

FAITH AND REPENTANCE

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"Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21).

The whole passage beginning from the seventeenth verse is Paul's message or invitation to the elders of the church at Ephesus to come to him at Miletus. We see this specially gracious man, this divinely called apostle, scholarly and gentlemanly in his way, moving amongst these people at Ephesus for about three years. He was preaching publicly, disputing with Jews and Greeks, and going from house to house telling them of a hell for idolaters and all who stumble at the cross; and of a heaven that God had prepared for the church which He had purchased with His own blood. All this bore testimony to his own deportment amongst them, and he called upon them to bear witness to the truth of what he now affirmed concerning his three years' sojourn in their midst. And it appears that the sum of all this instruction is in this word, I "taught you these two things so necessary to vital religion and to "holiness without which no man shall see the Lord," namely, "repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ."

If there is no saving religion without repentance, if we are destitute of repentance we have no saving religion. If faith is a necessary part of vital religion and we have no faith, we have no vital religion. May the Holy Ghost open these great essentials of true religion to our hearts and understandings and give us, if we possess them, to know that we do; and if we do not possess them give us these blessed inestimable gifts which shall never die in their fruit.

Repentance is a relative term, it relates to two parties. It relates to the sinner to whom the Holy Spirit gives repentance in respect of the things from which he is made to turn. It also relates to God to whom the sinner in repenting, turns. These two things are very important to notice; in all real religion there is the movement of quickened souls. There is a view of things which was not known until divine life was imparted; there is knowledge of sin and of wrong ways. Repentance has respect to a course and a direction. We are all eccentric, out of proper centre by sin; we are all in a wrong course and direction because of sin. Every sinner's back is toward God, his face toward sin, the world, death and hell. What a solemn thing for you here who are indifferent to your standing and to the end that awaits you; indifferent to the judgment day and to Him who will sit on the great white throne and summon you to stand before Him; indifferent to the books that shall at that day be opened, out of which will be read to you who are before Him in your sins, your life on earth, your heart life, the way your feet went, your eyes looked, your hands acted; all these things will be read out to you. What tingling ears there will be before that throne! Your infidelity will be read out to you; and your enmity to God, and your hard thoughts of Him, and your proud determination to have your own way, and your resistance and wicked rebellion. All shall be read aloud to you by Him whose word and whose judgment can be neither resisted

nor contradicted. If any of you die in your sins it will be an awful thing for you to stand before the great white throne.

The Lord Jesus is exalted to give repentance, and where this is given, the wicked direction, the wrong look and the wayward feet are brought to a stand, and the sinner being turned, turns and he sees himself, and his woe. He sees the law of God and himself a lost sinner; he is ready to despair, soon feels he is hopeless, and grows into a knowledge of his wretched condition. Then, as it is expressed in the first epistle to the Thessalonians, this repenting sinner turns, "from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for His Son from heaven even Jesus," who, as he will know later, shall deliver him from the wrath to come. People think this is simple and rightly understood it is, if you use the word simple in the sense of being unmixed, nothing duplex; because it is the work of God and not the work of man. So it is in this respect a wonderful thing that God should come and take one of two; two in a field, one taken and the other left; two in a bed, one taken and the other left; two grinding at a mill, one taken and the other left. God comes into a family and takes one, turns him round, opens his eyes, quickens his conscience and lays divine things with weight and reality on his mind.

This is what the apostle taught at Ephesus, setting before the people the evils of idolatry, the terribleness of a fallen nature and of God's judgment to come. Through his preaching demonstrated, applied and opened by the Holy Spirit, these people find a mighty change, a revolution in their souls. That is a great thing. Blessed be God, some of us can remember, not the day perhaps, nor the means, but that there came to us something that made us feel we were wrong, and needed something we possessed not. We know something in us was altogether sinful, we were made to feel that there was a God against whom we had sinned, and that if we died as we then began to feel ourselves, we should be forever under His curse and His hot displeasure in perdition. It is a great thing to have this to look back upon. Paul put it before the Thessalonians; he said: You did this; you did by the preaching of the word and by its appearing in you, turn from idols to the living God; to serve Him in your confessions and petitions and to wait for His Son from heaven, even Jesus.

Some may say, "But that belongs to the beginning." So it does, but do you confine repentance to the beginning? Do you limit it to those days when your life hung in doubt; when you had no certainty as to what would come to you? If you do, you err.

