

Sabbath School Lesson #7 – Our Forgiving God – 9-15 November 2019

Christ would have us acknowledge our guilt, that it may be washed away in the blood of the Lamb. “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper; but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy” (Proverbs 28:13). Our only safety is in confessing our sin to God, for in the day when every work shall be brought into judgment, with every secret thing (Ecclesiastes 12:14), our secret sins will be safe from observation, for God will have buried them in the depths of the sea and they cannot be found (Micah 7:19; Jeremiah 1:30), and God Himself will have forgotten them, so that He cannot make them known if He would. It is as blessed to be able to tell the Lord our secrets as it is to know His secret.

How does God forgive or deal with our sins? “Thou hast set our iniquities before Thee, our secret sins in the light of Thy countenance” (Psalm 90:8). Is this a matter for joy, or for sorrow? for gladness, or for despondency? Doubtless the most of those who read it do so with a feeling of fear and dread. The thought that all their sins are open before God, makes them tremble, and they wish to forget it. They cannot get over the mistaken idea that God is a stern, implacable tyrant, ever watching to find some sin to charge up against His creatures. And so in their minds they picture God as keeping a stern eye on those sins, in order that He may exact penance for every one of them. This is judging God by man; it is making Him altogether such an one as themselves. But the apostle Paul assures us that “whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope” (Romans 15:4). Therefore it must be that there is hope and comfort in the text of Psalm 90:8. Let us see what is the result of God’s setting our secret sins in the light of His countenance, for the Scriptures have much to tell us about it.

First let us take that wonderful blessing that God commanded Aaron and his sons to pronounce upon the children of Israel: “The Lord bless thee, and keep thee; the Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee; the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace” (Numbers 6:24-26). So there is grace in the shining of the face of the Lord. And what does grace do? The grace of God bringeth salvation (Titus 2:11). “By grace are ye saved” (Ephesians 2:9). “In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace” (Ephesians 1:7). “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound; that as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness, unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 5:20-21). So in the shining of the Lord’s face there is forgiveness and salvation – eternal life.

Further, there is peace in the lifting up of the countenance upon us. Peace is the opposite of enmity and strife. Sin is enmity. “The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (Romans 8:7). The giving of peace is the taking away of sin, and the bestowing of righteousness. “And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unreproveable in His sight” (Colossians 1:21-22). “For He is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition, . . . that He might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby” (Ephesians 2:14-15). In the lifting up of God’s countenance upon us there is the taking away of sin, and the giving of righteousness.

The Psalmist said, “There be many that say, Who will show us any good?” and gave the reply, “Lord, lift Thou up the light of Thy countenance upon us” (Psalm 4:6). The light of the Lord’s countenance brings good. Therefore when our secret sins are set in the light of His countenance, His goodness comes to take their place. And so, when sin was oppressing the Psalmist’s soul, he said, “Why art thou cast down O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me? hope thou in God; for I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance” (Psalm 42:5). The practical help afforded by the light of the Lord’s countenance is thus set forth: “We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us, what work Thou didst in their days, in the times of old. How Thou didst drive out the heathen with thy hand, and plantedst them; how Thou didst afflict the people, and cast them out. For they got not the land in possession by their own sword, neither did their own arm save them; but Thy right hand, and Thine arm, and the light of Thy countenance, because Thou hadst a favour unto them”

(Psalm 44:1-3). Read again of the blessings that come with the light of God's countenance: "Justice and judgment are the habitation of Thy throne; mercy and truth shall go before Thy face. Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound; they shall walk, O Lord, in the light of Thy countenance. In Thy name shall they rejoice all the day; and in Thy righteousness shall they be exalted. For Thou art the glory of their strength" (Psalm 89:14-17). So we see that when the Lord makes His face to shine upon us, mercy and truth are in the glance. His mercy puts His truth in the inward parts of those who walk in the light of His countenance.

When the chosen people were captives in Babylon, and their city and temple were in ruins, the prophet Daniel set his face to seek the Lord by prayer and supplications, and confessing his sin and the sin of his people, and said, "O Lord, according to all Thy righteousness, I beseech Thee, let Thine anger and Thy fury be turned away from Thy city Jerusalem, Thy holy mountain; because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and Thy people are become a reproach to all that are about us. Now therefore, O our God, hear the prayer of Thy servant, and his supplications, and cause Thy face to shine upon Thy sanctuary that is desolate, for the Lord's sake. O my God, incline Thine ear, and hear; open Thine eyes, and behold our desolations, and the city which is called by Thy name; for we do not present our supplications before Thee for our righteousnesses, but for Thy great mercies" (Daniel 9:16-18). The shining of the Lord's face upon His sanctuary, would be its restoration; His looking upon His people's desolations, would be their deliverance; so when God sets our iniquities before Him, it means forgiveness; and the light of His countenance upon our secret sins will take them all away. "Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, Thou that leadest Joseph like a flock; Thou that dwellest between the cherubims, shine forth. Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh stir up Thy strength, and come and save us. Turn us again, O God, and cause Thy face to shine; and we shall be saved" (Psalm 80:1-3). "Unto you that fear My name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in His wings" (Malachi 4:2). "For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord will give grace and glory; no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly" (Psalm 84:11).

The Lord is a God of glory; but His glory is His goodness. "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). But for their sin, they would not have come short of His glory; so that the perfect righteousness of God is His glory. And therefore when God gives His Son's Spirit (Galatians 4:6) to strengthen His people against sin, and to lead them in the paths of righteousness, it is "according to the riches of His glory" (Ephesians 3:16). His grace brings salvation; but when that has been accomplished, and the saints shine with the glory of God, through the ages to come, the glory with which they shine will simply reveal "the exceeding riches of His grace" (Ephesians 2:6-8). This is how it is done: "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). "God is a sun" (Psalm 84:11). The light and glory of God are seen in Christ, and Christ is "the Sun of righteousness" (Malachi 4:2). As the sun shines upon the earth, and causes it to bring forth fruit, and brings life and health and gladness, so the light of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ, shines in the hearts of men to cause righteousness and praise to spring forth. "For the fruit of the light is in all goodness and righteousness and truth" (Ephesians 5:9).

But God is not partial in His favours. The Lord is no respecter of persons. When we are exhorted to love our enemies, to bless them that curse us, to do good to them that hate us, and to pray for them that despitefully use us and persecute us, the reason given is "that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven; for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:44-45). The sun shines as brightly upon the fields of the infidel as upon those of the Christian. "There is nothing hid from the heat thereof." Thus it is with God. "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men" (Titus 2:11). There is not a soul on earth upon whom the sunlight of God's grace does not shine. "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Romans 5:20). "God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). And "He died for all." By the grace of God, Christ "tasted death for every man" (Hebrews 2:9). In the judgment it will appear that upon every man has the glory of God's grace shone, more than sufficient to take away all sin.