

THE BLOTTING OUT OF OUR TRANSGRESSIONS

Isaiah 43:25 tells us something supremely important about God and also about ourselves. Isaiah wrote: “I, even I, am the One who blots out your transgressions, for My own sake, and I shall not remember your sins.”

The prophet said this although the people of Judah had been wicked, and although they still had to face stern discipline. Three verses later God still says through Isaiah, “I shall disgrace the dignitaries of your temple. I shall consign Jacob to destruction and Israel to scorn.” Cities in Israel had been practising idolatry. God would not ignore His Word. He had said, many years before, that, if the people of any city worshipped other gods, the other Israelites had to put them to the sword and destroy the city completely (Deut 13:12-15).

The Hebrew word for “blot out” was used in an instructive range of contexts. It was used for a person wiping his mouth (Prv 30:20). It was used for wiping tears from the face (Isa 25:8). In Numbers it was used for curses that had been written on a scroll, and washed off into bitter water to be drunk, to test whether a man’s wife had been unfaithful to him (Nm 5:23). In order to spare Israel after they had worshipped the golden calf, Moses interceded for them. He said that if the Lord would not forgive them, He should blot out his own name from the book that He had written (Ex 33:32-33). We can hardly imagine anyone who would volunteer such a thing. The picture of wiping off was a very vivid one when God denounced the idolatry of King Manasseh of Judah: “I shall wipe Jerusalem as someone wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down” (2 Kng 21:13).

The word for “blot out” was often used in contexts of judgment. God threatened through Moses that, if anyone heard God’s stipulations, but congratulated himself and thought, “I shall be safe even if I go my own stubborn way”, God would blot out his name from under the sky (Deut 29:19-20). This does not mean extinction rather than ongoing torment in the age to come, but complete removal from this present life. The same Hebrew word for “blot out” had the same meaning as “exterminate.” God sent the flood to blot out all existing things (Gn 7:23) together with human lives (Gn 6:7; 7:4). Full erasure from the face of the earth was also the meaning of this verb “blot out” in contexts of judgment. After the worship of the golden calf God had said, “Let me alone, that I may destroy them and blot out their name under the sky” (Deut 9:14).

People whom God forgives do not have to live righteous lives for a set time before they can be forgiven. Those whom God forgives are wicked and ungodly (Rm 4:5), and after God forgives them they continue to sin because of their sinful natures.

God is eager to forgive. This is an amazing truth about Him, in spite of His justice and His wrath against sin. He had revealed His nature to Moses on Mount Sinai: “The LORD, the LORD, the merciful and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in unfailing mercy and truth. He preserves mercy for thousands, and forgives wrongdoing, rebellion, and sin.” God merciful nature runs like a silver thread through the book of Isaiah. He had said, “Although your sins are like scarlet, they will be as white as snow (Isa 1:18). This is a powerful description of how forgiven people look in God’s sight. It helps us appreciate the picture of blotting out transgressions in Isa 3:25. Another picture is used in the next chapter: “I have swept away your offences like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist” (Isa 44:22). Isaiah had used another picture in Isa 40:2: “Her sin has been paid for.”

The sins of the people of Judah had not been trivial. Quite often the Hebrew word for “transgression” is appropriately translated as “rebellion”, or “revolt.”

We get closer to the meaning of blot out in Is 43:25 in another series of passages where this Hebrew word is used. In this verse “blots out your transgressions” is parallel to “I shall not remember your sins.” Blotting out from one’s memory means obliterating from the memory. David asked that God would no longer remember his transgressions against him (Ps 51:1). Further in the psalm he prays: “Blot out all my iniquities” (Ps 51:9).

How comforting, then, for sinful people that God wants to be known as the One who blots out sinful people’s transgressions or rebellious acts, and does not remember them. The complete removal is put in another way in Ps 103: “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us” (Ps 103:12).

If we ask, “Why does God do such a thing?” this verse answers, “For My own sake.” There is nothing in sinful people to motivate God to act in this way. He does it for His own sake. It is His nature and His desire to blot out transgression.

If anyone asks, “How can this be squared with the New Testament, which says that God justifies, or forgives, “for Jesus’ sake?” the answer should not surprise anyone. Jesus Christ is the same Lord who said “I am” at the burning bush, and who told the Israelites at Sinai, “I am: the LORD, your God, and I have brought you out of slave quarters in the land of Egypt” (Ex 20:1). Prophets foretold Jesus Christ as “the LORD, our

righteousness” (Jr 23:6).

When anyone forgives, he chooses to pay the cost himself. The cost of the Lord’s blotting out of sin and erasing it from His memory. It was His own divine life, the shedding of the blood of His incarnate body in pain and shame. He blots out sin for His own sake, indeed!

This concept of not remembering sin any more is the heart of the New Testament, which Jeremiah foretold (Jr 31:34; Hb 8:12).

This has a good deal to say about why Christian people go to church. They certainly do not go to congratulate each other for being such fine, righteous-living people. They are not particularly outstanding. They go primarily to hear the good news about God’s forgiving nature and the self-effacing work of Jesus Christ, who earned this forgiveness for them at great cost. However, it is more than hearing about it. God is also particularly rich in the ways in which He offers, conveys, and seals His forgiveness to sinful people: through the heard assurance of the Gospel in the readings and the preaching of God’s Word, through baptism, through absolution, through the Lord’s Supper, and through the mutual encouragement of fellow-Christians. The confidence that God in Christ has wiped out their own sin is the reason why Christians also pray, “as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

The Scriptures use a rich number of ways in expressing this central article of the forgiveness of sins. Forgiving means that God does not credit our sins against us. Justification means that God credits us with the obedience of Jesus Christ Himself. Alongside these is reconciliation. God has Himself removed His just wrath against His enemies and proclaimed His peace (Rm 5:9-10). There is also the picture of being adopted, yes, even born anew, as children of God. In His parables Jesus used a series of concrete images for God’s forgiveness: debts wiped off, a lost sheep found, a prodigal son’s being given the best garment, shoes for his feet to make him different from a servant, a ring for his finger, (the equivalent of our right to sign cheques), and the prime calf butchered for him in a feast of joy. There is joy in the presence of God over a sinner who repents. God Himself rejoices when He forgives and restores. Praise God that in Christ He blots out our transgressions and erases them from His memory!