

## WHEN ANGELS SING

By

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When the publicans and sinners were thronging to hear Jesus, the Pharisees and scribes were critical, saying,—"This man receives sinners and eats with them." In reply, Jesus told the parable of the shepherd who left the flock of ninety-nine to find the sheep that was lost, and then rejoiced over it. "I say unto you, that even so there shall be joy in heaven over one sinner that repents, more than over ninety and nine righteous persons, who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7).

Later he said "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repents." (Luke. 15:10)

Writing in *Christianity Today* over a quarter of a century ago, L. Nelson Bell said, "Today little is said in the churches about repentance. Few indeed are the sermons that stress its necessity. Many church members have never been confronted with the fact of personal sin and the steps whereby it is forgiven...And because we have downgraded the fact and the effect of sin, the need of repentance has faded into the limbo of a supposedly antiquated theology." (Feb. 2, 1973)

Nelson Bell's call for repentance went unheeded and now, 27 years later, the subject is studiously avoided in the religious world, as can be seen in the way preachers call on their hearers at the close of the sermon: "Now, you can receive Jesus into your heart ... just say this prayer ..." "Make Jesus your Lord; invite him into your heart today." It is as though none are sinners, but all are righteous saints with whom the holy Son of God would feel perfectly at home.

This condition is stated in the words of Dave Hunt, writing in *The Berean Call*: "The watered-down gospel many preach today is of a tolerant 'God' who exists solely for our benefit. We are not told to come as repentant sinners confessing our guilt under the just condemnation of a Holy God. Instead, we are persuaded to 'make a decision for Christ' because everything will work out better for us if we do. That is not the gospel.

"To believe Christ died for our sins are to acknowledge that we are vile sinners, that God's penalty for sin is just, and that Christ's death has paid that penalty in our place. Trusting Jesus for salvation involves turning from one's sin. It is irrational to imagine that Christ took the penalty so that we could continue in sin... 'The promise that whosoever believes in Christ .shall not perish' (Jn.3:16) implies that if we do not repent by turning to Christ through believing in Him, we shall surely perish." (*The Berean Call* May, 2000)

John the Baptist began his ministry saying, "Repent..." (Matt. 3:2). When Jesus began to preach, it was by saying, "Repent" (Matt.4:17). And on the day of Pentecost, Peter

commanded the audience to “Repent and be baptized...” (Acts 2:38). At the conclusion of his next recorded sermon, Peter said, “Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord...” (Acts 3:19) It is significant of today’s apostasy that the first word preached by Jesus, John and Peter, is the last word preached by so many today. Repentance is a change of mind that works a change of conduct. In the Bible it is often associated with sorrow for sin. “For godly sorrow works repentance unto salvation, a repentance which brings no regret; but the sorrow of the world works death.” (2 Cor. 7:10) But it is more than sorrow for having committed a sin; it is sorrow for having been motivated by base desires, and then the release of all such desires, that one’s life may be directed by God.

One of the hardest things for man to do is to recognize that he is wrong and that another must take the lead. This is exactly what happens in repentance. In the parable of the prodigal son we see an example of true repentance (Luke 15). He had walked away from his father’s restraint and care to go his own way into a life of sin that left him destitute and miserable. Jesus said that “when he came to himself” he recognized his true condition that he had sinned against heaven and against his father, and was unworthy to be called his son. This is the internal “godly sorrow that forms the basis of repentance, and without which no external acts are of any value.

He then acted upon his change of heart, arose, and made the journey to his father, who in love was waiting to receive and forgive him, even as our heavenly Father is longsuffering, and ready to forgive each penitent believer. (2 Peter 3:9).

The first four Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-6) describe the characteristics of one who is repentant: poor in spirit, sorrow for sin, meekness, and a hunger and thirst for righteousness. It is when one looks deep into his conscience, and finds that it has been leading him in the wrong direction - when he finally “comes to himself” and admits “I have sinned against heaven, and am not worthy to be God’s son” — that’s when he is ready to repent and receive God’s pardon and peace. One may profess a belief in Christ without ever having repented and therefore will never know the joy of forgiveness and full pardon.

After King David had committed the sins of adultery and murder he continued to perform his job as though nothing was wrong. Then the prophet Nathan confronted him with what evil he had done. Unlike most political leaders, who excuse and deny their sins, David confessed his guilt. “Against thee, thee only have I sinned...my sin is ever before me.” It was when he realized that he was morally bankrupt that he was able to repent and pray, “Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God ... Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with a willing spirit. Then will I teach transgressors thy ways and sinners shall be converted unto thee” (Psa. 51:10, 12-13)

One reason there is little motivation for repentance is the failure to believe in the purity and perfection of God. He is referred to as “The man upstairs” or sometimes as “The Man.” Everywhere we hear expressions such as “O God” or “My God” used with no

thought of respect for The Almighty. Even in the trendy churches there is little focus on Jehovah God — His purpose, His commands, His holiness, His righteousness. Instead, we are impressed with “exciting” activities and entertainment. Churches are bigger than ever, filled with the most prosperous people in the world, but where there is no concept of God’s holiness, there is little recognition of man’s sinfulness and need for repentance.

The prophet Isaiah was the kind of man who would be described as a good man, honest and upright. He wasn’t disturbed about his spiritual condition, not until in a vision he saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, with the seraphim crying to each other, “Holy, holy, holy, is Jehovah of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.” Then Isaiah said, “Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, Jehovah of hosts” (Isa. 6:1-5).

Could we have the same view of the Creator, would we not have the same reaction? How then would we view the affluent, greedy, pleasure-seeking people among whom we dwell? Isaiah’s humble and contrite attitude stands out in contrast to modern church leaders who love to dress in robes of splendor, and who become more proud and arrogant the longer they practice their profession.

Job considered himself a righteous man, and eloquently defended his integrity, until he was confronted by God Himself, with revelations of reality. Then Job cried out: “I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye see thee: wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:5-6).

The closer one gets to God the greater his realization of his own sin, and it is he who sees himself as a sinner who gets the best view of God. It was the publican who said “Be merciful to me, a sinner,” who was justified in the sight of God. (Luke 18:9-14)

“Jehovah is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart, and saves such as are of a contrite spirit.” (ps.35:18)

It was because of our sins that Jesus was crucified. God laid our sins on Jesus, and he bore them in our place in his body upon the tree (1 Peter 2:24). God recognizes the depth of our sin. Do we? Few have the courage to measure their guilt by the standard of God’s purity. Yet, it is when we stop making excuses, and seek God in humble repentance that we shall find peace and joy in His great mercy and grace.

The question is put by the late Otis Reed: “Are you courageous enough to acknowledge to God Who loves you, the hopelessness of your situation — the bankruptcy of your life as you are living it?”

Repent! That’s when seasons of refreshing will come. That’s when you will find the peace that passes understanding.

*That’s when the angels will sing!*

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