

WHAT MAKES FORGIVENESS POSSIBLE?

Psalm 51

Hebrews 9:19-28

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January 13, 2019

SCRIPTURE

¹ Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. ² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. ³ For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. ⁴ Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. ⁵ Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. ⁶ You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. ⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. ⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. ⁹ Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. ¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. ¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. ¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. ¹⁴ Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance. ¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. ¹⁶ For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. ¹⁷ The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. ¹⁸ Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, ¹⁹ then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar (Psalms 51 NRSV).

¹⁹For when every commandment had been told to all the people by Moses in accordance with the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the scroll itself and all the people, ²⁰saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that God has ordained for you." ²¹And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. ²²Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. ²³Thus it was necessary for the sketches of the

heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves need better sacrifices than these. ²⁴For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. ²⁵Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; ²⁶for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. ²⁷And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, ²⁸so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him (Hebrews 9:19-28 NRSV).

MESSAGE

The vast majority of Christians around the world use a ritual with water called “baptism” to represent entrance to or identification with the Church. Many churches will place a baptismal at the physical entrance to the sanctuary to remind believers, as they gather for worship, what baptism means. Through baptism we are numbered with the visible community of God’s people.

Jesus commanded his followers to baptize but did not explicitly describe how baptism was to be done, other than in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Early Christian art depicts Jesus being baptized by John with water poured from a shell. A first century Christian document called *The Didache* reveals that the early Christians had a pragmatic approach as to the method of baptism and no single way was designated as the right and only way to do it.

Over time, some churches preferred to immerse as it seemed to best represent death and resurrection (Rom 6:4-5; Col 2:12). Some preferred to pour as it seemed to best represent the outpouring of the Holy Spirit who joins us to the Body of Christ (Acts 1:4-5; 2:17; Joel 2:28; 1 Cor 12:13). And some preferred to sprinkle as it seemed to best represent forgiveness and cleansing from sin (Lev 16:14-14; Ezek 36:25; Heb 10:22).

It is easy to see how immersion represents death and resurrection. Going under water is like a burial and coming up out of the water is like being raised from death. It is also easy to see how pouring water can represent the pouring of the Spirit. But what in the world does sprinkling have to do with forgiveness? I must confess that the last thing on my mind when I get caught in the rain in a parking lot is, “This is wonderful! I must be forgiven!” Instead I am thinking, “Rats! I’m getting wet. How fast can I get to my car?”

A clue as to how sprinkling came to be associated with forgiveness can be found in Psalm 51, a psalm of King David. David says, "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean" (51:7). This psalm was written by David when Nathan had come to him after David committed adultery with Bathsheba and arranged for her husband, Uriah, to die in battle. David pleads for forgiveness. "Purge" is a translation of a Hebrew term meaning "un-sin." David wants God to take away all the effects of sin in his life. This is the meaning of forgiveness in the broadest sense of the word.

The word "sin" is seldom used today outside the church except in derision or as an example of a petty misdeed. Politicians speak of a "sin tax" and by that they mean taxing items like alcohol and tobacco products. But this trivializes the word. A member of Rick Warren's church asked him, "If I smoke, will I go to hell?" Warren replied, "No. But you'll smell like you did."

The biblical story tells us that sin is a far more serious matter than we think it is. The condition of Sin is the cause for the various manifestations of Sin in the world. War, hatred, bigotry, murder, envy, selfishness, theft, adultery, indifference and gossip are just some of the symptoms of this condition. The symptoms are not equal in their seriousness, for example, murder is more heinous than gossip. But all "sins" point to the condition of Sin and the fact of Sin points to our need for forgiveness.

David knew he needed forgiveness. He also knew that the hyssop plant was used in most of the sprinkling ceremonies having to do with the removal of the effects of sin. (The plant that is referred to as hyssop in the Bible may not be the plant we refer to as hyssop today but the fact that it is called hyssop can still remind us of the biblical hyssop.) David uses the symbolism of the hyssop plant to underscore the desperateness of his situation.

There are several sprinkling ceremonies in the Old Testament that have to do with the removal of the effects of sin. These effects include: bondage, death, defilement, and alienation. Sometimes blood was sprinkled and other times water was sprinkled. I will highlight four of the ceremonies.¹

The first ceremony is part of a festival that is known to most of you. It is the festival of Passover. The first Passover took place when the people of Israel were slaves in Egypt. In one final, mighty act of deliverance, God led the Israelites out of slavery into freedom. To demonstrate his mighty power and force the Egyptians to release their Israelite slaves, God was going to kill all the firstborn of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh to the firstborn of the Egyptian cattle. The people of Israel were to celebrate their deliverance on

¹ I have simplified this somewhat in order to provide the big picture.

that night by killing and roasting and feasting on a lamb. Each household was to take hyssop, dipped in the blood from their lamb, and sprinkle the blood on the lintels and doorposts of the home (Ex 12:22). Wherever God saw that blood marking the door, he would "pass over" and spare the firstborn of that home. The sprinkling of blood represented liberation from bondage.

