

Repenting Before A Gracious God

One of the most important things you will ever do in your life, if not the most important, will be the act of asking for forgiveness. How you will live your life here, and where you will spend the next life comes down to asking for forgiveness. People spend eternity in heaven or in hell based on whether or not their sins are forgiven. Therefore, one of the most important things you can ever do is ask God for forgiveness.

Unfortunately, asking God for forgiveness is also one of those things we find tremendously hard to do. Anyone who has had to ask another human being for forgiveness knows what an excruciating experience it is to our pride. To ask someone else for forgiveness is to blame yourself, make yourself vulnerable, and place yourself entirely at the mercy of someone else. They may refuse you forgiveness. They might turn your humility into humiliation. There is hardly a greater blow to our pride than asking for forgiveness.

We struggle to ask God for forgiveness. We find it easy to pray for protection, for provision, for healing, for deliverance, for the salvation of others. We may find it easy to ask to thank God for various things in our lives. But of all the kinds of prayers we pray, confessing our sins may be the hardest.

Why do we find it so hard to ask God for forgiveness? Why do we squirm at the thought of repenting and confessing? Perhaps, it's because too often we imagine God as hard and cold, with his arms folded, looking down his nose at us while we beg and beg and beg for forgiveness, and only after repeated pleas, does God slowly warm up to us, and reluctantly forgive us, still feeling hurt and a bit bitter towards us. But this is thinking of God in our own image. We are thinking of how we forgive and how others forgive us, and thinking of God that way.

But that is not at all how God forgives. God loves granting forgiveness. God keeps repeating throughout the Bible how much He loves to forgive.

Exodus 34:6 *And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth,*

Psalms 103:8-13 *The LORD is merciful and gracious, Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy. ⁹ He will not always strive with us, Nor will He keep His anger forever. ¹⁰ He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities. ¹¹ For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; ¹² As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us. ¹³ As a father pities his children, So the LORD pities those who fear Him.*

How does Jesus portray God's heart towards those who repent? Cold? Hard? Icy? When the prodigal son returns, the father receives him with open arms, clothes him, and calls for a feast of celebration. What was Jesus trying to get across here? God loves to forgive. God wants to forgive. You could put it this way: God is looking to forgive. He is looking for just reasons to forgive.

So here you have a God who wants to forgive sinners, and here you have sinners who more than anything need forgiveness. What breaks the circuit? Or to put it another way, what closes the circuit, so loving mercy flows from the power source of God down to the needy sinner?

The answer is that there is a problem not with God granting mercy, but with people truly asking for it. God loves to forgive. But He loves to forgive people who truly ask for it. God loves to give grace, but the Bible says He gives grace to a particular kind of person – the humble person. God loves to forgive, but He forgives people who are truly repentant. In other words, God forgives

people who truly want to be forgiven. The problem is not pride in God that makes Him reluctant to forgive us, but pride in us that makes us reluctant to seek forgiveness. True repentance is the switch that closes the circuit and brings God's mercy. True repentance brings the father running to embrace the returning sinner.

Daniel chapter 9 is one of the clearest pictures of repentance in all the Bible. Daniel's prayer is a model prayer for how to speak to a God who wants to forgive you. Daniel shows us what it looks like to want forgiveness. Daniel's prayer shows us what kind of heart is like a lightning conductor for the grace of God, drawing the merciful heart of God.

Whether you are a Christian who needs to confess your sin to God daily, or whether you are thinking about becoming a Christian and want to know how to approach God for forgiveness, this prayer is like a recipe of ingredients of true repentance.

Daniel 9 is a written prayer. This was a prayer which Daniel really prayed, but a prayer which he gave much time and thought to. He crafted it, carefully worded it, and wrote it down. This isn't just a few thoughts that popped into Daniel's head; this is a concentrated prayer of repentance. As we study this written prayer, we'll find five components of repentance.

I. Repentance Depends on God's Faithfulness

Daniel 9:1 *In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of the lineage of the Medes, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans -- ² in the first year of his reign I, Daniel, understood by the books the number of the years specified by the word of the LORD through Jeremiah the prophet, that He would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem.*

Daniel had been reading the prophecy of Jeremiah. He was into the first year of the changeover from Babylon to Persia, and he knew that God had said through Jeremiah that Israel would be in captivity for exactly seventy years. He knew that they were coming close to that seventy year mark. And so he begins praying to God regarding Israel and Jerusalem.

