

The Forgiveness of Sins

[Psalms 103:1-14](#)

The Apostles' Creed

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When was the last time you heard the word "sin" out in the public arena, in a White House briefing, for example? Of a corporate earnings report, or even Newsweek Magazine? You may see it on a menu describing the "sinfully delicious" chocolate mousse, but if you insert "sin" in a business meeting, your colleagues will glance at each other with a barely concealed smirk on their faces. Sin has been demoted, diminished, done away with. Ours is a post-modern world where "truth" is spelled with a lower case "t." Truth, we are told, is relative. You have your values and I have mine, and who am I to claim that mine are right and yours wrong? And if there is no universal standard of right and wrong, sin is an empty concept. Yes, there may be social maladjustments out there, and psychological alienation. There is surely economic disparity and interpersonal estrangement. But with good will, hard work, and the proper application of science, technology, and data, we can overcome these incapacities. There is no sin that needs forgiving, only ignorance that needs enlightening and disorders that need alteration.

It's soothing to hear that sin is obsolete, until, that is, a colleague spreads false rumors about you and ruins your chance for a promotion. Then notions of interpersonal estrangement won't cut it! Then you will insist that you have been sinned against, and the sin must be punished. When a con artist handed me a bogus check for the car I was selling several years ago, I wasn't interested in his psychological alienation; I wanted him caught and penalized for grand larceny. If you discover that your spouse is cheating on you, I doubt that theories of social maladjustment will make you feel better about it. If you're refused the house you want to buy because you don't have the right color skin, there is a law to which you can appeal, a law based on the universal conviction that racism is dead wrong.

Sin is real, and the author of the 103rd Psalm employs three different words to describe it: sin, transgression, and iniquity.

The term "sin" in verse 10 means, "missing the mark." And that's what our consciences tell us every day: we may shoot for moral perfection, but we never hit the target, let alone the bull's eye. As Paul put it in Romans 3:23, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The term "transgression" in verse 12 signifies bold defiance against God. Whereas "sin," may indicate a mere failure or mistake, "transgression" is a willful rebellion: "I know this is wrong, but I'm going to do it anyway!" The third term, "iniquity," occurs twice, in verses 3 and 10. Isaiah defines it best when he writes, "Your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God." And not only between us and God; iniquity is the shame that makes us duck behind the nearest hedge when we encounter someone whom we have wronged. So the three terms cover the length and breadth of disobedience, from simply missing the mark, to outright defiance, and to the resulting rupture in our relationships with others and with God.

I hasten to say that "sin" is not the central theme of this Psalm. If, on the one hand, the Psalmist has caught us in the net of sin, transgression, and iniquity, it is only in order to introduce us to the One who has the power to extract us from that net and to enfold us within his loving embrace. The very structure of the Psalm reinforces the triumph of God's forgiving grace over our sin and, for that matter, over God's own anger and accusations. Verse nine that God accuses us and is angry at our sinning. But in the previous verse we are told that "the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." And in the following verses we are assured that "he does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him." So even God's accusations are bracketed by God's mercy; God's anger dissolves under the steady flow of God's steadfast love.

The same structure occurs at the beginning of the Psalm. In verse three the Psalmist declares that we are guilty of iniquity and are deserving of the Pit. But in the previous verse he blesses God for all his benefits,

and in the following verse God "crowns us with steadfast love and mercy." Once again, our guilt and its penalty are surrounded and surmounted by a God who, as verse 5 puts it, "satisfies you with good as long as you live."

You say it every Sunday when you recite The Apostles' Creed, but do you really believe in the forgiveness of sins? Or are you still entangled in a net of guilt and self-recrimination? Does your god keep a radar gun pointed at you, and does your god keep a permanent record of your infractions? Then I invite you to meet the God who has conquered sin once and for all and who offers you a full pardon and a total amnesty. The Lord to whom Psalm 103 refers, the Lord who "forgives all your iniquity," is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ who, in the words of 1 Corinthians 15:3, "died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures." The little preposition "for" in that verse means "in order to deal with." Christ died "in order to deal with" our sins, and the deal is forgiveness, absolution, and a clean slate. "I will forgive their iniquity," God told Jeremiah, "and remember their sin no more." (Jeremiah 31:34)

Bruce Larson once told of a devout pastor in the Philippines who carried a secret burden of long-past sin. He had committed that sin during his time in seminary, and though he had repented of it and had never repeated it, he could not get over it. Even though he was ordained, he had no inner joy, no real sense of God's forgiveness. There was a woman in his parish who claimed to have visions in which Christ spoke to her. The pastor was skeptical, and to test her claim he said, "You say you actually speak directly with Christ in your visions. Let me ask you a favor. The next time this happens ask him what sin your pastor committed while he was in seminary." The woman agreed and went home. When she returned to the church a few days later, the priest said, "Well, did Christ visit you in your dreams?" "Yes, he did." "And did you ask him what sin I committed while in seminary?" "Yes, I asked him." "And what did he say?" "He said . . . 'I can't remember.'"

Confess your sins, your transgressions, your iniquities to God. Then, should the devil himself point an accusing finger at some sin you committed in the past, however shocking, however heinous, Jesus will step in and say, "I don't remember."

"For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us."