The second ceremony involved blood sprinkled on the altar in the Tabernacle and later the Temple (Lev 16:14). This was for atonement. Atonement means a price is paid to repair a broken relationship and make it one again. If you mispronounce atonement as "At-One-Ment" it will help you remember what it means.

Because Sin brought death the price needed to atone for Sin is life. This is the rationale behind the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament. Sacrifice is a vivid reminder of the seriousness of this problem. We associate death with the most serious of matters. Sacrifice points to the seriousness of Sin – apart from God there is no life.

But there is more to it. The sacrifice is meant to be a substitution. Whenever an Israelite saw the sacrifice of animals, the blood was a graphic reminder that the innocent animal had died in his or her place. The classic verse for this is in Leviticus, "For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life" (Lev 17:11 NIV).

The blood represents life. The death of the innocent is a substitution for those who deserve death (namely, us). Over and over again in the minds of the Israelites there was this teaching that the sacrifice was a substitution.

The third ceremony concerned defilement. Originally the word defile meant to make something dirty or unclean. Later it came to mean to make something unuseable. The Bible tells us that King Josiah defiled a certain shrine, meaning he made it unuseable (2 Kings 23:8). If a person engaged in certain kinds of unacceptable behavior they were considered ritually defiled and classified as useless. For example, if a priest was in contact with corpses he could be considered ritually defiled and his service in the Temple suspended.

This third ceremony involved sprinkling water using a hyssop stalk (Num 19:16-19). This indicated that the person was no longer defiled. The person was useful again and could fulfill their service, their purpose.

The fourth ceremony concerned alienation from the community. A common reason for alienation was a disease such as leprosy. There was a law that prevented lepers from

associating with healthy people. Whenever they came near to a person who was healthy they had to shout, "Unclean, unclean!" The manner in which they had to shout it was also humiliating. They had to cover the upper lip with their lower lip. Try that sometime. Try shouting something while your upper lip is covered by your lower lip. "Unclean, unclean!" It sounds grotesque. As soon as these words were shouted, all the healthy persons would run away. At every turn, the shame, horror and loneliness of being a leper was ground into their psyches. Many could not handle this and so took their own lives. It seems so unfair to be an outcast not for what you did but because of what life did to you. But this is part of the manifestation of sin in the world. This is why the world needs to be redeemed.

Sometimes a leper was cured of the disease. This was verified by a priest. Then there was a ceremony that involved using hyssop, water, and blood to welcome back the person who had been alienated from the community (Lev 14:1-7).

When David cried "purge me with hyssop" he had in mind all these ceremonies. He was asking God to remove the scourge of bondage, death, defilement, and alienation from his life. He was asking God to forgive him and take away all the effects of sin.

Now the author of Hebrews takes these four different images from the Old Testament and ties them all together into one.

¹⁹For when every commandment had been told to all the people by Moses in accordance with the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the scroll itself and all the people, ²⁰saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that God has ordained for you." ²¹And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. ²²Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins (Heb 9:19-22).

Throughout the book the author argues that rituals such as these four ceremonies point to the possibility of forgiveness but lack the power to make it a reality. Fortunately for us, Jesus Christ has come to make it a reality.

But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. ²⁷And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, ²⁸so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him (Heb 9:26b-28).

Because Christ has come to remove the effects of bondage, death, defilement, and alienation, the author later adds:

Let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water (Heb 10:22).

Jesus is the Lamb of God by whose blood we are set free from bondage to sin². He is the Resurrection and the Life who has conquered death and raises his children to everlasting life. He is the Mighty Redeemer who makes each believer an Onesimus³ – no longer useless but empowered to live useful lives for him. He is the Love which laid down his life for us and made us his friends.

In a few moments you will have the opportunity to come forward and sprinkle water on your forehead. There is no power in the water. There is no magic in the act. But may the sprinkling of the water remind you of who has the power. Christ's blood was sprinkled so you can know complete forgiveness and be free from enslavement to evil. His blood was sprinkled to conquer death and give you eternal life. He came to give you a fresh start and an authentic purpose. He came to make you his friend. And someday you will see him face to face and he will hold you tightly in his arms and welcome you like you were his lost brother or sister – because you are.

² It is interesting to note that John points out that hyssop was employed at the crucifixion (Jn 19:29-30).

³ The name Onesimus means “useful.” So Paul makes a play on words by saying, in effect, “Before he was *not* Onesimus but now he *is* Onesimus.” The love of Christ had changed him into the real Onesimus. Christ can do the same for anyone (see Philem 11).