Now think about this. He sees Scriptures which say that God is going to restore His people after seventy years, and he knows that seventy years is close. Think how he could have responded. He could have thought, "Well, if God said seventy years, then I'm just going to sit back and watch. No need to pray for what God said He would do." Did he do that? No, he prayed. Why did he pray? He prayed because he believed in God's faithfulness. God said He would do this, God always keeps His word, so I am going to petition Him about this. And God's faithfulness led Daniel into a prayer of repentance.

God's faithfulness is the foundation of repentance. If God changed, if God was whimsical and arbitrary and fickle, there would be no hope of forgiveness. No one is more consistent, more unchanging, more reliable than God.

If a child has a father who is stormy and temperamental, who explodes and sulks one moment and laughs and jokes the next, how is the child to know when to approach and when not to? Probably the child will just try to stay out of sight. If you don't know what you're going to get with God, there is no point in asking for forgiveness. But the God revealed in Scripture is not a moody, unpredictable God. He reveals Himself as the quintessence of consistency. The repentant can expect mercy. The humble can expect grace.

Lamentations 3:22-23 ²² *Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not. ²³ They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness.*

Do you know why you can look to God for forgiveness? Because He is the same yesterday, today and forever. He is still the father in the story of the prodigal. He is still gracious and compassionate. He is still the one who loved the world and gave His Son. He is as forgiving and gracious as He ever was, and ever will be.

With God's faithfulness as the foundation, Daniel begins his prayer of repentance. The next thing we see about true repentance

II. Repentance Feels the Seriousness of Sin

³ *Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes.*

Daniel set his face toward the Lord God. Daniel focused His attention and thought on God and God alone. His prayer was accompanied with the signs of mourning: fasting, sackcloth and ashes.

Now when you consider that Daniel was undoubtedly one of the wealthiest men in the whole kingdom, for him to be fasting is a choice. For him to be in sackcloth and ashes is a choice. He has set this time aside to seek God in repentance. He is not praying brief prayers while in the chariot on his way to an appointment. He is not praying silent prayers as he walks about doing official business. No, Daniel has stopped what he is doing to seek God in this way. He has stopped eating. He has stopped dressing comfortably. He deeply reveres God and senses the weight and enormity of sin. For Daniel, Israel's sin is as if he had lost a child or a wife. Israel's situation is one of great shame and disgrace. He mourns. He afflicts himself. He acts as if he had been demoted or fired, or shamed.

For something as significant as Israel's return to their own land, Daniel is not praying a prayer just as he goes. He stops to give all his attention to God.

Imagine a husband and wife who have had an argument. Can you picture any reconciliation happening if the husband is on the phone to someone from work, reading a newspaper, sipping coffee, and between all that, says "Sorry for the argument." Will that work? No, reconciliation usually means stopping what you are doing to put things right.

Although we will not all fast and put on signs of mourning for every sin we confess (Daniel didn't do that), the principle here is that repentance takes sin seriously enough to cause you to stop what you are doing to pray and put it right. It cannot be properly done in a by-the-way fashion. That neither communicates sorrow, nor allows you to seriously think about what you have done.

Why did Daniel feel the weight of sin so heavily? It was because of how he viewed the One we sin against. Look at verse 4.

⁴ *And I prayed to the LORD my God, and made confession, and said, "O Lord, great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and mercy with those who love Him, and with those who keep His commandments,*
⁵

Notice how Daniel addresses God. He calls Him Lord – Adonai. This is the one who rules, the absolute boss of all. Daniel says, God you are the Law-giver, the rule-maker. You are the government. Our sin is breaking the law in the front garden of the Supreme Court Judge. He also calls Him the great and awesome God. The words here suggest the fearsome properties of

God. The word *awesome* actually means *the one to be feared*. He is not a God to be trifled with. He inspired dread and terror in those who cross Him. Our sin is like taking a knife and stabbing at the feet of a Tyrannosaurus Rex.

He also calls Him the faithful and merciful God. Those who love Him and obey him find Him to be a promise-keeping, steadfast, loyal and loving God. Our sin is like the betrayal of a wife having an affair with another man.

