

## EXCEPT YE REPENT

By Harry A. Ironside

### Chapter 4

#### CHRISTS CALL TO REPENT

**"The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ."** Notice that combination grace and truth. Men must face facts if they would enjoy grace. Surely there never was a more insistent call to repentance than that put forth by Him of whom it could be said, **"Grace is poured into thy lips."**

From the moment He began to preach, His message, like that of His forerunner, John, was, **"Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."** There is something intensely solemnizing in this. GOD had come down to earth and was speaking in His Son. He came with a heart filled with love and compassion for men, so bruised and ruined by sin; but He had to wait upon them; He had to press home to them their sad plight; He had to call upon them to acknowledge their guilt and their ungodliness ere He could pour into their hearts the balm of His grace. For GOD must have reality. He refuses to gloss over iniquity. He insists upon self-judgment, upon a complete right-about-face, a new attitude, ere He will reveal a Saviours love.

With this principle the arrangement of the four Gospels is in perfect harmony. In the Synoptics the call is to repent. In John the emphasis is laid upon believing.

Some have thought that there is inconsistency or contradiction here. But we need to remember that John wrote years after the older Evangelists, and with the definite object in view of showing that JESUS is the CHRIST, the Son of GOD, and that, believing, we might have life through His Name. He does not simply travel over ground already well trodden. Rather, he adds to and thus supplements the earlier records, inciting to confidence in the testimony GOD has given concerning His Son. He does not ignore the ministry of repentance because he stresses the importance of faith. On the contrary, he shows to repentant souls the simplicity of salvation, of receiving eternal life, through trusting in Him who, as the true light, casts light on every man, thus making manifest humanity's fallen condition and the need of an entire change of attitude toward self and toward GOD.

To tell a man who has no realization that he is lost, that he may be saved by faith in CHRIST, means nothing to him, however true and blessed the fact is in itself. It is like throwing a life preserver to a man who does not realize he is about to be engulfed in a maelstrom. When he sees his danger he will appreciate the means of deliverance offered. So when the message of the Synoptics has made a profound impression on the soul of a man, he will be ready for the proclamation of eternal life and forgiveness through faith in CHRIST alone.

When they came to JESUS and told Him of certain Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices as his Roman legions quelled a Jewish uprising, and again when they reported the falling of a tower in Siloam as a result of which many were killed, He solemnly declared: **"Think ye that they were sinners above all [others]? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye**

**repent, ye shall all likewise perish.**" Whether men are taken away by violence, by accident, or, as we say, by natural death, their doom is the same unless they have turned to GOD in repentance. We perhaps think of such occurrences as those referred to, as signal instances of the divine judgment against wickedness. But GOD's holy eye discerns the sinfulness of every heart and calls upon all to take sides with Him against themselves. Until this is done, saving faith is an impossibility. This is not to limit grace. It is to make way for it. And be it remembered, repentance is not a state automatically produced. It is the inwrought work of the HOLY SPIRIT effected by faithful preaching of the Word. But how seldom today do we hear the cry, "**Except ye repent.**"

When our Lord looked on to the day of manifestation He declared: "**The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here.**" Could He have made it clearer that grace is for the repentant soul, and there can only be judgment without mercy for him who persists in hardening his heart against the Spirits pleading?

And so, when He upbraided the cities wherein most of His mighty works were done, He prophesied their doom because they would not repent. Bethsaida, Chorazin, Capernaum are but ruins today because, although the testimony given was of such character that if it had been vouchsafed to Tyre and Sidon they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes, the people in these cities were unmoved. The stones of these Galilean cities are today crying out of the dust of ages, "**Repent ye, and believe the gospel.**" But how few there are with ears to hear and hearts to understand!

It has often been noticed with wonder by thoroughly orthodox theologians that, whereas many cultured preachers, whose Gospel testimony is unimpeachably correct, see few or no converts, some fervent evangelist who does not seem to proclaim nearly so clear a Gospel, but who drives home to men and women the truth of their lost condition and vehemently stresses the necessity of repentance, wins souls by the scores or even hundreds. It was so with Sam Jones, with D. L. Moody, with Gypsy Smith, with Billy Sunday, with W. P. Nicholson, with Mel Trotter, and many more. Is not the explanation simply this, that, when men truly face their sins in the presence of GOD, their awakened and alarmed consciences make them quick to respond to the slightest intimation of GOD's grace to those who seek Him with the whole heart? This is not to set a premium upon ignorance, nor to glorify a half-Gospel, for undoubtedly where the full clear announcement of salvation by faith alone in a crucified, risen, and exalted CHRIST follows the call to repentance, the converts will be much better established than where they have to grope for years after the truth that sets free from all doubt and confusion of mind. The evangelists cited above all came themselves to a better understanding of grace in their maturity than in their early years. But those years were nevertheless wonderfully fruitful in the turning of many from sin to righteousness and from the power of Satan unto GOD.

