

398 Deliverance for the Captives

In view of how things are going in this world these days, it is timely to remind ourselves briefly of the situation between Almighty God our Creator and the human race. For a start, every human being is still made “in God’s image” and thus matters to Him, and should also therefore matter to us.

But there is bad news too. Because of the Fall of Genesis 3, all of us are “born into sin”, “the wages of sin is death” and “without shedding of blood there is no remission” (Romans 5.12 & Romans 6.23 / Hebrews 9.22). So, putting it bluntly, in our natural, unforgiven state, we are all on the proverbial “Death Row” as far as God is concerned, facing both physical and - far worse - spiritual death, which involves eternal, conscious separation from our loving Creator (egs., I Corinthians 15.17 / Ephesians 2.1,5 / Colossians 2.13 / Luke 16.19-31). Jesus is surely not joking when He speaks often in His parables of “weeping and gnashing of teeth”.

This reality of our dire spiritual state before God is of course offensive to Man in his natural state. He ignores it, denies it (as in atheism and humanism), or tries to overcome it by following substitute Faiths based on good works (as in Islam and eastern Faiths).

Yet in His loving mercy God has decisively acted. First, under His covenant with the children of Israel He emphasised the key principle of divine forgiveness being dependent upon the shedding of blood. Those animal sacrifices could only ever be tokens of His forgiveness (eg., Acts 17.24-31, especially verse 30a), pointing forward to Jesus, the true Lamb of God.

Second, in God’s good time Jesus was duly given (eg., Philippians 2.5-8). The significance of Jesus’ death is scripturally and beautifully set forth in these words from the Prayer of Consecration in the Book of Common Prayer: “Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who of thy tender mercy didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the Cross for our redemption; who made there (by his one oblation once offered) a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world ...”. Truly, “It is finished” (John 19.30), and what we could term God’s whole “framework of forgiveness” is now in place: Jesus’ death, in its universal reach because He Himself had no sin, can be claimed by anyone on the planet as being on his or her behalf (eg., I Peter 2.22 / I John 2.2).

Returning to that grim Death Row scene, the prisoners need only go to the Governor and claim the sacrificial death of Jesus in their place; the Governor signs their release papers and they walk out of the prison as captives now gloriously freed. This is what Jesus' ministry as Messiah and Lord is all about, "... to preach the gospel to the poor ... to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives ... to set at liberty them that are bruised ..." (from Luke 4.18-19 (Isaiah 61.1-2a)).

God's wonderful forgiveness comes in two stages. Our initial forgiveness is granted with God's gifts to us of faith, new birth and salvation, which are then publicly displayed by our confession in "Jesus Christ as Lord" at our baptism (eg., Romans 5.1-2; 8.1). Then, as Christ-redeemed sinners we regularly confess our sins before God (which damage our fellowship with Him but not our salvation), and receive God's fresh forgiveness through Jesus (eg., I John 1.6-2.2).

As we witness to these truths in a "not-that-bothered" world, we need to emphasise that these extraordinary blessings have to be positively claimed (a claiming prompted by the Holy Spirit). If the prisoner on that Death Row does nothing about the Free Pardon available along the corridor in the Governor's office, then so be it – nothing will change and death will duly come.

That Philippian jailer – who ironically was just as much a prisoner on Death Row as anyone else – blurted out "What must I do to be saved?". He got the answer, and, praise God, it happened! (Acts 16.25-33).

There is that other question too which we occasionally come across in these Reflections, "What must I do to be lost?", or, more accurately, "What must I do to REMAIN lost?". The answer is tragically simple – "Nothing".

We have the Lord's multitude of promises, such as "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts" (Zechariah 4.6b); and, "God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind" (II Timothy 1.7).

There is no need for us to fear. There is every need for us to warn and assist, and then to leave each person's eternal destiny in the hands of our "almighty and most merciful Father" and of His Son the Lord Jesus Christ, who "hath done all things well" (Mark 7.37).

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