

The Miracle of Repentance

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There is no principle of the gospel more important than repentance. At least that is what the Lord seems to be saying in the scriptures. Several times He instructed His servants to “say nothing but repentance unto this generation” (D&C 6:9; 11:9; see also 19:21). Does He mean that literally? Is every topic of all the missionary lessons supposed to be repentance? Does repentance have to be the subject of every Church classroom discussion? Of course not. Why did He say it that way then?

The Lord was using a figure of speech called hyperbole, which is an intentional exaggeration to emphasize a point. He said it in a hyperbolic way to stress that there is nothing more important in all the gospel than getting people to repent. This one principle is so vital that it towers above all others in primacy and urgency. Driven by faith, repentance is the single most important principle to live in order to make the Savior’s Atonement effective and meaningful in our lives.

Repentance is not just feeling guilty for having sinned, nor is it mere “forgetfulness,” pushing the sin way back in our mind to conveniently not be reminded of it. It is an attitude change and a behavior change. We repent

not only of sins but also of *sinning*, and we are willing to do whatever is necessary to remove the stain and the pain. We turn to the Savior. He is the only one who can take away our sins because He paid the price for them.

Godly Sorrow and Suffering Are Necessary

In true repentance, godly sorrow and suffering are necessary. According to the scriptures, if you haven’t suffered, you haven’t repented. We have all been through the anguish. Sometimes we feel like pounding our head against the wall, wondering how we could be so foolish as to do the sinful things we do. We hurt inside. And it is not just guilt for being caught or feeling the embarrassment for having to confess. It is godly sorrow we are feeling.

Years ago I saw a painting in an old *Instructor* magazine entitled *Turning Toward the Light* (by Ray W. Hellberg, center spread between pages 20 and 21 in “Four Faces of

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Repentance,” *Instructor*, January 1965). It made quite an impression on me. It portrays the stages a person goes through to be totally rid of his or her sins—from the agonizing pain of darkness to the glimmer of hope and recognition that there is a Light we can turn to and then to fully committing to dedicate ourselves to that Light.

Who is it in scripture that comes to your mind that has given us the most detailed, the most graphic portrayal of the pains of a damned soul? You probably think first of Alma the Younger, and we are glad that he was willing to divulge, and actually carve into the record, those intimate and agonizing details of what he went through to be forgiven of his sins (see Mosiah 27:28–29 and Alma 36:12–17).

He described wading through tribulation, the bitterness, the bonds, the abyss, and the inexpressible horror at the thought of having to stand before God and answer for all he had done. Alma wrote that he was “harrowed up” by the memory of his many sins. What is a harrow? Those involved in cultivating field crops know that it is an implement that is dragged behind an animal (and now behind a tractor) to break up the hard ground for planting. If a harrow were dragged over a live body, it would certainly become an instrument of torture. Alma also wrote that he was racked with torment. What is a rack? An instrument of torture. Alma chose his words intentionally; he was tortured by his sins, just as is the man portrayed in the painting.

Alma later taught his own wayward son, one who was sinning grievously while serving a mission, “Let your sins trouble you”—meaning what? Let your sins bother you to bring you down to severe depression? No. Alma said, “Let your sins trouble you, with that trouble which shall bring you down unto repentance” (Alma 42:29). Be glad to suffer the godly sorrow now so you won’t have to suffer the full effects of your sins later.

Confession Is Necessary

President Spencer W. Kimball taught:

*No one can ever be forgiven of any transgression until there is repentance, and one has not repented until he has bared his soul and admitted his intentions and weaknesses without excuses or rationalizations. He must admit to himself that he has grievously sinned. When he has confessed to himself without the slightest minimizing of the offense, or rationalizing its seriousness, or soft-pedaling its gravity, and admits it is as **big** as it really is, then he is ready to begin his repentance.* [“Love Versus Lust,” BYU devotional address, 5 January 1965; emphasis in original]

We have a worry these days. Many in this generation seem to be growing up with the carefree attitude “I can sin now, and I can always repent later. It only takes a few months of waiting and I can go on a mission or I can go to the temple.” But Elder Richard G. Scott warned, “The thought of intentionally committing serious sin now and repenting later is perilously wrong. . . . Premeditated sin has greater penalties and is harder to overcome” (“Making the Right Choices,” *Ensign*, November 1994, 38–39).

We must confess and forsake our sins now and not put off our repentance. Alma warned us not to procrastinate the day of our repentance. As the old rabbis used to say: You cannot repent the day before you die, because you don’t know what day you will die.

