

HOW CHRIST CALLED THE ANCIENT JEWS TO NATIONAL REPENTANCE

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Jesus was disappointed with the way the Jews responded to His call to national repentance. He says He is also disappointed with the response of Seventh-day Adventists.

Fresh from His own experience of corporate repentance and baptism “in behalf of the human race,” Jesus demanded the same from the Jewish nation: “From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). And His disciples also “went out and preached that people should repent” (Mark 6:12).

Christ’s greatest disappointment was that the nation did not respond. He upbraided “the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent” (Matthew 11:20). He likened the nation to the unfruitful “fig tree planted in His vineyard. . . . For three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none” (see Luke 13:6-9).

The barren fig tree which Jesus cursed became a symbol representing not merely the mass of individual unrepentant Jews, but the corporate people which as a nation rejected Christ:

“The cursing of the fig tree was an acted parable. That barren tree, flaunting its pretentious foliage in the very face of Christ, was a symbol of the Jewish nation. The Saviour desired to make plain to His

disciples the cause and the certainty of Israel’s doom’ (*The Desire of Ages*, page 582).

“Our Lord had sent out the twelve and afterward the seventy, proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand, and calling upon men to repent and believe the gospel. . . . This was the message borne to the Jewish nation after the crucifixion of Christ; but the nation that claimed to be God’s peculiar people rejected the gospel brought to them in the power of the Holy Spirit” (*Christ’s Object Lessons*, page 308).

Note how personal sin had grown to become national sin. It was accomplished by the nation’s leaders, and it bound the nation to corporate ruin:

“When Christ came, presenting to the nation the claims of God, the priests and elders denied His right to interpose between them and the people. . . . They set themselves to turn the people against Him” (*Christ’s Object Lessons*, pages 304, 305).

How National Ruin Followed National Impenitence

Only national repentance could have saved the Jewish nation from the impending ruin that their national sin invoked upon them:

“For the rejection of Christ, with the results that followed, they were responsible. A nation’s sin and a nation’s ruin were due to the religious leaders” (*Ibid.*, page 305).

“Paul showed that Christ had come to offer salvation first of all to the nation that looked for the Messiah’s coming as the consummation and glory of their national existence. But that nation had rejected Him who would have given them life, and

had chosen another leader, whose reign would end in death. He endeavored to bring home to His hearers the fact that repentance alone could save the Jewish nation from impending ruin" (*The Acts of the Apostles*, page 247).

In Jesus' last public discourse He made a final appeal to these leaders at the Jerusalem headquarters to repent. Their refusal broke His heart. With tears in His voice, the Saviour predicted the impending national ruin: "All these things will come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem. . ." (Matthew 23:13-37).

Christ certainly appealed to individuals to repent, for He said, "there will be joy in Heaven over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:7). But there is a distinct difference between national repentance and individual repentance. He also appealed to "this. . . evil generation," that is, the nation. "The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah" (Luke 11:32). The fate of a nation, not merely that of individuals, hung in the balance.

Like a lone flash of lightning on a dark night, this reference to Nineveh illustrates Jesus' idea. National repentance is so rare that few believe it can ever take place. He used Nineveh's history as an example to prove that what He called for was indeed possible. If a heathen nation can repent, He said in effect, surely the nation that claims to be God's chosen people can do the same! "As Jonah became a sign unto the Ninevites, so also the Son of Man will be to this generation. . . . The men of

Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation, and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed, a greater than Jonah is here" (Luke 11:30, 32).

The "How" of Heathen Nineveh's Repentance

If one picture is worth a thousand words, Nineveh's repentance vividly illustrates a national response to the call of God. A nation repented, not simply a scattered group of individuals. We find it easier to believe a "great fish" swallowed Jonah alive than to accept that a government and a nation can repent at the preaching of God's Word. "The people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them" (Jonah 3:5). There is no reason to doubt this sacred history.

This repentance began with "the greatest," and extended downward from the usual order in history to "the least of them." Word came to the king of Nineveh and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles" (Jonah 3:6, 7).

It is true that this call to repent did not originate at the royal palace. But note that the government of Nineveh wholeheartedly supported it. The "city" repented from top to bottom. Fantastic! The repentance was both nationally "proclaimed and published," and individually received. The divine warning had proclaimed a national overthrow of Nineveh; the leadership led the people to repent—a national repentance.

