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## REPENTANCE

THE call to repentance is emphasized throughout the Word of God; it is the burden of many a passage in the Old Testament, it is the theme of many a New Testament utterance. Upon page after page, in generation after generation, sinful and rebellious people are called to repent of their sin and return to God. Here is one of the important factors in the presentation of the Word of God to the people. This is no less true in the preaching of the evangelist than it was in the proclamation of the prophet. The evangelist, when he presents the Gospel, is dealing with people in their sins; and such an audience must repent and turn to God if they would know the blessings of the Gospel. Repentance is therefore an important matter in the sinner's return to God. There is no turning to God unless there is a turning from sin, and if the evil-doer would come back to God in the Gospel way he must humiliate himself in the presence of God and repent of his sin.

What is repentance? A most reliable definition is that given in the *Shorter Catechism*: "Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavour after, new obedience." To be repentant, therefore, is to have a clear sense of the guilt and the pollution of sin, to have a grief over sin and a hatred of it. This is a hatred which reveals itself in a turning away from sin as a loathsome thing. It is true that the word from which "repentance" comes signifies a change of mind, but it should be recognized that it is a change of mind accompanied by deep emotional experiences. So many would speak and write of these things as if emotional accompaniment were anathema. But is not the cry of the repentant the cry of the broken-hearted? When the people of Nineveh repented they mourned and fasted as they turned from their sin and cried to God. Beside this sense of sin and grief over sin, there is also a consciousness that God is merciful and will forgive the repentant as he turns from evil to live in obedience to Him. Repentance is not just cold intellectualism; it is an experience through which the sinner passes as he, conscious of the loathsomeness of his sinfulness, returns to God and pleads for mercy.

Limiting our consideration of this theme to its usage in the New Testament let us consider:—

## I. THE EMPHASIS IN THE SPOKEN WORD

As we open our New Testament the first voice we hear is that of John the Baptist. He is the last representative of the old dispensation so soon to end. With what prophet-like words he met those who came to him. To the Sadducees and Pharisees he said, "O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance" (Matt. iii. 7 f.). As he is introduced to us it is as the prophet preaching in the wilderness of Judea saying, "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. iii. 2). He raised his voice after the silence of the years, and cried, "Repent!"

The echoing of the voice of the Baptist had hardly died away when Jesus came forth. As He began His public ministry He said, "Repent ye, and believe the Gospel". His was the voice that invited, that entreated, that warned; but it was also the voice which commanded. It was this voice of command which rung out as He declared, "Repent ye". Then, as John the apostle saw the unveiling of Christ on the isle of Patmos, he saw Him as the Son of man in the midst of the lampstands. He is the One the churches would know as the Searcher of the reins and hearts. First He speaks to the church which has left its first love and says, "Remember from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works" (Rev. ii. 5). Time and time again this call is reiterated in the letters to the churches, till at last He calls the lukewarm Laodiceans to "be zealous therefore, and repent" (Rev. iii. 19).

The disciples were being sent forth on what has come to be known as "the mission of the Twelve". They were sent forth two by two and were given power over the unclean spirits. Then we read, "They went out, and preached that men should repent" (Mark vi. 12). Like their Master, the disciples commanded the people to repent.

But what of the post-Pentecostal preaching? Two examples of the apostles' method can be found in Peter and Paul. First of all let us take Peter. As the people in Jerusalem listened to the first utterance of the church on the day of Pentecost they were pricked in their hearts and came to Peter and the others and said, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Peter

replied, "Repent, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins" (Acts ii. 38). Shortly afterwards the people in the city came flocking around Peter and John, following the wondrous healing of the lame man who sat by the Beautiful Gate of the temple. But as they came their hearts must have been stung with the condemning words Peter spoke to them as he charged them with killing the Prince of life. As he concluded, he said, "Repent ye therefore, and be converted" (Acts iii. 19).

The apostle to the Gentiles took the same message to the uncircumcision as Peter took to the circumcision. While he spoke to the Athenians on Mars' Hill Paul said, "Now [God] commandeth all men everywhere to repent" (Acts xvii. 30). On taking farewell of the Ephesian elders he said that he had gone from house to house, "testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts xx. 21). When he was before Agrippa he spoke words which might well be taken as descriptive of his whole ministry; "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision: but showed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance" (Acts xxvi. 20). Repentance was therefore clearly emphasized in the spoken message of those days. It would be good if there were a return to that early emphasis in the preaching of to-day.