When we returned to Utah in 2000 after our mission in Chile, we found our oldest daughter dating a young man named McKell, a lively returned missionary who was also involved in theater programs at Brigham Young University. He was a frequent visitor in our home, and we came to like him.

That fall our daughter was awakened one Sunday morning to hear some terrible news. Her friend McKell had been visiting a cousin

along the Oregon coast, and the two of them were far out on a pier when a storm came up suddenly and swept them off into the water. His cousin was battered among some rocks and was rushed off to a hospital, where he struggled for his life. McKell was apparently swept away by the undertow, and his body was not recovered. Eight days later, the very day of a memorial service for him, his body washed up onto the shore and could finally have a proper burial.

McKell was a good young man, just twenty-five years old. I don't believe he knew that he would be leaving the earth that day.

Sister Davidson was one of our extraordinary sister missionaries in Chile. When she finished her mission she returned to school at BYU and continued serving in her ward. One Sunday afternoon while crossing the street near her apartment, she was struck by a car and killed. She was on her way to a meeting and found herself on the way to a different meeting. I spoke in a memorial service for her a few days later. I don't believe Sister Davidson knew she would be leaving the earth that day.

The fact is, none of us knows exactly when we will be departing this mortal sphere, so we should be ready always—never procrastinating the day of our repentance but repenting daily and keeping ourselves prepared to meet God.

Don't wait until the pressure situations of mission and marriage arrive to do your repenting. If the announcements and invitations have already been sent out and you have the interview with the bishop and a member of the stake presidency, and then you realize together that you are not ready for the sacred covenant-making in the house of the Lord—then what do you do? It could be pretty embarrassing, couldn't it? The embarrassment doesn't matter; you don't ever want to enter the holy temple if you are not worthy. To take upon yourself the most sacred covenants and make the most

binding promises of your whole life when you are not spiritually prepared or worthy to do so would bring upon you serious condemnation.

Before going to the temple, before going to sacrament meeting, even before kneeling to pray, be reconciled to Heavenly Father and to the Savior—and if there is any conflict or friction between you and any other person, get it resolved now.

Forsaking Our Sins Is Necessary

The scriptures teach that forsaking our sins is necessary. The Lord said, "By this ye may know if a man repenteth of his sins—behold, he will confess them and forsake them" (D&C 58:43). To forsake means to give up, abandon. Indeed, we must abandon all sin as soon as we can—and it might require a lengthy and mighty struggle to rid ourselves of our toughest and most perplexing weaknesses. It is essential, as soon as possible, to expel sin from our lives. That is forsaking.

There is another angle for us to look at regarding the forsaking of sins. When I was first called to work with the missionaries at the Missionary Training Center in Provo, Utah, I quickly learned that by far most of the elders and sisters were prepared and worthy to be there. Those who were not soon found that they couldn't learn the lessons and they couldn't learn to love their companion; nothing seemed to go right because they couldn't get the Spirit, and they couldn't get the Spirit because they were not clean. Those few had to return home and repent, and then many of them were able to return to the MTC and make it work.

Although the great majority of the missionaries were prepared and worthy to be there—learning to represent the Lord Jesus Christ—I noticed that even among them there were some who caught themselves agonizing over past sins. They had fully repented, but they still had a bright recollection of their recent

(and sometimes distant) sins, and they became depressed as they remembered the gross sins of their past. What hadn't they done? They hadn't forsaken those sins in yet another sense. Part of forsaking is forgiving yourself and putting the sins behind you—burying the old man of sin, as the apostle Paul put it (see Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:11–12)—and leaving them buried and not digging them up anymore.

Sometimes people will sincerely desire to repent and secure Heavenly Father's complete forgiveness, saying to the Savior, "Here, Lord. Here is my whole package of sin. Please take it away."

And He does.

Then we go back and say, "Wait a minute. Give me some of those sins back; I want to suffer a little more for them!"

No. When you have totally repented, you must forsake those sins, forget about them, bury them away, and not bring them up again. Jesus beautifully stated the principle in agricultural terms: "No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). In other words, when you have planted your life in a more spiritual furrow, keep your eyes straight ahead and don't look back to the old sins, the old people, the old places. Someone has suggested that when Satan reminds you of your past, just remind him of his future! Keep your eyes looking ahead and on the Savior.