Jesus' point was this: if this happened once in history, why couldn't it happen with the Jews also? The Jews could have achieved national repentance easily and practically. (And why can't it happen with us?) The high priest, Caiaphas, could have led out as well as did the king of Nineveh. Caiaphas needed only to accept the principle of the cross as Jesus taught it.

How Caiaphas Could Have Led Israel to Repentance

Let's give Caiaphas the generous benefit of a doubt. At first he could have been sincerely uncertain how to relate to Jesus in the early days of His ministry. But by the time of Jesus' trial he could have taken a firm stand for right. He needed only to make a simple speech such as this to the Sanhedrin: "For a time I didn't understand the work of Jesus. You brethren have shared my misunderstanding. Something has happened among us that has been beyond us. But I have studied the Scriptures lately. I have seen that beneath His lowly outward guise, Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the true Messiah. He fulfills the prophetic details. And now, brethren, I humbly acknowledge Him as such, and I forthwith step down from my high position and shall be the first to install Him as Israel's true High Priest."

A gasp of surprise would have rippled through the Sanhedrin chambers if Caiaphas had said these words. Today he would be honored all over the world as the noblest leader of God's people in all history. He could have done what Moses would have loved to do. (In fact, many of them, would

doubtless have followed Caiaphas' lead. We have already seen how the religious leaders fastened national guilt upon the people. It follows that the same leaders could as easily have led them into national repentance. Christ could have died in some other way than murder by His own people, and Jerusalem could today be the "joy of the whole earth" rather than its sorest plague spot.

If the remnant church ultimately chooses to follow ancient Israel in impenitence, Christ will suffer at her hands the most appalling humiliation He has ever endured. He will be crucified afresh, wounded anew "in the house of [His] friends" (Zechariah 13:6). Humanity's final indignity would be heaped upon His sacrifice.

But God's Word must proclaim good news. Christ did not sacrifice Himself to be defeated. The antitypical Day of Atonement resolves all doubt. In the light of the cross we see the assurance that the church will at last overcome this tragic ancient pattern of unbelief. The church is His prized possession, "which He has purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). In the end His people will not deprive Him of His reward.

For once in history, history will not repeat itself. His church will fully vindicate Christ. He will see that the infinite price He paid for their redemption was worthwhile. An infinite sacrifice will fully redeem and heal an infinite measure of human sin.

Though He was "a greater" than Jonah and 'a greater than Solomon," Christ did not appear in the glorious garb and pomp of Solomon. Nor did He "cause His voice to be heard in the street" as did

Jonah (compare Matthew 12:42; Isaiah 42:2). Yet the Jewish leaders had evidence enough of His authority. The quality of His solemn call to repentance convinced them of what their pride refused to confess. No other “sign” would be given that “evil and adulterous generation.” Once she refused to acknowledge Heaven’s last call to repentance, nothing could stay Israel’s frightful doom.

And the sure evidence of the Holy Spirit’s work today resides in the True Witness’ solemn call to us to repent.

The Ingathering of Repentant Jews

There remains a luminous hope for ancient Israel’s literal descendants in our day:

“Hardening in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved. . . . For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. . . . Through the mercy shown you they also may obtain mercy” (Romans 11:25-31).

Note that the fulfillment of the prophecy hinges on a repentant Christian church. In the days before us we shall see some surprising developments among repentant Jews:

“When this gospel shall be presented in its fullness to the Jews, many will accept Christ as the Messiah. . . .

“In the closing proclamation of the gospel, when special work is to be done for classes of people hitherto neglected, God expects His messengers to take particular interest in the Jewish people whom they find in all parts of the earth. . . . This will be to

many of the Jews as the dawn of a new creation, the resurrection of the soul. . . . They will recognize Christ as the Saviour of the world. Many will by faith receive Christ as their Redeemer. . . .

“The God of Israel will bring this to pass in our day. His arm is not shortened that it cannot save. As His servants labor in faith for those who have long been neglected and despised, His salvation will be revealed” (*The Acts of the Apostles*, pages 380, 381).

