

Part 2: Biblical Themes in the Old Testament  
H. God's Answer for Sinful Rebellion  
24. Repentance

To recap the theme of the previous lecture, Scripture is clear that the anger of God against sin can be properly dealt with only by the offering of an atoning sacrifice, and also that the death of Jesus was the only atoning sacrifice that is sufficient to the task. However—and this is today's theme—it is equally clear that not everyone reaps the benefits of Jesus' atoning sacrifice. The difference between those who have been reconciled to God and those who have not has to do with repentance; it is only the repentant who are reconciled to God.

So what is repentance? It is more than regret, and more than sorrow for sin. Repentance is really a change of mind about how to live—a commitment to reject a life of sin and rebellion against God in favor of a life lived in service to the Lord. This change of mind is proved by a change in behavior, the first sign of which is the acknowledgement and confession of sin. But other actions must follow: behaviors that support the new way of living.

Listen to these scriptural admonitions to repent. (Not all use the term “repent.” But in every case what is advocated is a new way of living, a way that forsakes sin and pursues righteousness.

- Lev 5:5 When anyone becomes aware that they are guilty...they must **confess** in what way they have sinned.
- Lev 26:40-42 If they will **confess** their sins...—their unfaithfulness and their hostility toward me...—then when their uncircumcised hearts are humbled and they pay for their sin, I will remember my covenant...
- Ps 34:14 **Turn** from **evil** and **do good**; seek peace and pursue it.
- Pr 28:13 He who **conceals** his sins does not prosper, but whoever **confesses and renounces** them finds mercy.
- 1 Ki 8:47-50 (From Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple) If they have a **change of heart** in the land where they are held captive, and **repent** and plead with you in the land of their captors and say, 'We have sinned, we have done wrong, we have acted wickedly'; and if they turn back to you with all their heart and soul... then from heaven... hear their prayer and their plea, and uphold their cause. And forgive your people...
- Isa 55:7 Let the wicked **forsake** his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him **turn** to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.
- Isa 59:20 "The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who **repent** of their sins."
- Jer 8:6 I have listened attentively, but they do not say what is right. None of them **repent** of their wickedness, saying, "What have I done?" Each pursues their own course like a horse charging into battle.
- Jer 26:3 Perhaps they will listen and each will **turn** from their evil ways. Then I will relent and not inflict on them the disaster I was planning because of the evil they have done.
- Ezek 18:21 "But if a wicked person **turns away** from all the sins they have committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, that person will surely live; they will not die.
- Ezek 18:23 Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they **turn from** their ways and live?

So again, what is repentance? It is turning **from** and confessing sin, and turning **to** God, to live life his way.

There is an innate awareness in the human heart that knows the truth about the human need to own up to and repent of sin. But there is also by nature a deep reluctance to do this. For one thing, even if we are truly sorry for our sins against God and against others, we may feel reluctant to confess them because of the penalties that may result, such things as fines, a divorce, loss of employment, or even incarceration. But even without those penalties, repentance is difficult. It requires self-denial, which is never easy, and also honesty about one's failures.

But lack of repentance is more difficult in the long run. Sin that is held on to, or even unconfessed exacts emotional and psychological penalties in the hearts of all but the most hard-hearted. A guilty conscience is no small thing to have to live with. And perhaps the only thing scarier is when a conscience that should trouble a person no longer does so because it has become too callused.

The Bible does not use the words "guilty conscience" to describe Adam and Eve's troubled spirits in the aftermath of their rebellion against God. But their actions were perfectly consistent with the distress of a guilty conscience. Gen. 3:7 begins, *Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked.* The "opening of Adam and Eve's eyes" wasn't one of those good "aha" moments that we all have from time to time, when we come to a new understanding of what has previously confused and frustrated us. Quite the opposite; this was an "Oh no" moment, a "What have we done?" moment.

That's why, as the very next phrase indicates, Adam and Eve sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. There was something about their physical nakedness that bothered them, something they had not experienced before. This was partly an indication of the damage that had occurred in their relationship with each other. They were not as at ease with each other as before. There was some distrust and suspicion of each other that would soon be revealed in Adam's trying to shift the blame to Eve.