What's Daniel doing here? He's addressing God as He is, not as Daniel would like Him to be, Daniel is not trying to view God in a way which makes his sin seem smaller. No, he speaks to God as He is, because no prayer can make God into anything but what He is. He's not making his sin smaller; He's magnifying his view of God's majesty and authority and mercy.

Let's imagine you're a father or a mother, and one of your children comes to you and says, "Mom/Dad, you know how you say you will love me no matter what? You know how you say we all make mistakes?" You will think, this child is trying to prepare me to think of his sin lightly. He is trying to make his wrongdoing seem small. We don't have to do that. We don't have to try to make our sin seem lighter than it is, so as to make it easier for God to forgive us. God doesn't forgive us because our sin is small; He forgives because His mercy is great. It is the same in prayer. We need not come to God and pretend He is more loving than just, and speak to Him that way. We needn't pretend He is more just than loving, and speak to Him that way. He is just and merciful. He is good and great.

Much repentance breaks down because we end up addressing a god of our own imagination – either too sentimental, where he winks at our sin, or too brutal, where he forgives only with great reluctance. Let us come to Him as He is, and see our sin in light of Him. It is when we allow our sin to be as serious as it is in light of God's holiness that we are throwing ourselves on God's mercy. We are depending not on airbrushing our sin, but on the steadfast love of the Lord.

Not only does repentance treat sin honestly, true repentance treats self with brutal honesty.

III. Repentance Takes Full Responsibility for Sin

"we have sinned and committed iniquity, we have done wickedly and rebelled, even by departing from Your precepts and Your judgments. ⁶ "Neither have we heeded Your servants the prophets, who spoke in Your name to our kings and our princes, to our fathers and all the people of the land. ⁷ "O Lord, righteousness belongs to You, but to us shame of face, as it is this day -- to the men of Judah, to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, those near and those far off in all the countries to which You have driven them, because of the unfaithfulness which they have committed against You. ⁸ "O Lord, to us belongs shame of face, to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, because we have sinned against You. ⁹ "To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, though we have rebelled against Him. ¹⁰ "We have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God, to walk in His laws, which He set before us by His servants the prophets.

Daniel is clear. We have sinned. Sinned means to wander off the path. What does that make us? Sinners. We have committed iniquity. Iniquity means to act perversely. We consciously committed acts of iniquity. We have done wickedly and rebelled. Wickedly means pre-meditated evil. Rebelled means we defied Your authority.

We departed from your laws. We knew what they were, and we left. We did not listen to your prophets. You spoke to us, and we said, "No." We were unfaithful to you.

Daniel is not trying to sound sorry for sins. Daniel is simply appearing before God on behalf of

Israel and saying: this is who we are. We are sinners. We are rebels. We are stubborn. I don't detect Daniel calling Israel weak, or riddled with personality problems, or overcome by peer pressure, or possessed by the demon of rebellion, or a victim of circumstances. Daniel is ruthlessly calling himself and his people sinners. Daniel is claiming ownership for sin. He is taking the charge sheet from God, and saying, "Guilty."

On the other hand, he is turning to God and saying "Blameless." he is saying that God is righteous. God is fair and just. God set the laws, and sent prophets to remind. God made provisions for forgiveness, and warned Israel not to follow other gods. God did not do anything which He had not warned them about. Daniel is saying, "You are right, and we are wrong. You have not wronged us by punishing us. We have wronged you."

This was David's heart in Psalm 51

Psalm 51:4 *Against You, You only, have I sinned, And done this evil in Your sight -- That You may be found just when You speak, And blameless when You judge.*

Repentance can never get off the ground until we agree that we have sinned. Nobody made us sin. Nobody forced us to sin. Nothing in our circumstances made it inevitable that we sin. The sin belongs to us; the righteousness belongs to God.

See, sometimes there is an impulse in us which tends to want to blame God for part of our sin. Remember the scene in the Garden. God asks Adam if he has eaten from the tree.

Genesis 3:12-13 ² *Then the man said, "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate."* ¹³ *And the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."*

This is man's response. Others tempted me. Circumstances made me. My own personality made me. My upbringing made me. And when we say those things, we are in a way, blaming God. "If You hadn't made me like this, I wouldn't have done it. If You hadn't put that in my path, then I would have obeyed. You made it too hard to obey."

But what do the Scriptures say?

