

A FIRST IN HUMAN HISTORY: A DAY-OF-ATONEMENT REPENTANCE

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The cleansing of the sanctuary since 1844 is a non-negotiable truth to Seventh-day Adventists, the foundation of our existence. It also has profound ethical significance.

Why does an “antitypical” heavenly Day of Atonement involve a special experience for God’s last-day people? Has He arbitrarily withheld that unique blessing from previous generations? Would it be fair for Him to grant the last generation something He deliberately kept away from others in past ages?

No, but previous generations were not able to avail themselves of the full grace Heaven longed to bestow. Not God’s unwillingness to give, but man’s unreadiness to receive, has caused the long delay of thousands of years. History had to be allowed to run its course. In no other way could the human race, “Adam,” learn.

It was to grant them the same justification by faith which Abraham enjoyed when “he believed in the Lord” (Genesis 15:6), and the same precious experience that Paul’s Letter to the Romans described. But their unbelief made it impossible at that time, and the law had to become their “schoolmaster” or “tutor” to lead them on a long detour of history, back to the place where Abraham was, that they “might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:24, KJV).

The prophetic word, “for two thousand three hundred days, then the sanctuary shall be cleansed” (Daniel 8:14), predicts that during the last era of human history, the faith of God’s people will mature, making possible their full reception of Heaven’s grace. The prophecy of Daniel comprehends their spiritual development “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

God withheld nothing from Adam that arbitrarily barred him from the company of the 144,000. Rather, his own spiritual immaturity made it impossible to appropriate the grace an infinite God would have granted even then. God could have cleansed the sanctuary anciently, if human spiritual development had made it possible. We must not limit God’s infinite resources; the deficiency has been ours. Jesus calls every generation to repent, for “all have sinned.” “The knowledge of sin” comes through “the law” (Romans 3:23, 20). The Holy Spirit imparts this wholesome knowledge of his guilt to “every

man.” Its “light” has passed no one by (John 1:9). But a final generation will receive the gift of repentance, a *metanoia*, an after-perception, a contrite view of the past as history finally reveals it. Then it will be said, “The marriage of the Lamb has come, and his wife has made herself ready.” Rev. 19:7.

How Repentance Takes Place

King David’s double crime of adultery and murder illustrates how the Spirit convicts of sin. For the Holy Spirit to abandon him would have been the cruelest punishment possible. No, God loved him still. The Holy Spirit pricked him with sharp conviction. “Day and night Your hand was heavy upon me,” David says. The Lord “broke” his “bones,” metaphorically. Then, David adds, “I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, ‘I will confess my transgression to the Lord,’ and You forgave the iniquity of my sin” (Psalm 51:3-5). This was genuine repentance.

One may never have heard the name of Christ, but he senses in his heart that he has sinned, and come short of the glory of God. There is an awareness, however dim, of a perfect standard in the divine law as it is in Christ. The Holy Spirit penetrates human hearts with the conviction of “sin, and of righteousness” (John 16:8-10).

Guilt, Like Pain, Is a Signal That Something Is Wrong

A wound in the body triggers pain messages to the brain. While a painkiller drug can superficially alleviate the discomfort, it provides no healing. Serious disease or death can follow an artificial suppression of symptoms. Thus, when the sinner rejects the pain of the Holy Spirit’s merciful conviction of sin, spiritual sickness and death follow. Pain in the body prompts the sufferer to seek healing. African lepers, whose sense of pain is anesthetized, lose fingers at night, bitten by rats because they cannot feel. Of how much greater value to us is the Holy Spirit’s painful conviction of sin.

The grateful sinner prays, “Thank You, Lord, for loving me so much as to convict me of sin. I confess the full truth. You have provided a Substitute who bears my penalty in my stead, and His love motivates me to separate from the sin that has crucified Him.” This

miracle occurred in David's heart when he prayed, "I will declare my iniquity; I will be in anguish over my sin" (Psalm 38:18).

Such repentance reflects not only sorrow for sin and its results, but a genuine abhorrence of it. It produces an actual turning away from sin. The law can never do this for anyone. This miracle comes only by grace. "The law brings about wrath," imparting only a terror of judgment, but when grace works repentance, "old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (Romans 4:15; 2 Corinthians 5:17). Sin, once loved, is now hated, and righteousness, once hated, is now loved. "The goodness of God leads you to repentance" (Romans 2:4).

Such repentance includes the actual "remission of sins," that is, sending them away (Luke 24:47). The New Testament word for forgiveness means a separation from sin, a deliverance from its power. True repentance thus actually makes it impossible for a believer in Christ to continue living in sin. The love of Christ supplies the grand motivation, a change in the life (2 Corinthians 5:15).

