

Psalm 103. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 5 November 2014.

As you know, we are now well on our way through a series of talks based on the Book of Psalms. The set psalm for this morning is Psalm 103. In that our psalm – as many others – is reasonably long, I shall confine our reading to a few verses at the beginning, in the centre, and at the close of the psalm:

A Psalm of David.

Bless the Lord,¹ O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name!

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgives all your iniquities ... The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy ... He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us ('nor requited us', that is) according to our iniquities.

For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us ... the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him ...

The Lord has established His throne in heaven ... Bless the Lord, you His angels, who excel in strength ... who do His pleasure. Bless the Lord, all His works, in all places of His dominion. Bless the Lord, O my soul!

We can hardly miss that David both opens and closes his psalm with the same expression, 'Bless the Lord, O my soul!', and, in between these two 'bookends' (if you like), he advances many reasons why, not only he himself personally, but all creatures in heaven and on earth should indeed 'bless the Lord'.

This morning, I want to focus on just one such reason;² namely that, as David says, when speaking of the believer, the Lord '*forgives all your iniquities*' – a point echoed in one of the epistles of the New Testament which speaks of God, and I quote, '*having forgiven us all our trespasses*'.³

I was reading recently that there is 'in a cemetery not far from New York City a headstone engraved with the word: 'Forgiven' ... There is no date of birth, no date of death, no epitaph ... only a name and the solitary word "Forgiven".⁴ But I guess that that is one of the greatest words which could ever be engraved on anybody's headstone.

But you may have noticed that David expanded graphically on his appreciation of God's forgiveness of the sinner when he adds, 'as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us'. Not, I note, 'as far as the north is from the south' – which we know to be a measurable distance in that it is just over 12,400 miles around the earth's surface from the North Pole to the South Pole.

How glad I am therefore that David spoke of the gap which God has created between the believer and his or her sins, not as being 'as far as the north is from the south', but 'as far as the east is from the west' – for it is impossible to measure this distance in that there is no East Pole or West Pole. 'East' is simply the direction from which the sun is seen to rise.

But this is just one of many ways in which God in His word, the Bible, expresses the extent of His forgiveness of the sinner. About three hundred years after David penned our psalm, three other Old Testament characters were moved by God to add their own vivid word pictures and images.

King Hezekiah of Judah reigned for some 29 years around 700 BC, and, on one occasion, when praising God for his recovery from a life-threatening illness, he thanked God that, as Hezekiah put it, 'in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction ... you have cast all my sins behind your back'.⁵ And what a thought that is ... that the forgiveness of the sinner can be portrayed as God hurling his or her sins behind His back – out of His sight and of no further interest to Him.

One of Hezekiah's contemporaries, the prophet Isaiah, contributed another bold description of forgiveness when he quoted the Lord of hosts Himself as having declared to His believing people, 'I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, your transgressions, and, as a cloud, your sins'.⁶ God was saying that, in the same way that, in Isaiah's day, writing would be erased from a leather scroll by wiping with a sponge,⁷ so He had obliterated and completely removed His people's sins.

And not only that, but He had cleared them away, He said, just as when His wind swept away the thick clouds, restoring the beautiful blue sky, so that no remnant of mist or cloud remained. And any who are not yet Christians do well to heed the preaching of the apostle Peter to the people of Jerusalem some seven hundred years later, 'Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out'.⁸

But it is to another of Israel's prophets, whose life overlapped the lives of both Hezekiah and Isaiah ... to the prophet Micah, that we owe one of the boldest of the word pictures found in the Bible to describe God's forgiveness of the sinner: 'You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea'.⁹ To Micah, 'the sea' was undoubtedly the Mediterranean Sea – referred to throughout the whole Old Testament as 'the Great Sea'.¹⁰ The deepest recorded point in the Mediterranean is over 17,000 feet.¹¹ That is a long way down, with no possibility of anything being fished out from that depth.

