

**SO GREAT SALVATION -
IN FORGIVENESS
EPH. 1:7; COL. 1:14**

INTRODUCTION:

"How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" This probing question in the letter to the Hebrews is a reminder to us of the greatness of our salvation. Could it be possible that some of us who have benefited from God's salvation are still unaware of its greatness? Could it be that some of us who have rejected God's salvation did so without understanding just how great it is? Because both of these are probably true, I want us to begin 1996 by exploring together just how great God's salvation really is.

The only way I know to confront you with the greatness of God's salvation is to look at different aspects of it from week to week. I am fully aware that Jesus our Lord said, "I am come that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). If we are to enjoy the fullness of life that the Shepherd of our souls intends for us to know, then we must appreciate and appropriate every thing that he has purposed to do for us. This is no small challenge that I am accepting, but I believe it to be very important for the spiritual welfare of our souls.

Where do we begin? I propose that we begin with what must be the first act in God's saving work in our lives. Before God can do anything else that is going to make a difference in our lives, something must be done about our sins. What does God propose to do about our sins? God proposes to freely and fully forgive all of our sins. In Paul's listing of the blessings that God's elective grace have brought to us, His people, he puts redemption and the forgiveness of

sins at the top of the list. Everything else God does for us is based upon the fact that He has forgiven our sins.

It is important that you understand that you have been forgiven. Your life will never be full as God wants it to be full as long as you carry with you unresolved guilt. The only thing that can remove this unresolved guilt from your life is God's forgiveness. The basic elements involved in God's forgiveness are found in this statement in the Ephesian Letter.

I. OUR FORGIVENESS REQUIRED THE DEATH OF CHRIST.

"In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace." I was confronted with what is required to extend forgiveness in a very moving way by an article in Christianity Today last year. The article was written by Philip Yancey. In the article he reflects upon the ethnic cleansing that has been going on in Bosnia over the last four years. Seeing the reports of ethnic cleansing in the news reminded him of a book he had read years earlier entitled, The Sun Flower, by Simon Wiesenthal. The book is based on an forgettable experience that Wiesenthal had as a young Polish prisoner toward the close of the Second World War. He Himself lost 89 of his Jewish relatives to the cruel hands of the Nazi's during that period. Wiesenthal himself attempted unsuccessfully to commit suicide when he was first captured by the Germans.

He reports that on one bright, sunny day he was working as a part of a prison detail cleaning rubbish out of a hospital for German casualties. A nurse approached him and asked, "Are you a

Jew?" When he indicated that he was she signaled for him to follow her. Very apprehensively he followed her up a stair way and down a hall until they reached a dark, musty, room where a lone soldier lay, swathed in bandages. White gauze covered the man's face with openings cut out for a mouth, nose, and ears.

The nurse left him in the room with this soldier. The wounded man was an SS officer and he had summoned Wiesenthal for a confession. "My name is Carl," said a strained voice that came from somewhere within the bandages. "I must tell you of this terrible deed/tell you because you are Jew."

Carl proceeded to reminisce about his upbringing as a Catholic youth and how all of that had been lost when he joined Hitler's Youth Corp. He had served in the Youth Corp with distinction and had only recently returned having been severely wounded on the Russian front.

Carl made three attempts to tell the story in his weakened, raspy voice, Wiesenthal pulled away as if to go. Each time the soldier reached out to grab his arm with a white, nearly bloodless hand and begged him to stay.

He wanted to tell Wiesenthal about an incident that had taken place in a Polish town. In reaction to thirty soldiers being killed by booby traps that had been set, the SS troops rounded up 300 Jews, herded them into a three story house, doused it with gasoline, and fired grenades at it. Cal and his men encircled the house, their guns drawn to shoot anyone who tried to escape.

"The screams from the house were terrible," he said. "I saw a man with a small child in his arms. His clothes were alight. By his side stood a woman doubtlessly the mother of the child. With his free hand the man covered the child's eyes, then he jumped into street, seconds later the mother followed. Then from the other windows fell burning bodies. We shoot them one by one."

All the time Carl was telling this Wiesenthal sat in silence. Finally Carl said, "I am left here with all my guilt. In the last hours of my life you are with me. I do not know who you are, I know only that you are a Jew and that is enough. I know that what I have told you is terrible - I know what I am asking is almost too much for you but without your answer I cannot die in peace."

After hearing the dying appeal of the German soldier, Wiesenthal said, "At last I made up my mind and without a word I left the room." The cost of extending forgiveness to the dying German soldier was just too much. He was not willing to pay the price. Philosophers and theologians have struggled with this dilemma of Wiesenthal through the years. Did he do the right thing? I leave the answer to that question to others, but to the thing that creates such gratitude in my heart is that when God was faced with the depth and expensiveness of my sin he didn't walk away in silence. Instead He sent His Son to be the propitiation for my sins. This is the affirmation of our text.

Why did our forgiveness require the blood of Jesus Christ? There are at least two elements in the explanation. The first is the holiness of God. God being who He is could not allow the injustice

and the evil that was involved in my sin to go unpunished. You will never understand the cross until you understand the holiness of God.