I really like some words from Isaiah 54:4: "Thou shalt forget the shame of thy youth." I am taking those words out of their historical context, but I find the phrase itself profoundly meaningful. We all know that nobody gets through teenage years unscathed. Everyone has problems growing up—some worse than others—but it is imperative that we forget the shame of our youth. Repent, put it behind you, and move on. Even Joseph Smith confessed that during his youth he struggled, as he wrote, with

all kinds of temptations; and, mingling with all kinds of society, I frequently fell into many foolish errors, and displayed the weakness of youth, and the foibles of human nature; which, I am sorry to say, led me into divers temptations, offensive in the sight of God. [JS—H 1:28]

Joseph went on to explain that he was never guilty of any great or malignant sins; he was never disposed to commit such, but he did have to repent and put those indiscretions behind him. So did the apostle Paul. He, too, had to dispose of a sinful past. He wrote to the Saints in Macedonia: "*Forgetting those things which are behind, . . . I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God*" (Philippians 3:13–14; emphasis added).

One sister missionary, while bearing her testimony during the first hours at the MTC, explained that she had experienced a long, hard struggle to prepare herself and be worthy to represent the Lord as a missionary. She didn't go into any detail of her past sins; she just let everyone know that she had gone through an extended period of serious repentance. At one point in her testimony she stopped and smiled and said, "I can't even remember the person I used to be."

When you have fully repented of your sins and are converted to the Lord, you are born again—you become a new person. You don't have to be concerned about your old sins because that old person who committed those sins is buried away. That is not you. You have become a new person who would not commit such sins. Therefore you can forgive yourself, forsake those sins, and forget your past. It's like Sister Ogden's organ playing: whenever she makes a mistake, she has to forget it and move on. She can't dwell on it. There is much more to get right.

Jesus helps you become a new and different person who has learned the divine principles of *forgiving* and *forgetting*. The Hebrew word for atonement is *kippur* (as in Yom Kippur: the day

of atonement), and the basic meaning of *kippur* is to cover up. The Savior has suffered for, and covered up, the sins of us all—pending our complete repentance.

The Good News of Repentance

The scriptures not only teach that there are awful consequences of not repenting but also that there are extraordinary rewards for repenting. The gospel of Jesus Christ is occasionally referred to in the scriptures as “the gospel of repentance” (D&C 13:1; 138:57; JS—H 1:69). The word *gospel* means “good news”; therefore it is the good news of repentance. We sometimes look upon repentance as a punishment—as a distasteful, negative thing. It does involve some pain, of course, but genuine repentance is a blessing—a happy, positive thing.

Two questions are often asked:

1. How can I know if I have been forgiven of my sins? King Benjamin’s answer is that you will have “peace of conscience” (Mosiah 4:3). By that peace and the Spirit you will know.

2. If the Lord says He will forgive and forget, why can’t I forget? If I sit down and think about it, why can I still conjure up the lurid details of my past sins? The Lord leaves the memory in your mind as an early warning system; it is protection against going back to the old ways, the old sins. Alma didn’t say he could remember his sins no more; he said he could remember his pain no more. He could remember his sins all right, but he was not harrowed up by the memory of those sins because he had repented of them.

When you fully repent you are born again and become a new person (see Mosiah 27:24–29), and the cloud of darkness that once overshadowed you is removed (see Helaman 5:11, 41).

Whatever your past has been, your future is spotless, so tie yourself to your potential, not to your past. One of the most beautiful

truths of the plan of happiness is that the Lord forgives and forgets (see D&C 58:42). He chooses what He will remember. When you forsake “Babylon,” God forgets that you ever lived there.

Unless you have murdered someone (premeditated murder) or committed the sin against the Holy Ghost (as very few have), you can be totally forgiven of all your sins. That is indeed good news. But you must ask! The Lord said, “Thy sins are forgiven thee, *according to thy petition*” (D&C 90:1; emphasis added).

One day while working at my desk in BYU’s Joseph Smith Building, I had to erase some writing at the top of some student assignments. I reached into a drawer where I keep a box of pencils that each have an eraser at the end. I grabbed one of the erasers and began vigorously erasing, and while I was erasing I admit that the smell brought back some nostalgic feelings. All through the years of growing up, just before elementary school began each year, I remember going out with my mother and buying school supplies: paper, notebooks, pencils, rulers—and erasers. Is that negative thinking or what? We bought erasers. They were a real part of learning. We knew we would make mistakes and needed erasers. So it is in life. We knew we would come to earth to this “education probation” and make mistakes. We need erasers, and, fortunately, our mistakes are not written in ink—just pencil—and can be totally erased.

