

and give us temporal blessings, in order to encourage us to go that one step further and make our repentance internal, from the heart, and therefore real. This Ahab never did.

And then there's Manasseh. He was the most wicked king the southern kingdom of Judah ever had:

2 Chronicles 33:9,10

*Manasseh made Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to err, and to do worse than the heathen, whom the LORD had destroyed before the children of Israel. And the LORD spake to Manasseh, and to his people: but they would not hearken.*

The evil he encouraged in Judah was the tipping point that caused the Lord to judge them all by sending them into exile:

Jeremiah 15:4

*And I will cause them to be removed into all kingdoms of the earth, because of Manasseh the son of Hezekiah king of Judah, for that which he did in Jerusalem.*

After fifty years of his evil reign, he was taken in chains to Babylon, and there he humbled himself and truly repented:

2 Chronicles 33:11-13

*Wherefore the LORD brought upon them the captains of the host of the king of Assyria, which took Manasseh among the thorns, and bound him with fetters, and carried him to Babylon. And when he was in affliction, he besought the LORD his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, And prayed unto him: and he was intreated of him, and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD he was God.*

But how do we know that his humility wasn't just outward and superficial, like Ahab's? For three reasons: Firstly, we're told he "knew that the Lord, he was God." In other words, he came to know the Lord personally for himself. Secondly, just as in Saul's conversion, he became a man of prayer:

Acts 9:11

*Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth.*

Thirdly, we're told that during the last five years of his reign, he desperately tried to reverse all the evil things he had done in Judah. It didn't work, because the nation didn't go along with him. But Manasseh saved his own soul by humbling himself and crying to the Lord. That's always the way.

King David mouthed the words "I have sinned" more than once in Scripture, and every time he meant it from the heart:

2 Samuel 24:10

*And David's heart smote him after that he had numbered the people. And David said unto the LORD, I have sinned greatly in that I have done: and now, I beseech thee, O LORD, take away the iniquity of thy servant; for I have done very foolishly.*

We have many psalms written by him to prove beyond doubt that his repentance was real:

Psalms 51:1-5

*Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest. Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.*

He, just like Manasseh, was given a true view of himself by the Lord. And that's what we need to have – a true view of the sinful, self-centred state of our own soul. This can only humble us to the dust. There will be no more room for pride:

1 Samuel 2:3

*Talk no more so exceeding proudly; let not arrogancy come out of your mouth: for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed.*

Only the Lord can change such hardened creatures as we are, and break our pride altogether. Then our attitude will be totally changed for good, and for ever.

Many people feign repentance, and it may bring tears, but it's only in order to try to avoid some kind of judgment. True repentance, on the other hand, would never attempt to avoid any judgment for sin, it would accept it as just and right. And that in turn would cast us solely upon God's mercy.

May we all recognise our sinful, selfish nature, and the judgment we personally deserve for it. But may we also come to the Lord, and truly repent in our hearts.

Luke 18:13

*And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.*

## We Have Sinned

1 John 1:10

*If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.*

"We have sinned." How many times do we hear that or a similar expression these days? Do we hear the Prime Minister use it? No. What about other important national figures? No. They think they can deal with any situation that comes along, even when they are completely out of their depth. Such is the pride of man. Yet, in the Bible, it's just this kind of expression that God is looking for. We are sinners before a holy God. A simple acknowledgment of that fact would be the first step towards being helped by Him.

Jeremiah 29:13

*And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.*

But our pride prevents us from acknowledging that. We think we're so good, and that we are more than capable of coping without God. So we try to bumble along without Him.

During the Second World War, our King called for days of prayer and humiliation. We didn't win the war because we were better than our German neighbours, but because God answers prayer. Our leaders today ought to call the nation to prayer. To acknowledge God. To humble ourselves before Him. That has always been the way out of difficult situations throughout history. And God ordained it to be that way:

2 Chronicles 6:28-31

*If there be dearth in the land, if there be pestilence, if there be blasting, or mildew, locusts, or caterpillars; if their enemies besiege them in the cities of their land; whatsoever sore or whatsoever sickness there be: Then what prayer or what supplication soever shall be made of any man, or of all thy people Israel, when every one shall know his own sore and his own grief, and shall spread forth his hands in this house: Then hear thou from heaven thy dwelling place, and forgive, and render unto every man according unto all his ways, whose heart thou knowest; (for thou only knowest the hearts of the children of men:) That they may fear thee, to walk in thy ways, so long as they live in the land which thou gavest unto our fathers.*

And the church should be leading the way in this. Surely the role of the church is to get people to recognise their sin before God and to show them the remedy. Not only to call nations to repent, but also to call each one of us personally to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ to save us

from our sins. After all, that's what Christ came into the world to do. He is a Saviour to all those who call upon Him.

