

BLESSED IS THE MAN

In William Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*, a Scottish general, at the instigation of his wife, murders the king of Scotland. Lady Macbeth is tormented by guilt, and she can find no relief. Her troubled spirit causes her to walk in her sleep at night. On one occasion of her 'slumb'ry agitation,' a physician and a lady in waiting observe her rub her hands together, and say:

Yet here's a spot. Out, damned spot, out, I say! One. Two. Why then, 'tis time to do't. Hell is murky. Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account? Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him? The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now? What, will these hands ne'er be clean? No more o' that, my lord, no more o' that. You mar all with this starting. Here's the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.

Lady Macbeth thought she had blood on her hands, and so she did, but in a figurative one, and not in a literal one. Her consciousness of guilt vexed her soul, and she could find no rest. Shakespeare's play illustrates that the guilt of sin is an unbearable thing, and is enough to drive insane those that receive no forgiveness. Apart from Christ, there is no forgiveness. With Him, however, there is forgiveness, and peace with God.

After the Exodus, when Israel at Mount Sinai rebelled against the Lord, and broke His law, the Lord would have destroyed them, but Moses interceded for them. He appealed to the Lord to protect His reputation as one who is faithful, and to remember the covenant He made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. So, the Lord heard Moses's plea, and did not destroy Israel. (Exodus 32:7-14) Later, when the Lord revealed His glory to Moses, He said to Moses:

The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation. (Exodus 34:6, 7)

The Lord revealed Himself as a God who is severe, and punishes sinners, but who is also merciful, and forgives sinners that repent.

King David understood both his sin, and the Lord's mercy. In the Book of Psalms, he wrote:

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile. When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer. I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. (Psalm 32:1-5)

David, like all men, sinned. He found that, if he hid his sin, and did not confess it, then he was miserable. He groaned all day long, and his body was weak and sore. Day and night he felt the weight of God's hand, the weight of his conscience, upon him. His soul was fevered, and parched. Finally, he acknowledged his sin. He

confessed it to the Lord, and, when he did, the Lord forgave him. The Lord forgives them that acknowledge their sins; He forgives them that do not conceal, but rather confess their sins. By experience, David learned that the man whose sin the Lord forgives is a blessed man, a happy man, at peace with God, and with himself.

In the days of the divided monarchy of Israel and Judah, the people rebelled against the Lord, and the Lord sent prophets to call them to repent, and to warn them of their punishment if they should not. The people were wicked, yet they, hypocritically, continued to observe the ceremonies the Lord had prescribed to them. Through Hosea the prophet, the Lord said to the people of the two kingdoms:

O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee? O Judah, what shall I do unto thee? for your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away. Therefore have I hewed them by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of my mouth: and thy judgments are as the light that goeth forth. For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings. (Hosea 6:4–6)

The people sometimes did good, but the good they did was superficial and fleeting. So, the Lord spoke judgment against them. God required sacrifice, but the sacrifices were void if the hearts of the ones offering were not penitent. God gave the ceremonial law, but the keeping of it meant nothing without the keeping of the moral law.

To Isaiah the prophet, the Lord described the people of Judah this way: “Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward.” (Isaiah 1:4) The people of Judah had corrupted themselves. They had turned away from the Lord. Concerning the city of Jerusalem, the Lord said:

How is the faithful city become an harlot! it was full of judgment; righteousness lodged in it; but now murderers. Thy silver is become dross, thy wine mixed with water: Thy princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves: every one loveth gifts, and followeth after rewards: they judge not the fatherless, neither doth the cause of the widow come unto them. (Isaiah 1:21–23)

The city of Jerusalem had been a good city, but, in Isaiah’s time it was wicked. It was unfaithful to the Lord. It had become like a prostitute who sells her body for money. The people had forsaken the Lord. At one time, righteous men had lived there; then, murderers. At one time, the rulers of the city had been concerned with justice; then, the rulers themselves rebelled against God’s law, and they conspired with their advisers to steal from the people. The judges took bribes to pervert justice. They had no care for the orphan and the widow. They had no interest in helping the helpless. The city had once been like silver, but then like dross; once it had been like fine wine, but then like wine diluted with water. It had become altogether worthless.

The Lord said what He would do concerning sinful Judah and Jerusalem:

Therefore saith the Lord, the LORD of hosts, the mighty One of Israel, Ah, I will ease me of mine adversaries, and avenge me of mine enemies: And I will turn my hand upon thee, and purely purge away thy dross, and take away all thy tin: And I will restore thy judges as at the first, and thy counsellors as at the beginning: afterward thou shalt be called, The city of righteousness, the faithful city.

The Lord was angry, and would ease Himself by taking vengeance upon His enemies. They were like silver mixed with tin. He would purge away the dross, and leave only the pure silver. We would install righteous judges and righteous advisers, as there had been in time past. The Lord would Jerusalem once again the faithful city.