This repentance is like the scarlet thread that runs through every inch of rope that is made in the Royal Navy. It distinguishes a child of God all his days. If you limit repentance to the beginning, then you would limit sinning to the beginning. Do you not sin? Have you never contracted guilt since the Lord blessed you? Is there no evil heart of unbelief in you moving and tempting you to depart from the living God? Are there no wrong thoughts in you? Do you never say wrong words? Are you never in an evil disposition? Does no passion ever come and in a moment prevail against you? No child of God will say so of himself. He says, "Sin is mixed with all I do and think and say." Where that is the case, is there not a need of this sweet grace of repentance? And is this not a pure and most blessed and comfortable grace too, when some touch of mercy, some new influence of the Spirit of God comes upon you and you find yourself weeping before the Lord, saying to Him: I have sinned, I am not worthy to be called Thy son; I have tried Thee more than any other in Thy family, if child I am, but I turn to Thee.

This is what belongs to every child of God; and this does not contradict the Apostle's word in the epistle to the Hebrews, "Therefore," he says, "leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God" (Heb. 6:1). This is not contradicted because when you repent through the grace of the Holy Spirit; when you repented as it were, yesterday and perhaps this morning, and felt you loved that sweet grace of repentance; it was not laying again a new foundation; the old remains, and this is new. Said God to Israel: "If thou wilt return O Israel, return unto Me" (Jer. 4:1). When you wonder, what a mercy it is to return again to the Lord! It is said in the prophecy of Hosea, of Israel under her constant backslidings, "yet have ye not returned unto Me, saith the Lord." But when the child of God has sweet repentance in his heart he turns again toward the Lord. One of the sweetest mercies we can ever have in our souls is that pure evangelical repentance that flows freely from an exalted Saviour into the hearts of His children enabling them to sorrow after a godly sort for their sins, as did those in the church at Corinth. It is written of Peter who as a child of God, a disciple follower of Christ, and had blasphemously declared he knew nothing of the Lord Jesus, that when the Lord looked on him he went out and wept bitterly. David was reproved by Nathan and convinced, and said, "I have sinned" (2 Sam. 12:13).

This repentance has several very beautiful things in it. It has true contrition.

"The contrite heart and broken
God will not give to ruin."

What a mercy to have contrition in your soul! What a blessing it is to be truly contrite before the Lord.

Repentance has in it also a free spirit of confession. The Lord speaks of this to His backsliding people by Jeremiah. "Only acknowledge thine iniquity" (Jer. 3:13). It is a great thing to have a free spirit in this. I know the spirit that would make us say; I am clean in some things where I have not been clean. There is a spirit in man that would hide his transgressions. "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper, but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy" (Prov. 28:13). This is one of the beautiful things that you find in true repentance; a free confession of your sins before the Lord. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8,9). I have felt a very warm love to repentance, and a wish that I could repent every day of my life and repent deeply of the sins which I daily commit. It is a mercy to be kept from outward transgression, but with all this mercy there is inward falling and failing; and it is a mercy when the testimony of God's word so comes to us in the convincing light of the Spirit of God as that we do feel, and say before God that we have sinned.

This was Paul's preaching, He himself was a sinful man. He tells us that when he would do good he was hindered and could not do it; and that the evil he would not do, he did. There was cause and room in his case for this blessed grace of repentance.

There is also in repentance: humility. When grace comes in new touches by the Holy Spirit, the soul really humbles himself before the Lord. He says with the Psalmist, "I was as a beast before Thee" (Ps. 73:22). This is language which today is not thought fit for a Christian to use. I should

like to be a Christian by the side of this Christian man in the seventy-third Psalm who thus confesses his waywardness. He confesses that he had tried to understand the perplexing providences of God but could not do it; he confesses that he had erred greatly in this; and when he was instructed he smote upon his thigh and he said "So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was a beast before Thee," and repentance filled his heart. He was a happy man in that he was blessed with repentance. It will run through all your days, you will be repenting and repenting.

"Nor is it such a dismal thing
As 'tis by some men named;
A sinner may repent and sing,
Rejoice and be ashamed."

I believe that the more mercy you get into your heart, the more sorry you are for your sins; and while you rejoice in your salvation, you are sorry for that sin that broke the guiltless heart of the Lord Jesus. It is one of the most comfortable places you can live in, to be blessing God for Jesus Christ, and again and again reproaching yourself before the Lord because you are a sinner. Is not this what the Lord spoke of to Israel when He said that on the day of atonement they were to afflict their souls before Him? Not on the day when He would come out and consume them, but on the day when the only atonement was made they were to have a holy convocation; they were to come before the Lord in the blood that had been shed, in the sacrifice that had been consumed. There in that holy gathering of this people they were to afflict their souls, condemn themselves, hate themselves and say that they were as beasts before Him. Yet, blessed be His name, they could say: Here is the atonement; in this we come, by this we pray, in this we hope and through this we look for redemption promised in the Messiah. So when you get this blessing you are not miserable, you are not in bondage; you turn from yourself with hatred of sin; you turn from your false confidence and all things after which your heart has been foolishly and wickedly running, to Him who is the hope of Israel and her Saviour in time of trouble. Repentance is a great grace; it is given as Joseph Hart says,

"Repentance is a gift bestowed
To save a soul from death."

