

Part 7: The Blessing of Repentance

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I'm sure you've all been in a circumstance like this: You're watching football game on TV, you're at a rally downtown, you're passing train cars on a road trip and there it is—someone standing there with a sign, some railroad car painted with one word: Repent.

There's one command in our passage today and it's that one word, "Repent." Today we conclude Peter's sermon to the Jews. Having healed a crippled man, Peter chastises the Jewish crowd for their amazement at this miracle—a man raised from a disease—when they did nothing when God raised from the dead his servant, son and our savior Jesus Christ whom they had killed.

While they wanted to please God, Peter said you killed his kin, you were annoyed at his anointed, you caused suffering to his servant, and you murdered his messiah. But God raised him up.

Yet, Peter unpack something marvelous today. Here's the wonderful mystery of the gospel. Those who were once ignorant can be made wise, those who were once dirty can be washed clean, those who were once under the burden of their own murderous hearts can actually be blessed by the very one they murdered. Those who worked hard to put Jesus to death can receive the work of God to bring them back to life. How? By that wonderful work of repentance.

For many of us that word is tied to apocalyptic preachers, or hell and brimstone sermons. It is a polarizing word: on account of this word these apostles are thrown into prison—yet on account of this word thousands are brought out of eternal prison into eternal life. Repentance in our text today is the boundary between annoyance at the gospel and acceptance of the gospel. It's the one line between sinner and saint.

So what is repentance?

This is going to be our main point this morning: **Repentance saves us from our mess by turning us to the blessing of Jesus.** We worked hard to make a mess, but God has done a greater work. We will see this in three ways this morning. First we will see **Our Ignorance and God's Providence**, then Peter will walk us through **Our Repentance and God's Promise** and lastly we will see **God's Promise and Our Response.**

To begin, let's revisit part of Peter's sermon last week: **Acts 3:12-15**, "Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk? "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. But you denied the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses."

Now, notice the odd shift that Peter has as he begins our passage today in **Acts 3:17**, "And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance as did your rulers."

And here is our first point this morning: **Our Ignorance and God's Providence**

No one likes to be called dumb—but we will gladly take it when the alternative is to be called a murderer. And here we see Peter modeling the two essential notes of evangelism: conviction and compassion.

He convicted them: you denied, you delivered, you demanded, you killed. But in another breath he shows an odd display of compassion by saying they acted in ignorance.

What do we make of this? How can those who were so diligent and determined also be called ignorant in their actions?

Perhaps it's helpful to consider the small town just north of here called Libby, Montana. Libby, small as it was boasted a mine which provided 80% of the world's vermiculite—a commonly used material when processed. But when raw and unprocessed, as it was at the source in Libby, it releases asbestos—another material which is known to cause cancer and lung disease.

The people of Libby were ignorant of this. Their kids would build forts out of the discarded mining containers. The local playgrounds and high school track were saturated with asbestos contamination from the clouds of asbestos rich dust the railroad trains would stir up throughout the day.

They were literally killing themselves. But no one knew. They intentionally went about their days. They didn't accidentally live in Libby—they meant to. And yet even though they were ignorant of what they were doing—it didn't change the deadly consequences.

When Peter says these men acted in ignorance—he isn't saying they didn't mean to kill Jesus and therefore they aren't guilty any more than we would say those living in Libby didn't mean to live in Libby. But what he does mean, is just like those who lived in Libby—their ignorance carried deadly consequences.

You thought it was just another ordinary crucifixion—but you killed the messiah. They were dumb to their sin—but they were devastated by that consequence. What you don't know can still kill you. Ignorance might be bliss—but at the end it never blesses.

We are all born into this blissful ignorance. When we come out of the womb, and grow up without hearing the gospel—we can point to superficial things like those in Libby could have. Our chest gets tight when we run, the track stinks when it's hot. We can identify jerks in the world, unfulfilled dreams and present pains. You can try to correct all those external issues—but you'll find it can't solve the core problem.

In Libby, they closed the mine, they sued the railroad company, the federal government sunk nearly a billion dollars into the cleanup efforts. And yet no caution tape, to monetary damage, and no dollar could fix what had been done. They were ignorant, and when they were in the know—none of their work could actually help them. In the same way you can attack the felt needs of your life but as long as you remain condemned in your sin—it fixes nothing.

