

THREE REASONS TO PRACTICE REPENTANCE

59 Listen, Jehovah's hand is not so short that it cannot save; nor is his hearing so poor that he cannot hear. ²On the contrary, your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have caused him to hide his face from you, so that he refuses to hear [you]. ³Your hands are stained with blood, and your fingers [are stained] with iniquity. Your lips have spoken lies, and your tongue mutters wicked things. ⁴No one calls for justice; no one pleads [his case] with integrity. They rely upon worthless arguments and speak lies; they conceive mischief and give birth to iniquity. ⁵They hatch the eggs of vipers and spin a spider's web. Whoever eats their eggs will die; and when one [of those eggs] is broken, a viper is hatched. ⁶Their webs cannot become garments, neither can they clothe themselves with their deeds—their deeds are evil, and acts of violence are in their hands. ⁷Their feet run to evil and they hasten to shed innocent blood. They think evil thoughts; ruin and destruction are in their paths. ⁸They do not know the way of peace; there is no justice in their paths. They have made crooked roads for themselves; whoever travels along them will not know peace.

⁹Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us. We look for light, but [all is] darkness; [we look for] brightness, but we walk in dark shadows. ¹⁰We grope along the wall like a blind man; indeed, we grope along like those who have no eyes. At midday we stumble as if it were twilight. We are like dead men among the living. ¹¹We all growl like bears and moan mournfully like doves. We look for justice, but there is none; we look for salvation, but it is far from us—¹²because our transgressions are many before you, and our sins testify against us; our transgressions are with us, and we acknowledge our iniquities: ¹³apostasy and denial of Jehovah, turning back from following our God, plotting extortion and fraud, uttering lies our hearts have conceived. ¹⁴Justice is driven away and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth has fallen in the marketplace and honesty cannot enter. ¹⁵Truth is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil makes himself a prey. Jehovah saw [all] this and it displeased him that there was no justice.

¹⁶He saw that there was no one—he was astonished that there was no one to intercede; therefore, his own arm helped him and his [own] righteousness sustained him. ¹⁷He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head. He dressed himself in the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself with zeal as though it were a cloak. ¹⁸He will repay [them] according to what they have done: wrath to his enemies, retribution to his foes; he will repay the islands what they deserve. ¹⁹Therefore, from the west men will fear the name of Jehovah, and from the rising of the sun [they will revere] his majesty; for he will come like a rushing flood driven by the breath of Jehovah. ²⁰But a redeemer will come to Zion, [he will come] to those in Jacob who repent of their sins, declares Jehovah. ²¹As for me, this is my covenant with them, declares Jehovah. My Spirit, who is upon you, and my words that I have put into your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouths of your children nor from the mouths of their descendants, from this time forth and forever, declares Jehovah. (Isa. 59:1-21)

Introduction

Back in 1919 eight members of the Chicago White Sox baseball team conspired to throw the World Series. One member of the team, the first baseman, conceived the plot and presented it to an East Coast gambler. The big sinister first baseman assured his seven teammates that there was big money to be made; they would share \$80,000 between them. With their share of the money they could pay off their debts, buy a business, and be financially set for life. He assured his crooked teammates that it would be all so easy; nobody would ever know.

But they were wrong. They didn't get away with it—the scandal was exposed, and the consequences of their iniquity were devastating. There was a Grand Jury investigation; the eight players sat in a Chicago courtroom in guilt and shame. Most of them never got to enjoy any of the \$80,000 they had hoped to share; what each of them did get was a lifetime suspension from baseball.

The course that at first appeared to be easy, profitable, and secure, for these eight men proved to be devastating; resulting in disgrace and irreparable loss. Here is just one public example of the devastating effects of sin; may it impress upon our consciences the realization of the devastating effects our iniquities have upon our lives and our relationship with God.

In Isaiah 59 we are confronted with three dimensions of the devastating effect of sin—three good reasons why we must practice repentance.

I. We Must Practice Repentance, Because Our Sins Cause a Separation Between Us and Our God (Isa. 59:1-8)

The people of Israel wondered why the LORD did not answer their prayers, why He did not come to their rescue. The LORD now gives His answer to their perplexing questions:

Listen, Jehovah's hand is not so short that it cannot save; nor is his hearing so poor that he cannot hear. ²On the contrary, your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have caused him to hide his face from you, so that he refuses to hear [you]. (Isa. 59:1-2)

Following upon the charge stated in verses 1-2 there comes the presentation of the evidence in verse 3. *"Your hands are stained with blood, and your fingers [are stained] with iniquity."* Crimes of violence polluted the land: murder, rape, armed robbery, children sacrificed to pagan idols. *"Your lips have spoken lies."* Dishonesty had become a way of life, an accepted practice. There was no respect for truth and no commitment to it; the sanctity of covenants and contracts was not respected—in marriage, in business, in personal affairs. *"Your tongue mutters wicked things."* What came forth from the mouth was profanity, vulgarity, cursing; the suggesting and the plotting of unscrupulous schemes, character assassination and gossip.