But the one whom Adam and Eve were most afraid of was their Creator and senior partner in life. This shows in v.8 which says that they *heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day.* This wasn't a new sound or new experience for them. They were used to hearing the approach of God. But this time it was different. Instead of being eager and willing to meet him to talk things over or maybe go sightseeing, this time *they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden.* They hid. It didn't make any sense, of course. How could they hope to hide from the one who made even the trees they were using for cover? But this was not a thought-out escape. Adam and Eve were frantic because they knew their good relationship with God was gone. But they weren't yet ready to meet God face to face, to confess their sin and return to serving him (if that was even possible).

Nor are too many people today. All of us by nature are guilty of Adam and Eve's sin of rebellion against God. All of us by nature, are similarly naked and without excuse before God, and living under the condemnation that sin brings. The question is whether we will repent and confess our sin and take advantage of the atonement offered by Christ.

That sounds easy on the face of it, but repentance, as I've said, is a very difficult thing. It was for Adam and Eve. Their trying to hide from God represents their desire to avoid being confronted with the reality of their sin. But when Adam could not escape the confrontation, he made excuses. He blamed Eve, telling God that *the woman* [he referred to her impersonally, not as "my wife" or "Eve" but as the woman] - *she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.*" In other words, "It's not my fault; it's Eve's fault." And in blaming her, Adam implicated God as well in saying "*The woman you put here with me.*" As if to say, "You gave me the wrong partner, and she tempted me to sin." Excuses seemed so much more attractive to Adam than facing the ugly truth about his sin.

And it was not different with Eve, who, in turn, blamed the serpent. The fact is, however, Adam and Eve had been partnered with each other to be partners and servants of God. And so both were accountable and both were culpable for their sin. And so are we all.

We still are at least tempted to try to shift the blame. "We are in trouble but it isn't our fault. We are the product of a dysfunctional family. We have children who disappoint us after all we've done for them. We have a spouse who doesn't love us enough or in the right way. We didn't get enough education. We are the wrong color, we aren't good-looking, our health is poor, we were born in the wrong part of the world. Much of this has to be God's fault since He made us." Like Adam, we are at least tempted to blame others or even God for our sins.

Or, as God pursues us, as he did Adam, we may use the excuse that we're not as bad as somebody else. "We're better than our neighbors. We don't drink as much, or mess around, we work hard, we're devoted to our family. Really, what does sin have to do with us and our lives? Sin is the big things we read about in the papers every day - murders, arson, armed robberies, kidnapping." So it is a major turning point for any of us to realize that whatever our behavior, good or bad, we are selfish people and that were it not for God's presence and grace, we would act entirely out of our own self-interest - and to realize that sin is more than particular unlovely acts (like eating the fruit of the wrong tree); it is whatever separates us from God, including our pride and desire to do our own thing, and our self-righteousness.

Despite their initial excuses, Adam and Eve did respond to God's call and come out of hiding. We know this by God's further communication with them, in which he informed them of the difficulties of life from then on, but also of a coming offspring who would vanquish the rebellion-inciting serpent. But the divided courses of their offspring in the next generations showed that the way of repentance was a hard one to travel. Cain and his line persisted in rebellion against the Lord. Abel, and, later, Seth, and his line started off honoring the Lord by their obedience, but fell away over the generations until only Noah and his family remained as God's servants.

Long after the flood, the same tension revealed itself in Abraham's descendants. God's consistent counsel was that they be the obedient servants he had called them to be, and that they immediately repent of and confess any departure from his ways. And although there were always some who did this, many more persisted in their rebellion. They were not willing to change—at least not to the extent required.

Some, for example, treated the law of God as an unwelcome boundary to which they would walk as closely as possible without violating the letter of it. Cain had done that earlier by bringing God an offering, but one that he knew was not his best.

Nadab and Abihu did it by offering incense to God, but in a way they knew was unacceptable. King Saul did it by taking it upon himself to offer sacrifices before battle when he knew he was required to wait for Samuel. King Ahab did it by trying to force Naboth into selling his vineyard when he knew that such a thing would violate God's provision that every Israelite be guaranteed a permanent piece of the Promised Land.

And some of the Pharisees of Jesus' day did similar things: not actually murdering their enemies, but feeling free to hate them; not physically violating their marriage vows, but feeling free to be emotionally and mentally immoral; not violating their oaths, but feeling free to shade the truth in devious ways. They ignored what they already knew to be the essence of God's law—loving God above all and their neighbors as themselves—in favor of attention to the smallest details of its provisions.