How can we call the Jews to such repentance, unless we experience it ourselves? God’s great heart of pity is moved on behalf of these suffering people, and a great blessing awaits them when we are prepared to be the agents to bring it:

“Notwithstanding the awful doom pronounced upon the Jews as a nation at the time of their rejection of Jesus of Nazareth, there have lived from age to age many noble, God-fearing Jewish men and women who have suffered in silence. God has comforted their hearts in affliction and has beheld with pity their terrible situation. He has heard the agonizing prayers of those who have sought Him with all the heart for a right understanding of His word” (*Ibid.*, pages 379, 380)

One’s heart beats a little faster to read those words, so pregnant with hope and wonder. What a joy it will be to witness the fulfillment of our beloved Paul’s bright visions of future restoration of the true Israel! Millions of Christians look to literal Israel in Palestine as the fulfillment. However, the servant of the Lord, foresaw the genuine fulfillment to be the repentance of many individual Jews who will learn

from the remnant church the principle of corporate guilt and repentance.

Could it happen in our time?

Yes, if we really want it. The Jews will be our pupils, to learn from us what they didn't learn two thousand years ago—how to repent.

HOW THE ANCIENT JEWISH NATION SEALED THEIR DOOM

The A-to-Z story of their rebellion is frightening. Scripture warns us that we stand poised on the brink of a similar disaster.

Could Jesus accuse people of a crime when they were innocent? If someone accused me for example of starting World War I, I would response that this was unreasonable. I wasn't even born when it started! Yet Jesus accused the Jewish leaders of His day of guilt for a crime committed before any of them were born. His charge against them sounds unreasonable.

The story is in Matthew 23. Jesus has just upbraided the scribes and Pharisees with a series of "woes" accompanied by vivid flashes of irony and indignation. He concludes by springing on them this charge of murdering a certain Zechariah: "That on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar" (verse).

For years I thought this Zechariah was a victim whom Christ's hearers had personally murdered in the temple during their lifetime, not more than 30 or 40 years previous.

Human Guilt from A to Z

I was shocked to discover that this man was murdered some 800 years earlier. (2 chronicles 24:20, 21 records the story). Why did Jesus charge this crime on the Jews of His day?

He was not unfair. When we see the principle of corporate repentance guilt, the picture becomes clear. In rejecting Him, the Jewish leaders acted out all human guilt from A to Z (Abel to Zechariah), even though they may not yet have personally committed a single act of murder. They were one in spirit with their fathers who had actually shed the blood of the innocent Zechariah in the temple. In other words, they would do it again, and they did do it—to Jesus.

By refusing the call to repentance which the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed, they agreed to assume the guilt of all murders of innocent victims ever since the days of Abel. One who could not err fastened the entire load on them.

Suppose the Jewish leaders had repented? If so, they would have repented of "the blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world" (Luke 11:50). And thus they would not have gone on to crucify Christ.

To understand Jesus' thinking, we need to review the Hebrew idea of corporate personality. The church is the "Isaac" of faith, Abraham's true descendant, "one body" with him and with all true believers of all ages. To Jewish and Gentile believers alike, Paul says Abraham is "our father" (Romans 4:1-13). Even to the Gentile believers he says, "Our fathers were . . . baptized into Moses."

“We [are] all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks” (1 Corinthians 10:1, 2; 12:13). We “all” means past generations and the present generation.

Thus Christ’s body comprises all who have ever believed in Him from Adam down to the last remnant who welcome Him at His return. All are one individual in the pattern of Paul’s thinking. Even a child can see this principle. Although it is his hand that steals from the cookie jar, when mother learns what happened, it’s his bottom that gets spanked. To the child this is perfectly fair.

The Old Testament Makes It Clear

(a) Hosea depicts Israel’s many generations as one individual progressing through youth to adulthood. He personifies Israel as a girl betrothed to the Lord. Israel “shall sing . . . as in the days of her youth, as in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt” (Hosea 11:1; 2:15).

(b) Ezekiel defines Jerusalem’s history as the biography of one individual:

“Thus says the Lord God to Jerusalem: ‘Your birth and your nativity are from the land of Canaan; your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite. . . . When I passed by you again and looked upon you, indeed your time was the time of love. . . . You are exceedingly beautiful, and succeeded to royalty’(Ezekiel 16:3-13).

Generations of Israelites came and went, but her corporate personal identity remained. The nation carried the guilt of “youth” into adulthood, as an adult remains guilty of a wrong committed when he was a youth—even though physiologists say that

time has replaced every physical cell in his body. One’s moral personal identity remains regardless of the molecular composition of the body.

(c) Moses taught this same principle. He addressed his generation as the “you” who should witness the captivity to Babylon nearly a thousand years later (see Leviticus 26:3-40). He also called on succeeding generations to recognize their corporate guilt with “their fathers”:

“If they shall confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers, which they trespassed against me, and that they also have walked contrary to me; and that I also have walked contrary to them, and have brought them into the land of their enemies; if then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they then accept the punishment of their iniquity. . . . I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt” (Leviticus 26:40-45).

