

Psalm 143

The Last Penitential Psalm

1. The last “Penitential Psalm” (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, and 130).
In the Bible, 7 signifying completion, fullness.
In each, the writer confesses his sin and asks God for mercy and forgiveness.

At first glance, we may ask why is Psalm 143 “Penitential.”
Only verse 2 acknowledges wrongdoing, and even then the confession of sin is **not personal**.
It only says, “*No one living is righteous before you.*”

It reminds us of **Romans 3:23**, “*All have sinned.*”
Only verse 1 asks for mercy.
The Psalm is mostly about David’s enemies (3-4), from whom he asks to be delivered (11-12).

Psalm 143 is still a “Penitential Psalm.”
Even though the opening verses are in the form of a general confession of sin rather than a personal one, they nevertheless hit on **the chief problem for anyone who seeks mercy from God** (and there are many different theories in the world about what man’s greatest need is (love, self-worth, self-belief, education):***God is righteous; we are not.**

- “righteous, righteousness, right, just, justify, justification”
- all translations of the same Greek root word
- general meaning common to all of them, even though their individual meaning may differ slightly

- Greek = “verb ‘justify’ is ‘dikaioo,’ noun ‘righteousness’ is ‘dikaiosune,’ adjective ‘righteous’ is ‘dikaios’”
- ***a definite and vital connection between the act of justifying and the righteousness of the individual who has been justified***
- in pagan Greek literature, the “justified person” was one who did not selfishly or self-forgettingly transgress the boundaries set for him in life, and he gave freely of himself to others while at the same time desiring what was rightly his without abandoning his rightful claims
- the Apostle Paul uses “justified” in its purely classical sense in ***Romans 5:7***, “*Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die.*” Paul’s point, when connected to ***Romans 5:6, 8***, “*You see, at just the right time, when we were still helpless, Christ died for the ungodly. But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us,*” is that ***we were neither good, nor righteous, and yet Christ died for us.***
- in the biblical sense, “justified” means “what is right, conformable to right, answering to the claims of what is right, apart from any consideration of whether current customs or any other factors determine the order or direction
- in the biblical sense, “justified/righteous” and “good” (Greek “*agathos*”) are synonymous only because “justified/righteous” presupposes an unchanging, objective norm to which one conforms and is then called “good,” whereas the subject of being “good” apart from being “justified/righteous” presupposes a subjective norm of what is good derived from itself
- New Testament usage of the words “justify and righteous” are not subjective but objective; the content of their meaning is not determined by the one interpreting the passage; if that were the case, what is righteous one day, may not be

righteous the next day; the content of the meaning in that case would be dependent upon the fluctuating standards and ethics of men; and so in our world today we see **a relativity of truth, and this method of interpreting Holy Scripture is a vicious thing, for what is right one day is not right the next**

- *God is the objective standard which determines the content of the meaning of "righteous" ("dikaios"), and at the same time He keeps the content of that meaning constant and unchanging because **He is the unchanging One.** (Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 1:12; 13:8)*
- **"Righteousness in the biblical sense is a condition of rightness the standard of which is God, which is estimated according to the Divine standard, which shows itself in behavior conformable to God, and has to do above all things with its relation to God, and the walk before Him. It is called "*dikaiosune theou*," "**the righteousness of God**" in Romans 1:17; 3:21, "*In the Gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed by faith from first to last; as it is written, 'But the righteous shall live by faith.'* But now apart from the Law (doing good things to be "good") the righteousness of God has been revealed, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe (God's standard of "*righteousness/justification, not man's*) for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus."**
- The definition of "right, righteous, justification" belongs solely to God, not to man; God defines what is right and what is wrong, not man; and God's standards are unchanging, no

matter the direction of the customs of culture; and His standard of righteousness *carries value before Him*, **Ephesians 4:24**, *“In reference to your former manner of life as an unbeliever, lay aside the old self which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.”*

- and now God’s standard of righteousness has come into the world in the Gospel to measure man by a standard different than his own, and different from the world’s standards; to the world “righteousness” is merely a social virtue with a vaguely religious background, and this profanes the truth; to the God-lover and Jesus-follower, “righteousness” is thoroughly a “religious” concept and completely a “spiritual” endeavor, designating the acceptable and normal relationship between him and his behavior and His God; ***this is why each person will “give account of himself to God,”*** how did he measure up to God’s standard of required righteousness
- again, man’s chief problem: God is righteous; he is not; God is the judge (Psalm 143:2) of all and must act justly. How can He show mercy to sinners like ourselves? ***How can God be just and justify the sinner at the same time?*** This is the very question the Apostle Paul raises in **Romans 3:25-26**, *“God displayed Christ publicly as an atoning sacrifice in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate God’s righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed (God removed the penalty of sins committed by believers before Christ had died to cover them; by faith Old Testament believers looked forward to the cross of*

Christ, today believers look back to the cross of Christ); for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that God would be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus

