

The Book of Repentance

by Harry Ironside

The Book of Job illustrates the importance of repentance by showing how a good man, Job, was brought to repentance and realized the actual corruption of his own heart.

Scripture: Job 42:5, James 5:11

Topics: "Self-Examination", "Repentance"

Description

Harry Ironside emphasizes that the primary theme of the Book of Job is repentance, rather than the question of why the righteous suffer. He illustrates how Job, a man of great integrity, ultimately comes to recognize his own sinfulness and need for repentance, culminating in his declaration of self-abhorrence and humility before God. Ironside contrasts Job's journey with other biblical figures, highlighting that even the most righteous among us must confront the evil within and seek God's mercy. The sermon underscores that true repentance is essential for all, regardless of one's perceived righteousness, and is a work of the Holy Spirit leading to self-judgment and blessing.

Transcript

"Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy" (James 5:11).

If asked to give the primary theme of the Book of Job in one word, I should reply, "Repentance." As Genesis is the book of Election, Exodus of Redemption, Leviticus of Sanctification, Numbers of Testing, and Deuteronomy of the Divine Government, so Job, possibly written by the same human author and at about the same time, is distinctively the book of Repentance. I know all will not agree with me as to this. Most, perhaps, will insist that the outstanding theme of this ancient drama is, Why do the godly suffer? or something akin to this. But they mistake the secondary for the primary theme when they so insist. Unquestionably this book was divinely designed to settle for all time -- and eternity too -- the problem of why a loving and all-wise God permits the righteous to endure afflictions such as those from which the wicked are oftentimes shielded. But behind all this there is another and a deeper problem; it is the evil in the hearts of the best of men and the necessity of judging oneself in the light of the holiness of God; and this is repentance.

To illustrate this theme in such a way as to make evident to every man the importance and necessity of repentance, God takes up the case of Job, the patriarch of the land of Uz, and gives us in detail an account of the process that led him at last to cry, "I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes."

How different is God's method from the one we would naturally follow! If I had to write a book on repentance, and I wanted a character to illustrate properly this great subject, I fancy I would select a very different man from Job. If searching through the Holy Scriptures for such an illustration I might possibly think of David -- so highly exalted, so greatly blessed -- yet who in a moment of weakness and unwatchfulness fell into so grave a sin and afterwards repented so bitterly. The sobbings of his heartfelt penitence and self-reproach, as breathed out in the divine ear in the language of Psalm 51, is indeed the classical passage on the repentance of a child of God who has failed.

Or I might select Manasseh, the ungodly son of a most pious father, whose horrid vices and unmentionable wickednesses dragged the name of Hezekiah into the dust and brought grave reproach upon the honor of the God of Israel. And yet Manasseh was brought at last to repentance and humbled himself before God, and was eventually saved in answer probably to that dishonored father's prayers offered so long before. What a fine picture of a truly repentant soul does Manasseh present as he bows low before the throne of God confessing his manifold transgressions and seeking forgiveness for his scarlet sins.

Or I might turn to the New Testament and endeavor to tell again the story of Saul of Tarsus, blameless indeed outwardly before the Law, but a bitter persecutor of the church of God until the risen Christ appeared to him, as he fell stunned and blinded by "the glory of that light," on the Damascus turnpike, crying when convinced of his error, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" His after life proved the sincerity of his repentance and the depth of his contrition.

Or if one turned from the pages of holy writ to those of history and biography, he might cite the repentance of the man of the world as seen in Augustine of Hippo or Francis of Assisi, the genuinely changed profligate, or as in the cases of John Bunyan, Ignatius Loyola, John Newton, or, in our own times, of Jerry McAuley, the river thief. In each of these men, when brought into the presence of God, we have a change of attitude indeed that lasted through life.

But if any or all of these were cited as illustrations of the necessity of repentance, how many there would be to say: 'Yes, we quite realize such men needed to repent. Their sins were many, their wickedness great. It was right and proper for them to repent in the agony of their souls. But I, thank God, am not as they. I have never gone into such depths of sin. I have never manifested such depravity. I have not so far forgotten what is right and proper. I am a just man needing no repentance.' Do you say that none would literally use such language as this? Perhaps not, yet the spirit of it, the inward sense of the words, has often been uttered in my own hearing, and I am persuaded in the ears of many others of God's ministers.

Now, in order that none may so speak, when we turn to this ancient book in our Bibles, we find that God searched the world over, not for the worst man, but for the best, and He tells us his strangely pathetic story and shows how that good man was brought to repentance -- that thus "every mouth might be stopped," and all the world of men might be brought in guilty before Him. For if a man of Job's character must needs repent, what shall be said of me, and of you, who come so far behind him in righteousness and integrity and have sinned so deplorably and come so far short of the glory of God? Can you not see then the wisdom of Jehovah in selecting such a man to show forth the need that all men should repent?

Consider then the case of Job. A wealthy Oriental sheik, apparently, he lived in the days before the knowledge of God had been lost, though it is evident that idolatry, particularly the worship of the heavenly bodies, already had supplanted in places the older worship. For, be it remembered, paganism is not a step

upward in the evolution of religion from the lowest fetichism to pure monotheism. It is rather a declension, as Romans 1 shows us. Men turned from the living and true God to these vain idols, and "for this cause God gave them up" to all sorts of unclean practices. But Job had escaped all this. He was perfect in his behavior, upright in all his ways, one who revered God and detested iniquity.

