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An Exposé of Idolatry, Part 7

Even a shallow reading of the prophets reveals many passages which we might call “doom and gloom.” They speak of certain, unavoidable judgments that were soon to come upon God’s people. For example, in the latter part of the 8th century BC, during the reign of Hezekiah, Micah warned the people of God on account of their sin:

Micah 3:9-12, “Now hear this, heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and twist everything that is straight, who build Zion with bloodshed and Jerusalem with violent injustice. Her leaders pronounce judgment for a bribe, her priests instruct for a price, and her prophets divine for money. Yet they lean on the Lord saying, ‘Is not the Lord in our midst? Calamity will not come upon us.’”

Therefore, on account of you, Zion will be plowed as a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the temple will become high places of a forest." (Emphasis mine).

It is tempting to take this warning as a prophecy of the destruction of Judah in 586 BC. Yet I assure you, that is NOT the reference here. Micah is speaking of the Jerusalem of his day and is referencing a certain doom which was soon to come; however, it was a *doom which actually never materialized!*

So how do we take this strong, certain message of judgment- as well as the many other negative prophecies in the Old Testament *which never came to pass*? This is a key text in our understanding of the Old Testament judgment passages. Years later, during the ministry of Jeremiah we read this:

Jeremiah 26:16-19, "Then the officials and all the people said to the priests and to the prophets [speaking of Jeremiah], 'No death sentence for this man! For he has spoken to us in the name of the Lord our God.' Then some of the elders of the land rose up and spoke to all the assembly of the people, saying, 'Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah; and he spoke to all the people of Judah, saying, "Thus the Lord of hosts has said, 'Zion will be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem will become ruins, and the mountain of the house as the high places of a forest."' [That is the text just quoted from Micah, a passage which spoke of a doom that most certainly was coming upon the land!] Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah put him to death? Did he not fear the Lord and entreat the favor of the Lord, and the Lord changed His mind about the misfortune which He had pronounced against them?"

From this passage we conclude that every prophecy of judgment in the Old Testament is accompanied by the conditional, "*Unless you repent...*"- whether stated or not! God said as much to Jeremiah explaining the nature of His judgment-revelations, God told Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 18:7-8, "At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy *it*; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it."

So whether or not God appends the conditional, "*Unless you repent,*" we understand that accompanying every message of judgment in the Bible is this glorious provision! And we see this in Ezekiel 14. The judgment of 586 BC was fast approaching the people of God; destruction was imminent! And all of it was on account of their idolatrous hearts. Accordingly, Ezekiel announced that judgment was soon to come:

Ezekiel 14:4, "Therefore speak to them and tell them, 'Thus says the Lord God, "Any man of the house of Israel who sets up his idols in his heart, puts right before his face the stumbling block of his iniquity, and *then* comes to the prophet, I the Lord will be

brought to give him an answer in the matter in view of the multitude of his idols.””

The language here is certain. Judgment was coming! God soon was going to give an answer to His people’s idolatry! YET with a shift of epic proportions, God issued a word of hope just two verses later:

Ezekiel 14:6, “Therefore say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus says the Lord God, “Repent and turn away from your idols, and turn your faces away from all your abominations.””

I love this! “In wrath, God always remembers mercy” (cf. Habakkuk 3:2)! D. I. Block wrote speaking of v. 6 this explanation:

The second announcement of judgment opens with an urgent appeal to the Israelites to repent of their idolatry. The call is surprising, coming immediately after what appeared to be an absolute announcement of judgment in vv. 4-5, and after a long series of prophecies in which the imminent catastrophe had been proclaimed. (Block, 1997, p. 428)

Such is the glory of the grace of God! As long as grace is operative, there is always hope! And that hope we see in Ezekiel’s call to his fellow Israelites to repent of their sin!

Yet what does that mean? What is repentance? Ezekiel answers that with three exhortations which together comprise the call of repentance. Consider that God’s idolatrous people were called to turn from self to God.

Ezekiel 14:6a, “Therefore say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus says the Lord God, “Repent...””

