

The Forgiveness of Sins.

On the page of scripture, God has employed many graphic word pictures to convey to His people the complete removal of their sins. Ponder afresh today a few better-known examples.¹

God declares that the believer's sins:

(i) Cannot be reached.

'*As far as the east is from the west*, so far has He removed our transgressions from us' (Psalm 103. 12).² David speaks, not of 'north from south' (about 12,500 miles around the earth's surface), but of 'east from west', thereby indicating an immeasurable distance.

For, though a person travelling either north or south eventually arrives at a pole, from which he can proceed no farther, somebody travelling east or west never reaches any such a point. There are therefore no points from which to measure the distance between 'the east' and 'the west'.

(ii) Cannot be seen.

'You have cast all my sins *behind your back*' (Isaiah 38. 17).³ Sins are depicted as hurled well and truly out of God's sight, as no longer being the subject of His attention or concern.

(iii) Cannot be remembered.

'I will *remember* their sin *no more*' (Jer. 31. 34).⁴ 'Seeing then, that Christ is on the throne, where are my sins? They are not on Him now. Oh, No! No! They were all put away on the cross, and buried in the grave of everlasting forgetfulness. Not one of them will ever be found. They have even gone from the very recollection of God'.⁵

And it is wonderful to know that the very One who pledges 'their sins and their iniquities will I *remember* no more' (Hebrews 10. 17), Himself 'is not unrighteous to *forget*' any of their work and loving ministry performed 'for His name' (Hebrews 6. 10).

(iv) Cannot be found.

'You will cast all their sins *into the depths of the sea*' (Micah 7. 19),⁶ from where they can never be recovered. For, no! God does not throw them *onto the surface* of the sea, leaving open the possibility that they might float back to shore. He casts them *into the vast depths*, like such a spot, we might say, as the Mariana trench in the Pacific Ocean which reaches almost seven miles down!⁷ And, what is more, He permits no fishing in that sea!

'Sheila O'Gahagan was a factory girl in Ireland. Broken down in health, she was advised to try the effect of a holiday by the seaside. In her heart of hearts she was perplexed by a problem that struck much deeper than that of her health—the problem of her sins. One day she sat, with her Bible on her knee, looking out on the waves breaking on the Giant's Causeway, and came upon the passage in Micah: "Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea". As she surveyed the horizon, she said to herself: "My sins are all cast 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 sink 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".⁸

(v) Cannot be read.

'I am He who *blots out* your transgressions' (Isaiah 43. 25). We note that 'transgressions' are not merely '*crossed-out*' (following which they might still be read), but '*blotted-out*' – so completely erased and eradicated that no trace remains. The apostle Paul speaks in similar language: 'God, ... having *blotted out*⁹ the handwritten indictment (of our indebtedness) which was against us, ... has set it aside, nailing it to the cross' (Colossians 2. 13-14). And so perhaps we might say that, in one sense at least, our transgressions *have been* '*crossed-out*'!

The apostle's point is captured brilliantly by Horatio Spafford in his soul-stirring hymn, 'It Is Well with My Soul':

My sin, oh, 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!

And we do well to remember that Mr Spafford wrote those lines at the time when he had recently lost (i) all his possessions to fire, and (ii) all his four daughters to water.¹⁰ The godly man derived his comfort and encouragement from that which he knew lay well outside the range of all earth's trials, sorrows and sufferings; namely, the blessedness of having one's sins forgiven.¹¹

Why not follow Mr Spafford's example today? Put aside your fears and anxieties, and bask in the sunshine of the divine pronouncement, 'Your sins are forgiven' (1 John 2. 12).¹²

And bear in mind that, when David started to enumerate some of the many 'benefits' which he had received from the Lord,¹³ he placed the forgiveness of all his sins at the top of his list (Psa. 103. 2-3)!

Notes

¹ Consider also: 'though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow', Isa. 1. 18, and 'wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow', Psa. 51. 7.

² 'The farthest point *east* and the farthest point *west* in the United States are both in Alaska ... *Pochnoi Point* in the Aleutians is as far *west* as you can go and still be in the US. But if you travel a few miles farther west, you'll end up at Alaska's *Amatignak Island*. Because that spot is west of the 180th meridian separating the Eastern and Western Hemispheres, it is technically *east* of the rest of the US. But you'll never find a spot where east and west are *actually* next to each other ... East goes on forever. West goes on forever. They never meet. You can't get farther from something than that ... When you read in Scripture that your forgiven sins are separated from you "as far as the east is from the west", you are assured that they are an immeasurable distance away—gone forever', Dave Branon, '*Our Daily Bread*', 9 November 2008. (The distance between the two points in Alaska is only about 70 miles.)