But while we were ignorant in our sins—God was not. While we didn't know what we were doing, God did. Peter continues saying, **Acts 3:18**, "But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled."

While they worked in ignorance, God worked in meticulous providence. Maybe you've heard the story of Joseph, the favorite son of his father, who was sold into slavery in Egypt by his jealous brothers. As decades went by, guilt began to creep into the brother's minds and they regretted what they did, yet there was nothing they could do to fix it. But God was at work.

When they traveled in the midst of a famine to the only land that had food—the foreign nation of Egypt—they found that at the proper time, Joseph had made his way into Pharaoh's favor. Joseph—the one who they sold into slavery—was now the means by which God's promised people would not starve to death. He said this to his brothers: **Genesis 50:19-21**, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear, I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them."

When you consider your own life you might wonder if it's God who is ignorant—you've got plans but it seems like God keeps putting roadblocks in place. You might look at your own sin and say, "How can anyone justify this? How can I ever be free of my addiction, my abuse, my deceit and my slavery?" But just as Joseph provided the provision of comfort to those who sought to kill him—so does the greater Joseph, Jesus Christ. And what is the provision he gives to us in our spiritual famine? What comfort does he provide?

Repentance as the plan of God's provision: therefore Peter says, **Acts 3:19a** "Repent and turn back."

This is our second point this morning: **Our Repentance and God's Promise.**

So far in Acts, we have seen two evangelistic sermons: Peter at Pentecost and Peter in our text today. And notice how carefully he chooses his words of response. At Pentecost he says, "repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ," and now he says, "repent therefore and turn back."

When we typically think about our response to the gospel we use words like "belief" and "faith." Peter is not avoiding those words because they are unimportant, but instead because they are so important the he has been defining them. Remember in Acts 2 the Christians are called "believers," but the Bible wants us to see that if you want to be called a believer, you must be called first to repentance. J.C. Ryle says it this way: "Wherever there is faith, there is repentance. Wherever there is repentance is, there is always faith."

When we talk about faith it's easy to think about one person: Jesus. But when we understand faith and repentance together we realize that faith implies knowing another person: ourselves! Repentance is the mirror of faith where everything we believe about Jesus is believed backwards about ourselves. For instance, to take Jesus as a savior is to be one who believes he needs saved. To take Jesus for eternal life is to believe you were headed for eternal death. To believe we need his righteousness is to believe we are unrighteous. And the way in which we cross that great divide is by repenting.

Repentance realizes we shouldn't live in Libby. And when that clicks, true faith is shown by leaving, by returning to the refuge of another. Repentance is different than remorse, or guilt. Repentance is guilt satisfied. Repentance is faith telling our guilt where to go. It goes back to God.

Repentance is always costly. It would have been costly to move from Libby. It is costly for a Muslim to repent and face the persecution of their family. Repentance is costly when we are so dedicated to fleeing sexual sin that we delete all social media from our phones and install monitoring software. Why would you do that? Because you truly believe the blessing to be greater than the burden. God's work to bless us is always better than the mess our sin makes.

Notice three wonderful blessings of God's work toward repentant sinners in Peter's words.

First, in our repentance God promises ***Immediate Removal of Our Sins***. **Acts 3:19**, "Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out."

That word in Greek is a cleaning and cleansing word. To have your sins "blotted out," is to have your sins erased and obliterated. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, two characters are trying to make sense of why Lady Macbeth (who was complicit in a murder) had spent so much time washing her hands and with such fervor. And as they are talking we overhear her saying to herself, "Out, damned spot, out I say!"

The blood was long washed off her, but her conscience couldn't be scrubbed. But when we repent and come to Jesus that eternal stain is shown to be nothing more than dry erase marker on the white board of mercy.

As the Psalmist says, **Psalm 103:12**, "As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgression from us."

That's not to say we won't remember it—it's our own memory of sin which makes the gospel sweet and keeps us humble. But we are able as Paul says, to remember it without condemnation. Why? Because when we repent and take Jesus by faith the sins we committed are transferred to the account of Jesus. It is wiped off of our heart—and written onto the cross.