In verse 4 the LORD confronts the people with a further accusation: *“No one calls for justice; no one pleads [his case] with integrity. They rely upon worthless arguments and speak lies; they conceive mischief and give birth to iniquity.”* They called upon the LORD, but not in righteousness—their hearts and lives were devoid of the righteousness and truth that are the prerequisites for answered prayer. The charge brought against the nation of Israel in Isaiah’s day is that they relied upon worthless arguments, and spoke lies—they had a false confidence in their religious heritage as the children of Abraham and their religious status as those who bore the name of being the people of the LORD, but there was no true personal faith in the LORD, no commitment to Him. It amounts to the same charge that would be brought once more against the nation in the days of the prophet Jeremiah,

*This is what Jehovah of hosts, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. ⁴Do not trust in deceptive words and say, “This is the temple of Jehovah, the temple of Jehovah, the temple of Jehovah!” ⁵If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, ⁶if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, ⁷then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers forever and ever. ⁸But look, **you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.** (Jer. 7:3-8)*

As verse 4 describes their approach to God, verse 5 describes their conduct towards one another. *“They hatch the eggs of vipers and spin a spider’s web”*—their dealings with one another were poisonous and treacherous. *“Whoever eats their eggs will die”*—i.e.; the naïve and unsuspecting are victimized. *“When one of those eggs is broken, a viper is hatched”*—i.e.; those who oppose their unscrupulous practices find themselves viciously attacked and persecuted. Verse 6 speaks about the ultimate futility of their unrighteous works: a spider’s web, designed to ensnare its victims, cannot be fashioned into a durable garment; likewise, a society that forsakes the fundamentals of honesty, integrity, commitment, cannot survive.

In verses 7-8 Isaiah presents a general description of the society. *“Their feet run to evil”*—all moral restraints are broken, the people have given themselves over to evil conduct with a passion. *“They think evil thoughts”*—the society described here has degenerated to the level of that just prior to the universal flood, note Genesis 6:5, *“And Jehovah saw that the wickedness of man was great upon the earth, and that every conception of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”* (Gen. 6:5) Isaiah now goes on to present the consequence of such a life. *“Ruin and destruction are in their paths”*—what lies ahead, what awaits them and what they will eventually encounter on this road of unrighteousness they have chosen to travel is desolation and destruction. *“They do not know the way of peace”*—when a man or society travels the crooked pathway that is devoid of and opposed to truth and righteousness, he shall find that it is also devoid of peace.

With regard to such lives the LORD declares, *"Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God"* (vs. 2.)

Here then is the first reason why we must practice repentance; namely, the fact that our sins cause a separation between us and our God. May our prayer be that of the Psalmist:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. ²⁴See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. (Psl. 139:23-24)

Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. ¹⁰Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. (Psl. 51:9-10)

II. We Must Practice Repentance, Because Our Sins Rob Us of Strength and Light (Isa. 59:9-15)

Verses 9-11 describe a people who are powerless before the forces aligned against them. *"We are like dead men among the living."* Their adversaries and oppressors (mostly likely the Assyrians) were mighty, while they themselves had the power of a dead man. *"We all growl like bears and moan mournfully like doves"*—but to no avail. Whether they assert themselves like bears, or mournfully plead like doves, it does no good; they have no strength in themselves, and they find no pity with their oppressors and no answer from the LORD their God. *"We look for justice, but there is none; we look for salvation, but it is far from us."* "Justice," or, "judgment," here is used in the sense of vindication and deliverance by the LORD their God. They looked for the LORD to come to their defense, but it did not happen—they are left to themselves and they are left powerless before the adversaries and oppressors aligned against them.

Verses 9-11 describe a people who are groping in the darkness of confusion and despair. *"We look for light, but all is darkness; we look for brightness, but we walk in dark shadow."* They looked for the sun to rise, but it set instead; rather than the anticipated illumination and redemption, there came increased confusion and isolation. *"We grope along the wall like a blind man; indeed, we grope along like those who have no eyes."* They stumble about in the darkness of confusion, having no direction and without hope. What is described here is the experience of the foretold covenantal curse that would come upon the nation for their disobedience to the LORD their God:

... if you do not obey Jehovah your God and do not carefully follow all his commandments and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you ... ²⁸Jehovah will afflict you with madness, blindness and confusion of mind. ²⁹At midday you will grope about like a blind man in the dark. You will be unsuccessful in everything you do; day after day you will be oppressed and robbed, with no one to rescue you. (Deut. 28:15, 28-29)

In verses 12-13 their condition is traced directly back to their iniquities. On behalf of the people, Isaiah himself defines the cause of their dilemma: *“our transgressions are many before you, and our sins testify against us; our transgressions are with us, and we acknowledge our iniquities”* (vs. 12)—there is a consciousness of the sins being practiced, but there is a deep attachment to them. The transgressions that plagued the nation are enumerated as follows: *“apostasy and denial of Jehovah, turning back from following our God, plotting extortion and fraud, uttering lies our hearts have conceived”* (vs. 13.)