³ For the imagery, contrast how, in the days of the Judges, Israel 'cast' God's law 'behind their back', Neh. 9. 26.

⁴ The Lord's words here through Jeremiah stand in marked contrast with His earlier judgement pronounced on Israel's false prophets through the same prophet, 'Behold, I will utterly *forget* you, and I will cast you off', Jer. 23. 39; cf. Hos. 4. 6. The Hebrew word translated 'forget' there (*ונשית*) occurs in only five other verses in the Old Testament. Outside of the book of Job (Job 11. 6; 39. 17, where the word may signify to extract or deprive), the word unmistakably carries the meaning 'to forget', Gen. 41. 51; Isa. 44. 21; Lam. 3. 17. A synonym (*נכח*) is set over against 'remember' in 1 Sam. 1. 11.

Interestingly, an early edition of the King James Version (dated 1638) was wrongly printed with our Lord's words in Luke 7. 47 shown as, 'Her sins which are many are *forgotten*'!

⁵ C. H. Mackintosh, '*The Cross and the Throne*', Things New and Old, Volume 1.

⁶ As He once drowned the Pharaoh of the Exodus in 'the depths' of the Red Sea. Exod. 15. 4-5.

⁷ 'The Challenger Deep in the Mariana Trench is the deepest known point in Earth's oceans ... at 10,994 meters (36,070 feet) below sea level ... If Mount Everest were placed at this location it would be covered by over one mile of water', <https://geology.com/records/deepest-part-of-the-ocean.shtml>. (36,070 feet is over 6.83 miles.)

⁸ A. Naismith, '*1200 Notes, Quotes and Anecdotes*', number 1019.

⁹ Paul actually used the same Greek word (*ἐξαλειφω*) in Colossians 2. 14 as was used in the Greek Old Testament translation of Isaiah 43. 25.

¹⁰ Mr Spafford's material wealth was consumed in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. Having invested heavily in land and property in the downtown area of expanding Chicago, he lost everything overnight. But the worst was yet to come. Just two years later, in November 1873, his four daughters, eleven-year-old Annie, nine-year-old Maggie, five-year-old Bessie, and two-year-old Tanetta, drowned in mid-Atlantic when the ship on which they travelled to Europe with their mother Anna collided with another vessel.

Along with the other survivors, Anna was brought to Cardiff, from where she cabled a heart-rending telegraph message to her husband. The first two words said it all, 'Saved alone'. Mr Spafford left on the next available ship to cross the Atlantic and join his wife. According to an account written by their fifth daughter (born after the tragedy), midway across the ocean 'the captain called Father into his private cabin. "A careful reckoning has been made", he told (him), "and I believe we are now passing the place where the Ville du Havre was wrecked" ... On the high seas, near the place where his children perished, he wrote the hymn that was to give comfort to so many' (extracted from: Bertha Spafford Vester, '*Our Jerusalem*').

¹¹ Psa. 32. 1-2; Rom. 4. 6-7. Remember that when the Lord's wider circle of disciples reported back to Him that 'even the demons are subject to us in your name', He responded, 'do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven', Luke 10. 17-20. If I may paraphrase His words, 'What matters most is not the *power of my name on earth*, but the *presence of your names in heaven!*' The Saviour was counselling His disciples to ensure that their joy was based, not on the 'rollercoaster' of success or failure which they would doubtless experience in His service, but on that which lay altogether outside the reach and range of any experiences on earth; namely, on their eternal salvation. (Indeed, sometime earlier, the apostles themselves had experienced an embarrassing public failure when attempting to cast out a demon, Luke 9. 40.)

¹² According to Luke, those very words 'your sins are forgiven' had been spoken by Jesus to a man and a woman separately, Luke 5. 20; 7. 48. On both occasions, those present questioned His authority to 'forgive sins'. 'Who is this?' they asked, Luke 5. 21; 7. 49. Who, indeed? The Pharisees may have been spot on with their *Theology* ('Who can forgive sins, but God alone?'), but they were way off the mark with their *Christology* ('Who is this which speaks blasphemies?'), Luke 5. 21.

¹³ 'He selects a few of the choicest pearls from the casket of divine love, threads them on the string of memory, and hangs them about the neck of gratitude', C. H. Spurgeon, '*The Treasury of David*', on Psalm 103. 3.