In the first and second chapters we get a remarkable revelation of things in the unseen world. Job is the subject of a conversation between God and Satan, the accuser of the brethren who accuseth them before our God day and night. The Lord challenges Satan, asking, "Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth ... one that fears God and eschews evil?" Remark, Job was all that God said he was -- a saint, a man of faith, a true child of God. This book gives us, then, not the repentance of a sinner, but the repentance of a saint.

Satan denies the truthfulness of the divine estimate of Job and particularly declares that Job does not love and reverence the Lord for what He is in Himself, but for what Job received at His hand. To prove the contrary, the devil is permitted to wrest from the patriarch all that he possessed. Instead of renouncing God, Job exclaims, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." Thus far Satan is defeated, but he is relentless.

On a second occasion he reiterates his implication that Job does not love God because of what He is, but because he really loves his own life most and recognizes that he is indebted to God for it. Permission is given Satan to put his corrupting hand on Job's body, filling it with a loathsome disease, so that death is really to be preferred to life. In his dire extremity, as he sits mournfully in the ash heap scraping the horrid filth from his open sores with a piece of pottery, when even his wife bids him renounce God, he rises triumphantly above his very great trial, exclaiming, "Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" He glorifies God in the fires. Satan is defeated. Jehovah has made manifest the fact that this man is loyal to Him and loves Him for Himself alone, and not simply for His gifts. It is a marvelous thing thus to find one to whom God means more than all earthly possessions, yea, than life itself.

Thus the first scene ends with Satan baffled and defeated. In what follows we need to remember that Job knew nothing of that which had transpired in the unseen world. Had he done so, he would never have gotten into the deep perplexity that ensued after his friends came with their bitter accusations against his character.

In the next part of the book God has another object in view altogether. Job was a good man. He was altogether righteous, as God Himself knew and declared. But Job knew it too -- knew it so well that he did not realize the actual corruption of his own heart. And after all, it is what a man is by nature that counts, not simply what he does. To repress one's nature is one thing; to be free of inbred sin altogether is quite another. Job's life had been such that he had apparently forgotten that he was as sinful in himself as any other, though wonderfully preserved by divine grace. God therefore designed to bring this good man to repentance, to give him to realize that his nature was vile, though his life had been so well regulated, so that thus he might magnify the loving-kindness of the One who had made him His own.

So Job's three friends, all men of importance like himself, came to condone with him. Each proved true to his own clearly indicated character. Eliphaz of Teman was distinctly the man of experience. An observant student of natural law, he again and again declares, "I have seen." Bildad of Shuah was the typical traditionalist. Ask the fathers, he says; they are wiser than we. They shall teach thee. Zophar of Naamah was the cold, hard legalist who considered that God weighed out calamity in exact proportion to man's sin,

and dispensed mercies only according to human desert.

For seven days and nights they encamped around the stricken Job, their grief and his too deep for words. But though they spake not, they thought much. Why had these calamities befallen their friend? Could they be other than punishment for hidden sin? Was it not inconceivable that a good God, a faithful Creator, could allow such affliction to come undeserved? Their accusing eyes uttered silently what their lips at first refused to speak.

Job could not stand those eyes. His soul writhed under their implied suggestions that he was suffering for wickedness hitherto concealed. At last he "opened his mouth, and cursed his day," and vehemently declared his innocence and besought the sympathy of his friends. Then came the long debate. Again and again they charged him with hypocrisy, with overindulgence toward his children, which had brought their ruin, with hidden sin of vicious character, which God was dealing with. They begged him to confess his iniquities and thus give God a chance to show him mercy.

Sturdily, honestly, sometimes ironically, Job answered them, denying their accusations, assuring them of his confidence in God, though admitting his sore perplexity. He even went so far as to declare that, if their philosophies were right, then God was unjust in His dealings with him. At last they were silenced when by his final speech he met all their accusations and vigorously maintained his own righteousness. In three chapters (29, 30, and 31) he used the pronouns "I," "me," "my," and "mine" 189 times. But this was before he saw the Lord.

Elihu, a younger man who had listened in silence to the entire debate accepted Job's challenge for some one to speak on God's behalf. In a masterly address he showed that affliction may be sent for instruction rather than solely as punishment. He exalted the wisdom of God, who is not obliged to reveal beforehand His reasons for chastening. And he pointed out that the bewildered soul is wise when he asks of God -- waiting for Him to instruct, rather than attempting to understand His ways through human reasoning.

As he speaks a thunderstorm startles the friends. The vivid lightnings alarm. Then a great whirlwind moves across the desert, and, as it draws near, the voice of the Lord speaks to the soul of Job propounding question after question which the wisest of men could not answer. He reproves Job for suggesting the possibility of unrighteousness in His ways. And as a sense of the divine wisdom and majesty comes over the patriarch's afflicted soul, he exclaims: "Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth. Once have I spoken; but I will not answer: yea, twice; but I will proceed no further." (40:4-5).

But God was not yet through. He speaks again, bringing before Job's soul a sense of His greatness and power, of His glory and omniscience. As Job contemplates it all he gets a new conception of the holiness and the righteousness of God. His own littleness is accentuated. That God should look at all upon sinful men now amazes him. "The end of the Lord" is reached at last, and he cries out: "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (42:5-6). We know the rest and need not dwell upon it here. The great object of the Lord has been attained. Job changes his mind -- his whole attitude -- both as to himself and as to God. Humbled to the dust, he condemns himself and glorifies the Lord. And this is what God had in view from the beginning. And it is what all must reach in one way or another who are saved by His grace.

"That Thou shouldst so delight in me

And be the God Thou art,
Is darkness to my intellect,
But sunshine to my heart."

Self-judgment is the sure precursor to blessing, and self-judgment is the work of repentance wrought by the Spirit of God.

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