

In Psalm 103 the Psalmist says:

¹**Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, *ble*ss His holy name!**

²**Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits:**

³**Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases,**

⁴**Who redeems your life from destruction, Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies,**

⁵**Who satisfies your mouth with good *things*, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.**

What is the *first* benefit for which he praises the Lord with all his being? *That God has forgiven all his iniquities.* This is not the *only* blessing of salvation – there are many! – but **forgiveness** is the *first* and *best* because it is the doorway to a right relationship with God and, therefore, the door to all the other blessings of salvation God has promised you! Forgiveness is the mother of all God's gifts.

Today let us examine this great gift of God called 'forgiveness' from Psalm 130 and let His forgiving love in Jesus Christ move us deeply to amaze us, change us, and motivate us to love and serve Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and also to love one another.

In Psalm 130 we meet **God's gracious and powerful Forgiveness**:

1) the Sinner's Cry for help: ¹**Out of the depths I have cried to You, O LORD;** ²**Lord, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications.**

Here is this man crying out to God from the depths, that is, a place of deep distress and unhappiness. The reason for His distress and his crying out to God is his sin. For some reason he has entered an especially deep awareness of His sinfulness before God. Perhaps he has committed a great sin that needs to be forgiven. Or maybe the Holy Spirit has just been exposing more and more of his "ordinary" sinfulness to him so that he learns to lean more and more on God His Savior. Isn't this what believers pray for?

²³**Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties;**

²⁴**And see if *there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*** (Psalm 139:23-24)

It is important to remember that this is "**A Song of Ascents.**" It is one of the songs that the people of Israel sang as they were on their way to the temple to come into the holy presence of God to worship Him. As the worshipers drew near to God in the temple courts they could smell the blood of the sacrifices which reminded them that **the wages of sin is death** (Romans 6:23), that we deserve to die for our sins, and we need Someone to die in our place in order to enter God's presence and know His love.

-Isn't it often on our way to church that we become most keenly aware of our sinfulness and our unworthiness to enter the presence of God? The scenes of the past week and of our lives flash before across the screens of our minds: we have been impatient again, we have been harsh with our loved ones, because we are so focused on ourselves we were irritated when something didn't go our way, we looked lustfully at women on the street and on our screens, we looked down on others in pride, we prayed little because we rely on our own strength, and the list of our sins is very, very long.

Three times he cries out to God for mercy: ***I have cried to You, O LORD...hear my voice...Let Your ears be attentive to my voice...***

These depths of sin and shame are a place where the false gospel of self-help provides no answer. Just try harder to do better? Just look inside yourself for power to pick yourself up and keep going? Just push away the negative thoughts and think more positively about yourself so you can feel better about yourself? None of these self-help therapies can remove our guilt and make us right with God. None of these human efforts can pay for sin and assure us of God's love.

There are deep places in life where only God can go, and to God the LORD alone we must go for help. So, in faith, this person cries to God alone for help because only He can solve the problem of sin and restore my broken relationship with Him. No amount of hard work or money or medicine or comedy or alcohol can get us out of the deep hole of sin's despair. All sin is committed against God's supreme majesty and requires the supreme penalty – and only the infinite, eternal God can take care of that for us.

He is very aware of what it means to stand before God. He confesses: ³**If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?**

-He knows that God is all-seeing, all-knowing. Even before a word is on our tongue, he knows it completely. He perceives our thoughts from afar. (see Psalm 139:1-6) **The eyes of the Lord are in every place.** (Proverbs 15:3) Nothing is hidden from God's sight.

-He also knows that God is absolutely pure. He does not accept or tolerate or overlook or forget sin. He **marks iniquities**. This means that he *takes note* of it; He writes it all down in His record book that He has for each one of us. Job says: **If I sin, then You mark me, and will not acquit me of my iniquity.** (Job 10:14)

Surely, before this true, holy, all-knowing God we cannot stand if he should keep all our sins in His record. This means that we cannot justify ourselves before Him. No amount of excuses will cover us and allow us to stand. Blaming others will not allow us to stand either. Paul says in Romans 3: ¹⁰ **There is none righteous, no, not one...** ¹⁹ **Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become ^[e] guilty before God.**

Dear people of God, do you know such depths of distress in your life? Do you accept the reality of sin and the need for God alone to save you from your sin? Are you living the pretend life of thinking you're fine and you have no trouble with God? Do you think you deserve better than God's judgment? If you do not face this reality of sin and God's wrath, if you have no such awareness, you are deceiving yourself. Pretending there's no cancer when you actually have cancer will not prevent your death, and pretending that you have no serious sin problem before God will not prevent your eternal punishment.

