

Repentance

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There is Paul, facing the great minds of his day—the pagan philosophers of Greece. He is standing in one of the very centers of pagan thought, Athens. He is speaking to people who have never heard of Jesus Christ and know nothing of the true God. Greater skeptics one could hardly imagine. Does Paul weaken his message in order to reach these people? Does he say that we really all worship the same god, just with different names? Does he debate with them over their points of philosophy? Does he hire temple prostitutes to dance and sing (with Christian words, of course) to bring in the crowds? No. Emphatically, no! Oh, he uses an anecdote and a stunning opening statement to get their attention. But he never gets down on their level. He held the banner of Jesus Christ high.

Hear his opening words: “Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious,” or very religious. He goes on, “For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.” The Athenians are so concerned that they may have left a god out of their religion that they have erected an altar to the unknown god. Brilliantly, the inspired Paul picks up on this and tells them that this god, the god they don't know, is the God he is going to speak about.

And then Paul tells them about God—how He doesn't dwell in man-made temples; how He is the Creator of all living things; how He has created all men and predetermined history; that He is not far from us and that, in fact, in him we live, and move, and have our being; and how we are His offspring.

And then he hits them with the obvious conclusion. If God is like that, we ought not to think that we can fashion an image like God. He is far beyond that. Next, beginning with verse 30 of Acts 17, Paul says, “And the times of this ignorance,” the ignorance of pagan idolatry, “The times of this ignorance,” Paul says, “God winked at.” We might say today that He turned a blind eye. “But now,” Paul continues, God, “now commandeth all men every where to repent. Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.” God has appointed a day when that man resurrected from the dead, Jesus

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Christ, will judge the world. And because of that, God now commands—He doesn't suggest, He doesn't wimper, He doesn't plead, and He doesn't sincerely offer—He *commands* all men everywhere to repent. Many will be guilty of disobeying the command, but He commands it anyway.

What a message for that pagan world. And what a message for today. Will you be like most of Paul's jaded hearers and mock the Gospel message and command to repent, or simply say, Oh, I'll think about it and hear it again another day? Or will you be like the few, mentioned in verse 34, who clave to Paul and believed?

God commands everyone to repent because a day of judgment is coming. Will you turn a deaf ear and go to eternal condemnation? Or are you willing to hear me out and find out what repentance is, what you are to repent of, and what you are to turn to?

As in the Days of Noah

Not too long ago, while driving through a nearby town, I saw a man standing on the street with a sign that said to repent or we would likewise perish, and the sign referred to the times of Noah. Most people tend to think of such men as wild-eyed fanatics. I wouldn't doubt if many people thought that the man ought to be put into a mental institution. But, you know, I don't know what he would have said if I had stopped to talk with him, but what he had on that sign was entirely in keeping with the Bible.

Jesus said, in Matthew 24, "But as the days of Noe [Noah] were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, And knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be." And let me tell you, when that happens, it will be too late. By the time it started to rain, God had already sealed Noah and his family and the animals inside the ark. Don't wait until it is too late.

The worldwide Flood of Noah's time was the biggest natural disaster in the history of humanity. The population of the earth was possibly in the millions or even billions. All died except for eight people—Noah, his wife, their three sons, and their wives. And it all happened because the people were so sinful that God wiped them out. Is God to blame? No! The Bible tells us that He caused it because of man's sinfulness.

Today, we tend to think of natural disasters as random occurrences due to natural causes. But why should their cause be any different than the cause of the disasters in the Bible? A few generations after Noah, we see in Genesis 11, verses 1-9 a united, but once again sinful, humanity that God sees must be stopped in its progress. How does He do this? He brings disaster upon them by confounding their language so they can no longer understand each other.

Time and again, we see in the pages of Scripture events that from our human perspective we might see as natural or human-caused events: The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the plagues suffered by Egypt, the Israelites' wandering in the wilderness, the enemy raids upon the Israelites during the times of the judges, the famines during the times of the kings, and the eventual enemy invasion and fall of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. But the Bible reveals that God caused all of these events. Why? Sin.

