



Forgiveness in Three Images

By Rev. Dr. Peter Barnes

Christians always want to understand the world better than it understands itself in order that we can comment on it with light and understanding. However, we are members of another kingdom (Phil.3:20-21) ruled by a king who is not from our earthly world (John 18:36-37). For sinners, one of our first issues must be that of forgiveness – which is probably not first on the list of world priorities. In Psalm 103 the Psalmist gives us wonderful recounting of God’s mercies to us, and why we have every reason to praise the Lord and be thankful to Him. The evangelist, Paul Little, used to read this Psalm whenever he felt depressed, which is a therapy to be recommended. In the middle of the Psalm we find three images of forgiveness.

First, ‘as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him’ (Ps.103:11). People from ancient times were well aware of the extent and the splendour of the universe, although it was not measured in mathematical formulae. ‘The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims His handiwork’ (Ps.19:1). To contemplate the heavens above us even moved the almost unmovable Immanuel Kant. The Psalmist draws on this sense of wonder, and uses it as a picture of God’s steadfast covenant love toward those who praise and fear Him.

Secondly, ‘as far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us’ (Ps.103:12). The first line of Rudyard Kipling’s *The Ballad of East and West*, has been often quoted by those who have not read the poem itself: ‘Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet’. That is certainly true in terms of geography, which was Kipling’s point, although he went on to say that it was not true in terms of moral worth. The Psalmist’s point is that the geography is an

illustration of God’s forgiveness.

When the Bible tells Christians, those predestined in Christ, that we have ‘redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished upon us’ (Eph.1:7), it is saying something wonderfully extravagant but also wondrously true. The blood of Jesus cleanses us from ‘all sin’ (1 John 1:7). The penalty for sin has been paid, and there is nothing left to pay. Commenting on 2 Corinthians 5:21, Charles Spurgeon pointed out to Christians that ‘the Lord our Righteousness has put a divine robe upon you, so that you have more than the righteousness of mankind – you have the righteousness of God.’ His grace is sufficient for us; indeed, His grace is more than sufficient for us!

Thirdly, ‘as a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear Him’ (Ps.103:13). Australia has been the home to a spate of shark attacks during 2020, but at least one which was both frightening and bizarre has had a more pleasing outcome. On 17 July a ten-year-old boy was fishing from a boat with his father and two other men off the northwest coast of Tasmania when he was seized by a shark which dragged him into the water. Immediately, the father dived into the ocean to save his son, and succeeded in frightening the shark off and rescuing his boy. If a human father, sinful as he is, could do that for his child, how can we doubt what God has done, and will do, for His adopted children? This is precisely the analogy that Jesus gives in Matthew 7:7-11, to do with seeking blessings from our Father in heaven. Small wonder that J. I. Packer called adoption ‘the highest privilege of the gospel’. Out of His divine compassion, He adopts sinners into His family.

You and I are sinners in need of forgiveness from the God we

have offended. Sometimes we need to be warned; sometimes we need to be wooed. There are warnings sprinkled throughout Psalm 103 – we are as ephemeral as dust and grass and the flowers of the field (Ps.103:14-16) – but in verses 11-13 God gives us three images of His forgiveness, as the God who is rich in mercy (Eph.2:4). The heavens, the points of the compass, and the compassion of a father for his children each give us some

idea of something we can barely grasp. What can we say, but join the Psalmist in singing ‘Bless the Lord, O my soul!’ (Ps.103:1, 22)

Rev. Dr Peter Barnes, Moderator-General of the Presbyterian Church of Australia