

Zech. 1:1-6 Return to Me: A Call to Repentance

In this text, we find the opening words of Zechariah's words to Israel. In v. 3 God says, "**Return to me . . . and I will return to you.**" And as we will see, these words stand true today. And we need them! We need to understand them! We need to obey them! This is really a call to repentance! And it is fitting as we take the Lord's Supper today, as we examine ourselves in the light of the Gospel of Christ, particularly as we remember his death! And by God's grace, I hope and pray we will hear from God; we will learn more about the doctrine of repentance and put it into practice in our lives. I have three parts to this sermon as consider repentance: 1) The need for repentance; 2) The provision of repentance; and 3) The result of repentance.

1. The need for repentance. Think back to the context of these words. Jerusalem was in shambles, walls broken down, temple destroyed, the majority of the people exiled to Babylon. Why? Israel was disobedient to God's commands. They broke their side of God's covenant with them. And the promised curses fell upon them. This is judgment! When we think of God's promises, we usually only think of the good things. But, there are also promises of curses that fall upon those who disobey. Right before Moses died, he gathered the people, and he reminded them of God's covenant. He first gives the blessings of those who keep his commandments. But then he gives the curses of those who disobey. Listen to some of them from Deut. 28. "**But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments . . . then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you**" (v. 15). Among these curses we find failed crops, closed wombs, disease, drought, defeat of enemies, blindness and confusion of mind, oppression, robbery, etc. For Zechariah's context, we read in vv. 36-37: "**The Lord will bring you and your king whom you set over you to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known. And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone. 37 And you shall become a horror, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples where the Lord will lead you away.**"

In that same chapter, which I will quote in a moment, God says, "***if they repent, He will restore them***" (Deut. 30). This was Zechariah's first sermon as a prophet: Repentance. Why? The people broke God's covenant. And with Zechariah we begin to see the fruits of repentance curses change to blessings. God put it into King Cyrus' mind to let Israel go back and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple.

So, what about us today? Why do we need repentance? Well, We are NOT ethnic Israel living under Mosaic Covenant. When we come to the NT, the writers do not treat us as if we are still under the laws of Moses in the same way as ethnic Israel. However, the principle is still the same. It is sin! We need to repent because of sin. God judges this world because of sin (Rom. 3:6) And NOTHING is more serious than sin! Paul says in Rom. 3:9: "**What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: None is righteous, no, not one.**"

Sin separates us from God. And it doesn't just separate us as two captains may pick teams for pickup game of basketball. Sin does not merely separate two kinds of apples or seedless watermelons from those with seeds. Sin separates completely. **For the wages of sin is death** (Rom. 6:23). As Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden where the tree of life could be found, so we are cast out of God's presence because of sin. To sin doesn't mean that we make a mistake. It means we fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). God is holy! As sinners, we are not! And since God cannot look upon anything that is unholy, nor can he come into the

presence of sin, as sons of our fallen first Father Adam, we are separated from God. Paul says we are “alienated” from God “without hope in this world,” “darkened in our understanding” (Eph. 2:12; 4:18). Sin sets us apart.

Sin is evil. Twenty-eight times in the Bible we see sin described as evil. There is no lesser category. Sin is not as the USSR used to say, only a “*mistake*.” Sin is evil. And let me be clear: ALL sin is evil. Yes, some sins have worse consequences. But, all sin is evil. It is evil to murder. It is evil to steal something that does not belong to you. It is evil to disobey your parents. It is evil to commit adultery. It is evil not to be content. It is evil love the things of this world more than we love God. And when we get to the NT, Jesus goes straight to the sins of the heart. You may say, “Jon, I’ve broken none of those commandments.” But Jesus says, “***If you look at a woman with lust in your heart, you’ve sinned.***” And, “***If you’ve thought evil against your neighbor, you’ve sinned***” (Matt. 5). Brothers and sisters, I am only touching the surface at the depths of our sins. Sin is evil!

And what makes sin so evil? Sin is evil because it is against God! I think of Isaiah when he gets a vision of the holiness of God and he sees the sins of Israel. And, even as a “holy” prophet, he sees the depths of his own sin. He says, “***Woe is me!***” “***I am a man of unclean lips.***” I think of King David, after his great sins of lying, adultery, and murder. Later, when repentance comes he says, “***For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight . . .***” (Ps. 51:3–4)

Sin also brings judgment. God told Adam, “do not eat of the tree of good and evil . . . the day you eat of it you will die.” Nothing has changed. Death and separation from God is the ultimate judgment for sin. But, there are other judgments and consequences along the way. With Israel of Zechariah’s time, they were judged with loss of country, possessions, and sent to exile for 70 years. Notice in our text also that sin brings the anger of God (v. 2). God is angry with sin . . . ALL sin. Again, whether it is murder or sins of the heart, they all bring the judgment of God, his wrath and his anger.

So, which of us have not sinned? Which of you does not deserve all these things I’ve mentioned? We need to repent; we need to turn from our sins, from ourselves, from our idolatry and turn to God, without which no one will be saved . . . which brings us to our next truth . . . the provision of repentance.