What about today? Has God stopped causing "natural" disasters, wars, and other catastrophes? Is He now so weak that He must allow tragedies that He does not will? Is God letting things slip by Him? Is He making mistakes? No. God does not change. God makes no mistakes.

Individually, as a nation, as a civilization, and as the human race, we are sinful. We are a rebellious, adulterous, covetous, violent people, and we always have been ever since Adam. And what, as a civilization, can we expect?

What Can We Expect?

What can we expect when we have rejected the God of the Bible and replaced Him with a false God of our own making who is nonjudgmental and tolerant and even a savior of unrepentant sinners and people of all religions? What can we expect when we have replaced the true God with science and the blind chance of evolution, or with the pursuit of material gain?

As a people, we serve our economy, our employers, our military, our children, ourselves, or anything else rather than God. We vainly give lip service to God, especially in times of tragedy, but do not obey Him or seek to know Him through studying the Bible.

We reject His Son, Jesus Christ, as the one Way of salvation, and try to enter His rest through every false belief imaginable; or, alternatively, we try to create our own paradise through creature comforts and amusements.

We raise children who are even more rebellious than we. We wonder why we have rising crime rates while we inject violence into our children's minds through entertainment. We kill millions of babies before they are even born, and baby and feel sorry for murderers who have brought themselves to death row.

We commit such mass adultery by what we call divorce that a child raised through adolescence by both of its natural parents is a rarity. And then we wonder why they begin to have children without being married at all.

We also ask as much as possible for a product or service and give as little service or product quality as we can get away with in return. Instead of calling this stealing, we call it maximizing profit margins. We elect to high office people who are known liars who then so perfect their art while in office that we can never know that we have the truth about anything in government.

By continually bombarding our populace with advertising, we have made nonstop coveting a way of life.

Jesus Christ said, in Luke 17, verses 28-30, "Likewise also as it was in the days of Lot; they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; But the same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all. Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed." What did the days of Noah and the days of Lot, who lived in Sodom, have in common? They were times of great wickedness right before God brought destruction.

We Are All Sinners

Now, I don't want you to misunderstand something. I am not saying that those who are affected by disaster are worse sinners than anyone else. Just the fact that they are human makes them sinners in God's sight. So, for example, I am not saying that those who died in the Asian tsunami or in the terrorist attacks on 9-11 or in Hurricane Katrina or any other example you might name are necessarily worse

sinners than anyone else. Jesus Christ Himself plainly tells us otherwise.

In Luke 13, in verse 1, we read, "There were present at that season some that told him [meaning Jesus] of the Galilaeans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." Although the legal authorities committed this atrocity, this could certainly be seen as a form of terrorism.

The people, in their quest for an answer to such a tragedy, had come to a conclusion: God had allowed the Galileans to die in such a manner because the Galileans were particularly sinful. This was a typical conclusion for the Jews of that day, who considered that suffering must be the result of particular sin, and lack of suffering a sign of personal righteousness. Nevertheless, they wanted to confirm this belief with Jesus, who immediately set them straight: "And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay." These people did not so suffer because they were worse sinners than the rest of their nation.

Then Jesus gave an answer that should serve as a warning for you and me today: "But, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." Except ye repent.

Our Lord saw these tragedies as warnings that we are all sinners, all deserve the same fate, and will all perish unless we repent. To make sure no one misunderstood Him, Jesus repeated Himself in verses 4 and 5 by addressing another tragedy of His day: "Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." These people died in the collapse of a tower and perished eternally, going to eternal damnation because they were unrepentant sinners. And, Jesus' message is clear; you will do the same—unless you repent.

Don't Blame God

Man brought sin and suffering and death into the world. Don't blame God for it; blame man. When Adam and Eve sinned, they caused sin and suffering for all of their descendents.