The second is the depth of my sinfulness. The word translated sins in our text is actually the word for deliberate transgressions. It is not the words for mistakes or failures, but rather the word that indicates that I have knowingly and deliberately trespassed. I have knowingly and deliberately broken the law of God. I have knowingly and deliberately done what I knew to be wrong and yet God didn't walk away in silence but caused His Son to be offered as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. That sacrifice is the bases for my forgiveness.

II. GOD'S FORGIVENESS RELEASES US FROM ALL OUR SINS.

The Apostle uses two significant words in our text. "Redemption" has in it the idea of release from bondage by the payment of a price. The word was most commonly used of someone being released from slavery from the payment of a price. "Forgiveness" has in it the idea of releasing someone for some wrong that has been done. Another idea that is in the Word is to send away. The basic idea in redemption and forgiveness is that something is done about our sin so that it is no longer a factor in our relationship to God.

1. The release is from the control of sin.

This is the idea that is in redemption. Jesus our Lord taught that whenever anyone commits a sin they become the slave of that sin. As we commit sin we lose the power to do anything about the sin. The sin ends up mastering us rather than us mastering the sin. The sin uses us instead of us using the sin to gain something that we desire. But when God forgives, the power of that sin

over the life of the individual is broken. The person is redeemed, released from the power of sin.

This must be a part of what John meant when he declared, "The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son cleanses us from all sin." The blood of Jesus Christ brings about a release from the control of sin in our lives.

2. Forgiveness is a release from the penalty of sin.

The penalty for any and all sin is death, or ultimate separation from God. One sin separates a human being from any kind of meaningful, life-giving relationship with God. Even though we were created to know God, to love God, and to serve God, sin makes this an utter impossibility. It cuts us off from that life transforming relationship with God. But when God forgives the sin he sets aside the penalty.

The reason God is able to so freely set aside the penalty for our sins is that Jesus bore the penalty for our sins on the tree. He died the death and experienced the separation from God that our sins deserved. Oh, what a wonderful thing it is to know that you have been released from the penalty of your sin and there is "Therefore no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.

3. Forgiveness provides a release that is unconditional.

God does not grant forgiveness conditionally. He does not forgive us if we will do thus and so. The release that forgiveness gives is unconditionally and thus it is permanent.

Some of you once felt forgiven but circumstances have changed. You have disappointed yourself

and you suspect that you have disappointed God and now you feel as though God may have withdrawn his forgiveness. You have sensed that maybe the forgiveness has been cancelled and you are now again facing the penalty for your sins. The tense of the verb in our text is so significant. "In Him we have redemption." "Have" is a present tense verb which carries the force of having as a present possession. Since we are "in Him" we have as a present possession redemption, even the forgiveness of our sins. It is not something we hope for in the future. Rather it is something we enjoy in the present.

III. GOD'S FORGIVENESS REVEALS THE RICHES OF HIS GRACE.

Tom emphasize just how great God's forgiveness is the Apostle adds that qualifying phrase "In accordance with the riches of God's grace." This means that we have received a full and complete forgiveness that can be explained only by the grace of God.

1. Grace measures the forgiveness.

Just how extensive is this forgiveness? Just how complete is this forgiveness. Can we be sure that it reaches to all of our sins? The Apostle offered assurance by reminding us that it is according to the riches of God's grace. The measure of this forgiveness can be measured only in terms of the immeasurable riches of the grace of God. Anyone who knows anything about God's grace knows that it is immeasurable and unsearchable. There is no way that you can ever put a human calculation upon the measure of the forgiveness that we know in Christ.

2. Grace explains the forgiveness.

You may want to step back from this text and ask the question, "Why would God want to forgive me? Can you give me some reason that a holy God could care that much about me an unworthy mortal sinner?" There is an explanation and it is found in the nature of God. The creator God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ is a God who is rich in grace. That grace has found its ultimate expression in God offering to guilty sinners forgiveness for all of their sins. God did not consider the depth and extent of your sin, and walk away in silence. Instead, when he looked upon the depth and extent of your sin, God willed to make a way to bring you home. He did that through the death of His Son because of His grace.

I don't know of any idea that can enter the human mind that can make as much difference in the way you live life as knowing for sure that you are forgiven. To carry with you day by day the guilt of past sins is a burden that squeezes out of life joy and peace. It makes every day gray and discouraging. But to know that that burden has been lifted from your shoulders and that you are forgiven brings into the life joy and freedom. Bunion pictured this in his great allegory called Pilgrims Progress, as Christian came with that heavy burden on his shoulder at last to the cross. When Christian fell beneath that cross and looked up, the burden was lifted from his back and rolled down the hill into the empty tomb. You can know that experience today. No matter how heavy the load you bear, God offers forgiveness.

The first things to consider when you are considering the greatness of God's salvation is forgiveness. This is where God's saving work in our lives begins. It begins when God based on the death of His Son sets us free from the control and penalty for our sins. If you have received

that gift, surely you will be giving God the praise forever. If you have not received that gift surely you will want to receive it this morning.