

THE CROSS AND FORGIVENESS

EPH. 1:3-8

INTRODUCTION:

Someone has written, “Forgiveness is man’s greatest need and God’s greatest achievement.”

Chuck Colson writes about Albert Speer, the famous Nazi criminal. Colson saw him being interviewed one morning on ABC’s “Good Morning, America.” Speer was the confidant of Adolph Hitler whose technological genius was credited with keeping the Nazi factories humming throughout World War II. In another time he might have been one of the world’s industrial giants. He was the only one of 24 war criminals tried in Nuremburg to admit his guilt. Speer spent 20 years in Spandau Prison.

In the interview David Hartman referred to a passage in one of his earlier writings, “You have said that the guilt can never be forgiven, or shouldn’t be, do you still feel that way?” A terrible look of pathos and pain came across his face as he responded: “I served a sentence of 20 years and I could say I am a free man, my conscience has been cleared by serving the whole time as punishment, but I can’t do that. I still carry the burden of what happened to millions of people during Hitler’s lifetime and I can’t get rid of it. This new book is part of my atoning, of clearing my conscience.”

David Hartman, the interviewer pressed the point. “You really don’t think you will be able to clear it totally?” Speer shook his head, “I don’t think it will be possible.”

Thirty-five years Speer had accepted complete responsibility for his crimes. His writings were filled with contrition and warnings to others to avoid his moral sin. He desperately sought expiation. All to no avail!

Chuck Colson wrote of that interview, “I wanted to write Speer to tell him about Jesus and His death on the cross, about God’s forgiveness but there wasn’t time. The ABC interview was his last public statement; he died shortly after.” Colson was right in his response. The Christian gospel includes forgiveness in the great benefits that God provides for His people. It is a part of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. One of the great statements about forgiveness is included in this beautiful doxology that opens the letter to the Ephesians. Let’s camp around the statement this morning and allow our hearts to be filled with a fresh awareness of what it means to be forgiven.

I. FORGIVENESS REQUIRED THE DEATH OF JESUS CHRIST.

“In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that He lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.” The prepositional phrase “through His blood” reveals to us the cost of forgiveness. Forgiveness never comes cheap. It always has a high price tag to the one who is offering it. In this case it is the sovereign God of this universe, the God of grace and mercy, who through the death of His Son at the cross paid the price to make forgiveness available for all.

What made the price so high? What was it about our trespasses that required God to offer His Son as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world? We need to understand the background of this deed so we can appreciate what God did for us in Christ.

1. The character of God made the death of Christ necessary.

None of us are equipped to fully appreciate how holy God really is. Neither are we equipped to appreciate just how offensive sin is to God. It is only when we catch some understanding of the depth of His holiness, the richness of His character that we begin to understand the necessity of the cross.

One of the leading theologians of our day, Dr. Erickson, who teaches now at Baylor University, has written: “God is not merely a private person who has been wronged but He is also the official administrator of the judicial system. As a private person He could in a sense forgive offenses against Himself, just as humans forgive one another. But for God to remove or ignore the guilt of sin without requiring a payment would in effect destroy the very moral fiber of the universe, even the distinction between right and wrong. An additional problem is that God is a being of infinite or perfect holiness and goodness. An offense against Him is much more serious than an offense against an ordinary sinful person. When someone is against us, we are aware that the fault may in least be in part ours, and that we have on numerous other occasions sinned against others, and probably against the very person who is presently wronging us. But with God, who does not tempt or do any wrong, there is no such element of imperfection to make our sin seem less dreadful.”

It is only as we understand the position and character of our God that we will understand the necessity of the cross.

2. The seriousness of our sin makes the cross necessary.

The word translated in the text “sins” is translated in the older version “trespasses.” The word has in it the idea of someone intentionally, deliberately, violating a law, stepping across the boundary between right and wrong. Our sins have in them the very spirit of rebellion and resistance to the rights of God over our lives. John put it into a simple statement in his first letter when he wrote, “Sin is lawlessness.” By lawlessness he means that every act of sin has in it at least the seed of rebellion against God. Every act of sin is a threat that God’s rule over this universe. Every act of sin is a resistance against God’s good purposes in this universe. Every act of sin is an act of treason against a good and gracious heavenly Father, the king of the universe.

Unless you understand just how repulsive and ugly your sin is, you will never appreciate the forgiveness of God. Dr. B. H. Carroll had a saying that he quoted often, “Little sinners make little saviors.” Because our generation has taken sin so lightly, we have begun to take the forgiveness of God as a light thing. We have failed to appreciate what it cost God in order to provide free and full forgiveness to us for all of our transgressions.

II. FORGIVENESS SETS US FREE FROM OUR SINS.

The word translated “forgiveness” in our text has in it the basic idea of releasing, or sending away. It carries in it the idea of letting go of sin, its dismissal or pardon in the sense of the remission of its penalty. This is the very thing that Albert Speer had despaired of ever finding. All of his attempts had failed to set him free from his transgressions.

1. Forgiveness frees from the penalty of sin.

Every sin has a penalty. The penalty for sin is death, separation from God forever and forever. When God forgives the sinner He sets aside the penalty so to be forgiven is to be free from the dread of the penalty for our sins. Is this not a wonderful thing?