But the prophet's words have even greater meaning *for us today*. For ocean researchers tell us that the deepest spot of all – the southern end of the Mariana Trench of the western Pacific Ocean – reaches almost seven miles down.¹² That is a greater distance *down*¹³ than the distance *up* if you could stand Pen y Fan¹⁴ on top of Snowdon,¹⁵ and then stand both on top of *Mount Everest*!¹⁶

We know then that, if our Creator God speaks in His word of His having hurled 'all' of the believer's sins 'into the depths of the sea', He wants us to know that there is no possibility whatever of any of them ever being charged against the believer.

I was reading earlier this week about an Irish factory girl by the name of Sheila O'Gahagan. Broken down in health, Sheila was advised to take a holiday by the seaside. But in her heart of hearts she was perplexed by a problem much greater than her health – the problem of her sins. One day as she sat with her Bible on her knee, looking out on the waves breaking on the Giant's Causeway, she came across the words of the Old Testament prophet Micah: 'You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea'.

A few months later she died, and the following verse was found in her desk:

I will cast in the depths of the fathomless sea
All thy sins and transgressions, whatever they be:
Though they mount up to heaven, though they reach down to hell,
They shall sink in the depths, and above them shall swell
All the waves of my mercy, so mighty and free;
I will cast all thy sins in the depths of the sea.¹⁷

Yes, Sheila, indeed God's mercy *is* free, and so also *to us*, if our trust is in the Lord Jesus, is our forgiveness.¹⁸ But our forgiveness was *not* free as far as God Himself was concerned. For it cost Him the suffering and death of His own Son, of whom the New Testament says, 'In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins'.¹⁹

I mentioned that Sheila was from Ireland. Interestingly, it was an Irishman who once said, "The Lord Jesus has forgiven me all my sins, and *He's never going to hear the end of it*". And that was very much the sentiment of David in our psalm for this morning. For, as we noted earlier, he both opens and closes his psalm with the words, 'Bless the Lord, O my soul!'

And I close by quoting from one of the best known hymns in the English language – a hymn which to some extent paraphrases our psalm for today – a hymn chosen by our Queen to be sung at her wedding 67 years ago this month.²⁰ The first verse of that hymn reads:

Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven;
To His feet thy tribute bring.
Ransomed, healed, restored, **forgiven,**
Who, like me, His praise should sing?
Praise Him! Praise Him!
Praise the everlasting King.

'Amen' to that!

Footnotes

¹ When the Lord 'blesses' us, He reviews our needs and He responds to them; when we 'bless' the Lord, we review His actions and excellences and we respond to them.

² 'Forget not all His benefits' is a much needed reminder, because all too often we omit to thank God for His many mercies. We take them for granted. But beyond thanksgiving for our temporal and material blessings, we should be careful to thank Him for forgiving 'all our iniquities'.

³ Col. 2. 13.

⁴ <http://odb.org/2005/07/17/forgiven-2/>

⁵ Isa. 38. 17.

⁶ Isaiah 44. 22.

⁷ See NIDOTTE, number 4681.

⁸ Acts 3. 19.

⁹ Micah 7. 19.

¹⁰ Thirteen times, from Num. 34. 6 to Daniel 7. 2.

¹¹ The Mediterranean Sea has an average depth of 1,500 m (4,900 ft) and the deepest recorded point is 5,267 m (17,280 ft) in the Calypso Deep in the Ionian Sea. See ... http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mediterranean_Sea

¹² 6,831 miles. The Mariana Trench or Marianas Trench is the deepest part of the world's oceans. It is located in the western Pacific Ocean, to the east of the Mariana Islands. The trench is about 2,550 kilometres (1,580 mi) long but has an average width of only 69 kilometres (43 mi). It reaches a maximum-known depth of 10.994 km (10,994 ± 40 m) or 6.831 mi (36,069 ± 131 ft) at the Challenger Deep, a small slot-shaped valley in its floor, at its southern end, See ... http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariana_Trench

¹³ 10,993 metres.

¹⁴ The highest peak in South Wales at 886 metres.

¹⁵ The highest mountain in Wales at 1,085 metres.

¹⁶ 8,848 metres high.

¹⁷ '1200 Notes, Quotes and Anecdotes', Archie Naismith, number 1019.

¹⁸ Cf. Luke 7. 42.

¹⁹ Eph. 1. 7.

²⁰ 20 November 1947.