This is just what the apostle Paul was writing about in Romans 5. Of Adam, he says in verse 12, "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered

into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." In other words, by sinning, Adam introduced sin into the world. God said that the result of sin would be death. This is seen also in Romans 6:23 where we read that "the wages of sin is death." Okay, so going back to Romans 5:12, we see that Adam introduced sin into the world, and by introducing sin into the world, he also introduced death into the world because we are all sinners.

Being the first human, Adam was our representative head. When he sinned, his sin was imputed to all his descendents. In other words, Adam's sin is counted as if it were our sin. Not only that, but when Adam sinned, it also caused human nature to become depraved. That is, we have a tendency to sin. Sin permeates every aspect of our nature—our will, our thoughts, our emotions, and so on. As Paul again writes in Romans 3, beginning with verse 10, "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: Their feet are swift to shed blood." And notice verse 16, "Destruction and misery are in their ways." Yes, it is humans who have caused destruction and misery. And in verse 17, we read, "the way of peace have they not known." Why? Why is this? Look at verse 18: "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

We Have Brought Our Sufferings on Ourselves

So we see that we as a race are the direct cause of many of our own miseries. Ever since the Fall of man in the Garden of Eden, we are sinful by nature, and this causes us to be greedy, covetous, murderous, adulterous, warlike, and generally lawless. I am not saying that we all have all of these tendencies to the fullest degree possible. But we all naturally have them to one degree or another, and, of course, we affect each other. I may never have stolen anything, but if someone steals my car, I am affected by someone else's sin. And other people are affected by my sins.

Before Adam sinned, there was no death. Life was idyllic. Suffering and death started only after Adam sinned. Did it come by God's pronouncement? Yes. But that was in response to man's action—man's sin.

After Adam sinned, not only did man's nature change—from innocence to sinful depravity, but the nature of the entire Creation changed. In Genesis 3, we read that Adam would have to sweat to grow food because the soil became difficult to work, tending to bear weeds. In Romans 8:20-22, we read that the Creation was made subject to vanity. This word “vanity” means an emptiness of purpose or futility. But He who subjected it to this vanity, meaning God, did so in hope, “because,” as verses 21-22 explain, “even the creation itself shall be freed from the slavery of corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that all the creation groans together and labors in birth together until now” (*English Majority Text Version*). The Creation has become corrupt. It is no longer “very good” as it was when God originally made it. It has now become corrupt. Things happen that cause people to suffer.

So, we see that some suffering comes directly from sinful man's actions—wars, acts of terrorism, murders, and thefts are obvious examples, but there are many others. And, some suffering is a result of the corruption or brokenness of the Creation. And, some is directly from God because of man's sin, such as the Flood of Noah's time. This was all caused by sin entering the world through Adam.

God Doesn't Have to Save Anyone, but in Love, He Graciously Saves Those Who Believe on His Son

God has no obligation whatsoever to save us from the physical and spiritual destruction we've brought on ourselves. But the Bible says, in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” Yes, God has no obligation to save anyone. But He is a God of love, and He saves those who believe on His Son whom He sent to die for sinners.

Yes, perhaps you are not the worst of sinners. But that does not get you out of peril. You are still a sinner. And the Bible clearly says, “the wages of sin is death.” And that death referred to is both physical and spiritual or eternal death. But, in Romans 6:23, the verse goes on to say, “the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Yes, just as sin results in eternal death, so God can give you the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ! But how?

First, remember what Paul said, “God commands all men everywhere to repent.” But what does it mean to repent? What is repentance?

Repentance is a turning. It is doing an about face and going the other way. But what is it a turning from? Repentance is a turning from sin. Biblical repentance is not just a turning from a sin here and there. It is not just remorse because of a fear of punishment. It is the result of a comparison of our loathsome, sinful nature and God's Holy, righteous nature. It is a turning from our sinfulness; the sinfulness that permeates our very nature. And since sin saturates our nature, when we repent, we detest ourselves. True repentance brings us to where we can say with Job after he was confronted by God, "I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." If you are truly repentant, you will know that you deserve to be punished in hell fire forever.

