

I met a man we'll call 'Dan' many years ago when he came up to me after a church service to let me know he was homeless and to ask if I could help him get a hotel room for the night. Every so often someone will walk inside a church with a real need to be met and Dan was just such a person. That request marked the beginning of a season of care and assistance for Dan. People from the church found him a place to stay and a place of employment. It was a remarkable turn-around story, until it wasn't. All the computers were stolen at Dan's new place of employment. It turned out that Dan was the one who stole them. And that wasn't all. He was arrested after a long car chase in a vehicle that he had also stolen. I went to talk to him at the county jail. He was remorseful and broken on the other side of the glass. He had been trying to keep an addiction under control but couldn't. I remember feeling pretty raw about the whole thing myself- taken advantage of, if you know what I mean.

Dan was sent to prison and I was content to turn the page on the whole chapter, but over a year later I was pumping gas into my car at a highway service station when I heard someone yelling my name from across the parking lot. I looked up to see a group of men in orange jumpsuits next to a prison van and one of them was calling my name! It was Dan, of course. Before I knew it he and I were having a brief conversation under the watch of an armed guard. Dan asked me for the church's address so I wrote it down for him real quick and he told me he'd write.

About a week later this came:

1/6/2001

Jeff,

It was very good seeing you the other day, unfortunately we couldn't talk longer but in time I hope we will. God is truly good. He has been answering my prayers daily in His time! I've been wanting to say thank you for all that you have done for me. I hope that you know at that time I wasn't right. Right with God, I mean. I was a hopeless sinner then, but now I'm a child in Christ growing every day. Everyday I thank God for putting yourself in my life. When I got into all this trouble and I was laying in Concord county jail, I remembered what you all had told me about repentance, forgiveness and I remembered the joy, love, peace and happiness that you all have. I had nowhere to turn, no one to turn to. All I wanted to do was die. I burned every bridge I had. I had known for years that my life could be much better but I wasn't willing to do anything to improve it. Anyway, since being in prison I have turned my life and will over to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and since, my life has been blessed with people who care about me. But most of all, I never have to be alone. Jesus will never leave me nor forsake me. That just amazes me. I'm in prison physically, but not spiritually. Finally my past has been forgiven. I believe my past haunted me for years. No longer does it hold me back from going forward. Without God in my life I wouldn't have made it through what I've been through in this past year and I know now that I won't make it without Him. It almost seems crazy but I'm grateful to be in prison. It took coming here to find Jesus Christ. Now I believe he has plans for me to be a witness to others in here and out there. Everyday I look forward to doing that. The more I learn the more I want to share!

Dan

I used to keep this letter with me at all times- a reminder not to give up on people. I say 'used to,' because a couple years later someone gave me a newspaper with an article circled. Dan had gotten out of prison! –and he promptly got arrested after stealing yet another vehicle.

It's been said that, "In the end people don't change. People don't really change." And when you hear someone say that, it sounds like something approximating wisdom (Dan's life is evidence, isn't it?)- but it's not true. A statement like that is as much a denial of the redemptive message of the Good News as to say that Jesus isn't who he said he was.

Our problem is not that we can't change, but that we don't know how. And the reason we didn't know how is because we think we already know. No one takes the time to learn something they think they already know. No one takes breathing classes and so no one studies how to change.

In Scripture the word for change is repentance. "To turn," that's what it means to repent. And we say, "Repent- of course- if I do something wrong I repent. I'm sorrowful. I say I'm sorry. That's repentance, right?"

Listen, the good news of what God has done for us in Christ will remain an untapped resource in your life unless & until it's released in power through repentance. The changes we want. The changes we are seeking. The changes we need- the secret is repentance. Now this Psalm (Psalm 51) is perhaps the classic and greatest collection of verses in all of Scripture on this theme.

What is repentance? We don't know the real answer to that question because we think we know it already. Let's take a look together.