It is not only important to recognize the place this idea had in the spoken word; it is right that we should appreciate its relation to other important factors also. Let us consider:—

## II. THE PLACE GIVEN TO REPENTANCE

- (a) In the mission of Christ. We know that He came to seek and save the lost, that He came to give His life a ransom for many. These are vital and important matters that we must never forget. At the same time we should remember that Christ also declared, "I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke v. 32).
- (b) In the will of God. To know the will of God is one of the chief objectives in the study of the Word of God. What then is the will of God regarding man? One of the answers given to that question is found in II Pet. iii. 9: "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise as some

men count slackness; but is long-suffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." God wills that all men repent.

- (c) In the joy of heaven. It is revealed that heaven is the place of joy and gladness. We might well ask, What could happen here on earth to-day to bring immediate joy in heaven? The well-known fifteenth chapter of Luke gives the answer. It is Christ's answer: "I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance" (verse 7); "I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth" (verse 10). The repentance of man, even of one man, gives the angels cause for joy.
- (d) In the commission of Christ. Luke records that after His resurrection our Lord opened His followers' understanding that they might understand the Scriptures and said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke xxiv. 46 f.). Then He added their responsibility; "Ye are witnesses of these things." He commanded that "repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name." We have seen how Paul declared that God commanded all men to repent; now Christ commands His disciples to preach repentance among all nations. It is therefore Christ's commission that all be called to repentance.
- (e) In the purpose of Christ's exaltation. It must have been a great moment in heaven when Christ returned, when He was exalted. Concerning His exaltation Peter declared: "Him hath God exalted with His right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins" (Acts v. 31). Exalted to give repentance to Israel.

From the evidence of Scripture it is clear that all men everywhere should repent. Its place in the will of God, and its significant emphasis in the written and the spoken word of the apostles puts this beyond doubt. Men must repent.

But we realize that repentance does not stand alone; it is necessary, but man must do more than repent. There are what we might call:—

### III. THE ACCOMPANIMENTS OF REPENTANCE

These we shall consider in the following way:—

- (a) Regarding God. The key-note of this is struck for us by Paul as he spoke to the elders from Ephesus; it is repentance *toward God* (Acts xx. 21). To Agrippa he declared that men should repent and turn *to God* (Acts xxvi. 20). How important is this emphasis that, if man is going to turn in repentance from sin, in that repentance he must turn to God.
- (b) Regarding the truth. Truth and God are inseparable, particularly the truth revealed in His Word. If there are those who oppose the truth, there is a special way to deal with those opponents, and there is a special purpose in so dealing with them. "The servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle to all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth" (2 Tim. ii. 24 f.). As those who have hitherto shut their hearts to the truth turn from the error of their ways their repentance is accompanied with the acknowledgment of the truth they opposed. It is thus with all who repent; they must go on to the acknowledgment of the truth as it is in Christ.
- (c) Regarding the Gospel. When our Lord came forth preaching repentance, He added, "and believe the Gospel" (Mark i. 15). Surely this is a further step: the repentant one turns to God, acknowledges the truth, and believes the Gospel. In this way the sinner comes through to the forgiveness of sins. "Believe the Gospel"; how much the soul that is torn by sin and repents needs to hear and obey these words.
- (d) Regarding Christ. Back again we go to Paul's words to the Ephesian elders. He told them that he testified to Jews and Greeks "repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts xx. 21). Here, surely, is that to which all things lead; it is only through faith in Christ

that the repentant sinner turns to God. Only when this is accomplished can it be said that the great question has been settled.

- (e) Regarding baptism. When John the Baptist ministered baptism, it was a baptism unto repentance. Now in the post-Pentecostal period we are reminded that there is still a close relationship between repentance and baptism. That this might not be overlooked we remember that when Peter spoke to the enquiring crowd at Pentecost he said, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (Acts ii. 38). "Repent, and be baptized"—there is the two-fold command; "every one of you"—there are those thus commanded. Baptism, like repentance, is not only laid upon some; it is commanded for all. The New Testament knows nothing of unbaptized believers. By our baptism we acknowledge our identification with Christ, that we have died to sin and been raised to walk in newness of life with Him. Does not the *Shorter Catechism* declare that the ultimate end of repentance is a new obedience? Nothing explains such an obedience better than the walk in newness of life to which we are raised with Christ in our baptism. The way is plain; repent, turn to God, acknowledge the truth, believe the Gospel, have faith toward Christ, be baptized. Your sins will be forgiven, they will be blotted out (Acts iii. 19), and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Yet one word remains; it is a solemn word, one which is taken from an utterance made by Christ: "Repent, or ye shall all perish" (Luke xiii. 3). Although the words had a special significance for those to whom He spoke, they bring their solemn message to us to-day. It is only too solemnly true; except we repent, we must all likewise perish.

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