Let us ask God to show how we stand before Him in our sin so that we will cry out to God from the depths and discover the powerful hope and life-saving help that only He can give to sinners!

2. God's gift of forgiveness

The psalmist cries up to God out of the depths and there He discovers an amazing, a wonderful gift that only God can give: forgiveness – a clearing of the record of all that we have ever done against God and our neighbor! Actually, he discovers something higher and better than forgiveness: the God who forgives! In Him there is eternal hope and full redemption. Let us each run, not walk, to Him for help!

³ **If You, LORD, should ^[a] mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?** ⁴ **But *there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared.*** This is the “But” of the Gospel of God: ***But with You forgiveness*** (lit. translation). In the darkness of our sin, a bright light has shone: the light of the God who forgives sin. With You forgiveness – and later this psalm adds more: ⁷ ***with the Lord mercy, and with Him abundant redemption.***

He knows God has every holy right to keep a record of all his iniquities so that he will never be able to stand before God. But he also knows that God is ready and willing to destroy those sin records so every sinner who is broken down by his sin and cries to the Lord for mercy will meet a forgiving God, and by His mercy will be able to stand before God, justified, accepted, loved, and redeemed forever!

Let us note 7 marks of God's forgiveness from this passage:

1. Divine forgiveness is amazing: *But with You there is forgiveness.*

The psalmist stands amazed with awe and wonder at God's forgiving love when He says: ***But with You forgiveness!*** “**But**” expresses awe that the absolutely holy God is willing to strike all my sins from the record when I have offended His majesty so deeply and insulted His glory so repeatedly and arrogantly. *Who can understand such a gift as this? It is unspeakably surprising and incomprehensible.* When God says those famous words about Himself in Isaiah 55:9: **“For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts,”** He is describing the mystery of forgiveness.

2. Divine forgiveness is heartfelt: *But with You there is forgiveness.*

Forgiveness is not only something that God does; it is something that dwells with Him. It lives deeply in His character and heart. It belongs to His nature to forgive those who call upon Him in repentance and humility. The Bible says that **God delights in mercy.** (Micah 7:18) In Psalm 86:4-5 David prays: **To You, O Lord, I lift up my soul, for You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in mercy to all those who call upon You.** No sinner is so evil or so untouchable as to be turned away from God when he reaches out to Him for mercy. God turns none away because forgiveness lives in Him.

3. Divine forgiveness is unique with the LORD God: *But with You there is forgiveness.*

With You means that here is the One Place where you can find real and total forgiveness. Who is this “You” of verse 4? He is the **LORD** – the covenant God – and the **Lord** – the mighty Creator God – of verse 3. (see v. God says in Isaiah 45:21-22: **And there is no other God besides Me, a just God and a Savior; there is none besides Me. Look to Me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.**

Other religions may *talk* about forgiveness but it's not real. They just mean that if you try hard enough to be and do good, their god might find you worthy and ignore your sins. But a God who is true and holy cannot ignore sin. He requires that all our sin be paid in full

and that He receive all the glory, honor and righteousness that is due Him. But with this God – the LORD who appeared to Abraham and Moses and sent His Son to earth – there really is forgiveness.

This is the message of Micah 7:18 - **Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in mercy.** Who is like this God who pardons iniquity? There is no one like Him! As we shall see in a moment – only this God, the God of the Bible confessed in the Christian faith – is forgiving and has provided real forgiveness for sinners. In this way He has set Himself completely apart from all other gods.