And how does he do that? By the precious blood of Jesus Christ. "What can wash away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. O' precious is the flow that makes me white as snow, no other fount I know, nothing but the blood of Jesus."

For those who feel guilt, shame or remorse--you've probably realized that it can't be hidden and it can't be absolved by human means. For those wondering what repentance looks like it's part confession: confessing the mirror of faith (where Jesus is sinless, I'm sinful, where he's the savior, I need saving). But it's also part redirection: it recognizes that life lives according to our own plan makes a mess, but we are saved and satisfied by living life according to Jesus' plan—and for his glory.

This new life is our life, but life in him. This life is often hard, but here Peter adds another blessing of repentance: ***Ongoing Refreshing in His Presence***. Look at **Acts 3:20a**, "that the times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord."

I remember on Christmas Eve a couple years ago a young woman slid on some ice and ran into my car. She was so apologetic, she worked quickly with insurance, and she made it right. And everything was

good. But, outside of that one encounter, I don't know her and she doesn't know me. We aren't pen pals, we don't do holidays together, and I can't even remember her name.

But notice how the fruit of repentance is not only the forgiveness of sins, but it includes ongoing times of refreshing that comes from his very presence. The righteous God who once stood against us in our sin has by his own will befriended us in grace. When we have such a friend as this we are refreshed in his presence.

For many of us, when we are sinful, when we are shameful, and when we are downright scared—coming to the presence of God seems like we would find frustration and rage more than refreshment. But that's not the biblical picture God paints.

The prodigal son was met with guilt and shame—but only when he considered how far he was from the father and how deep his rebellion. He went home expecting to find judgement at the gate but instead he found grace—swept up in the father's embrace. God sends his servants of conviction and guilt to chase down sinners so that when they return they can be met as sons. Our faithful brother Jesus, has opened his inheritance to us so that we might be welcomed home with great refreshment.

It's on account of this brother the author of Hebrews says, **Hebrews 4:16**, "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in a time of need."

If you're someone who has been lost in the wilderness for days without water, when you are finally found the very last thing you probably want to hear is a command. But a thirsty man who refuses the command to drink is called a fool. And a wayward sinner who heeds the command to repent is called refreshed in spirit, and a Christian in name.

Lastly, Peter reminds us that in our repentance God promises ***The Restoration of All Things in Christ's Return***. We are to repent so that God may blot out our sins, so that he would refresh us with his presence and that: **Acts 3:20-21**, "and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago."

Why do we repent? We repent because there is one Christ appointed for us, there is one name given among men by which we can be saved, there is one hope for the restoration of all things and it is in Jesus--the Christ.

What great hope is there for those of us, who like these Jews, missed Jesus? He's coming back. There's yet time to turn to him again. He came once, and he's coming again to restore all things and until that moment there's time to repent.

And here we see how repentance shapes not only our present confidence, but our future hope! We make future plans all the time. We hope to get what we want from our degrees, from our weddings, from our careers or promotions. But none of those things will bring the restoration you really need.

But there is one who is appointed for you. One--and no more. One person who not only brings refreshing of soul in the present, but will one day bring the restoration of all things on a level we cannot even imagine. And repentance assures us that when he comes, he comes for us.

Whenever we have an opportunity to repent—we have an opportunity to remind ourselves that the same God who worked faithfully at the cross is still working. Repentance reminds us that we are not yet who we will be, nor are we where we will be, but one day we will be.

I wonder, if you have such a theology of repentance? Far from being a box checked upon conversion—Peter speaks of repentance as the privilege of the converted. It's what gets us into the blessing of Christ, it's what assures us of the comfort of Christ in this life, and what seals us for the restoration of Christ in eternal life.

The kindling which Martin Luther used to light the fire of the Protestant Reformation was this doctrine of repentance. His lead sentence, his chief thesis was this: **"Thesis 1: When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' (Matthew 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."**

My wife and I were once in two different vehicles driving the interstate to the same place. We got caught up in road construction and by the time I reached our destination I found out Sarah had made it there hours earlier despite leaving at the same time as me. I was dumbfounded. But here's how it happened: in front of her, several cars peeled back on the interstate to exit the interstate by going the wrong way up an onramp, and then to a frontage road.