First of all, this text tells us a great deal if we connect it to the incident that is responsible for it. This is a Psalm of David and in most Bibles there is a caption to this Psalm- not only this Psalm, but most Psalms. The caption tells you the circumstances into which the Psalm was written. It gives us, to some degree, an explanation of the reason behind why the sentiments were being expressed. The caption to Psalm 51 reads: "A Psalm of David when the prophet Nathan came to him after David committed adultery with Bathsheba."

The story goes like this. Uriah the Hittite was one of David's truest and best friends. Uriah was one of the 37 men that went out into the wilderness when Saul was trying to kill David. They risked everything to go out with David and protect him. They risked their lives and he would have certainly been killed without them. David owed those men, including Uriah, his life. Now, Uriah, who was a great soldier, was out with the Israelite army fighting against the Ammonites. David was in Jerusalem and he saw Uriah's wife, Bathsheba and he fell for her and using the power of his position as king he had her brought to him one night and he slept with her and she got pregnant. This was a problem, of course, because her husband was away fighting dutifully for his country.

So David began to try and cover up what he had done. He had Uriah called back from the front, ostensibly, so he could learn how the battle was going. David listened to Uriah's report, and he made sure to ask enough questions to insure that the meeting lasted until late in the evening. Finally David thanked Uriah for the update, but then he said, "Look, it's late. You need to stay overnight before you go back to the front, so go home. Have a great meal. Take a bath. Sleep with your wife."

And Uriah responded, "Far be it from me, when my men are sleeping on the hard cold ground, in danger and far away from any of these comforts- far be it from me, at a time like this, to do that which they are forbidden to do. Therefore, I will sleep in my front yard. I will not go in. I will show my solidarity with these men." Do you see how earnest and full of integrity this man was?

So he doesn't go in, and David's hand is forced. He sends a message back to Joab who was the general in charge of Israel's forces. David instructs Joab to send Uriah and a small group of men out on a very dangerous mission and to withdraw support. Joab follows his orders and Uriah is killed. As soon as he's reported dead, Bathsheba goes into mourning and after the time of mourning is over David marries her. Later, Bathsheba gives birth to the child she was pregnant with; a son, and David thinks everything is fine.

But after all of this has taken place, the prophet Nathan comes to visit, and Nathan gives one of the greatest sermons in the history of the world. He says, "David, let me tell you a story. There were two men: a rich man with lots of flocks and a poor man with no flocks, he just had one little lamb. She was like a daughter to him. She ate from his dish; she slept in his arms. But the rich man stole that lamb. He killed it and served it to his guests." Then Nathan asked David, "What should be done?"

David rose in wrath and said, "Is this man without pity?! This is a heartless man. As the Lord lives this man should die. Does he think there's no justice in my kingdom? Let him stand before me. Who is this man?" And Nathan says, "You are the man." It was the most devastating sermon application in the history of the world. "You are the man."

I would like to take this moment, to remind all of us, and to thank God for the Nathan's in our lives. We would be dead without them. People who bring the word of God to us and lay it on our hearts help us to see the blind spots in our lives. I have been fortunate to marry a Nathan. Let me ask, do you have a Nathan in your life? Do you let them operate? We're in big trouble without them. Let's be thankful for them (it might take a year or two to acclimate to what they have to say, but we should be grateful).

David is devastated at this point and he is plunged into the darkest despair. His life is hanging by a thread. He blew up his life! How could he now be a king- where would he get the credibility? How could he ever face God again? How could he look at himself in the mirror or live another day?

Here's one thing that we have in these verses. We have an account of how David managed to get out of that dark place- and he did get out. But he didn't just get out- he triumphed. He became a greater leader. He became a greater man of God. He became a greater person. David comes out on the other side of this horrendous sin in triumph. How is that possible? It's because he repented.

