

Getting Out of the Religious Rut - 2

Last week we looked at what it means to be in a religious rut. It starts with the rote, when there is repetition without feeling. The heart begins to drift, and love for God begins to cool. The heart is looking elsewhere, and we are repeating religious forms without feeling.

Isaiah 29:13 *'Therefore the LORD said: "Inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths And honor Me with their lips, But have removed their hearts far from Me, And their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men,"'*

The next stage is the rut, where we find ourselves in bondage to the rote. Going through the motions is all we know and all we do. We find ourselves stuck in lifeless Christianity, and so we do nothing more than spin our wheels, and get deeper into the rut. We begin to lose the sense that there should be more to this than repeating certain acts without any life.

The next stage is rot, where decay sets in, and we no longer desire or expect anything more from our relationship with God. The kind of cool, distant relationship we have with God we start to regard as normal, and we no longer have any expectation of something more.

In contrast to that, we saw what revival is. Revival is where The Presence of God is felt. We recognise, like Jacob did – *surely God is in this place, and I knew it not!* The power of God is felt. Things happen which can only be explained by the hand of God. Progress is made – people move forward to become more like Christ.

We made these applications – if you feel no desire for revival, it is probably because you are not saved to begin with. Revival means *to live again*. You have to be spiritually alive to begin with, to desire a refreshment of that life. Unsaved hearts do not need revival as we are speaking of it – they simply need regeneration.

For the Christian we ask, *'How badly do you want revival?'* If you are satisfied with your Christian life, then complacency has set in, and you are probably comfortable in your rut. You ask, *'Do I need revival?'* The degree to which we are not experiencing power, presence and progress is the degree to which we need revival. If you want revival, are you willing to do whatever God tells you to do in order to obtain it. What will you refuse to do? What will you not do?

To know what it is that God requires of us, we come back to our passage in Isaiah 1. After rebuking them for their formalism, for their dry, dead, rote, heartless religious ritual, and telling them He wants them to suspend the whole thing until they get right – He gives them the solution.

Isaiah 1:16-18 *'Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; ¹⁷ Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. ¹⁸ Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.'*

What is a word for '*put away the evil of your doings, cease to do evil, learn to do good*'? Repentance.

The beginning of revival is repentance. It should be clear to us that the reason we are in a spiritual rut is not because we have been obeying God, otherwise, we would have experienced a continual sense of His Presence, His Power, and we would be making progress. It is obvious we get into a rut through our disobedience. Therefore the first way out is repentance.

Every revival in Scripture began with repentance. Once the Lord used someone like Jonah or Samuel or Ezra or King Josiah or Hezekiah to show the people they were not where they needed to be, the next thing they did was repent.

Jonah 3:5-9

The people showed **mental repentance**. They agreed with God they had sinned against Him.

They showed **emotional repentance**. They grieved over their sin – often fasting, and wearing sackcloth and weeping.

They showed **volitional repentance** – they stopped doing certain things – they destroyed the idols, they cleansed the Temple, they began doing what they were supposed to be doing.

The result was the Presence, the Power and progress. How often did God promise Himself to Israel if they would just repent?

Zec 1:3 *'Therefore say to them, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Return to Me," says the LORD of hosts, "and I will return to you," says the LORD of hosts.'*

Jer 3:22 *'Return, you backsliding children, And I will heal your backslidings.' "Indeed we do come to You, For You are the LORD our God.'*

Isa 55:7 *'Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts; Let him return to the LORD, And He will have mercy on him; And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon'.*

Repentance. What does it mean exactly? What does the Bible mean when it tells us to repent?

Repentance is not:

1) Admitting you have sinned

There are many scoundrels in the world who will plead guilty to their crime, but they are not repentant.

Agreeing with God, or man, that you have sin may not disturb you in the slightest. I can think of a number of people in the Bible who admitted they had sinned, but did not repent:

When the plagues came thick and fast, Pharaoh said to Moses, '*I have sinned*,' but he did not repent of withholding Israel from going.