God gives this, and Christ is exalted to give it. It comes down like rain upon sinners. It melts them, it dissolves them, it humbles them, it crumbles them. The sparing mercy of God shines to them, and the forgiveness they want they see to be in the face of Jesus Christ, and in His blessed atonement. God grant that we may be repenting continually. I know I should be happy if I repented every day. I know I should be happy if I could weep before God over my fallen nature and over my constant sinning.

Weep and repent over your fallen nature. When you can say to the Lord: I do grieve that I have got a nature contrary to Thy nature. I have got a heart that will always be doing what is contrary to Thy heavenly precepts. Thy holy word. It is a fact whether we believe it or not, we have such a nature. There is no person here this morning who does not possess "an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God" (Heb. 3:12). It will allure you in that direction; it will turn your feet out of the way of peace; it will turn your mind away from the Lord Jesus; it will bring you to follow some vanity, as false teaching brought the Galatians away from the gospel. Being in such

a condition you will find yourself mourning before God over your wicked nature. And this has a good effect upon us when we are favoured with it. It keeps us from boasting. It keeps us from thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. It makes us think according to the measure of faith which the Lord has bestowed upon us. Right thinking of self comes from divine teaching. Look then to this; let us in our own hearts, by the help of the Spirit of God regard this great matter of repentance not only at the beginning but all through our pilgrimage. If we could tear out of our breasts this horrible thing sin, we should not need repentance, but as long as we have these two things, a wicked heart and wandering from the Lord, we shall need this sweet grace of repentance. Blessed be God, our Lord Jesus Christ is exalted to give it, to give it whereby a heart of stone is made like wax; whereby a sinner who would justify himself says: I am a sinner, and I deserve all that God may send in a way of chastisement and infinitely more.

Then, faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. Someone says: that is a nicer and a brighter subject. It is connected with repentance, you cannot separate them. What God has joined in the scriptures, may He join in our hearts. If you talk of faith and leave out repentance, your talk is but vanity, there is no good in it.

The object is set before us in this word, "faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." Why not to the Father by name? Why not to the Holy Ghost by name? Why only the Lord Jesus Christ? Because, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19), and because Christ has the Holy Spirit without measure, and by Him the Holy Spirit is given to sinners. Faith then is directed by the Holy Spirit to Christ, because "in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9), and all the good pleasure of God's goodness is in Him. This is the great object of faith.

In Jeremiah it is written, "O the hope of Israel, the saviour thereof in time of trouble" (Jer. 14:8). This is a door of hope for a sinner. No matter how poor, how wicked, how hard, how desponding, how all but despairing he feels in himself, this sets a door of hope before him. The Lord Jesus Christ, incarnate deity, suffering human nature united to God. There is no other door of hope. God knows no other. The scriptures know no other. Faith knows no other. O the hope of Israel, the Saviour to save from all sin. "The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). When that drops into the heart, there is nothing wrong to the soul. God is right, grace is everything, Christ is first and last, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending. When the blood of Christ comes, everything is right between the soul and God. The majesty of God and the gentleness of God and the kindness of God unite and are life to the soul. Everything is right when pardon comes.

The beginning of this word is a little entered into, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (1 Cor. 2:9). The Christian begins to see by faith a full Christ. This is what the Apostle appears to have had in view when he said, "Let us go on unto perfection" (Heb. 6:1), or unto the merit that the Lord's people are destined to reach. O! To have a faith view of a full Christ. What is intended by it? Deity is there. Holy human nature is there. Infinite merit is there. The covenant of grace is there. The love of God is there. The provisions for a sinner's salvation are there. The purposes of God are there and the faithfulness of God is there. There is nothing that a soul can require, nothing that the church of God can need and ask for that is wanting. Everything necessary for life

and godliness, for time and for eternity, the Lord God has put in His Beloved Son. Faith's view of that will give the soul such a feeling of what Christ is, such a satisfaction with Him and with all He has done and is doing and possesses, that faith will sing,

"Here's all a God can give,
Here would I constantly abide,
And every moment live."

Do you cherish an idol then? No. Do you cherish self then? No. Would you will to have your own will and your own way then? No. God, Christ is all and in all. O! What a faith it is that lays hold of the Lamb! What a blessed faith it is that goes to the Lord Jesus. This is very wonderful to a sinner. It tells him this; and what sweet pleasure I have felt sometimes in saying it,

"Christ is the friend of sinners;
Be that forgotten never."