The Lord said to His people:

Hear the word of the LORD, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah. To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the LORD: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. (Isaiah 1:10–15)

The people of Judah were like Sodom and Gomorrah, those wicked cities that the Lord destroyed with fire and brimstone. They were sinful, always breaking the moral law of God, and they were hypocrites, because they continued to observe the ceremonial law. They offered sacrifices for sin, thinking that by such offerings they would be absolved from their sins. A ritual, in itself, however, does not save a man from his sins. A ritual is but an outward sign of an inward state. The hearts of the people were not right, and so their ritual sacrifices were in vain. They were hard of heart and impenitent. So, their sacrifices meant nothing to the Lord. Worse, their sacrifices were repugnant to Him. They, because of their wicked hearts, had made sinful the very rituals that the Lord had prescribed, and He commanded them to stop. He despised both the sacrifices, and those that offered them. The people continued to pray to Him, but He refused to hear them. When they opened their hands to Him in prayer, He closed his eyes to them. They offered the bloody ritual sacrifices, but to no avail, because they already had on their hands the blood of the people they murdered.

The people were sinful, and so the Lord was angry with them. What could they do to prevent their destruction? What could they do to be right with God? The prophet said:

Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. (Isaiah 1:16–18)

If the people would be right with God, then they had but to repent. They had to confess their sins, and to have remorse for them. They had to admit that they were wrong, and God was right. They had to turn away from their sins and to turn to God. They had to cease sinning, and to do right. They oppressed the widow and the orphan; they had to care for them. If they would repent of their sins, and throw themselves on the mercy of the Lord, then the Lord would forgive their sins, and they would have peace. The prophet stated for then the simple terms of Lord's covenant with His people: "If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: But

if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it. (Isaiah 1:19, 20)

Jesus, early in His earthly ministry, saw one Levi, later called Matthew, sitting at his tax booth, collecting taxes. The Jews despised them because they collaborated with the Roman state, and because they took more in tax than they had any right to. Jesus called Levi to be his disciple, and Levi left everything, and followed Jesus. In those days, tax collectors were pariahs. Levi invited Jesus and his other disciples to his home, and prepared a great feast for him, and for tax collectors, and others, whom he had invited. The scribes, and Pharisees, religious leaders, complained that Jesus's disciples ate and drank with sinners. Saint Matthew, in his gospel, recorded that Jesus replied, "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." (Matthew 9:12, 13) The scribes and Pharisees were self-righteous, and Jesus, in His parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, taught that the penitent tax collector, and not the self-righteous Pharisee, was right with God. Yet, at Levi's house, Jesus said that, if man is self-righteous, and does not think he needs to repent, then Jesus can do nothing for him. Jesus ministered to them that acknowledged their sins, and repented of them.

Saint Luke recorded a similar event that happened some time later:

And Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. And, behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus, which was the chief among the publicans, and he was rich. And he sought to see Jesus who he was; and could not for the press, because he was little of stature. And he ran before, and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him: for he was to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up, and saw him, and said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for to day I must abide at thy house. And he made haste, and came down, and received him joyfully. And when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, That he was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner. And Zacchaeus stood, and said unto the Lord; Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold. And Jesus said unto him, This day is salvation come to this house, forsomuch as he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost. (Luke 19:1–10)

Zacchaeus was not merely a tax collector, but chief among them. He had by his greed and extortion grown rich. He did no work, but took money from them that did. On one occasion, Jesus passed through Jericho, where Zacchaeus lived. Zacchaeus wished to see Jesus, but he could not, because many people were around Jesus, and Zacchaeus was small of stature. So, Zacchaeus ran ahead of Jesus and the crowd, and climbed a tree so that he could see. When Jesus was near, he looked up, saw Zacchaeus, and told him quickly to come down from the tree, because Jesus had to stay at Zacchaeus's house that day. Although Jericho was a city of priests, Jesus did not wish to visit the home of any priest, or Pharisee, or any other religious figure. He rather wished to visit the home of a tax collector, a great sinner, and loathed by the people. Zacchaeus quickly came down from the tree, and gladly welcomed Jesus. The people, for their part, complained that Jesus went to visit the home of a sinner. Zacchaeus, at his home, and in the presence of Jesus, acknowledged his sins, and that his sins had made him wealthy. He confessed his sins to the Lord. He repented of his sins, and vowed to make restitution. He would give half his wealth to the poor, and repay fourfold those he had defrauded. Jesus told Zacchaeus that his sins were forgiven. Because Zacchaeus had repented of his sins, and bore fruit in keeping with repentance, salvation came to him and his house. Zacchaeus was a true son of Abraham. Like Abraham, he had faith, and his faith

was in the Lord Jesus. Like Abraham, he obeyed the Lord; he did the works of Abraham. Jesus went to the home of Zacchaeus because it was his mission to seek and to save lost souls.

Saint Paul, in his epistle to the Romans explained how a man is right with God:

For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, Saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin. (Romans 4:3–8)

Abraham was not right with God because he kept the ceremonial law. He lived before the giving of the law. Abraham was right with God through faith. Besides, God operates, not on the principle of works and merit, but on the principle of faith and grace. Abraham believed God, and so God reckoned Abraham righteous. As David taught in the psalms, God imputes righteousness to a man, not because of his good works, but because he graciously forgives a man his sins. The man that is right with God because his sins are forgiven is a happy man indeed.

Let us always repent of our sins. Let us bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Let us be glad that our sins are forgiven, and that we are right with God.

Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.