When Saul disobeyed God by not killing all the Amalekites and keeping some of the spoil, he said to Samuel 'I have sinned'. But he was not repentant – he just wanted Samuel to keep up the appearance of being in support of him as king

When Judas said to the chief priests and elders 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.' He admitted his wrong, but he did not repent.

Repentance is not merely *knowing you have done wrong*. I would say that the conscience of every person on earth at some point tells them – *you are wrong*.

2) *Feeling sorrow over your sin*

Many people mistake tears, regret and guilt for repentance. They even feel that because they are weeping, or feel terrible they are in the act of repentance itself.

Regret is often part of repentance, but you can have regret and no repentance at all. Suppose I am talking to you outside and I lean on your car, and as I do so, my watch scratches the paint. I apologise profusely, and you can see I am embarrassed and very ashamed. Next week, we are standing there, and I do it again. My eyes well up with tears, and I say, 'I can't believe I did it again!' Next week, I do it again, and you can see the shame and anguish all over my face. I am not insincere, I truly regret scratching your car. But at what point will I say 'I am actually repentant of scratching your car?'

It was customary for Israelites to show their sorrow by tearing their clothes. It was an outward symbol of regret and pain. Many of the godly kings of Judah tore their clothes when they realised how deeply Israel had sinned.

But when that emotion was all there was, God said to them in Joel 2 – '*Rend your hearts and not your garments.*'

Paul tells us there is a kind of godly sorrow which leads to repentance. But there is another kind which acts like a substitute – feel terrible, but make no turns, no changes.

3) *Wanting to reform.*

Now surely when someone wants to do right they are repentant. Correct? They have agreed that sin is bad and righteousness is better – haven't they repented? No. Repentance is more than wanting to do right.

At this very moment there are countless drunkards in the world who agree that being sober is better, and they wish they could quit. But they haven't repented of their drinking. There are countless gamblers who wish they could stop wasting their livelihood on bets and machines and games. They want to reform. But they don't. There are, at this moment, countless sex addicts, drug addicts, thieves, workaholics, and other sinners who wish for another life, but they have not repented.

The wish that you were something other than what you are is not the same as the act of turning from what you are into something else by God's grace.

These things are like chewing gum. When you chew chewing gum, the movement of your jaws makes your stomach think you are chewing food and gets it going, so that it can actually postpone hunger pangs. You haven't actually sent any food down there, but you've done some of the motions you would do when actually eating, so as to postpone the hunger pangs.

Confessing you have sinned, feeling deep regret over it, and wanting a different life are some of the things you do when you repent; just like chewing is what you do when you eat, but by themselves, they are not repentance, like chewing without food, is not eating. It's a substitute that tricks your aching conscience into thinking you have done something about it, when you really haven't.

Now there is something which needs to be cleared up regarding repentance. God calls you to repent. God may incline your heart to repent. God will give you desires to repent. But God will not do your repenting for you.

Notice in our passage that God promises cleansing and revival not before, but after, they have repented. He does not say that He will come and do a work and they will find themselves repenting because of it. He tells them – *'You repent, and I will cleanse.'*

God does not have to repent. Sinners have to repent. And God will do everything short of the act of repentance, because that must come from you. But many today have this idea that 'since my heart is so dead and sinful, I will just wait for God to give me repentance.' I will wait for God to come and give me repentance like a gift-wrapped package.' He will not do that. He will take nine steps out of ten toward you, but you must take that tenth. You must repent. If you're in a rut, God will extend a hand, God will give you instructions, but you must want out badly enough to take his hand and follow the instructions.

So what is biblical repentance?

1) Return to God, and repent of turning from Him.

When God calls His people to repentance, He is not simply calling for a change of behaviour. He is calling for a change of heart. Sin and disobedience is rooted in the heart.

Do you remember how many times Jesus linked love and obedience?

He said:

John 14:15 *'If you love Me, keep My commandments,'*

John 14:21 *'He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.'*

John 14:23-24 *'Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine but the Father's who sent Me."*

Put simply, an obedience problem is a love problem. Do you have a problem pleasing someone you love? To answer that question simply ask yourself, *do you have a hard*

time pleasing yourself? No – because you love yourself. And it is the same with anyone in your life whom you love; you find joy in pleasing them in proportion to how much you love them! An obedience problem is a love problem. So repentance starts with returning to Christ Himself and repenting of having drifted.