If you say, 'Boy, I don't understand that! Whenever I've repented I've come out feeling worse! Dirty. Polluted. Weaker. How could he come out in triumph?' David comes out of the pit singing. **V.15** *"Unseal my lips, O Lord, that my mouth may praise you."*

How could David come to this place where the holiness and the righteousness of God are now a comfort to him? Where did he get that kind of boldness? The answer: repentance.

What is repentance? We're going to look at it together, but give me just one second to point out that this story tells us something right off the bat. It tells us that we all desperately need repentance. We all need repentance.

Now some of you might be saying, "I don't know. What do you mean 'all?' I've never done anything like what David did. I've never killed somebody." My guess is that's true. So you might say, "Look, I haven't done anything as bad as David." But you're missing the point. David is one of the great people in history. David was the forerunner in Scripture for Jesus himself. The messiah was referred to as the "Son of David." Why? Because David was an impressive person. He was an artist; he was a poet and a musician whose works have lasted for centuries. He was a great leader. He was brave and a tremendous soldier and warrior. David was beloved of the Lord- a man after God's own heart. There have been few men greater than David.

So here's what I want to ask you: if David had this stuff in *his* heart, you don't think you do too? If *David* was capable of this, you don't think *you* are? If David had things in his heart- un-dealt with; un-addressed- which finally exploded and blew up his life, you don't think you have them? This message is not just for the David's and Dan's of this world who've managed to make huge mistakes. We need repentance too.

So what is repentance? For this I want us to look at just one verse from David's psalm. In just one verse we find all the elements to true repentance.

If you've found that repentance has not brought you joy or wholeness in the past- if it's given you more of a sense of feeling bad or guilty- or if you've found that repentance has not actually changed you but that you've fallen back into the same old habits over and over again- then it's worth considering that perhaps you haven't repented. Are you willing to consider that might be true of your life?

If you really want to know what repentance is, and if you want to learn to do it well, you need to look at the three elements that make up verse 4. "*Against you, and you alone, have I sinned; I have done what is evil in your sight. You will be proved right in what you say, and your judgment against me is just.*"

There are three elements to that verse for us to examine and I'll label them for us in this way, in case you're taking notes. We need to see our sin, we need to admit our sin, and we need to mourn our sin. See; admit; and mourn. That's what we need to do with our failings & our shortcomings.

The first two are mental disciplines that have little to do with feelings. They cause us, instead, to think. But the last one- if you've done the first two correctly- the last one will cause an earthquake in you that ultimately will result in a transformed life.

Let's talk about the first element. Seeing our sin. It comes from the place where David says, "I have done what is evil in your sight." The first step of repentance is that you have to see your sin as it really is, and the only way to do that is to see it how God sees it. This is important. We aren't to look at our sin according to the standards of our friends, or the culture that we live in, or even according to our own feelings. If the question we're asking is: should I or shouldn't I feel guilty for what I've done? (Did I do right or wrong?) The only place to go for an answer is to God.

Now that's a pretty dramatic departure from what our culture is communicating to us. The society in which we live would have us follow our hearts on this one. Let your conscience be your guide. Look inside and you'll know. That's the way our culture would have us evaluate our guilt, but you have to ask yourself, what is truly right and wrong? You can't look inside for the answer to that

question. Think about the ramifications of that type of thinking. No matter how selfish I am; no matter how cruel or exploitative; no matter how dishonest, if my heart tells me it's ok, it's ok?

There must be a standard of right and wrong higher than my heart and to discover what that is we have to go to Scripture. We need to educate our hearts. We need to teach them. The question we should ask is, "how does God see this?" That's the standard to which we measure ourselves.

Once we have seen our sin, the next thing we do is we admit it. We admit our sin. Look in verse 4, David says, "*Against you, and you alone, have I sinned.*" "*I sinned.*" This is another big subject. David had to take responsibility. That's the reason he found himself in the situation that he did. He had avoided taking responsibility. He did not want to face up to what he had done, and in trying to avoid responsibility he ultimately chose to end a man's life so that his behavior would remain hidden.