The word for “repent” is **שׁוּב** (*šûb*). It is a broad word used over 1,050 times in the Old Testament to denote turning, returning, answering, going back, putting back, reviving, revoking, repenting, desisting, withdrawing, unleashing, and much, much more (it is translated 187 different ways in the NASB). The word is used synonymously with:

- “Inclining your heart unto the Lord your God” (Joshua 24:23).
- “Circumcising yourselves to the Lord” (Jeremiah 4:4).
- “Washing your heart from wickedness” (Jeremiah 4:14).
- “Breaking up your fallow ground” (Hosea 10:12).

Though the word is used in the Old Testament with ten different distinct meanings, nevertheless the vast majority of the uses of this word fall into three categories. The first speaks of movement in general. God told Sarah, “At the appointed time I will return to you” (Genesis 18:14). This obviously is NOT its use in our text (however it is the use in over 270 times in the Bible). It serves to explain the passages in Scripture where it says that God

“repented” of a certain course of action (cf. Jeremiah 26:19; 18:8). It does NOT denote a change in God, BUT simply a change in His observable direction!

The second use serves to mirror the idea of the primary verb of the sentence.

Genesis 26:18, “And again Isaac dug the wells.”

A wooden translation would be, “And repenting, Isaac dug the wells.” Yet in the context this translation doesn’t make sense. Accordingly, the word is translated as “again” over 120 times. Now as before, this is NOT its use in the passage before us.

The third use of שׁוּב (šûb)- and theologically the most significant- is in passages dealing with God’s people turning away from evil and turning back to God. This use is found 129 times in the Old Testament. That clearly is how the word is used in our text. So let’s talk about this nuance when it comes to this word. When שׁוּב (šûb) is used of moral/salvific repentance, it speaks of a “turning from” and so a “turning to.”

Think of a person travelling on a road who does a U-Turn such that now they travel in the opposite direction. That’s the idea with this word. It involves a turning *FROM* something and a turning *TO* God. What is that “something”? In answering this the Old Testament doesn’t say. Accordingly, we need to look at the New Testament and for this we go to THE example of repentance in the new covenant, The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

Luke 18:9-14, “And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: ‘Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, “God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.”

But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!”” It is from the example of the tax collector that we get to the bedrock of Biblical repentance. It is NOT simply turning *FROM* a particular sin or sins *TO* God (which is how we tend to think of it which incidentally is not wrong; it is just NOT complete). RATHER, we must understand first that this word denotes a turning *FROM* self-reliance *TO* God-reliance! That is the essence of Repentance in the Bible! Notice...

Luke 18:9, “Christ told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous.”

This is the essence of all rebellion; it is autonomy! It is living in this world relying upon your own intellect, perception, resources, etc. This was the core sin of the Fall! Recall the words of

David, “For Thou dost not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; Thou art not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise” (Psalm 51:16-17). This is the heart of repentance. It is dying to self in all of its forms and so living in reliance upon God for everything, including our understanding, desire, motive, objective, and much, much more.

Christ described the repentant life in these terms, “Blessed are the poor in spirit [the spiritually bankrupt], for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn [over their fallen condition], for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:3-4).

Do you understand the idea behind this word? It is NOT simply a turning from a sinful act or attitude, BUT a turning *FROM* autonomy in any form *TO* dependence and so reliance upon God for all things! In fact, the NT term used for this word is *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*) which speaks of a change in one’s mind/disposition before God- going from autonomy to submission and dependence upon the Lord!

Thus when God called upon the people to “Repent,” we understand that this was an exhortation for the people of God NOT only to abandon their sinful behavior and attitudes, BUT also to abandon their autonomy and so any claim they might have on their own life. It was a call for them to “lean NOT on their own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5), BUT to rely upon God and His word for that which is real! Iain M. Duguid wrote:

But what is ‘just good enough’ when it comes to your commitment to God? Is it enough to be 25 percent committed- you come to church one Sunday out of four and obey two and a half of the Ten Commandments? Is it enough to be 51 percent committed- better than the average pew sitter? Or must you be 100 percent, totally, life-dominatingly committed to God? If this was a multiple-choice test, I’m sure we’d all get the right answer. Everyone within the church knows that you ought to be 100 percent committed to God. So why is it that surveys time and time again show that the majority of Christians behave little differently from their secular counterparts? Why is it that the statistics on premarital sex and divorce are not radically different for Christians and non-Christians?