Imagine a husband and wife who are experiencing marital difficulties. They begin to recognise areas in which they have failed one another, things they should have done, things they shouldn't have done. Now, imagine the husband saying to his wife 'I did not take out the rubbish as often as I should have, I did not compliment your cooking as I should have, I did not praise you as I should have, I did not fix things in the house like I should have...I will start doing these things from now on..' Well, why will that not be good enough? Because, to merely focus on the action and not on the person, is to miss the point.

Zec 1:3 *'Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Return to Me," says the LORD of hosts, "and I will return to you," says the LORD of hosts.'*

The church at Ephesus had no problem in their performance, but they had missed the Person; and Christ calls them to return to their first love. Repentance begins with the frank admission, 'Lord, I have not loved you as I should have. My heart has been, and still is, cold. I have allowed substitutes and idols into my life. It has become too easy for me to disobey you.'

2) Ruthlessly seek out all known sin in your life. Agree with God that it is sin.

A repentant person wants to be pleasing to Christ in every area of his or her life. I have yet to conduct or attend a wedding where the bride came out with her hair ruffled, her makeup smudged, her wedding dress creased, her shoes not matching the dress, and then looked at the guests and said, 'Well, no one's perfect'. That would be inappropriate. We know no one is perfect. And we know no bride looks perfect. But for the one she loves, she wants to be as faultless as can be - down to the last eyelash. Her love leads her to being perfectionistic about her appearance.

Now, a believer desirous to know the Presence and Power of Christ has the same attitude about their whole walk with Christ. Yes, they know they will not be perfect, but that's not their attitude – they want to be pleasing to Christ. So they are always searching out areas of life not pleasing to Christ. Once you find it, agree with God that it is sin. Call it what God calls it. Describe it the way He does.

Tozer recommended what he called the pad and pencil method. This method is very simple and consists of getting on your knees with your Bible, a pad of paper and a pencil. Read the Bible and then write down what is wrong with you. The only way to remain spiritual is to *keep after yourself*. ... When the Holy Spirit says, 'You are that person,' write it down. Read on. When the Holy Spirit says you are wrong here or there, write it down. Then set your Bible aside and go over your list before God in confession with the promise that you will never be caught doing those things again. Commune with your own heart, be still and question yourself like a doctor with your open Bible before you.

I'm reminded of what the Israelites were to do before the Feast of Unleavened Bread. They were to seek out all yeast – all leaven, in their houses and remove it. A thorough

search of the entire house was to be made. Modern Jews pronounce a kind of statement over their search once it is complete. They say 'All leaven or leavening which is in my possession and which I have neither seen nor destroyed, nor known of, is to be as naught, and ownerless as the dust of the earth.'

Now that approach to yeast, should be our approach to sin. We should seek it out, and at some points be able to say – 'Lord, until you show me further in the Word, to the best I know I have found out and repented of all known sin in my life.'

Sometimes this is where fasting helps you.

3) Actively turning from those sins by practical deeds; actively obeying God.

We have already said that repentance does not happen until you actually stop doing the sin and start obeying. Up until that point, you may have had regret, sorrow, conviction, but repentance occurs at the point of turning from the action.

Do you remember what John the Baptist said when people came to him?

Luke 3:7-14 *'Then said he to the multitude that came forth to be baptized of him, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance, and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, That God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. ⁹ And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. ¹⁰ ¶ And the people asked him, saying, What shall we do then? ¹¹ He answereth and saith unto them, He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise. ¹² Then came also publicans to be baptized, and said unto him, Master, what shall we do? ¹³ And he said unto them, Exact no more than that which is appointed you. ¹⁴ And the soldiers likewise demanded of him, saying, And what shall we do? And he said unto them, Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages.'*

Every time Israel experienced a true revival, their actions changed. They cleansed the Temple. They smashed idols. They got rid of the witches and mediums and sodomites in the land. They began honouring the Sabbath. They honoured the assemblies God called for. They truly repented because they, firstly, came back to God, and they, secondly, found out every area of life displeasing to Christ and, thirdly, they turned from the evil and began doing what was right.