(d) Succeeding generations sometimes recognized this principle. King Josiah confessed that “great is the wrath of the Lord that is aroused against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us” (2 Kings 22:13). He said nothing about the guilt of his contemporaries, so clearly did he see his own generation’s as the guilt of previous generations.

(e) Ezra lumps together the guilt of his generation with that of their fathers to this day we have been very guilty, and for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests, have been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands” (Ezra 9:7). “Our kings” were

those of previous generations, for there was no living king in Ezra's day.

(f) The David-Christ relationship is striking. David's Psalms express so perfectly what Christ later experienced that the Saviour used David's words to express the feelings of His own broken heart: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Psalm 22:1; Matthew 27:46). Christ is the Word "made flesh." Nowhere does the perfect corporate identity of a "member" with the "Head" appear more clearly than in this David-Christ relationship. Christ knows Himself to be the "son of David." He has feasted on David's words and lived David's experiences. The perfect picture He sees of Himself in the Old Testament in the experience and words of the prophets, He lives out in His own flesh through faith.

(g) This idea of identity reaches a zenith in the Song of Solomon, the love story of the ages. Christ loves a "woman," even His church. Israel, the foolish "child" called out of Egypt, the fickle girl in her youthful "time of love," the faithless woman in the kingdom days, "grieved and forsaken" in the Captivity, at last becomes the chastened and mature bride of Christ. At last, through corporate repentance she is prepared to become a mate to Him.

Would You Have Done Better?

Let us picture in the crowd that gathered before Pilate that fateful Friday morning. The strange Prisoner stands bound. It is popular to join in condemning Him. Not a voice is raised in His defense.

Suppose you are connected with Pilate's government, or are in the employ of Caiaphas, the High Priest. You support your family with your wages. Would you have the courage to stand up alone and say, "We are making a terrible mistake here! This man is not guilty of these charges. He is what He claims—He is the divine Son of God! I appeal to you, Pilate and Caiaphas, accept this Man as the Messiah!"

Suppose your own close circle of friends has already joined the mockery and abuse of Jesus. Would you (or I) have the nerve to face them alone and rebuke them for what they do?

Realizing how easily a defense of Jesus might put you on the cross too, would you (or I) dare to speak out? Surely the answer is obvious. We dare not say that the church as a world body cannot know this repentance, lest when we survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died, we pour contempt on His loving sacrifice by implying that it was in vain.

Pentecost: Israel's History Not Totally in Vain

Jesus' appeal to the Jews failed to move them. Yet a glorious demonstration of corporate repentance occurred at Pentecost. His calls at last bore fruit.

The three thousand converted that day probably did not all personally shout "Crucify Him!" at Christ's trial, or personally mock Him as He hung on the cross. Yet they recognized that they shared the guilt of those who did.

But the Jewish leaders stubbornly refused to do so: "Did we not strictly command you not to teach in

this name? . . . You . . . intend to bring this Man's blood on us!" (Acts 5:28). In no way would they accept corporate guilt! (We Seventh-day Adventists have also denied ours, for decades.) Thus the Jews denied their only hope of salvation.

Pentecost has inspired God's people for nearly 2000 years. What made those grand results possible? The people believed the portrayal of their corporate guilt and frankly confessed their part in the greatest sin of all ages, which their leaders had refused to repent of. Pentecost was an example of laity rising above the spiritual standards of their leaders. The final outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the latter rain will be an extension of the Pentecost experience.

A leadership reaction against Pentecost occurred a few months later. The Sanhedrin refused to accept Stephen's portrayal of corporate guilt through their national history: "You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers" (Acts 7:51, 52). That "stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him" (verses 57, 58).

Do we see the pattern in this? It began with Cain. Generation after generation refused to see their corporate guilt. Finally, impenitent Israel demonstrated to the world for all time to come the tragic end that follows national impenitence. "All these things happened unto them as examples, and

they were written for our admonition, on whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Corinthians 10:11).

But in that tragic hour when Israel sealed her doom by murdering Stephen, a truth began to work itself out in one honest human heart. It would lead at last to correction of the sin of Israel. The "witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul." This young man's disturbed conscience thought through the great idea of a worldwide "body of Christ" that would eventually exhibit in full and final display the blessings of repentance which the Jews refused.