

# Help Our Unbelief

## The Apostles' Creed

*I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth,*

*And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.*

*I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.*

### Part 10: “The Forgiveness of Sins”

#### I. Scripture: Psalm 32:1-5

- In David’s experience, what happens when we *don’t* confess our sin? What happens when we do?

#### II. What this doctrine does not mean:

- That **Grace** is **Cheap**.
  - “You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body” (1 Cor 6:19-20 NLT).
  - “Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. ... Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: ‘ye were bought at a price,’ and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us” (Bonhoeffer).
  - “God’s grace and forgiveness, while free to the recipient, are always costly for the giver. ... From the earliest parts of the Bible, it was understood that God could not forgive without sacrifice. No one who is seriously wronged can ‘just forgive’ the perpetrator. ... But when you forgive, that means you absorb the loss and the debt. You bear it yourself. All forgiveness, then, is costly” (Keller).

- That God pretends that our sins didn't **Happen**.
  - Forgiveness doesn't mean there is no "remnant" of them in our lives; nor that there are not natural consequences and/or divine discipline as a result.
  - It's God not charging you with them, but pardoning you for them, covering over them (Rom 4:7), removing their guilt as far as east from west (Ps 103:12), and taking upon himself their guilt and absorbing their cost personally (2 Cor 5:21).
- That we can **Go on Sinning**.
  - "Well then, should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more of his wonderful grace? Of course not! Since we have died to sin, how can we continue to live in it?" (Rom 6:1-2, NLT).
  - "So what do we do? Keep on sinning so God can keep on forgiving? I should hope not! If we've left the country where sin is sovereign, how can we still live in our old house there? Or didn't you realize we packed up and left there for good? That is what happened in baptism. When we went under the water, we left the old country of sin behind; when we came up out of the water, we entered into the new country of grace—a new life in a new land!" (Rom 6:1-3, MSG).
- That **Grace is a Substance**, which the **Church Dispenses**.
  - "There actually is no such 'thing' as grace. That actually is a Medieval Roman Catholic teaching: that there is a 'thing' called grace that can be separated from the person of Jesus Christ. It is something Jesus Christ won on the Cross and he can bestow it on you. And there are at least seven ways it can be bestowed on you and they all, as it happens, turn out to be in the hands of the church. And you can have this kind of grace, and this kind of grace, and this kind of grace. There is no such 'thing' as grace! All there is is the Lord Jesus himself. ... Christianity is Christ because there isn't anything else. There is no atonement that somehow can be detached from who the Lord Jesus is. There is no grace that can be attached to you, transferred from him. All there is is Christ and your soul" (Ferguson).
  - Grace is Jesus Christ, coming to us, "clothed in the gospel" (Calvin).

### III. What this doctrine *does* mean:

- Three sorts of sins are forgiven:
  - We are **Sinners**, and yet we are forgiven.
    - "O God, I was born in sin, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps 51:5).
    - "We are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners" (Sproul).

- Jonathan Edwards said that the doctrine of original sin is the one empirically verifiable Christian doctrine. Look around. If even some are not born in sin, we'd expect some of those not, in fact, to sin. But all obviously do.
  - We sin by **Omission** (James 4:17), and yet we are forgiven.
    - “Any want of conformity to ... the law of God” (WSC).
  - We sin by **Commission**, and yet we are forgiven.
    - “For where no law is, there is no transgression” (Rom 4:15).
    - Any ... transgression of the law of God” (WSC).
  - A full expression of all these three aspects is **Justification**.
    - Not only “just as if I never sinned” but also “just as if I was not born in sin and just as if I always fully and faithfully represented the character of God in every opportunity to do so, in my attitudes, words, and actions.”
    - This is what it means to be “counted righteous in Christ”. See Gal 2:16; Rom 5.
- In Christ we have heard “the glorious ‘**But**’” (Packer).
  - “If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared” (Ps 130:4).
  - “You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked ... . But God, being rich in mercy ... made us alive” (Eph 2:1ff).
- “Forgiveness is **Pardon** in a **Personal** setting” (Packer).
  - The woman who was a “sinner” with the alabaster jar (Lk 7:37ff).
  - The paralytic lowered through the roof (Matt 9:5).
  - “There is nothing more difficult than to believe the forgiveness of sins” (Olevianus). Believing “this is my body, this is my blood, *given for you*” is what makes it personal, and difficult (Lk 22:20). The key is to believe it, while never losing the wonder of “amazing grace.”
- We must be **Humble!**
  - “It is the gift of God, ... so that no one may boast” (Eph 2:8-9).
- There is no **Failure** so bad that it can keep us from **Forgiveness**.
  - The Diocletian persecution and the “traitors” controversy, AD 301.
  - Nicene Creed: “We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.”

- “The forgiveness of sins” ended up in the baptismal formula, later the AC.
- “As a handful of sand thrown into the great sea, so are the sins of all flesh in comparison with the mind of God. And just as a strongly flowing stream is not obstructed by a handful of dust, so the mercy of the creator is not stemmed by the [sins] of his creatures” (Isaac the Syrian, 7th-C).
- We ought to celebrate the **Lord’s Supper** frequently!
  - “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:28).
  - The Table humbles the proud and exalts the downcast. It puts the picture of forgiveness, its great cost, and the wondrous love that bore that cost, before our eyes, when all of us are together, over and over again.

#### IV. Discussion

- How does the biblical revelation of “the forgiveness of sins” surprise, confuse, encourage, correct, thrill, startle, or delight you, and challenge you to live differently?
- What (if any) roadblocks remain for you? How do you need the Lord to “help your unbelief”?