Being by nature competitive, and a ruler keeper, I was beside myself. I didn't know you could do that. And even if I did, I doubt I would have taken it. I would have kept the course and criticized those who made such a drastic change. Be careful that this is not how you view repentance.

Because the truth is, it is that easy. For those who are caught up in their own performance, or offended at the idea of the gospel, you will wrestle to believe that through this one act of turning around we can get what we so deeply needed. But it's true. Such a wonderful U-turn is the work of the gospel, and the best way forward. C.S. Lewis said it well this way: **...progress means getting nearer to the place where you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turning then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road and in that case the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man.**

And here, to these Jews, they would have heard this message, and with the temple sacrifice system so ingrained in their minds they would have been hesitant to accept such a free gift. How could the one we just crucified be so quick to bless us who just crucified him! But this was in fact the very promise of God—he would accept no other way to bless his people.

This is our last point this morning: ***God's Promise and Our Response.***

Having given the "too good to be true" picture of repentance, Peter shows how this was, is, and will forever be God's plan for those who want to be blessed. **Acts 3:22-26**, "Moses said, 'The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your brothers. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you. And it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people.' And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaimed these days. You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers saying to Abraham, 'And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' God having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you, by turning every one of you from your wickedness.'"

I'm a big fan of reviews. The only problem is that I'll be convinced about one product based off one review, and then I'll find another review that seems to say something different—and I'm shooketh. Competing views and conflicting reviews can paralyze us from making a decision, but to these Jews Peter says, "All the prophets say the same thing—buy this product." Jesus is the greater Moses. If Moses was sliced bread, Jesus was greater than sliced bread.

Every prophet who ever spoke in the OT says so. Don't miss it. If we want the promise of blessing, you can't miss Jesus. Hebrews tells us that when you get to glory you'll encounter saints burned at the stake, sawed in two, persecuted, afflicted and impoverished on earth—and you know what they'll saw with resounding consensus: "Only Jesus, only Jesus. It was all worth it because God's blessing is only Jesus."

Peter even reminds the Jews, who longed for God's promise that this promise, this blessing is not just for them—it's for all who repent—the promise for the nations. And that promise for all people is in one person. Paul speaks of this same Old Testament passage this way: **Galatians 3:16**, "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'and to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ."

The source of the blessing you need to get you out of your mess is Jesus. There's no other one appointed for you. If you're not a believer, that's the message God has for you today. Don't wait—today is the day of repentance.

Jesus is the source of our blessing. But once we come to him, don't miss where we experience this blessing. One day, the blessing is experienced in what we are gathered to in glory—the restoration of all things. But did you notice that our blessing now is in the rejection of all things wicked?

Acts 3:26, "God having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness."

I have to tell you, I've read this passage many times before—but I couldn't believe my eyes when I was preparing for this sermon. There are certainly many places where we can experience the blessing of God in the Bible—but here Peter tells us that God sent Jesus to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles to bless us. How, by turning every one of you from your wickedness.

Don't we often see acts of repentance as the burden of God more than the blessing? We don't act wickedly because we hate it. We act in sin because we want it! We want sin because we believe it is a blessing! We want to live in Libby because it's a lovely place. But, let us be ignorant no more!

It's 4th of July week, and I've heard it said that the revolution was a "happy treason." I love that line. That's what repentance is, happy treason. Treason that rebels against the passions of our flesh tossing the tea of the world into the sea of Jesus' blood and instead we take up life in him and the certain blessing of it.

I want to close with this wonderful quote by J.C. Ryle, **"No one was ever sorry that he served the Lord. No one ever said at the end of his days, 'I have read my Bible too much. I have thought of God too much. I have prayed too much. I have been too concerned about my soul.' Oh, no! The people of God would always say, 'If I had my life to live over again, I would walk far more closely with God than I have done. I am sorry that I have not served God better, but I am not sorry that I have served Him. The way of Christ might have its cross, but it is a way of pleasantness and a path of peace.'"**