

“Prayer for the Journey: The Sacrifice of Confession”

Isaiah 59:1-2; 1 John 1:9 ¹

As we begin, I invite you to think of something in your life that you really, really, really wish you hadn't done. Can you think of something? What would it be worth to you to be able to undo that?

In this age of computers, it's often possible to undo digital mistakes if we have good backups or have other programs such as Norton *Go Back*™ or *Undelete*™ that can put things back like they were a little while ago . . . that is, if things work as they're supposed to. Unfortunately, though, life as a whole is seldom like that, is it?

All of us have things in our lives that we really, really, really wish we hadn't done, and that's the subject for the second week of our Spiritual Strategic Journey: the Sacrifice of Confession. The message this morning has a simple outline with just four points. Those points are **PURPOSE**; **PROBLEM**; **PROVISION**; and **DECISION**.

First of all, it's crucial to understand that God's **PURPOSE** in your life and mine is that we be secure in the sure knowledge of what is truly True; that we have wisdom to move successfully through every trouble and trial; that we live lives that are above reproach; that we be set free from worry and anxiety; that we be enabled to give thanks in all things; that we experience the power to love even our enemies; that we be able to rejoice always; and that we be overcomers who move through each day, not “somehow,” but triumphantly . . . and that's just a partial list!² How closely do those things describe your life as you sit here this morning?

I suspect that for most of us, there's a gap—and sometimes it's quite a huge one—between God's purposes for our lives and how we're actually living our lives. The Bible even tells us that “*God looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. Everyone has turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one*” (Psalm 53:2-3). And that, my friends, is our **PROBLEM**.

The Bible says that every single one of us is corrupt, and that even the best of our deeds are no better than filthy rags compared to the holiness to which God calls us (Isaiah 64:6). That is indeed a problem. It's a Big Problem, and the biblical word for our corruption, our idolatry, and our outright rebellion is “Sin.” From the very beginning of our human story, Sin has masqueraded as that which it is not and promised that which it cannot deliver.

Adam and Eve were deceived, thinking that by disobeying God's instructions and going their own way they would gain a more rewarding life. But what they discovered, and what we have discovered after them, is that contrary to what was promised, Sin brings only guilt, anxiety, despair, and death.

Sin is to the soul what disease is to the body, and the effect of disease on our physical organism is a picture of what Sin produces in our spiritual nature. In Psalm 51, David gave a graphic catalogue of what Sin does: Sin soils our souls, saturates our minds, stings our consciences, saddens our hearts, sickens our bodies, sours our spirits, separates us from God, softens our will, stains our hands and seals our lips. That's what Sin does, and that's why God hates Sin.

Sin is a devastating corruption that continually eats away at the core of our spirits. Sin is an awful sickness that requires the Cross for its healing. Sin opens a breach between us and

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on February 10, 2013.

² Matthew 5:44; Romans 8:37; Ephesians 5:20; Philippians 2:15, 4:4, 6-7; 1 John 2:6.

God that only the Cross can span. And with that statement of our **PROBLEM**, we come to the glad news of God's **PROVISION** for our problem.

The fact of the matter is that our Sin is far more serious than we can understand, and our release from it comes only at the price of the Cross. As Jesus told His disciples, "*my blood . . . is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins* (Matthew 26:28).

Why is there no forgiveness without the shedding of blood (Hebrews 9:22)? I must confess to you that I don't know. God alone really understands our situation. That's why Jesus said, "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they're doing*" (Luke 23:34).

In our mechanized, digitized and sterilized society, you and I work hard to keep our distance from death, and we deploy many strategies to insulate ourselves from it. Though every one of us has an unavoidable appointment with death, relatively few of us these days have ever seen another person die. And even when we have witnessed someone's death, what physical pain there may have been has usually been mercifully relieved by the medical arts.

I think the ancient Israelites may have understood the horror of Sin and the cost of forgiveness better than we do. How could we miss the point if we brought a huge bull without any blemish—a perfect animal—to the altar of sacrifice, placed our hands on the bull's head to symbolize that he bears the penalty for our sin, and then watched his blood gush against the altar, heard his agonizing bellows, and watched his gradual death . . . in our place?

That's the kind of death Jesus died, but, as horrible as His death was, the Bible says that Jesus "*was willing to die a shameful death on the cross because of the joy he knew would be his afterward*" (Hebrews 12:2, NLT). Have you ever wondered what joy could possibly have taken Jesus to the Cross and then kept Him there? The very idea seems like a perverse contradiction. What in all creation would Jesus have missed had He chosen to avoid the Cross?

Well, here it is. The joy that Jesus gained by the Cross is the opportunity to spend eternity with you. Let me say that again. ***The joy that Jesus gained by the Cross is the opportunity to spend eternity with you.*** The Bible says that "*God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*" (John 3:16). And that, my friend, is about you.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus told Peter, "Put your sword away. This isn't about power. This is about Love. No one takes my life from me. I am giving it . . . for you" (Hebrews 9:12; Matthew 26:52-53; John 10:17-18).

Having briefly considered God's PURPOSE, Our PROBLEM, and God's PROVISION for our problem, the question becomes how it is that this provision becomes operative in our lives. Jesus answered the question in His very first recorded words when He began His ministry: "*The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the Good News!*" (Mark 1:15; Matthew 4:17).