- *the ultimate and only answer for man's dilemma is the cross of Jesus Christ; Jesus suffered for our sin and has become our righteousness*
- justification/righteousness before God in the biblical sense therefore is the act of God removing from the believing sinner, his guilt and the penalty incurred by that guilt, and bestowing on him a positive righteousness, not of himself, but of Christ; the believer now standing in the righteousness of Christ is declared innocent and uncondemned in every point of God's righteous Law and Standard, for time and for eternity
- "justify, justification, righteous, righteousness" as used of man in his relation to God, have a legal, judicial basis; God is the Judge, man is the defendant; God is the standard of all righteousness
- in Israel's wilderness Tabernacle, the white curtains of the court symbolized the righteousness which only God is, the righteousness which God ***demand***s of any human being who ***desires to fellowship with Him***; and the white curtains also symbolized the righteousness which God provides on the basis of acceptance on the sinner's part, of the Lord Jesus Christ, who perfectly satisfied the just demands of God's holy standards which we have broken

- a just person before God is therefore one who has been declared so (Romans 1:17), not upon his own merit

So Psalm 143 is instructive for those who are truly penitent, because receiving mercy from God is not the whole of being a Christian. It is merely the place to begin, as King David does, with a plea for mercy in verses 1 and 2. But then he describes his dangerous situation, reminds himself of God's past work on his behalf, seeks God's guidance, and at last asks for God's preserving grace so he might continue to live and serve Him.

2. The Reasons Urging His Soul to Prayer:

- a. 143:2, "A Consciousness of moral unrighteousness." "No man will ever pray rightly until he is made deeply conscious that he has no claims whatever upon the favor of God, and that if his burdens are relieved at all, they must be relieved by sovereign mercy alone."
- b. 143:3-4, "A Terrible Sense of Danger."
- c. 143:5, "An Encouraging Reminiscence of God."
- d. 143:6, "An Intense Craving of the Heart." "There are two figures here indicating the craving of the heart after God. The first is taken from human life. As the suffering child stretches forth its hand to its mother, as the dying patient to his physician, as the drowning man to the rope thrown out for his rescue, so the soul of the penitent stretches out his hands to God. He must have Him or die and be lost. God is the necessity of necessities, **the Supreme need**. Another figure indicating the

craving of the heart after God is the longing of the parched earth for fertile showers.”

Conclusion

When Martin Luther wrote his Ninety-five Theses 500 years ago and posted them on the Castle Church door in Wittenburg, which launched the Great Reformation, the first of his theses read, *“When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said ‘repent,’ He meant that the entire life of believers should be one of repentance.”* Luther was opposing a distortion of the biblical idea of repentance which had grown up in the church of the Middle Ages (476-1500 AD). In the Latin Vulgate, which was the common Bible of those days, **Matthew 4:17**, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near,”* had been translated in part by the words *“do penance.”* This turned repentance into a sacrament Christians should do from time to time. When Luther studied this and other such texts in the Greek New Testament recently published by the Renaissance scholar Erasmus, he discovered doing penance was not the idea at all.

Luther discovered that Jesus demanded a radical change of mind resulting in an equally deep transformation of one’s life. He later wrote to his spiritual father and mentor, Staupitz, *“I venture to say they are wrong who make more of the act in Latin than of the change of heart in Greek.”*

This understanding of repentance as affecting all of life needs to be recovered by evangelical churches today, and a better understanding of Psalm 143 may be one way to begin.

In April 1996, the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals held a conference of key evangelical leaders at Cambridge Massachusetts, and produced the “Cambridge Declaration.” One of the papers presented at this

conference was by Sinclair B. Ferguson on the nature of repentance. Ferguson discussed the errors of the Middle Ages and argued that at least five features of that old medieval Christianity are noticeable now in contemporary evangelicalism:

1. Repentance has increasingly been seen as a single act, severed from a lifelong restoration of godliness.
2. The measure for Christian living has increasingly been sought in a “Spirit-inspired” living voice within the Church rather than in the Spirit’s voice heard in Scripture.
3. God’s Divine presence was then brought into the Church by individuals with “sacred powers of authority” deposited within them; and now today we see the “cult of the personality” and the so-called authority of tradition holding sway over Scripture.
4. The worship of God is increasingly presented as a spectator event of visual and sensory power, rather than a verbal event in which we engage in a deep soul dialogue with the Triune God. (The preeminence of Scripture, preaching, teaching)
5. The success of ministry is measure by crowds and cathedrals rather than by the preaching of the cross, by the quality of Christians’ lives, and by faithfulness.

Each of David’s items in Psalm 143 needs repentance to be present: dangerous conditions, remembrance of God’s past works, pleas for God’s guidance, desire for God’s preserving grace to live and serve Him. Repentance must be part of each of these matters for us too; because **none of us do even the best of what we do without sin**. Luther once wisely said, “*I have learned that even my repentance needs to be repented of.*”