glorious thought,

*My sin – not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!*
No other religion can sing, “My sin . . . is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more”!
Sins forgiven . . . sins forgotten . . . forever!

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ⁱ The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), vol. 4, p. 259; “Sacrifice,” mb-soft.com/believe/txs/sacrifice.

ⁱⁱ The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), vol. 3, p. 401.

ⁱⁱⁱ Donald G. Barnhouse, Romans Vol. 2, (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans Publishing, 1982), p. 251.

^{iv} Steve May, The Story File, (Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), p. 131.

^v Charles R. Swindoll, Strong in the Seasons of Life, (Portland, OR, Multnomah Press, 1983), p. 253.