2. The provision of repentance. In other words, God grants us repentance. He doesn’t say to Israel, I will judge you and leave you there. In these words of Zechariah, God, in his grace, in his mercy, says to a sinful people: “***return to me and I will return to you***” (vv. 3-4). Back in Deut. 30:1-4, listen to these words of Moses, which I am sure Zechariah would have recalled. Moses says, “***And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, and return to the LORD your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. If your outcasts***

are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will take you.”

Brothers and sisters, God does not have to save. Adam and Eve did not know God would show them mercy, that he would clothe them, they he would continue to provide for them, that he would make a promise to save them in a future deliverer. God is not obligated to grant repentance! This is pure mercy! Repentance is an undeserved grace. When you recount your sins as we all do and you come to God in repentance and he forgives you . . . again and again . . . this is mercy. Repentance is God’s provision. He provides repentance so we can be saved, so we can be made right with Him. And we see this provision of repentance throughout the Bible.

When the world sees someone on the street preaching, “*Repent from your sins,*” what do they think? Some may think, “*that legalist,*” or “*He’s shouting hate-speech,*” etc. Now, we don’t know a person’s motive. But, the words from a preacher or any person to “repent” are words of grace. Noah preached repentance. The prophets of the OT preached repentance. John the Baptist preached repentance. What was Jesus’ first words of his public ministry? “***Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.***” What did the apostles preach? Repentance. In one of his first sermons, Peter sounds just like Zechariah. He tells the Jews, “**Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.**”

In Acts 11 Peter reported to the church that the Gentiles had received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Verse 18 tells us that when these Jewish Christians “**heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.**” The very repentance that God had granted to the Jews of Zechariah’s time, had now come to the Gentiles of Peter’s time. The Bible says that “**today is the day of salvation**” (2 Cor. 6:2). In his mercy and grace God has provided salvation. And this salvation comes through repentance.

3. The result of repentance. Again, in v. 3, God says, “**return to me and I will return to you.**” Before repentance, God is far away. He is not near. But, after repentance, the opposite is true; God is near. More particularly in our text with Zechariah, as Israel had turned away from God in idolatry, what came their way? The curses of breaking God’s covenant, loss of land, home, possessions, sickness, drought, etc. But, what comes when the people turn from their sins in repentance? The blessings of God’s covenant. The Book of Zechariah is a book of renewal as repentance comes to the nation. They will return from exile in Babylon. They will rebuild Jerusalem and the great temple. Look over at 1:17: “**Cry out again, Thus says the Lord of hosts: My cities shall again overflow with prosperity, and the Lord will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem.**” With repentance there is renewal. There is restoration. There is prosperity. There is comfort. These are the fruits . . . the results of repentance.

What about today? How are we to understand and apply these words to Zechariah as we read them in the context of the New Covenant? Well, in principle, nothing has changed about the NEED for repentance and the PROVISION of repentance. From Zechariah and his preaching of repentance to the NT and the apostles preaching of repentance, in principle they are the same. But, in the NT, there is a heightening, a fulfillment. For Israel in exile, it was return to the land,

to Jerusalem, to the rebuilding of walls and temple. But, to the Apostles (and us), what are our blessings? Turn with me to Matt. 11:27-30. Listen to these words: **“All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”** These are not the words of a sinful prophet like Zechariah. These are not the words of a sinful but “good” king of Israel. These are not the words of one of the priests. These are the words to whom “ALL AUTHORITY” has been given. He is the Son, the truth prophet, priest, and king. And, He says, *“Come to me . . . all who labor and are heavy laden, and I . . . will give you rest.”*

You see, today when we eat this bread and drink this cup in the NEW Covenant we find ALL the provisions of repentance, All the blessings of God. ALL the promises of God in the Old Covenant find their fulfillment in Christ! This is why the writer to the Hebrews can say, **“You have come to the heavenly Jerusalem, the heavenly city”** (Heb. 12:22). As with ALL authority, God says through the prophet Zechariah, *“return to me and I will return to you,”* So, NOW, Jesus says with the same authority, *“Come to me and I will give you rest for your souls.”* **“No one comes to the Father except through the Son”** (John 14:6). Today, All the authority of the Father is given to the Son. Why? Well, in his essence, the eternal Son has always had authority. But, in the incarnation, the Son of God taking on flesh, living a sinless life, obeying ALL the commands of God in both his heart and his actions, and then laying down his life as a sacrifice for sinners, and then rising from the dead and ascending to the Father, ALL the fruits of repentance can be found by those who come to him. There is no better words we can hear today than these! As we turn from our sins, and by faith look to Christ, we are reconciled with God. We are given newness of life. Peace has come to our hearts. All our sins are forgiven. What beautiful truths we remember in the Lord’s Supper!

When we get to the NT, we don’t see the emphasis on the curses of the Mosaic covenant upon the people of God, the church. Those particular curses were given to Ethnic Israel as a theocracy. But now, in the NC (which we celebrate in the cup this morning) the curses have fallen upon Christ. And now, in the church (both Jew and Gentile) we have the fulfillment of all the promises to Israel. And in Christ, All the fruits of repentance are ours! And let me say in closing, as we examine ourselves that repentance is not a one-time event. It is an attitude of the heart. As Christians, YES, Christ has covered our sins. But, we still carry sin in our bodies and we still fight against sin. And our desire as Christians is always to turn, as we look to Christ.