

## "Sin, Transgression, and Iniquity"

A sister asked how it is that 2 Chron. 6:36 and 1 John 3:6-9 are both true; and also how it is that when 1 John 3:1-9 is true of an individual, he still prays the Lord's prayer, "Forgive us our debts." Perhaps the answer will help others, as it did her, and therefore we publish it.

DEAR SISTER: The thought was intended to prevail that when we are made free from sin, we are made free from sinning, and therefore free from the power of sin. That is all told in the sixth chapter of Romans, in almost every verse. It is the truth.

Then, of course, there does appear something of a puzzle between 2 Chron. 6:36 and 1 John 3:6-9; and between 1 John 3:6-9 and praying, "Forgive us our debts." Yet that is all straight and plain when the matter is really understood. But of course, in understanding it, we have to go considerably below the surface of things, though even then it is simple and plain.

It is all suggested and outlined in the three words that the Lord uses in giving His name, in Ex. 34:7: "Forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." Now these three words express different phases of sin. Think carefully while we open the truth as to each one of these words.

Iniquity is a thing done with evil intent. Transgression is to pass over bounds, to go out of the way, and may be done without evil intent. Sin signifies in its root idea to miss the mark; that is, to aim at the right mark, to do our best to hit the mark, and yet miss it by coming short: this is the root idea in the original word defining sin.

Let us take up these words, one by one, and go backward with them, beginning with the original idea of sin. There is no human language that has any word of its own that originally expresses the idea, which we have in the word "sin." This idea of sin comes altogether from the Lord. So it is literally true of what sin really is. Now when the Lord brought Israel out of Egypt, He had to teach them this. Their minds were so darkened that they had lost all the true idea that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had from the Lord on this subject; and the Lord had to begin with them, as upon a blank paper, —and that paper black, too, —to teach them what He meant when He told them that they had sinned. In order to do this, He must select a word in their language into which He could instill this idea, and by which would be conveyed to their minds His thought.

In those days they used bows and arrows, with which to shoot; they practiced in this by shooting at a mark; and when one had aimed at the mark, the very best that he could do, and then had given to his arrow the strongest impulse that he was capable of, and yet missed the mark by his arrow falling short, those standing by to tell the result announced it by the word which, in Hebrew, signified to miss the mark by coming short. Now that particular word in Hebrew was the word chosen by the Lord through which he would convey to their minds what He meant when He said: "You have sinned; you have aimed to do right; you did your best, but you came short; that shortcoming is what I mean when I tell you that you have sinned; just as, when you aimed at your mark, and did your best to hit it with the arrow, you missed it by coming short."

By the continual training, which God gave to the Hebrew people, He had built them up to where they had a clear conception of this true idea of sin. But there came a time when the gospel, the truth of God, must be preached to all nations outside of Israel. At that time the Greek language, like all others, had in it no word expressing God's idea of sin; therefore the Lord must choose, in that language, a word by which he would convey to the people who thought in that language what he means when He says, "You have sinned." And He chose in the Greek language the identical word, which corresponds to the one, that he had chosen in Hebrew, which signifies to miss the mark. And as the Greeks had already carried into the field of thought the idea of the missing of the literal mark with the arrow by coming short, and had made that word express mental shortcomings, it was easy for the Lord's thought to pass by this word to the mind of the Greeks.

In both languages He chose the same word, which means to miss the mark by coming short, this you see shows us plainly enough that that is the original idea, the very root, of what is meant by the word "sin." And it is expressed in Rom. 3:23: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." These are simply two expressions for the same thing. To "fall short" is the explanation of the word "sinned."

Now when you and I know something is right and with good intent aim to do that right thing, — aim to hit the mark, —you know that we fall short; because every action must be perfect, to be accepted. You know that the very best that we could ever possibly do in that direction would fall short. And you know that everything that was ever done by anybody, except the Lord Jesus, has fallen short just that way, —has missed the mark, —and so is sin. This is why our very best efforts need to be actually displaced by the merit of Jesus Christ, which becomes our own by faith, before it can be accepted. We must be justified by faith, and the only righteousness that will avail in our behalf is the righteousness that is by faith of Jesus Christ. As every action of ours comes short of the perfect standard of the law of God, and as every such shortcoming misses the mark, it is sin; because the root idea of sin is just that thing, —to miss the mark by coming short.

Now in all this we were in the right line; we did not go out of the bounds; we aimed right, but came short.

There is another phase of this. Our view of the mark may have become obscure. In our efforts to hit the mark, we may have stumbled and passed out of the bounds, —crossed over the boundary of right into the field of wrong, —and so transgressed. Yet bear in mind that this transgression is not distinct from sin; it is only an extension of the idea of sin, a carrying further the coming short. This is also sin, though it is a phase of sin further off than the former one: it is out of the right line.

The next, "iniquity," is further off than this. It is not simply passing over the bounds into the field of wrong by some error of judgment, or stumbling; it is the doing of wrong, knowing it to be wrong, and intending to do it, though we know it to be wrong. This is iniquity, evil-doing. This, in turn, is yet a further extension of the idea of sin; it is further off from the mark than when one is aiming at the mark; and because this also misses the mark, it is sin. Yet this is a deeper phase of the original idea of coming short.

Of course the idea of sin covers all of these, even to the utmost, because sin is coming short. And it matters not how far short, even to being directly opposite of right, an action may come, it is sin. Yet taking the original, the right, idea of sin, and holding fast to that, you can see how these other two words are expressive of the one great thought of coming short.

There is not a soul on earth who does not fall short. Of course you say, "Yes." Very good. That is why we confess our sins, which is simply confessing to the Lord that what we have done has come short of perfection, —has fallen short of hitting the true mark that God has set up; and therefore we ask Him to put the merit of Jesus Christ in the place of our missing the mark. We ask Him to "forgive us our debts."

Our flesh is sinful flesh; there is in it the tendency to wrong and only wrong, —the tendency to pass over the bounds, —transgress. Now the Lord Jesus, dwelling within by His Spirit, delivers us from this power of sin that is in us, and holds us back from doing wrong. He condemns sin in our flesh, and so frees us from the power of sin. Thus we do not transgress, do not go over the bounds, we do not sin.

Now the other word: iniquity is evil doing, bad intent. This Jesus Christ abolishes in us, takes away from us, delivers us from, and gives us a new mind, a new heart, a new spirit, a new disposition, that neither wants to do evil nor even thinks of doing evil. We commit no iniquity.

Thus we are made free from all the life of sin that has bound us; we are made free from sinning, by the power of Christ holding us back from transgression; we are made free from iniquity, by being given another Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, which loves the good, and will neither do evil nor think evil. Thus it is that "whoever abides in him sins not: . . . whoever is born of God does not commit sin."

And still it is true that the best we do, when aiming to do right, when aiming at perfection, which is the only standard, —in all that we can do, we fall short, we miss the mark, without the perfect merit of Jesus Christ to be our substitute and surety.

And thus it is that as to the root idea of sin, —to miss the mark, —it is literally true that there is not a man on earth that "does good, and sins not." We fall short; and therefore ever pray, "Forgive us our debts."

Thus also, as to the idea of sin in transgressing, —going out of bounds into the wrong way, —it is literally true that Christ saves us from sinning.

And thus further as to sin being iniquity, —evil doing, —it is literally true that Christ completely delivers his people from this, so that in deed and in truth they do not commit sin: "They also do no iniquity" (Ps. 119:3).

And above all, thank the Lord that he forgives "iniquity and transgression and sin."