James 1:13-14 ¹³ *Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone.* ¹⁴ *But each one is tempted when he*

For as long as we do not completely admit full responsibility for our sin, we are not yet confessing.

1 John 1:8-10 ⁸ *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.* ⁹ *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* ¹⁰ *If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us*

To truly repent is to agree with God that our sin is our fault entirely. As long as there is a hint of an excuse, some kind of plea of not guilty, some kind of mitigating circumstance that we're entering, we are not yet throwing ourselves entirely upon the mercy of God. If you want God's mercy, then do not justify yourself. If you want to be completely received by the arms of the Father, then come completely empty-handed. If you want Him as your Advocate, then do not defend yourself. Admit and own your sin, with the shame that comes with it.

Sometimes you hear that saying, "God helps those who help themselves." Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, God helps those who refuse to help themselves in the area of forgiveness.

You want God to acquit you, don't defend yourself. Take all the blame you are aware of, and watch how God's mercy is drawn to you.

Daniel's repentance was based in God's faithfulness, gave all its attention to God treated God as He is, laid the blame where it belonged. But there is another aspect to true repentance

IV. Repentance Accepts the Consequences of Sin

¹¹ "Yes, all Israel has transgressed Your law, and has departed so as not to obey Your voice; therefore the curse and the oath written in the Law of Moses the servant of God have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against Him. ¹² "And He has confirmed His words, which He spoke against us and against our judges who judged us, by bringing upon us a great disaster; for under the whole heaven such has never been done as what has been done to Jerusalem. ¹³ "As it is written in the Law of Moses, all this disaster has come upon us; yet we have not made our prayer before the LORD our God, that we might turn from our iniquities and understand Your truth. ¹⁴ "Therefore the LORD has kept the disaster in mind, and brought it upon us; for the LORD our God is righteous in all the works which He does, though we have not obeyed His voice. ¹⁵ "And now, O Lord our God, who brought Your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand, and made Yourself a name, as it is this day -- we have sinned, we have done wickedly!"

Daniel again rehearses what Israel did: departed, disobeyed, sinned and done wickedly. But notice what he says here: the curse and the oath written in the law of Moses has come to pass. What curse? Back in Deuteronomy 32, God promised Israel that if they departed from him, great curses would come upon them. Daniel says, this great disaster which has come upon us is precisely the consequence God said would come upon us. He is righteous. We are not. We got what was coming to us, so to speak. Daniel accepts the consequences as being part of what came with the sin.

You see, every sin has a Siamese twin – its consequence. To choose the sin is to necessarily choose the consequence with it. Part of the lie of sin is to tell you that this time, the Siamese twin of consequence will not be attached. But it normally is.

James 1:15 *Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.*

I have noticed in myself, and in others I have counselled, a kind of childish delusion that says, once I have confessed my sin, God must both forgive me and get rid of all the consequences of my sin. And occasionally, for special reasons, God chooses to separate the sin from the consequence. But not always. If we have really placed the blame where it belongs, and owned the sin as our own, we must also own the consequences. If I want to drink tasty poison, then I must take both the sweet taste, and the nasty after-effect.

David was promised some bitter chastening after his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband. He experienced it. He was hunted down by his own son Absalom. When fleeing the city, he was met by a man called Shimei, who threw stones at him, and shouted,

2 Samuel 16:7-13 *Also Shimei said thus when he cursed: "Come out! Come out! You bloodthirsty man, you rogue!" ⁸ "The LORD has brought upon you all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and the LORD has delivered the kingdom into the hand of Absalom your son. So now you are caught in your own evil, because you are a bloodthirsty man!" ⁹ Then Abishai the son of Zeruiah said to the king, "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Please, let me go over and take off his head!" ¹⁰ But the king said, "What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah? So let him curse, because the LORD has said to him, 'Curse David.' Who then shall say, 'Why have you done so?' " ¹¹ And David said to Abishai and all his servants, "See how my son who came from my own body seeks my life. How much more now may this Benjamite? Let him alone, and let him curse; for so the LORD has ordered him. ¹² "It may be that the LORD will look on my affliction, and that the LORD will repay me with good for his cursing this day." ¹³ And as David and his men went along the road, Shimei went along the hillside opposite him and cursed as*

he went, threw stones at him and kicked up dust.