And is it not marvelously significant that, in the three Gospels which were first circulated throughout the ancient world, the call goes forth to Jew and Gentile insisting that no unrepentant soul will ever find favor with GOD? Then, as the Christian testimony was better known, the sweet and precious unfoldings of light, life, and love were given in the Gospel of John. Of course, in the actual testimony of the Lord, the two were ever intermingled, for "**grace and truth**" are never to be separated.

Our Lord was the master soul-winner, and we who would be used of GOD in winning our fellows to a knowledge of Himself may well learn His ways and copy His methods, so far as human frailty will permit.

How easily He might have declared to the rich young ruler, who came running to Him asking, "**Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?**" that there was nothing to do, "only believe and live." Had He done so it would have been actually true. But He did not so say. Instead He undertook to probe the conscience of the young man by using the stern precepts of the Law, and He put a test upon him that only real faith would have led him to meet. "**One thing thou lackest.**" What was that? The young man had never realized his need of a Saviour. Self-satisfied and self-contained, he honestly prided himself on his goodness. The test, "**sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor,**" was not putting salvation on the ground of human merit; but it was intended to reveal to the young man the hidden evil of his heart and to show him his need of mercy.

To the Samaritan woman He did not give the living water until He had uncovered her life of sin, so that she exclaimed, "**Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet.**" This was tantamount to saying, 'I perceive that I am a sinner.' And after she believed in Him as Saviour and Messiah her own testimony was, "**Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: Is not this the Christ?**"

Rutherford complained in his day that there were so few professed believers who had ever spent a sick night for sin. And if this was true then, it is doubly true today. When our Lord answered the complaining legalists who objected that He received sinners and ate with them, He related the threefold parable of Luke 15. There we see the entire Trinity concerned in the salvation of a sinner. The Saviour seeks the lost sheep. The woman with the light, illustrating the HOLY SPIRIT's work, seeks the lost piece of silver. And all Heaven rejoices when the lost one repents.

The eager father welcomes back the returning prodigal. But we should not overlook the fact, that it was when the ungrateful youth "**came to himself**" and took the position of self-judgment because of his wicked folly, and actually turned his face homeward, that the father ran to him, though still a great way off, and fell on his neck and kissed him. He did not wait for his boy to ring the door bell or knock in fear and anxiety upon the gate. But, on the other hand, he did not offer him the kiss of forgiveness while he was down among the swine. He hastened to meet him when in repentance he turned homeward with words of confession in his heart.

Does all this becloud grace? Surely not. Rather does it magnify and exalt it. For it is to unworthy sinners who recognize and acknowledge their dire condition that GOD finds delight in showing undeserved favor.

The weeping harlot in the seventh of Luke, kneeling at the feet of JESUS and washing them with her tears while she dries them with her hair and a woman's hair is her glory illustrates, as perhaps nothing else can, the relation of repentance to saving faith. Her tears of contrition told out the grief of her heart as she mourned over her sins and judged her unclean life in the light of CHRIST's purity. His words of grace, "**Her sins, which are many, are forgiven,**" no sooner had fallen upon her ears than she believed His testimony, and she went away knowing she was clean.

True, He had not yet died for her sins, but faith laid hold of Him as the one only Saviour who had power on earth to forgive. Her weeping, her washing of His feet, her humiliation had nothing meritorious in them. The merit was all His. He who said to another of like character, "**Neither do I condemn thee: go and sin no more,**" had remitted all her iniquities and won her heart forever.

"It is not thy tears of repentance or prayers,  
But the blood that atones for the soul:  
On Him then, who shed it thou mayest at once  
Thy weight of iniquities roll."

When Bernard of Clairvaux was dying the monks praying by his pallet spoke of his merits. He cried out in Latin words which translated into English mean, "Holy JESUS, Thy wounds are my merits." Only a repentant man would so speak.

And so our Lord tells us that "**joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.**" There, where they know what a soul is really worth, every saint and angel rejoices with the Good Shepherd when a lost sheep is reclaimed from its wanderings.

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