One finds a kind of joy in the experience:

"The sadness that is used by God brings a change of heart that leads to salvation—and there is no regret in that! But sadness that is merely human causes death. See what God did with this sadness of yours: how earnest it has made you. . . . Such indignation, such alarm, such feelings, such devotion" (2 Corinthians 7:10, 11, TEV).

Peter manifested genuine repentance. We can identify with him, for he failed miserably, yet he accepted the precious gift of repentance which Judas refused. After basely denying his Lord with cursing, Peter "went out and wept bitterly" (Mark 14:71; Luke 22:62). His repentance never ceased. Always afterward tears glistened in his eyes as he thought of his sin contrasted against the Lord's kindness to him. But these were happy tears. The tempest of contrition always brings the rainbow of divine forgiveness. Even medical scientists recognize there is wholesome healing therapy in tears of contrition, for men as well as for women. We ruin our health and shorten our lives when we resist or suppress the tenderness, the melting influence of God's Spirit that tries to soften our hard hearts.

The Lord Himself who "so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" has prepared the way for His gospel. He has given humanity this capacity to feel the personal pain of conviction of sin. It is a clear evidence of His love!

But legalism or a perverted “gospel” short-circuits this work of the Holy Spirit in human hearts. As a consequence, millions are not able to experience the repentance that alone can heal the hurt they know deep inside. But Scripture foretells a time when the gospel will be restored to its pristine purity and the earth will be “illuminated” with its glory (Revelation 18:1-4). It will be like restoring a broken electric connection. The circuit will be complete—the Holy Spirit’s conviction of sin will be complemented by the pure gospel, and the current of Heaven’s forgiveness will flow through every repentant soul.

This Is Solid Happiness

Far from being a negative experience, such repentance is the foundation of all true joy. As every credit must have a corresponding debit to balance the books, so the smiles and happiness of life, to be meaningful, must be founded on the tears of Another upon whom was laid “the chastisement for our peace” and with whose “stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).

Our tears of repentance and sorrow for sin do not balance the books of life. Rather, our appreciation of what it cost Him to bear our griefs and cry our sorrows—this brings salvation within our reach.

“The nearer we come to Jesus and the more clearly we discern the purity of His character, the more clearly shall we see the exceeding sinfulness of sin, and the less shall we feel like exalting ourselves. There will be a continued reaching out of the soul after God, a continual, earnest, heartbreaking confession of sin and humbling of the heart before Him” (*Acts of the Apostles*, page 561).

“At every advance step in Christian experience our repentance will deepen. It is to those whom the Lord has forgiven, to those whom He acknowledges as His people, that He says, ‘Then shall ye remember your own evil ways, and your doings that were not good, and shall loathe yourselves in your own sight.’ Ezekiel 36:31” (*Christ’s Object Lessons*, pages 160, 161).

A repentance like this is beyond us to invent or to initiate; it must come as a gift from above. God has exalted Christ “to give repentance to Israel” (Acts 5:31). And to the Gentiles also He “granted. . . repentance to life” (chapter 11:18). Is He any less generous to us today? The capacity for such a change of mind and heart is a priceless treasure worth more than all the millions in Las

Vegas. Even the will to repent is His gift, for without it we are “dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1).

Such an experience seems almost wholly out of place in this first decade of the 21st century. Can a sophisticated modern church ever receive it?

What Makes Repentance Possible?

The Bible links “repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21). Repentance is not a cold calculation of options and their consequences. It is not a selfish choice to seek an eternal reward or to flee the pains of hell. It is a heart experience that results from appreciating the sacrifice of Christ. It cannot be imposed by fear or terror, or even by hope of immortality. Only “the goodness of God leads you to repentance.”

The ultimate source from which this superb gift flows is the truth of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. As faith is a heart appreciation of the love of God revealed there, so repentance becomes the appropriate exercise of that faith which the believing soul experiences. We follow where faith leads the way as illuminated by the cross—down on our knees. Peter’s call to “repent, and let every one of you be baptized” followed the most convicting sermon on the cross that has ever been preached (Acts 2:16-38). The compelling response at Pentecost was the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise: “I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all. . . to Myself” (John 12:32).

Why don’t we see more of this precious gift? Is modern man too sophisticated to welcome it? No, human nature is not beyond redemption, even in these last days. Genuine repentance with “works befitting repentance” is rare only because that genuine preaching of the cross is rare (compare Acts 26:20; 2 Corinthians 5:14). Its essence is powerfully set forth in Isaac’s Watts memorable words:

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
Richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride.

All through past ages since Pentecost, believing sinners have individually received the gift. Sleeping in the dust of the earth, they all await the “first resurrection.” Theirs has been one phase of repentance. Without a preparation for His coming, on the part of His living people, Christ cannot come. Until then, those sleeping saints of

all ages who personally repented are doomed to remain prisoners in their dusty graves.

Thus the “remnant” must unlock this logjam of lat-day events by a special repentance. Such an event—unique in history—is the reason for the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s existence.