People do horrible things, and the reason why is almost never, "hey, I think I want to go out and do something awful." There are exceptions, but for the most part that's not the rationale. Instead, we are able to do wicked things because we believe we'll be able to find ways of avoiding responsibility for what we've done. In our heads we say to ourselves, "maybe what I'm doing is wrong, but..." Eve says, "maybe what I did was wrong, but the serpent..." Adam says, "maybe what I did was wrong, but Eve..."

David did this too. David actually sent a message to Joab telling him essentially, "don't feel too badly about Uriah, we didn't kill him, the sword of the Ammonites did." If we ever say, "Maybe this is wrong, but..." we're using the same device that allowed David to justify killing an innocent man. There's no way out of our sin until we're willing to take full responsibility for it. What do you see in Psalm 51? You don't see David making excuses or blaming someone else or the circumstances. He simply says, "I sinned." No excuses. Unless you take the sin fully on, you'll never be able to take it fully off. You have to be able to say, "I did it. It was me."

These first two elements are very much about how we think. We have to teach our hearts to see right and wrong the way God does. We have to take full responsibility for what we've done.

Thirdly, David says, "*Against you, and you alone, have I sinned.*" David is in mourning over his sin. There is a huge wound on his heart. Repentance is painful because it cuts us in our hearts. He's doing surgery and you can't do surgery without cutting, but pay attention to what's making the cuts. Do you know what David is using? Pay attention to the double emphasis in David's words. He says, "Against you, and you alone..." In Semitic literature using a word twice was meant to demonstrate emotion. David is mourning what he has done to God. This is reinforced by what he wrote in the first verse. In verse 1 David writes, "*Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unfailing love.*"

Because of your great compassion, blot out the stain of my sins."

What he's saying is, "I see that my sin is the betrayal of a good and loving God." David mourns his sin by showing himself the goodness and the grace of God.

He doesn't look at himself in light of the law. He hasn't said, "I didn't obey, so I'm going to be punished." When we look at our sin that way, do you realize that's really using God? What we're saying at that point is, "I better obey or I won't get what I want." But David is saying, "What makes this wrong is not just that I broke a rule, but that I broke God's heart." "Not that I just trampled on God's law, but that I trampled on Him."

There's a type of repentance that focuses on the consequences and uses God as a means to avoid them and in this way you end up mourning your condition and not your sin. "God must hate me now. I'm a terrible person and I'm going to have to balance the ledger by doing a whole bunch of good things to make up for what I've done." And we feel guilty and we mourn the consequences we face. We feel stuck and we begin to believe the lie that maybe we'll never change.

When we are convicted by a fear of punishment it can restrain sin, but it will never transform our hearts. To simply go to God and say, "Lord, I was bad because I did x, y or z and now I'm afraid you're going to come get me. Oh Lord, please have mercy on me." That's not what David does. David says, "I see that I've hurt you God, and I don't care what the consequences are- you are just in your judging. The consequences don't matter to me, I want to honor you and to be right with you again."

David's kind of repentance focused on what he had done to wound God and when we follow suit, we come to mourn our *sin*, the thing that has trampled on God's loveliness, but not ourselves. Do you know why that's significant? It's the reason David could rise up from his devastation to new heights. He believed God could transform his heart; could make it new. He believed change was possible.

Do you? Do you believe that it's possible for God to transform your heart? Do you believe He can forgive you, restore you, and recreate your heart? Some of us have been walking around with tremendous burden of guilt on our shoulders, a sense that we are doomed to continue a cycle of futility. Listen, Jesus came so that we could have life and life to the full. In him we can know what it is to live fully to love deeply and to give freely. Our pasts, the shackles of our sins and failures do not have to bind us down any longer.

In his letter to a church in Corinth Paul gives us assurance of this. He writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17-18a, *"anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! And all of this is a gift from God, who brought us back to himself through Christ."*

Paul knew of what he spoke.