You could never tell what you see; never express what your heart feels when you receive this truth, "The Friend of sinners" (Matt. 11:19). If you love cleanliness naturally, how repulsive would be the presence of a person covered with vermin and filthy. A God who is glorious in holiness, loves sinners so as to go to them and eat with them. The Pharisees, so clean, they marvelled at Him because, "He receiveth sinners, and eateth with them" (Luke 15:2). Faith says: why, that is His glory. God says by Jeremiah, "It shall be to Me for a name of joy, a praise and an honour before all the nations of the earth" (Jer. 33:9). "I will pardon all their iniquities, whereby they have sinned against Me" (Jer. 33:8). Perhaps some of you have said, and have meant it: He can be glorified in my condemnation but I cannot see how He can be glorified in saving me. Now He says "It shall be to Me for a name of joy, praise, and an honour" to forgive sins; and faith receives it.

Poor sinner, you may be condemning yourself now; you may be saying: Whoever is fit for this? I am not. What is the fitness for forgiveness? It is guilt. What is suitability for Christ? A lost condition. What is suitable for a guilty conscience? Forgiveness. What is suitable for one clothed with filthy garments? A change of raiment. What is suitable for one who feels at a distance from God? The throne of grace. Faith sees these in Christ. O! For a little, a little of this blessed One seen by faith. See how the text places all here. That is what Paul says also in the first epistle to the Thessalonians, to which I have already referred. "Ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for His Son from heaven, which delivered us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess. 1:9,10). To the Romans Paul says of Christ, "Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification" (Rom. 4:25).

Says one: I wish I were right. Christ can make you right; but before He makes you right, He will make you feel you are wrong. Before He gives you a change of raiment you will know you have filthy garments on you, and before He forgives you and gives you peace, your conscience will have a lot of dead works on it. When Christ comes He puts all right. There is nothing wrong where He is. There is nothing wrong in the conscience where His blood is applied; nothing wrong in the affections where He is Prophet, Priest, and King. There is nothing wrong in the wishes of the soul where Christ is all and in all. He is the grand centre; the centre of two parties.

He is the centre of God the Father, for the pleasure of the Father is there; and, wonder of wonders, He is centre of some of us. He is the centre of our souls, our passions, affections, faith, hope, love, will, understanding; all finds a centre in Christ when the Holy Spirit is pleased to bring a gracious revelation of Him.

What a centre is Christ! What a fountain is the fountain of His blood! Have you any hope but the blood of Christ? If you have, may God kill it. What a blessed thing it is to hope by the blood of Christ. Think what the invaluable blood of Christ has brought. It has brought hope for all God's mercies, for the Holy Spirit's teaching, for His gracious sustenance; hope that He would teach you to pray and keep praying and waiting for an answer; hope for final perseverance, for good in your trouble and for sanctifying grace when you are in affliction; hope for all that heaven has good to give hereafter; and all through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We see then what a gospel the Apostle preached to the Ephesians. What a Christ he preached to them! Well might they turn away from Diana of the Ephesians to the Lord Jesus Christ; and you will do the same. You have got some god; not the goddess Diana, but you have got some god in your nature, in your eyes, in your affections. But if Christ comes, down will go that god. He will lose head and hands and feet and Christ will be the first and the last, all and in all to you.

Those two graces here set forth are so cardinal and so precious, so blessed that everyone who has them wants to have them constantly and to feel them every day. When you live a life of unbelief you live nothing but death. When unbelief turns you from God, you turn into foolishness and you begin to get hard, for the heart hardens through unbelief. "Take heed" says Paul, in the epistle to the Hebrews, "lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God." Then he speaks of hardening through the deceitfulness of sin. But repentance and faith, these two graces, keep us from that hardened condition, and sometimes they deliver us from it as they are renewed in our minds by the Holy Ghost.

Nothing but wrong will grow up in us. Nothing but what is right and good do we receive from God and the Lord Jesus Christ. "Faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." There faith centres, there she lives, there she hangs, there she expects. This faith is to live. As long as a sinner lives this repentance is to be with him; as long as he lives in this world, he will be a sinner as to the old man. We shall need no repentance in heaven. We shall have no faith there, for faith will experience a happy death in a full open vision. May the Lord give us these two graces. We shall be a blessed people if we have them. We shall be lively in the ways of God and tender in our spirits, humble in our minds, little in our own eyes. Therefore may we be led to cry mightily to God to give us these two things: "Repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." Amen