After Repentance, Then What?

But now what? You turn from your sinfulness. But what do you turn to? Do you turn to a better life? Do you turn to the law? Do you make resolutions? Do you just start living a life of overcoming your sinfulness? What a tragedy that so many people think this!

What is even worse is that even many ministers recommend what amounts to taking stock of your sins, setting your will against them, using a 12-step program or some form of psychology, and, perhaps with prayer and fasting and asking for God's strength, putting sin out of your life. The problem with this is that sin is not just external. You are sinful to your very core. How can you put yourself out of your life?

The best you can ever hope to do is to outwardly obey the letter of the law. But you will still be sinful inside! Even if you stop your actions, you will still desire them. And that is sin. We may, like Martin Luther, commit ourselves to a monastery. But, if we are honest as he was, we will know that God's wrath still abides on us. We cannot satisfy God's righteous demands. Love is the fulfilling of the law, and God demands perfect love. Instead of loving God, Luther realized that he hated God because he knew God's wrath was on him. And that is true of every natural man and woman.

This outward struggle with sin only makes us like the Pharisees—whitened sepulchres. Jesus said to them, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness." Self efforts to overcome sin without the remedy God provided only makes us hypocrites.

What is this remedy? Paul wrote of his struggle with sin, "But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord." Jesus Christ is the remedy God has provided.

Jesus Christ Alone is the Answer

When we repent, we are to turn from sin to Jesus Christ who has been crucified to pay the penalty for all our wretched sinfulness. In Romans 6:6, Paul writes, "Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin."

Jesus Christ Himself said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel." Paul explains why we should believe the Gospel, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek."

When we are faced with our sinfulness, we must turn to believe that Jesus Christ the Righteous, the Son of God, was made flesh, lived a sinless life, took upon Him our sins, and died for them on the Cross; shedding His blood to satisfy God's wrath against us and to pay the penalty that we would otherwise have had to pay in hell for our sins. Not only that, but His righteousness is put upon us, so that, as Paul wrote, "But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:30-31).

Faith

How do we turn to Christ? By the gracious gift of faith. I have quoted Ephesians 2:8-9 many times, and will likely do so again many times because these verses are so clear: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." The Jews, on the whole, did not seek righteousness by faith. Paul explains, "But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness. Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumblingstone; As it is written, Behold, I lay in Zion a stumblingstone and rock of offense: and whosoever believeth on him shall not be

ashamed" (Romans 9:31-33). That stumblingstone and rock is, of course, Jesus Christ.

Self-righteousness and self-dependence is so deeply rooted in human nature that it is impossible to turn to Jesus Christ without God's gift of faith. Repentance is from God. When the Gentiles turned to God, the Jewish Christians who heard of it said, "Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18). Psalm 80, verse 3, says, "Turn us again, O God, and cause thy face to shine; and we shall be saved." And Jeremiah 31:18-19 says, "Turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou art the LORD my God. Surely after that I was turned, I repented; and after that I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh: I was ashamed, yea, even confounded, because I did bear the reproach of my youth."

Yes, God commands all men everywhere to repent. And there is no doubt that those whom He has given to Jesus Christ will do so. In Psalm 110:1-3, we read of the coronation of Jesus Christ after He had accomplished our salvation: "The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool. The LORD shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion: rule thou in the midst of thine enemies. Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power." But we can come to Him only on the basis of His perfect righteousness, nothing of our own.

We turn in repentance from our sinfulness to rest faithfully and completely in Jesus Christ. Paul explains in Galatians 2:16: "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified." And in Romans 3:23-28, we read, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus. Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law." This is justification by faith alone. To those who turn and exercise faith in Jesus Christ alone as Savior, God pronounces the verdict, Not guilty!

Where will you stand on the Day of Judgment? Will you be found guilty of your sins? Or will you be found repentant of your sinful nature; washed clean of all of your sins; and, with a new, sinless nature, resting in Jesus Christ alone for your salvation?