Isaiah wrote about such people in distinguishing legal fasting from true fasting (ch. 58). They abstained from food and went about in sackcloth and ashes, but did it without true humility or a concern to help others find the freedom God intended for all his people. In each case, and in many more, people treated the law of God as a burden to be minimized rather than a gift to facilitate faithful service to God and to delight in (cf. Ps 1:2).

Here's the pattern found throughout the Old Testament narratives.

- Those who lived their lives in wholehearted service to God found themselves richly blessed.
- Too often, those who were so blessed became more enamored of the blessings than the One who blessed them and so became compromised in their service to the Lord
- Their compromises resulted in the negative consequences that are inevitable for those who fall out of fellowship with their Creator and Redeemer.
- Suffering helped people to refocus and get back to fundamental truths, like the need to repent of the attempt to live without God, and rededicate themselves to the life for which they were created.
- Those who truly repented again found themselves richly blessed by God.

Let me give just a few examples.

- Israel in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land. The people were ecstatic at several points: (1) After their deliverance from Pharaoh's army through the miraculous passage opened up through the Red Sea. (2) By God's provision of manna for their sustenance. (3) At the completion of the tabernacle and their delighted astonishment at God making his home in their midst. But in each case, they quickly returned to taking God for granted and grumbling at the hardships they faced. And time after time they repented only after suffering the consequences of life their way. Then again, they would find blessing, which lasted only until they again became compromised in their service to the Lord.
- King David. God had singled him out for great honor and blessing—specifically a kingdom that would endure forever. But, in the midst of enjoying a measure of rest from enemies all around, David indulged the lust of his eyes and misused the power of his position to engage in adultery, lying, and murder. He came to realize the enormity of his sin only through the intervention of Nathan the prophet. Then David repented and prayed that God would not cast him from his presence, but cleanse him and restore to him the joy of his salvation. David's sin brought severe consequences. But after repentance, God answered his prayers and David again found the Lord's blessing.

- The showdown on Mt. Carmel between God’s prophet, Elijah, and the false prophets of Baal and Asherah. Israel suffered for three years without the blessing of rain, evidence of the anger of God against the false worship of his people. So when the people finally, with divine help, sorted out in their hearts who the real God was, and how awful had been their rebellion against Him; when they finally, repented and again made the true confession – the way was open for a restoration of the covenant with all its blessings.
- The exile of God’s people from the Promised Land—this was the biggest of God’s punishments for the persistent unfaithfulness of his people. It meant not only the loss of the Promised Land but the loss of God’s presence. Finally after seventy years of repentant waiting and prayer, some of the exiles were allowed to return. But the blessings they experienced were never as great as those they’d lost. And there would be more centuries of waiting until the promised Messiah finally arrived as God’s ultimate answer for sin.

In each of these cases, and in many similar episodes recorded in the Old Testament, those who departed from the Lord’s prescription for life—whether through neglect and inattention or through overt rebellion—suffered the negative consequences of sin. Some of them never did repent, and stayed alienated from God, and even, in the case of those who opposed Elijah on Mt. Carmel, lost their lives to God’s judgment.

But those who did repent, found mercy, and a new life. And repentance still remains the only remedy for sin and its consequences. In his mercy, God has provided the perfect sacrifice to atone for sin. But to take advantage of Christ’s atonement requires repentance: a change of mind about how to live—a decision to reject a life of sin and rebellion against God, in order to love and serve him instead. This is more than an intellectual theology. That is, it doesn’t do any good to believe in the Ten Commandments or the Golden Rule, and to recite them on Sunday, if you don’t apply them the rest of the week – on Monday to that temptation which threatens to trip you up, and on Tuesday to the way you treat your family, and on Wednesday to what happens at work, and on Thursday, and Friday and Saturday...

God bent over backwards (as it were) to help his Old Covenant people live this way in anticipation of the complete salvation he was laboring to bring through Jesus Christ and the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. And he continues today with the world he so loves. There are only two possible responses: Repentance or the Refusal to Repent. And each brings one closer to an inevitable end. All that end up in heaven get there via the road of repentance; all that end up in hell, get there by their persistent refusal to repent.

As C.S. Lewis put it: There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says, in the end, “Thy will be done.” “You’re getting your way; you’ll never see me again.”