The answer is that all of us who claim the name of Christ have divided hearts. Outwardly, our appearance may ‘fit’: We go to church regularly and appear to be decent, religious people. Yet when it comes to the tough decisions in life, there are other standards operating than God’s Word, which demonstrates the existence in our hearts of other gods than the true God. We have deep-seated idolatries in our hearts that drive our various behavior patterns. (Duguid, 1999, pp. 187-188)

So what is the heart of the repentance here exhorted? It clearly was for God’s people to turn from their autonomous thinking and living and so live in dependence upon God and His word for their understanding. It involved a paradigm shift whereby God and His word become that which dictated and controlled everything in their lives.

This is where the elders and God's people at this time failed. Recall, they allowed the difficulties and uncertainties of life to dictate how they viewed reality and so what they believed about God. When they prayed and it didn't appear that God answered their prayer, they concluded God no longer was loving (Ezekiel 8:12a)! When they suspected that God ceased fulfilling his promises (which He did on account of their sin), they concluded God was not faithful (Ezekiel 8:12b)!

The result was an ethical domino effect of degradation in their thinking that deteriorated into outright rebellion against the Lord such that they became more reprehensible to God than the Canaanites they were charged to dispossess in the conquest!

The call of our passage to "repentance" first was a call for God's people NOT simply to say they were sorry, BUT to submit their hearts/minds to the Lord and His word! This is where God would have us live at all times! David wrote, "...In Thy light we see light."- there could be no error in our judgment, understanding, desiring, or doing where God's word completely governed our minds. Listen to Paul's exhortation when it comes to that which ought to govern our thinking:

Romans 3:4a, "...let God be found true, though every man *be found* a liar..."

God is the creator of this world. Therefore, if you and I are going to behold reality aright, it will only be through the eyes of God! Listen to how Christ lived when He was tempted by Satan to test God, Jesus said, "Man shall not live on bread alone [Christ here is speaking of life in its fulness, as God intended it to be. This quality of living doesn't come from eating well!], but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). If we are to be healthy, our living, thinking, desiring, understanding, relying everything must be governed and so determined by God and His word. That is why God' message to His idolatrous people in Ezekiel's day was, "...Thus says the Lord God, 'Repent...'" (Ezekiel 14:6)!

God's idolatrous people were called to turn from all idolatrous thinking.

Ezekiel 14:6b, "Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the Lord God, "Repent and turn away from your idols..."'"

This advances the call from a general "turning from self to God" to a specific focus; the turning away from all dependence upon or devotion to an idol! As we have seen, idolatry begins in the heart and may be present where no overt act of worship has taken place. It essentially is believing things about God that are untrue and so unworthy of Him. When such idolatrous thinking takes root in a heart the result is the emergence of a world-view which not only is at odds with the Kingdom of God, BUT colors everything we do, think, and say. Paul Tripp put it this way:

Imagine that you have placed your hand, with fingers narrowly separated, in front of your face. When you attempt to look through your fingers, your vision is obstructed.

As long as your hand is in front of your face, no matter where you turn to look, your vision will be altered by your fingers. So it is with an idol in my heart. It will exercise inescapable influence over my life. Wherever I go, whatever I am doing, the idol will influence what I do and how I do it. (Tripp, 2001, p. 30)

Practically speaking what does this mean? What does it mean to “turn away from [an] idol [of the heart]”? It means removing the fingers which prevent us from seeing the world accurately! What are those fingers? For Israel at this time, there were two of them.

Ezekiel 8:12, “Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, do you see what the elders of the house of Israel are committing in the dark, each man in the room of his carved images? FOR THEY SAY [this was their idolatry], ‘The Lord does not see us [meaning, He doesn’t love nor care about us]; the Lord has forsaken the land [meaning, He has not been faithful to His covenant promises].’”

These were the fingers that were inhibiting God’s people from seeing the world aright at the time of Ezekiel. Yet sadly there were other times when idolatrous fingers obscured the vision of God’s people.

