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FORGIVENESS  
AND THE  
SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

by

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"THE PROTESTANT FAITH"

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## FORGIVENESS AND THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

To know that one has been truly forgiven rolls away a great weight from our consciences. This is true when forgiveness is extended to us by one of our fellows and it is especially true when we realise that God fully forgives those sins by which we have wronged Him. Christianity is characterised by forgiveness, and when we speak of a Christian spirit we mostly mean a forgiving spirit. Outside of Christianity the forgiving spirit is often mistaken for weakness and pusillanimity.

Right from the earliest pages of the Bible, God has declared that He is a forgiving God. Thus in Exodus 34, when God declared His character to Moses, He said that He was "The Lord, a God full of compassion and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin". Also the prophet Isaiah, speaking in God's name, said that if people would truly repent, God would blot out their sins, saying "Come now, and let us reason together, said the Lord, though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow, though they be as red as crimson they shall be as wool".

God's forgiveness is so complete that He describes it as forgetfulness. When He forgives, He never brings our sins to mind again. The Bible uses different pictures to describe the completeness of God's forgiveness. It says God puts our sins behind His back, or He blots them out as a thick cloud, or He casts them into the depths of the sea, or as in Psalm 103, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us". The point of all these descriptions is that our sins are completely obliterated from God's sight through forgiveness.

Our Lord Jesus Christ underlined the free forgiveness of God. At the same time He emphasised that if we are to enjoy God's forgiveness we must have a spirit of forgiving others ourselves; and He set us the example, by praying for those who were crucifying Him, saying, "Father, forgive them".

God's forgiveness is free, but it is not groundless; for it rests upon the fact that the Son of God became man that He might take on Himself the penalty we deserve, but which would crush us to powder. As St. Peter says "He bore our sins in His body on the tree", and as Isaiah puts it "The Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all". If we bear the penalty it will sink us down to Hell. But by becoming man Jesus took our curse so as to set us free from it. Forgiveness is free to us, although it was costly to God. Now through Jesus Christ full forgiveness is offered to sinners. The whole Bible unites in affirming that God freely forgives those who turn to Him with repentance for their sins and in faith in His promise to forgive them for Jesus Christ's sake.

If we enquire, How may we obtain God's forgiveness, the answer is that forgiveness is for the asking, if we ask in sincerity, repentance and faith. This is reflected in the Lord's Prayer where Jesus taught us to ask daily for forgiveness using the words "Heavenly Father, forgive us our trespasses". So then when we realise that God forgives, and that we need forgiveness, the way to obtain it is to ask for it. Nothing more. St. Paul says in Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus", and St. John could not make more clear the fact that God

forgives all who ask in Jesus' name, when he wrote in I John 1:9 "If we acknowledge our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness", and again, "The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin".

The Bible knows nothing of having to confess your sins to a priest or minister before God will forgive you. It does however insist that we must forgive others if we want God to forgive us.

Let us not turn aside from this biblical truth, but rather dwell on the fact that God forgives freely and completely those who have disobeyed Him, if they are sorry and return to Him. Whenever we are conscious of our sins, let us seek forgiveness from God in the way that Jesus has taught us, namely by asking in simple faith our Heavenly Father to forgive us our trespasses. For as St. John said "If we acknowledge our sins, God is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." He is faithful because He has promised it, He is righteous to forgive because Christ has died for our sins and his obedience cleanses us from all unrighteousness.

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