What Is Different About Laodicea’s Repentance?

Laodicea is not innately worse than the other six churches. But since she is living in the last days which is the time of the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary, a never-before phase of our great High Priest’s Day-of-Atonement ministry calls for a never-before kind of response. This becomes another phase of repentance.

While Christ performs His “final atonement” in the second apartment of the heavenly sanctuary, can we continue living as though He were still in the first? The gap between Laodicea’s unique opportunities and her true state has widened so much that her pathetic condition has become the most difficult problem the Lord as ever had to deal with. And unless we walk carefully, we are in the greatest peril of the ages. Ellen White was given a glimpse of the significance of the transfer of Christ’s ministry from the heavenly sanctuary’s first apartment to the second:

Those who rose up with Jesus would send up their faith to Him in the holiest [apartment], and pray, ‘My Father, give us Thy Spirit.’ Then Jesus would breathe upon them the Holy Ghost. In that breath was light, power, and much love, joy, and peace.

“I turned to look at the company who were still bowed before the throne [in the first apartment]; they did not know that Jesus had left it, Satan appeared to be by the throne, trying to carry on the work of God. I saw them look up to the throne, and pray, “Father, give us Thy Spirit.” Satan would then breathe upon them an unholy influence; in it there was light and much power, but no sweet love, joy and peace. Satan's object was to keep them deceived, and to draw back and deceive God’s children” (*Early Writings*, pages 55, 56).

In a later statement, the author spoke of those who “have no knowledge of the way into the most holy [apartment] and they can not be benefited by the intercession of Jesus there.” We used to assume that “those” were Sunday-keepers; but now there are many within the remnant church who “have no [such] knowledge”:

“Like the Jews, who offered their useless sacrifices, they offer up their useless prayers to the apartment which Jesus has left; and Satan, pleased with the deception, assumes a religious character, and leads the minds of these professed Christians to himself, working with his power, his signs and lying wonders, to fasten them in his snare. . . . He also comes as an angel of light, and spreads his influence over the land by means of false reformations. The churches are elated, and consider that God is working marvelously for them, when it is the work of another spirit” (*Ibid.*, page 261).

The experience of Laodicea will fit the potential of the heavenly Day of Atonement, because the message to Laodicea parallels this cleansing of the sanctuary. What does this mean in practical, understandable terms?

Repentance and the Cleansing of the Sanctuary

The “daily” ministry in the sanctuary includes the forgiveness of sins, but the “yearly” goes further. The blotting out of sins takes place in the “times of refreshing” that is, the cleansing of the sanctuary (see Acts 3:19). The Day-of-Atonement ministry includes the blotting out of sins, and can occur only at the end of time, after the close of the 2300 years (see *The Great Controversy*, pages 421, 422, 483).

In these last days there is something Laodicea “does not know,” some deeper level of guilt that has never been discerned. Here is where that deeper repentance takes place.

It will not suffice for us to say, “Let the heavenly computers do the work—our sins will be blotted out when the time comes without our knowing about it.” There is no such thing as automatic, computerized blotting out of sins that takes place without our knowledge and participation. It is we who are to repent individually and understandably, not the heavenly computers. “The expulsion of sin is the act of the soul itself,” not of heavenly computers (*The Desire of Ages*, page 466).

A little thought will make it clear that no sin can be “blotted out” unless we come to see it and guilt must be realized if our Saviour’s complete ministry for us is to be appreciated. Nothing short of this can be adequate in the Day of Atonement.

Hence Laodicea’s experience of repentance is unique in world history. All things are being held up for lack of it. Our plane is freighted with the precious cargo of the loud cry “good news”

message to enlighten the earth. There is no time now for more delay—even to wait for persecution; when persecution comes, it may be too late.

Many inspired statements make clear the principle of a deeper layer of guilt beneath the surface. Here are a few examples:

“The work of restoration can never be thorough unless the roots of evil are reached. Again and again the shoots have been clipped, while the root of bitterness has been left to spring up and defile many; but the very depth of the hidden evil must be reached, the moral senses must be judged, and judged again, in the light of the divine presence” (*Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, page 1152).

“The Laodicean message must be proclaimed with power; for now it is especially applicable. . . . Not to see our own deformity is not to see the beauty of Christ's character. When we are fully awake to our own sinfulness, we shall appreciate Christ. . . . Not to see the marked contrast between Christ and ourselves is not to know ourselves. He who does not abhor himself cannot understand the meaning of redemption. . . . There are many who do not see themselves in the light of the law of God. They do not loath selfishness; therefore they are selfish” (*Review and Herald*, September 25, 1900).

“The message to the Laodicean church reveals our condition as a people. . . . Ministers and church-members are in danger of allowing self to take the throne. . . . If they would see their defective, distorted characters as they are accurately reflected in the mirror of God's Word, they would be so alarmed that they would fall upon their faces before God in contrition of soul, and tear away the rags of their self-righteousness” (*Ibid.*, December 15, 1904).