Whatever we think of the Anglican "*Book of Common Prayer*," at least every service calls for a confession of sin:

*"ALMIGHTY and most merciful Father, We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep: We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts: We have offended against thy holy laws: We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders: Spare thou them, O God, which confess their fault: Restore thou them that are penitent; According to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesu our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of thy holy Name. Amen."*

Where do we find such material in most churches today? Even the Church of England has watered it down in their modern service books. And many of their ministers think it's quite all right to skip over that part of the service altogether.

When was the last time you heard the Archbishop of Canterbury, or any leading clergyman, talk about sin? They'll talk about climate change, gender reassignment, and any other topic of the day, but our own personal sins? It's not a subject we are encouraged to talk about. Yet it's exactly such that the Lord wants us to acknowledge.

Most religious leaders, just like those in Christ's day, don't understand the truth about God. They're more interested in their church, and their status in it, rather than the truth. It has always been left to God to raise up prophets, outside of the main religious establishment, to speak for Him. We should be listening to the prophets from the Bible, not church leaders:

Isaiah 64:5  
*Thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness, those that remember thee in thy ways: behold, thou art wroth; for we have sinned: in those is continuance, and we shall be saved.*

Jeremiah 14:7  
*O LORD, though our iniquities testify against us, do thou it for thy name's sake: for our backslidings are many; we have sinned against thee.*

Daniel 9:8  
*O Lord, to us belongeth confusion of face, to our kings, to our princes, and to our fathers, because we have sinned against thee.*

But, alas, even if we do listen to the prophets and confess our sin as we ought, our repentance so often turns out to be such a light thing. I'm not sure whether that's because we don't realise how sinful we really are, or if it's because we don't *want* to realise it. Probably a mixture of both.

As we get older and look back at our fleeting life, we ought to become more and more aware of our sins as the years go by. Surely we should be able to see what a terrible mess we've made. What good have we actually achieved? What good haven't we achieved and should have done? Who have we let down? Have we truly loved our neighbour as ourselves? If we ask ourselves questions such as these, surely there is only one conclusion to come to – that we're rotten to the core. If we can't see any of that, we're blind, and we're just going to carry on in the same self-centred way:

Ephesians 2:12  
*...having no hope, and without God in the world....*

We must come to see our past for what it truly is:

2 Samuel 14:14  
*For we must needs die, and are as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again....*

Genesis 47:9  
*And Jacob said unto Pharaoh, The days of the years of my pilgrimage are an hundred and thirty years: few and evil have the days of the years of my life been....*

But we needn't dwell on the past, because there is a Saviour. We can look to Him to take all our sins away. The only thing we should be looking back on, is how the Lord has led us through the wilderness of this world, despite ourselves. We must now make sure we keep our eyes focussed ahead on what's to come, because the Lord has so much more in store for His people. It can only get better:

Philippians 3:13,14  
*Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.*

Let's look at a few characters from the Bible, and see how they saw their own sin:

Firstly, take a look at this bunch of likely lads: Pharaoh, Balaam, Achan, King Saul, Shimei and Judas. What have they all got in common? All of them mouthed the words "*I have sinned*" when they found themselves in a sticky situation, yet none of them truly meant it. They only said

those words to get out of the mess they were in at the time. There was no true heartfelt repentance in any of them. They knew jolly well they'd go back to their old ways again as soon as they were free from their temporary difficulty.

And then there's king Ahab. He was the most wicked king the northern kingdom of Israel ever had:

1 Kings 21:25  
*But there was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the LORD, whom Jezebel his wife stirred up.*

But after the prophet Elijah prophesied against him and his wife, he changed his behaviour, and it was quite impressive:

1 Kings 21:27-29  
*And it came to pass, when Ahab heard those words [Elijah's prophecy], that he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly. And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before me? because he humbleth himself before me, I will not bring the evil in his days: but in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house.*

There's no record of him acknowledging his sin in words, but in his actions, he humbled himself, and at least outwardly showed some kind of repentance. And what's more, the Lord saw it and recognised him for what he'd done, giving a promise that the evil to come wouldn't be in his lifetime.

This was a temporary respite. The evil would come, Ahab's sin was too great to avoid it altogether, but because he walked softly and humbled himself outwardly, the Lord was good to him. Was he saved to eternal life? We're not told. But it becomes clear he wasn't, for two reasons: Firstly, if he had been one of the Lord's people, the Lord would surely have given the promise directly to him, rather than indirectly to Elijah. And secondly, if it was true repentance, we would have seen him trying to undo all the evil things he had done in the land. But there's no record of that. Instead, three years later, we find he persuaded Jehoshaphat to go to war, followed his own false prophets, ignored the one true prophet of the Lord, Micaiah, and tricked Jehoshaphat to put on his kingly robes in battle while he went in disguise. He was killed anyway as it happens, but we see from this that he hadn't really changed in his heart at all.

It was just an outward display of humility. A very good one, and one that the Lord commended. And here's an example of how the Lord is so good to us. Even if our repentance is only external, not internal, the Lord can still take note of it