A Complete Cleansing Is Needed

Sister Ogden and I sometimes find ourselves sitting alone at our kitchen table eating a meal, but that’s all right since we are both voracious readers. We always have a stack of reading material (newspapers, *Ensign*, *Reader’s Digest*, *National Geographic*, or one of her “health nut” publications). One day I was thumbing through a magazine when a certain page caught my attention. Half the page showed

a man with a serious look on his face, and superimposed on the picture was a question in big print: ARE YOU CLEANSED? That question aroused my curiosity. I noticed that the page was advertising a whole line of cleanses: adrenal cleanse, blood cleanse, heart cleanse, joint cleanse, kidney cleanse, liver cleanse, and prostate cleanse. Then I noticed something that caught my attention even more. Just below the picture of the man was the sentence “At last, a complete cleanse line from a name I can trust.” Now you might suspect how that sentence registered in my mind: Yes, I thought, I certainly do know about a complete cleanse that comes through a Name I can trust.

In Santiago, Chile, there are at least four ambulance companies in that city of more than six million people. One of the companies is called Rescate Total (“Total Rescue”), and every time I saw one of the ambulances driving by, I thought, “No, I know where total rescue comes from. His name is Jesus Christ.” And His is the only name under heaven whereby salvation comes, from whom a complete cleanse can come—again, because He is the One who paid the price. He can take away all our transgressions.

The Baptism of Repentance

Sometimes we look with envy on the new convert stepping out of the baptismal font; we feel almost jealous of the fact that there goes the cleanest, purest person on earth. We think, “Oh that I could be baptized again and be freed from all my sins.” The fact is that we can be freed from all our sins regularly. If we go to sacrament meeting each week, and we go there having thoroughly repented of all our sins and then worthily eat that little piece of bread and drink that little cup of water, we may leave that meeting totally void of sin. We can literally be clean and pure as we walk out of sacrament meeting each week. We experience again and again the baptism of repentance.

True Repentance Requires More Than a Cleansing

Actually, the whole process of repentance requires more than just a cleansing, and we need to do more than just repair all damage done. Early in 1984, while returning to our home in Jerusalem, I must have been handling our large, heavy suitcases in such a way that something went wrong in my lower back. For several months I found myself in periodic excruciating pain—apparently from some bone fragments sticking in the largest nerve in my body, the sciatic nerve that runs down the spine and into the legs. After three months of experimental treatments in Israeli doctors’ offices and hospitals, and not being able to function because of the intense pain, my doctor put me on the strongest painkiller he could prescribe without personally accompanying me and sent me on a plane flight across the world to Salt Lake City for a back operation. The surgery was successful. After some weeks of recovery I flew back to the Holy Land to resume what I loved: teaching and guiding the students on field trips throughout the lands of the Bible and, over the years, climbing Mount Sinai a total of eighteen times.

I learned something from that painful ordeal. It is not enough to repair the damage done. I have to continually strengthen my back so it doesn’t happen again. So it is with repentance: we must cleanse ourselves of all that is wrong inside, repair the damage that has been done, and continually strengthen ourselves to become more and more resistant to sin and more and more capable of sustaining light and truth from Him who is our strength. It is through daily diligence to prayer and scriptures, along with exact obedience to all other commandments, and serving others and worshiping in the temple that we keep ourselves strong and avoid the sinning.

Each of us will stand before our Father and look into His divine eyes and report on what

we have done with this brief moment of time. We will all have photographic memories (and instant recall!), a perfect recollection of all we've done on earth—and that perfect awareness will either send us into deep despair and remorse or fill us with happiness and gratitude. It is up to us. We will all live forever—no exceptions. And we are determining each day exactly where and with whom we will live forever. Whatever has gone wrong in our lives that has tainted or darkened our souls can be erased, cleansed, removed, and purified by the power of sincere repentance. It is a miracle. Any evil words and deeds continue to rever-

berate through the universe until we pay the price of godly sorrow and total repentance; then they are completely obliterated. They are not there anymore, and we become a new person, full of light.

It makes me happy to talk about the twin miracles of repentance and forgiveness. It makes me happy to talk about the Savior and applying His atoning blood through the miracle of repentance. That way we acquire more and more light—until the day when we can become perfectly holy, as He is.

I testify of, and I rejoice in, these beautiful truths—in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.