4. Divine Forgiveness is just.

The God who is *merciful* and forgives sin is also the God who is *just* and **marks iniquities**. These two truths of Psalm 130:3-4 stand alongside each other and agree with each other not only in this Psalm but in all Scripture. The Bible says that God is just and therefore He holds the entire world – both Jews and Gentiles – accountable to Him for sin. (see Romans 3:19-20) He does not pretend our sin away or turn a blind eye to it. He condemns it completely and absolutely. When the Lord forgives our sins He does so in a way that is fully righteous and just, in a way that requires that every sin be paid for in full.

Our God is not the God of cheap and easy forgiveness. He does not sweep the dirt of our sins under the bed so that they're hidden from view yet are still really there and might come back to haunt and destroy us. But we can know for sure that when God forgives our sins, our sins are removed **as far as east is from west** and can never come back on us. (Psalm 103) In Jeremiah 50:20 the LORD says: **In those days and in that time, the iniquity of Israel shall be sought, but there shall be none; and the sins of Judah, but they shall not be found; for I will pardon those whom I preserve.** (Jeremiah 50:20) God pardons sin in such a way that it is dealt with in full justice, fully paid, and completely removed from existence.

5. Divine Forgiveness is costly

When the psalmist confessed His faith in God – **But with You there is forgiveness** – he knew what that meant. He knew it would require a bloody sacrifice. As he joined the thronging worshipers to go to the temple, and sang this “Song of Ascents,” he could smell the blood of the sacrifices as they climbed the temple mount. Soon he would see the altar where he would put his hand on the head of his bull or goat or sheep, pray his sins onto the animal, and kill it. Then the priest would collect the blood and pour it out at the base of the altar and burn the animal on top the animal.

The message was clear to every Israelite who believed God's Word: **without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.** (Hebrews 9:22) In Psalm 65 David describes what happens when God's people come to meet with God in the temple courts: **Iniquities prevail against me; as for our transgressions, You will provide atonement for them.** (Psalm 65:3) The word **atonement** means “to cover with blood” or “to remove from God's sight with a sacrifice.”

In the fullness of time, what the psalmist saw in *prophetic* form in the death of animals was *fulfilled* in the birth, suffering and death of Jesus Christ. Rather than count our iniquities *against us*, He counted every one of them *against His beloved Son!* **All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him [the Messiah] the iniquity of us all.** (Isaiah 53:6) What a high cost! Our forgiveness cost God the death of His beloved Son. It cost Jesus, the Son of God, the price of His life. He stood in our place as the sacrificial Lamb so that by faith in Jesus we could stand before God! Paul says that the record of our iniquities was nailed to Jesus Christ on the cross and **taken out of the way.** (see Colossians 2:14)

Out of the depths I have cried to You, O LORD. (Psalm 130:1) God has provided a way for us to be lifted out of the depths of our misery and His wrath! Jesus entered the depths of the pit for us when He suffered and died so that we could be rescued from the pit and lifted up to God's kingdom: ²**He brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps.** ³**He has put a new song in my mouth— praise to our God; many will see it and fear, and will trust in the Lord.** (Psalm 40:2-3)

Conclusion/Interlude

For us forgiveness is free, but for God it is very expensive. Let this truth always make us take our sin, every one, very seriously, not lightly. As we shall see in a moment: the price God paid for our sin to provide forgiveness for us makes us stand in awe, fear and wonder of God. *Do you think sin is not really a big deal? Think again! Only the death of the Son of God could pay for it!*

Instead, let the cross of Christ remind you just how insulting, intolerable and blasphemous our sin is to God. We define sin downward and minimize it, but put your sin in God's presence and see how horrible it truly is! When as a husband I am difficult toward my wife, I am hiding from her the loving, kind, patient leadership of God. When as a wife I am difficult toward my husband, I am telling Christ I don't want to submit to Him. When my goal in life is to get rich and move up the corporate ladder I am telling God He isn't enough wealth and power for me. Put your sin in the mirror of God's glory and see how far you fall short!

But let the cross of Christ also remind you just how wide and deep and long and high is the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge! (see Ephesians 3:16-18) How high is God's forgiveness – coming from highest heaven! How deep is God's forgiveness – going down to the deepest depths of hell for us. And how wide – covering our whole life: every thought and desire, every word and action. And how long – lasting a life time, taking us to eternity!