“The Holy Spirit will reveal faults and defectives of character that ought to have been discerned and corrected. . . . The time is near when the inner life will be fully revealed. All will behold, as if reflected in a mirror, the working of the hidden springs of motive. The Lord would have you now examine your own life, and see how stands your record with Him” (*Ibid.*, November 10, 1896).

“If we have defects of character of which we are not aware, He [the Lord] gives us discipline that will bring those defects to our knowledge, that we may overcome them. . . . Your circumstances have served to bring new defects in your character to your notice; but nothing is revealed but that which was in you” (*Ibid.*, August 6, 1889).

There is nothing “negative” in these quoted paragraphs. If one were sick with a fatal cancer, one would welcome as precious good news the surgeon's announcement that immediate surgery can remove the cancerous tissue and save one's life.

The Greatest Sin of All the Ages

What brought ancient Israel's ruin? She refused to accept her Messiah's message, which exposed a deeper level of guilt than she had previously realized. The Jews of Christ's day were not by nature more evil than any other generation; it was simply theirs to act out to the full the same enmity against God that all fallen sons and daughters of Adam have always had by nature. As our natural “carnal mind is enmity against God” (Romans 8:7), they simply demonstrated this fact visibly in the murder of their divine Visitor. Those who crucified the Saviour hold up a mirror wherein we can see ourselves.

Horatius Bonar learned this in a dream in which he seemed to be witnessing the crucifixion. In a frenzy of agony, as in a nightmare, he tried to remonstrate with the cruel soldiers who were driving spikes through Christ's hands and feet. He laid his hand on the shoulder of one to beg him to stop. When the murderer turned to look at him, Bonar recognized his own face.

Laodicea's repentance will go down to the deepest roots of this natural “enmity against God.” This deeper phase of repentance is repenting of sins that we may not have personally committed, but which we would have committed if we had the opportunity. The root of all sin, its common denominator, is the crucifixion of Christ. A repentance for this sin is appropriate because the books of Heaven already record this sin written against our names and the Holy Spirit will bring this presently unknown sin to our knowledge:

“That prayer of Christ for His enemies embraced the world. It took in every sinner that had lived or should live. . . . Upon all rests the guilt of crucifying the Son of God” (*The Desire of Ages*, page 745).

God's law reaches the feelings and motives, as well as the outward acts. It reveals the secrets of the heart, flashing light upon things before buried in darkness. God knows every thought, every purpose, every plan, every motive. The books of Heaven record the sins that would have been committed had there been opportunity. God will bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing. . . .

He reveals to man the defects that mar his life, and calls upon him to repent, and turn from sin” (*Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, page 1085).

“Opportunity” has often come to others in the form of alluring overmastering temptations through circumstances we ourselves may not have experienced. None of us can endure the full consciousness of what we would do if under sufficient pressure—terrorism, for example. (The enforcement of the “mark of the beast” will provide the ultimate “opportunity.”) But our potential sin is already recorded in “the books of Heaven.”

A Jewish concentration camp survivor of the Holocaust discovered this truth in an usual way. Yehiel Dinur walked into the Nuremburg court in 1961, prepared to testify against Nazi butcher Adolf Eichmann. But when he saw Eichmann in his humbled status, Dinur suddenly began to cry, then fell to the floor. It was not hatred or fear that overcame him. He suddenly realized that Eichmann was not the superman that the inmates feared; he was an ordinary man. Says Dinur: “I was afraid about myself. I saw that I am capable to do this. I am . . . exactly like he!” Mike Wallace of “60 Minutes” told the story on TV. He summed it up: “Eichmann is in all of us.” Only the full work of the Holy Spirit can bring to us the full conviction of the reality of sin; but in these last days when sins must be “blotted out” as well as pardoned, this is His blessed work. No buried bacteria or virus of sin can be translated into God’s eternal kingdom.

The Laodicean call to repentance is the essence of the message of Christ’s righteousness. Whatever sins other people are guilty of, they obviously had the “opportunity” of committing them. Somehow the temptations were overmastering to them. The deeper insight the Holy Spirit brings to us is that we are by nature no better than they. When Scripture says that “all have sinned,” it means, as the New English Bible translates it, “all alike have sinned” (compare Romans 3:23, KJV). Digging down to get the roots out,—this is now “present truth.”

There is no way that we can appreciate the heights of Christ’s glorious righteousness until we are willing to recognize the depths of our own sinfulness. For this reason, to see our own potential for sin is inexpressibly good news!

I take, O cross, thy shadow for my abiding place;
I ask no other sunshine than the sunshine of His face;
Content to let the world go by, to know no gain nor loss,
My sinful self my only shame, my glory all the cross.