The Scriptures teach that on both a national level as well as an individual and personal level, there is a connection between spiritual strength and righteous living, note Deuteronomy 11:8,22-25,

Observe therefore all the commandments I am giving you today, so that you may have the strength to go in and take over the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess ... If you carefully observe all these commandments I am giving you to follow—to love Jehovah your God, to walk in all his ways and to hold fast to him—²³then Jehovah will drive out all these nations before you, and you will dispossess nations larger and stronger than you. ²⁴Every place where you set your foot will be yours: Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the Euphrates River to the western sea. ²⁵No man will be able to stand against you. Jehovah your God, as he promised you, will put the terror and fear of you on the whole land, wherever you go. (Deut. 11:8,22-25)

When we lead a righteous life we are blessed with moral and spiritual strength. But when we practice iniquity instead of righteousness, we lose that moral and spiritual strength, note Joshua 7:10-12,

Jehovah said to Joshua ... ¹¹Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. ¹²That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run because they have been made liable to destruction. I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction. (Josh. 7:10-12)

The Scriptures also teach that there is a connection between spiritual light/enlightenment and righteous living:

... the path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining brighter and brighter until the full light of day. ¹⁹The way of the wicked is like darkness; they cannot see the things over which they stumble. (Prov. 4:18-19)

I have greater insight than all my teachers, because I meditate on your statutes. ¹⁰⁰I have more understanding than the elders, because I obey your precepts. (Psl. 119:99-100)

When we walk with Christ in His righteousness, we gain a greater degree of spiritual light and enlightenment. But when we travel the route of iniquity, we are turning our backs upon the light and journeying into the darkness.

According to verse 14, the moral and spiritual condition of the people made their deliverance impossible: *“Justice is driven away and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth has fallen in the marketplace and honesty cannot enter.”* Justice is turned away, indeed, driven away by the peoples’ immoral and ungodly lives; it is turned away by their devotion to injustice, by their *“plotting extortion and fraud, uttering lies our hearts have conceived”* (vs. 13.) Righteousness is portrayed as standing at a distance, refusing to come to the rescue of such a society. Truth has fallen in the streets, and honesty is refused admission into the society.

Here then is the second reason why we must practice repentance; namely, the fact that our sins rob us of strength and light.

III. We Must Practice Repentance, Because Our Sins will Bring upon Us the Judgment of God (Isa. 59:15-21)

Consider carefully the description of the LORD as it is given in verse 17; it is the description of a mighty warrior. He wears *“righteousness as a breastplate;”* i.e.; the action He is about to take is done in righteousness and is justified by His righteousness. He puts on *“garments of vengeance;”* the LORD will surely avenge the desecration of His law and the intolerable offenses against His holiness.

Consider carefully the word of warning issued in verse 18. The LORD will repay men “according to what they have done.” The Apostle Paul echoes these words in Romans 2:6-8,

God will give to each person according to what he has done: ⁷to those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. ⁸But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. (Rom. 2:6-8)

Furthermore, the LORD will repay *“wrath to his enemies.”* In the New Testament, the Apostle James warns,

You adulterous people, do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. (Jas. 4:4)

Verse 19 reports the effect it has upon the world when the LORD lays bear His arm and judges a nation for its sins: *“Therefore, from the west men will fear the name of Jehovah, and from the rising of the sun they will revere his majesty; for he will come like a rushing flood driven by the breath of Jehovah.”* Men are taught to

fear the LORD as they are confronted with His glory and majesty; as Isaiah had proclaimed earlier, *“Jehovah of hosts will be exalted by his judgment, and God—the Holy One—will be sanctified by his act of righteousness”* (Isa. 5:16.) In His longsuffering and patience the LORD has restrained His righteous indignation, but on the appointed day it will burst forth like a mighty river that has broken its dam; indeed, it will be driven along by the gale-like winds of God’s breath.

Consider carefully the promise given in verse 20: *“But a redeemer will come to Zion, [he will come] to those in Jacob who repent of their sins,’ declares Jehovah.”*

Here then is the third reason why we must practice repentance; namely, because our sins will bring upon us the judgment of God if we do not repent.

Conclusion

Remember those eight members of the 1919 Chicago White Sox baseball team; the reward they got for their iniquity was disgrace and lifetime banishment from the game they loved. Here is just one public example of the devastating effects of sin; may it impress upon our consciences the realization of the devastating effects our iniquities have upon our lives and our relationship with God.

In Isaiah 59 we are confronted with three devastating effects of sin—three good reasons why we must practice repentance. May the LORD give us the grace to practice repentance in our lives.