

TURN BACK TO GOD IN REPENTANCE

4 **“Say to them, ‘This is what the LORD says: ‘‘When people fall down, do they not get up? When someone turns away, do they not return? 5 Why then have these people turned away? Why does Jerusalem always turn away? They cling to deceit; they refuse to return. 6 I have listened attentively, but they do not say what is right. None of them repent of their wickedness, saying, ‘‘What have I done?’’ Each pursues their own course like a horse charging into battle. 7 Even the stork in the sky knows her appointed seasons, and the dove, the swift and the thrush observe the time of their migration. But my people do not know the requirements of the LORD.**

I, What is repentance?

When you first came to faith, the Holy Spirit entered into your body and into your soul as you were transformed from a faithless, dead thing, into a living, redeemed, recovered, child of God. Don’t object or be surprised when I say that the Spirit entered into your body because when Paul warns about sexual sins in 1 Corinthians 6 he says, **“Don’t you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?”** (1 Cor. 6:19). You have the Spirit of God.

When you last sinned—which was certainly already today—you turned away from God like a car thief not realizing or forgetting that there was a passenger in the back seat. You drove God along with you on your little joyride into sin. He was there with you, Christian, seeing everything, hearing everything, feeling everything, doing everything along with your arms and legs and eyes and every part of your body, as you used the temple of God, which is your body, to commit that sin, just as you’ve been doing every day of your Christian life.

So—we know what happens when we came to faith. And each person privately knows what happens when they sin. When you repent, what happens? To repent is to turn, and in our text the prophet Jeremiah expresses this “turning” almost a dozen different ways in just four verses. Repentance begins with being stopped by the Law, when the word of God or a friend with the truth or my own conscience goes to work and says: What you’re doing or what you’re done is a sin. Stop it!

This crushes us. It means that we’ve wrecked, desecrated, the temple of the Holy Spirit in our own flesh. The marble pillars of my bones and the altar of my own heart and the divine library—the repository of the Holy Word of God shelved and on display in my mind, are spattered with the blood of a sin, an unacceptable and disgusting event within me. And I can’t go back and undo that event, that sin. It’s on my record, published in God’s memory, and it can only condemn me. In verse 6, God quotes you and me as we

emerge from our berserk fit of doubt or self-indulgence and look at our sins and say:
“What have I done? How could I possibly have done this?”

But there’s something else—something outside. As the Father observes and remembers my sin, and as the Holy Spirit stands in his ruined temple within me, Jesus Christ comes with his own blood, and had poured it out on that same altar of my heart, and everything that was ruined is cleansed, covered, and restored by the grace of Jesus my Savior. This is the Gospel working in you, assuring you, loving you, and setting you free from your sin.

II, What should Israel’s repentance have been?

In Jeremiah’s time, Israel was falling deeper and deeper into sin. At first, he warns that they will be exiled, and then the exile comes, and the people hated him for having said it was coming. Then he warns them that the temple will be destroyed—and then the temple is destroyed. Then he warns them that they are standing in opposition to God—until they threw Jeremiah into an old cistern, and stood in opposition to him, too. They ignored the word of God right up to the day when the Wicked King of the Jews took his book—the very scroll of his prophecy, and burned it page by page.

God sighs and says: **“Why does Jerusalem always turn away?”**

The Lord uses different pictures of repentance, wanting us to catch one of them at least and to make it stick: **Do people fall and not get up?** A man who falls down and stays down is a man who’s dead. Is that Israel? Is that you? If you fall into sin, don’t you get up again?

When someone turns away, don’t they turn back again? This isn’t only about falling down, but about any turn we make. If you turn to go over to the cupboard to get the salt, do you stay facing the cupboard for the rest of your life? Don’t you turn back again? So when you sin, why don’t you turn back to God?

Jeremiah turns to some birds for more examples. The storks known to the people of Israel all migrated; they all knew where they were going and when they would be back. And the same thing is true of all the songbirds. We see the Robin leave, but we know it will be back again in the Spring. And this teaches us something about our life of repentance.

III, What should our repentance be?

Ever since the Holy Spirit came to roost in the temple of your own body, you have been the caretaker of that holy place. The Spirit does not migrate. He dwells. He lives. He builds you up and strengthens you. You are the custodian of that holy place, and you are not just a spectator.

So we sometimes talk about **two conversions**. The first is when you first came to faith. For most of us, it was when we were baptized. The second continues every single day for the rest of our lives. In **Matthew 18**, Jesus says: **“Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of God.”** We do this day by day, or it can never be done. In the first turning, when we were baptized, we were passive—it was something that came and happened to us. But in the daily conversion of repentance, mankind cooperates with the Holy Spirit. We want to read the holy word of God. We desire the change. We pray as Jesus taught us: “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.”

Let’s look carefully at ourselves and at the sin Jeremiah is warning against. This sin isn’t just one sin, like a single commandment being broken. Jeremiah is warning against the sinful life that wants to live secure in its sin. This is the sin of saying either, “I don’t care if I’m sinning,” or “I don’t think what I’m doing is a sin at all.”

There are two common kinds of storks that fly through Palestine. They are European birds that fly down to Egypt and other parts of Africa every year. Almost no migrating birds in that part of the world will fly across the Mediterranean Sea. They either go west to Gibraltar or east past the Bosphorus and through Palestine. White storks are very social and don’t mind other storks, even other birds, flying with them. But Black Storks are cliquey. If young Black Storks get separated from their family group, they just keep flying in whatever direction they think is right, and many of them never return, they never make a nest, and never mate. Jeremiah also talks about a horse filled with battle fever that charges ahead without swerving and doesn’t think about its goal at all.

This is living secure in a sin. It’s losing sight of what’s coming, because what’s coming is death, judgment day, and eternal damnation. And this is why God preaches the Law to us, through the Bible, through preaching, through friends, or through the conscience. God says, **“I kill and I make alive. I wound and I heal. There is no god besides me, and no one can deliver out of my hand”** (Dt. 32:39).

When the Law has wounded us, crushed us, and killed our egos and our sinful stubbornness, the Gospel comes by God’s grace and turns us back, like a Stork to its home, like a songbird to its nesting ground, so that we will return to the nest of God’s love, to where all of his blessings are waiting for us. So that he can remind us of what he has already done for us: How Jesus Christ came and cleaned the temple of our broken hearts. How he purified the altar of your heart with his own blood, shed for you. How he nourished you with his own sacrificed flesh. How he bathed you in the eternally healing water of baptism, and made you his child.

This is our daily path of repentance by which God, our God, turns us back. Amen.