Fruits of repentance.

That means:

To repent of not praying is to pray.

To repent of neglecting the Word of God is to read, memorise and meditate on it.

To repent of forsaking the assembling of the believers is to be at church when the believers meet.

To repent of not evangelizing is to seek out opportunities and start sharing the Gospel.

To repent of lying to your boss is to tell him you lied and to only tell him the truth.

To repent of looking at filthy images on TV is to stop doing it and set before your eyes what pleases God.

To repent of gossip is to quit doing it immediately and give thanks for others.

To repent of extravagant spending is to stop doing so and to use your money to advance Christ's kingdom.
And so we could go on ...

Do you want to know one of the secrets of the Christian life? God gives you the grace to turn away from sin and to do His will at the exact moment you choose to obey Him, not a moment before. Enablement comes not when you are doing nothing, but the instant you move to obey.

Study the Bible to learn the will of God and then do His will as you understand it. Start now by doing the next thing, and then go on from there.
Just do the next thing you know you should do to carry out the will of the Lord.

Now there is a severe warning in Scripture. There comes a time for some, when repentance is no longer possible. Repentance is not an option you can exercise any time you want, like a *Get out of Jail Free Card*. Repentance is not the amnesty card you use whenever it suits you. Repentance is a life buoy that God throws you. It is to be taken the moment it is called for.

The Bible warns us that some reach a point where repentance is no longer possible. It can be because you have sinned against the light so often, that you no longer feel conviction. When the Bible uses the term a seared conscience (I Tim 4:2), it could not have chosen a better metaphor; because, should you burn yourself on a hot stove, the body's nerve ending will transmit great pain, so that you get your hand away from what will be burning up live flesh. Then the skin will go to work repairing it. But, should you not listen to that pain, or ignore it, and return to the stove, eventually the body will build up scar tissue, where the nerves are no longer very sensitive. The irony is, where you have been scarred, you will not feel the burning until it is just about too late.

When you sin once, you sense the burn of the Spirit's conviction. But if you go back, and repeat and repeat, your soul develops scar tissue, so that the Spirit working with your conscience is hardly heard, even while you are sinning, until you have just about destroyed yourself. A seared conscience makes it very difficult, and in some sad cases nearly impossible to repent. Paul said that the unbelievers are '*past feeling*' (Eph 4:19). So the deep irony of repentance is this. The more you repent, the more able you are to repent. The less you repent the less able you are to repent.

It can be, in some cases, that persistent disobedience means that the Lord will rather discipline such a person unto death.

1Jn 5:16 *'If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that.'*

I say this to point out the urgency of repentance today. While your heart is tender enough to hear and agree and believe this message – repent today. Last week I asked if you would be willing to do whatever God called you to do to obtain revival – in other words, to count the cost. And now I ask you to count the cost of not repenting. Is that a cost you are willing to embrace – a slow descent into an ever harder heart?

Heb 3:12-13 *'Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.'*

But there is equally the warm promise of a loving Father:

Rev 3:19 *'As many as I Love, I rebuke and chasten. Be zealous therefore and repent.'*

Is 1:18 *'Come now, let us reason together.'*

God does not make it deliberately hard for the prodigal son. It is the opposite. If you are coming back to him, with the desire to identify and turn from sin in your life and live fully pleasing to Him, He will give you every grace you need. He will restore the joy you have lost. The Presence will return. The power will be felt. The progress will be experienced.

It is going to take time. You are going to have to get alone. You are going to have to block off time, maybe even a whole Saturday morning, or late parts of an evening. Spend time returning. Let Him show you every area. It will hurt, but only briefly as you bring it to the blood. Keep at it. And set your heart and mind and will like a flint to please Christ. Turn from sin, and He will enable you to turn. Turn to obey Him and He will enable you to obey.