2. Forgiveness frees from the power of sin.

In this statement of Paul “redemption” is used as a synonym for forgiveness. Redemption has in it the idea of setting a slave free through the payment of a price. This idea of setting someone free like a slave being set free then is in the word forgiveness. In a deep, personal sense when a sin is committed it will continue to bind the sinner until the sinner is forgiven. That sin will always be there with its destructive and negative influence in the life. The guilt that it has birthed will always be there. To hear God say, “I forgive” is a tremendous liberating experience. In that moment you are set free from that sin and its destructive power in your life.

This does not mean that you will never remember the sin again. Martin Luther told about an encounter that he had with the devil. The devil came to see Luther with a long scroll in his hand. The scroll contained a list of sins, and Satan said they were Luther’s sins. Martin Luther asked to see the list. Quietly and carefully he scrutinized the accusing bond lest Satan should magnify

his accusations. “But, no! They are all mine” acknowledged Martin Luther. “Then what are you going to do about them?” asked the devil. Taking the scroll to a table he took his quill and across the entire list of sins he wrote in letters large in repentance and faith, “The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin.”

You become aware in the deep of your heart that the blood of Jesus Christ washed away all your sins, and that you stand before God fully accepted in His beloved Son, it is a liberating experience. It sets you free from the continued tyranny of sin in your life. It sets you free to live as a son of God with joy and peace in your heart.

Dr. C. Roy Angel told of the funeral of an old country doctor. At least a half a dozen men spoke at the funeral service for this beloved doctor. Each one, overflowed with deep emotion, related some of the grand things in the old doctor’s life. Among them they mentioned that he often always went night or day wherever he was needed; and since he never sent out bills probably half of the county owed him money. He was a bachelor and often said to poor people, “Don’t worry about paying me. I don’t have much expense anyhow.”

The last speaker at the funeral was a pastor. He began his remarks by saying, “Let’s be fanciful. When our beloved doctor died, God sent Gabriel after him to take him to heaven. On the way the doctor roused enough to ask, “Where are you taking me?” Gabriel answered, “In my Father’s house are many mansions. One is waiting for you.” After a long silence the old doctor spoke again, “What about my sins?”

Gabriel smiled and said, “God buried them.”

Again a long time elapsed before the doctor asked, “Gabriel, where did God bury them?”

Gabriel answered quietly, “He has forgotten.”

Surely this is the truth. When God forgives, He buries our sins and then forgets where He buried them. Oh, the joy of being forgiven!

III. FORGIVENESS COMES TO US AS A GIFT.

There are two other key words in our text that needs emphasis. They reveal that forgiveness comes to us as the free gift of God.

1. Grace

“In accordance with the riches of God’s grace that He lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.” The word “grace” emphasizes that forgiveness is an expression of God’s generosity. It is always something that you receive, but did not deserve. There is no way we could ever deserve the gift of God’s complete forgiveness. It can come to us only because God is a God of grace. So, the forgiveness that comes to us is an expression of the immeasurable generosity of our God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

2. Have

The key verb in the verse is “have.” Interestingly the verb is a present tense indicative verb. This is significant in understanding the nature of God’s forgiveness. This means that it is

something that we have now and will have in the future. The present tense has in it the force of it being continuous. This means that the forgiveness of God is not something that we hope for in the future, but is a precious possession that we hold now. This aspect of forgiveness is extremely significant for the troubled soul.

Some people mistakenly speak of God's forgiveness as though it were something that we will know only at the end of life. Nothing could be further from the truth. God gives forgiveness now – in our present circumstances we have God's forgiveness now.

It comes to us as a free gift. "Through His blood" reminds us that it is at God's expense. The only thing you can do to receive God's forgiveness is to acknowledge that you need it. If you will come to God confessing yourself to be a sinner and undeserving of His forgiveness, it will be yours.

I read of a wealthy father who had a wayward son who forsook the home and the family. He pursued a life of immorality and crime. He brought disgrace to the name of the good family, and caused his father many years of deep sorrow. One day the son received the news of his father's death and decided immediately to go home, not for the sake of reconciliation but rather for the reading of the will and what he might get out of it. He knew his father was a kind and generous man, and selfishly he thought that some of the money might have been left to him. Assembled with other members of the family in the lawyer's office, he listened to the reading of the will. The first part of it was a long recitation of the sins of the son. The father had set them all down very carefully, naming them one by one, and expressing the grief of his heart which he had borne all those years. As the son listened he became more and more nervous as he heard the sad story

of his evil doings. He began to fidget and to fuss in his seat obviously disgusted with the proceedings. Finally, he could stand it no longer; he grabbed his hat and rose to his feet, stomped out of the room and slammed the door behind him. But he left too soon. For the second part of the will said that his father had bequeathed him \$25,000, but he never got it, for the simple reason that he refused to hear about his sin and he would not confess it. So he lost his inheritance.

It is only when we are ready to confess ourselves to be prodigals that deserve nothing from the Father, that we are in a position to receive this precious gift of forgiveness. There is someone who knows himself or herself to be guilty of sin but you are hesitant to acknowledge your sin before God. The Father waits for you this morning to say, "God, I have sinned. Have mercy upon me." Would you not do that today? The God of heaven and of earth gave His Son to die on the cross so that He might give you forgiveness without money and without price. This is the day to receive this precious gift of forgiveness from God.