When Peter preached at Pentecost, he told the people to "**Repent . . . and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out**" (Acts 3:19). And Paul wrote that "*I have had one message for Jews and Greeks alike—the necessity of repenting from sin and turning to God, and of having faith in our Lord Jesus*" (Acts 20:21, NLT).³

So what does it mean to "repent"? The central concept of repentance is to do an "about face" or a U-turn, so that we dramatically change the direction of our lives. As Paul noted, this

³ See also 1 Kings 8:47; 2 Kings 22:19; 2 Chronicles 32:26, 34:27; Job 42:6; Zephaniah 2:2; Matthew 3:8; Mark 6:12; Luke 3:8, 5:32, 13:5, 24:47; Acts 26:20; 2 Corinthians 7:10; 2 Peter 3:9.

turning has two movements: a turning away from sin, and a turning toward God. While such turning is initially an inward, spiritual decision, it's a decision that results in observable behavioral change. Roy Edgemon noted that repentance means three things:

1. *First, to repent means allowing God to change your **mind**.* The only way God can bring about the radical change that is required in our lives is for us to experience a radical change in how we think about right and wrong (Romans 12:1-2).
2. *Second, to repent means allowing God to change your **heart**.* The emotional center of our lives must be thoroughly regenerated, so that we begin to hate Sin as God does and to love what God loves.
3. *Third, to repent means allowing God to change your **behavior**.* Inner transformation that's real has observable and measurable effects. We stop doing things that are contrary to the Law of God, and we start doing things that build up God's inbreaking Kingdom.⁴

Chuck Colson is a good example of this. Chuck, "Nixon's Watergate Hatchet Man," became a Christian during that scandal because of the witness of his friend, Tom Phillips, who was then CEO of Raytheon. Colson told the story like this:

"I was tired, empty inside, sick of scandal and accusations, *but not once did I see myself as having really sinned*. But that night when I left Tom's home and sat alone in my car, my own sin—not just dirty politics, but the *hatred* and *pride* and *evil* so deep within me—was thrust before my eyes, forcefully and painfully. For the first time in my life, I felt unclean, and, worst of all, I could not escape. In those moments of clarity I found myself driven irresistibly into the arms of the living God. That was the night I gave my life to Jesus Christ and began the greatest adventure of my life."⁵

Our problem is that, like Chuck, we often have a hard time seeing ourselves as being *really* sinful. We tend to see ourselves as pretty "squared away" folk whom God is fortunate to have on His team. It is our fallen nature to be eager to confess everyone else's sin, but to be blind to nearly all of our own.

Yet when we parade our own righteousness, the truth is that "*all our righteous acts are like filthy rags*" in the light of God's holiness (Isaiah 64:6). The Bible says, "*Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear*" (Isaiah 59:1-2).

The Bible tells us that "*The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account*" (Hebrews 4:12-13).

Now that's Bad News; but happily there's Good News as well. The Bible also tells us that "*if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness*" (1 John 1:9).

Repentance is the single, inescapable requirement of God's forgiveness. And that brings us finally from **PURPOSE**, **PROBLEM**, and **PROVISION** to **DECISION**.

⁴Edgemon, *Doctrines Baptists Believe*, p. 79.

⁵ Charles Colson, *Loving God*, p. 247.

To repent is to acknowledge our need, our failure, and our guilt, to confess our faith in God's salvation through Jesus, and to return to God so that our sin may be forgiven and our relationship with God restored (Jeremiah 3:13-14).

The first time we do this, we are "born again" (John 3:3), and that rebirth lasts forever; but that one act of repentance is not enough to keep our relationship with God growing, intimate, and vibrant. Across the years, sin continues to creep back into our lives in ever more stealthy ways, moving from the more obviously destructive behaviors to the more covert and more easily rationalized sinful attitudes of the heart.

Even after following Jesus passionately for many years, Paul still confessed that "*I am rotten through and through so far as my old sinful nature is concerned. No matter which way I turn, I can't make myself do right. I want to, but I can't. When I want to do good, I don't. And when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway*" (Romans 7:18-19, NLT).

Paul also wrote that "*I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 3:12-14).

The Good News is that if our PROBLEM continues throughout our lives, God's PROVISION also remains good through every moment of our lives. From the first day of our salvation until the day we finally stand before God's judgment seat, it continues to be the case that "*if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness*" (1 John 1:9).

My friend, I said earlier that the joy that what Jesus gained by the Cross is the opportunity to spend eternity with you. His agony purchased the opportunity, but Jesus left the final choice with you.

Repentance is not simply the beginning of the journey, the entrance to the Kingdom, the vehicle of restored relationships. It is a continuing attitude of life whereby the Kingdom comes and Darkness is vanquished. "You cannot repent too soon because you do not know how soon it may be too late."⁶

"*Come now, let's settle this,*" says the LORD. "*Though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, I will make them as white as wool*" (Isaiah 1:18, NLT).

PURPOSE, PROBLEM, PROVISION, DECISION. The time for decision has come.

⁶ Sir Thomas Fuller, *Christian Reader*, vol. 32, no. 5.