God indicted His people with this accusation, “These things you have done, and I kept silence; you thought that I was just like you...” (Psalm 50:21a). What was the problem at this time? Living in autonomy (and so separate from God’s interpretation of reality), they arrived at what may sound like a minor error in their thinking... they pictured God and so thought of God as if He were a contemporary, “*He is just like us!*” And so when:

- Difficulty came upon them.
- They didn’t get what they wanted.
- They sinned and sought forgiveness.

They related to God in the same way as if He were their neighbor, friend, relative, or contemporary. This robbed God of His transcendent attributes such that all that remained was a weak, effeminate deity who couldn’t live in a world without them.

Christian, don’t miss it. Idolatry begins in the heart with false notions about God. And so after exhorting Israel to turn from their autonomy back to the Lord, God called upon His people to correct their false views concerning Him, His will, His character, and His Kingdom, “...turn away from your idols...” (Ezekiel 14:6)!

This brings us to the final exhortation; God’s idolatrous people were called to from the sinful practices that accompany idolatry.

Ezekiel 14:6c, “...turn your faces away from all your abominations.”

This is what Westminster Shorter Catechism #87 is talking about. The word used for

“abominations” is תוֹעֵבָה (*toebah*) which is a strong word in the Hebrew. It refers to that which God hates (in fact, the word is used of “a thing of horror” in Psalm 88:8)!

Proverbs 6:16, “There are six things which the Lord hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him.”

So yes, while God is a God of love, He also is a God filled with hatred for any and all rebellion/sin! Accordingly, in exhorting His people when it came to their repentance, it naturally followed that God would call them to turn from any and all sinful activity. In fact notice the language of our text: it references “all your abominations”... Israel’s sin at this point had become habitual!

Proverbs 26:11, “Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who repeats his folly.”

Habit is a powerful tool in the life of an image bearer. Humility, purity of speech, or any other virtue can become a habit in our living. When that is the case, virtuous living is NOT the battle it is for the person struggling to acquire such living. Yet habit can also work against us as Christians.

When Tim Tebow attempted to play professional football, how he tried to change his throwing motion, and when he couldn’t, he washed out of professional football. The man knew how he needed to throw the ball. He practiced for a couple of years to change his throwing motion. But when it came down to it, his body reverted to its prior, bad habit that had been forged over the course of his life.

This no doubt is why the final exhortation God gave to His people was for them to turn from all sinful living. Even with godly dependence and word-driven thinking, sinful living/habits will be hard to break. And as sin leads to sin, this sinful living will poison our lives such that our reliance upon God and our thinking will be compromised. Accordingly, it behooves us in our war against sin to attack the smallest expression of it in our lives, which is why Ezekiel exhorted God’s people saying, “...turn your faces away from all your abominations!”

Now sadly, this is where we usually begin when it comes to repentance. Yet we learn that as important as it is to turn from sinful actions or thoughts, nevertheless there are two important elements which must precede that: repenting of our autonomy and repenting of all false notions about God.

Accordingly, if you are one who struggles with sin (behind which is an idol), heed the calling that Ezekiel gave to God’s people in our text. We must:

- Cultivate a heart of brokenness and repentance by which we turn from self-trust to dependence upon God when it comes to what we think, desire, etc.
- Engage in a battle against worldly thinking and values in which we hold and cherish faulty views about God.

- Pay close attention to our living such that any and all sinful activity or habits are quickly replaced by Kingdom-oriented living!

As we close out our study of this passage, I don't want to leave it without impressing upon you the glory of the grace of God as it is revealed here! Accordingly, I want to go back to where we began. We've seen some pretty heavy things about God's course of action when His people fall into idolatry. Yet the passage before us indicates that in spite of any and all rebellion that we might perpetrate against God in our idolatry, the Lord nevertheless is "...faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9b)! Truly, "In wrath, God always remembers mercy" (Habakkuk 3:2)!

So regardless of where you might be this day in your walk... regardless of the sin with which you struggle... go to God, confess your sin, and so plead for His cleansing grace. That is a prayer He will always answer with a "Yes!" C. H. Spurgeon declared:

Do not sit down to sigh and lament; while the beloved Physician lives there is hope; there is a certainty of recovery even for the worst cases. (Spurgeon, 1990, p. August 11 Morning)

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