



“I Believe ... In the Forgiveness of Sins”

Perhaps one of the most precious truths found within the Apostles' Creed is when we confess our belief in the forgiveness of sins. This truth underlines the uniqueness of Christianity and sets it apart from the multiplicity of religions in the world. It has been observed that “*no book of religion except the Bible teaches that God completely forgives sins,*” and as we explore its depths together, we are confronted not only with the reality of our own sinfulness, but we are also dazzled by the glory of Christ's work and the wonder of God's love.

The Need for Forgiveness

It is a sad fact that we do not have to search hard before finding evidence of man's depravity. We only have to pick up the paper, turn on the radio, watch the TV or look into our own hearts and immediately we are bombarded with countless examples. War, genocide, terrorism, violent crime, hatred, exploitation and discrimination, to name but a few, all point their condemning finger at a guilty humanity, and whilst sociologists and psychiatrists may seek to soothe our consciences, yet the Bible's assessment is clear, the human “*heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick.*” (Jer 17:9 ESV)

This depravity cannot be restricted to a dysfunctional few, because since the fall of our first parents, we have all inherited a corrupt nature that makes it impossible for us to live in perfect conformity with God's holy law. However much we might try to delude ourselves the reality is that “*none is righteous, no, not one ... no one does good, not even one ... for we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” (Rom 3:10, 12, 23 ESV) As a consequence we stand condemned and divine Justice demands our punishment.

The Means of Forgiveness

It is at this point that our hopeless situation is transformed by divine action, because as one of our catechisms states: “*God does not leave all men to perish ... but solely of his love and mercy delivers his elect ... and brings them into a state of salvation.*” (Q. 30 of the Larger Catechism in modern English by R S Ward) But how can a Just God save those who have been justly condemned? Does he ignore the demands of Justice and overlook our offences? No, on the contrary, in his infinite wisdom, he finds a way by which he can remain Just and yet Justify the ungodly, and it is here that the glory of the Gospel dazzles us. In answering the question “*What is justification?*” the Larger Catechism explains how it is possible for God to forgive us our sins. It states (Q. 70):

Justification is an act of God's free grace to sinners in which he pardons all their sins, and accepts and accounts their persons to be righteous in his sight, not because of anything worked in them or done by them, but for the sake of the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ alone, which is credited to them by God and received by faith alone.

Forgiveness is possible, because Christ satisfies the demands of Justice at the Cross. Our offences have been transferred to him and his righteous obedience has been transferred to us, and as a consequence we are declared as not guilty and we receive forgiveness. As David says:

“Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity.”

Psalm 32:1-2 (ESV)

The Wonder of Forgiveness

In this act of forgiveness God promises to no longer remember the offences of those who have trusted in Christ, in the sense that he will never hold them against us or regard us as accountable for them. That promise embraces all sin whether past, present or future and includes all acts of omission and commission whether in thought, word or in deed.

Sometimes we find it extremely difficult to believe that God has **really** forgiven **all** our sins, especially when that great enemy of our souls, Satan, comes to us and reminds us of what we have done. Yet the promise remains true and faith enables us to embrace it, filling our hearts with wonder and expressing itself in grateful obedience.

But there is a challenge here as well. When we consider the magnitude of our offences against a holy God and the fact that we have been truly forgiven, how forgiving we ought to be towards those who offend against us. It is easy to remember the offences of others, but let us not be like the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:21-34). On the contrary let us *“be kind to one another, tendered hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave”* us (Eph 4:32 ESV).

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