David was a man who accepted the consequences of his sin. To refuse all consequences is really refusing ownership of sin. It's an immature view of sin, as if you can undo all you have done by just admitting you have done it. Sin is more serious than that. A repentant heart says to God, I have sinned, and I deserve everything that comes to me. Once again, when you make yourself defenceless, and throw yourself entirely upon the mercy of a loving God, you draw his gracious pardon.

Daniel looked solely to this faithful God, addressed Him as he was, placed the blame where it belonged, accepted the consequences, and then most importantly,

V. Repentance Appeals For Mercy

¹⁶ "O Lord, according to all Your righteousness, I pray, let Your anger and Your fury be turned away from Your city Jerusalem, Your holy mountain; because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and Your people are a reproach to all those around us. ¹⁷ "Now therefore, our God, hear the prayer of Your servant, and his supplications, and for the Lord's sake cause Your face to shine on Your sanctuary, which is desolate. ¹⁸ "O my God, incline Your ear and hear; open Your eyes and see our desolations, and the city which is called by Your name; for we do not present our supplications before You because of our righteous deeds, but because of Your great mercies. ¹⁹ "O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and act! Do not delay for Your own sake, my God, for Your city and Your people are called by Your name."

Daniel asks for mercy here in different ways. He asks for God to turn away His anger. He asks that God will listen and hear. He asks that God would favour Israel. He asks that God would forgive, act and remove the shame which Israel now had. He appeals to God to forgive them, and begin to reverse the chastening He had brought upon them. He is pleading for mercy.

But notice the reason Daniel keeps giving God for His mercy.

Verse 16 – *according to your righteousness, Your city Jerusalem, Your holy mountain, Your people.*

Verse 17 – *for the Lord's sake cause your face...*

Verse 18 – *the city that is called by your name... we do not present our supplications before You because of our righteous deeds, but because of Your great mercies*

Verse 19- *Do not delay for Your own sake, my God, for Your city and Your people are called by Your name."*

Are the reasons Daniel gives God to forgive Israel based on the qualities and properties of Israel? No, Daniel appeals to God to show mercy according to His nature, and for His reputation. Forgive us, not because we are forgiveable, but because You are forgiving. Have mercy on us, not because we are so worth saving, but because your reputation is worth upholding.

Even in the appeal for mercy, Daniel is not defending Israel. He is asking God to be Himself, be merciful, be covenant-keeping. Maintain Your reputation as faithful. Be the righteous and merciful God you are. Grant us mercy.

True repentance does not look for mercy because we think we are asking so earnestly, or because we are crying tears of repentance, or because we have really taken it seriously. Daniel did not think that his fasting merited God's forgiveness. We must appeal to God for mercy not because we think we are pitiful and therefore so deserving of mercy, but because God is so merciful.

When you ask God to forgive you based on yourself, you will always lack assurance. How do you know if you are sincere enough or sorry enough or contrite enough? But if you base your appeal

solely in God – in his stated desire to forgive the repentant, then you have a firm foundation.

Did God answer Daniel? Look at verse 20.

Daniel 9:20-23 ²⁰ Now while I was speaking, praying, and confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the LORD my God for the holy mountain of my God, ²¹ yes, while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the beginning, being caused to fly swiftly, reached me about the time of the evening offering. ²² And he informed me, and talked with me, and said, "O Daniel, I have now come forth to give you skill to understand. ²³ "At the beginning of your supplications the command went out, and I have come to tell you, for you are greatly beloved; therefore consider the matter, and understand the vision:

God answered immediately. No delay; no cold shoulder; no cool reception.

If there is a God who wants to forgive, and a needy sinner who needs forgiveness, the problem is not a lack of desire in God. The problem is a lack of true repentance in the sinner.

Think of your own life. Do you ever feel the weight of sin in light of a holy God, where it causes you to stop what you are doing? Do you claim full ownership for your sins, take full responsibility, blame yourself and no one else, or do you enter accompanying pleas of 'not guilty'? Do you accept the consequences, falling on his mercy to minimise them as He sees fit? Do you appeal to Him to glorify Himself as a merciful God in forgiving you?

This is true repentance. When it is in our hearts, we will find Him to be as faithful as He was to Daniel. We will find that He is still the Father who meets us running. Embraces us, calls for a robe, a ring and a feast to celebrate our return.