

Repentance: A Joyful Choice

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Repentance is not only possible but also joyful because of our Savior.

My dear brothers and sisters, when I was 12 years old, my family lived in Göteborg, a coastal city in southern Sweden. By way of reference, it is the hometown of our dear associate Elder Per G. Malm,¹ who passed away this summer. We miss him. We're grateful for his nobility and his noble service and for the example of his absolutely adorable family. And we certainly pray God's richest blessings to be theirs.

Fifty years ago, we attended church in a large remodeled home. One Sunday, my friend Steffan,² the only other deacon in the branch, greeted me at church with some excitement. We went to the chapel's adjacent overflow area, and he pulled from his pocket a large firecracker and some matches. In an act of youthful bravado, I took the firecracker and lit the long gray fuse. I intended to snuff out the fuse before it blew up. But when I burned my fingers trying to do so, I dropped the firecracker. Steffan and I watched in horror as the fuse continued to burn.

The firecracker exploded, and sulfurous fumes filled the overflow area and the chapel. We hurriedly gathered up the scattered remnants of the firecracker and opened the windows to try to get the smell out, naively hoping that no one would notice. Fortunately, no one was hurt and no damage was done.

As members came to the meeting, they did notice the overpowering smell. It was hard to miss. The smell distracted from the sacred nature of the meeting. Because there were so few Aaronic Priesthood holders—and in what can only be described as dissociative thinking—I passed the sacrament, yet I did not feel worthy to partake of it. When the sacrament tray was offered to me, I took neither the bread nor the water. I felt horrible. I was embarrassed, and I knew that what I had done had displeased God.

After church, the branch president, Frank Lindberg, a distinguished older man with silver-gray hair, asked me to come to his office. After I sat down, he looked at me kindly and said he had noticed that I had not partaken of the sacrament. He asked why. I suspect he knew why. I was sure everyone knew what I had done. After I told him, he asked how I felt. Through tears, I haltingly told him I was sorry and that I knew I had let God down.

President Lindberg opened a well-worn copy of the Doctrine and Covenants and asked me to read some underlined verses. I read the following out loud:

“Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more.

“By this ye may know if a man repenteth of his sins—behold, he will confess them and forsake them.”³

I will never forget President Lindberg’s compassionate smile when I looked up after I had finished reading. With some emotion, he told me that he felt it would be fine for me to resume partaking of the sacrament. As I left his office, I felt indescribable joy.

Such joy is one of the inherent results of repentance. The word *repent* connotes “to perceive afterwards” and implies “change.”⁴ In Swedish, the word is *omvänd*, which simply means “to turn around.”⁵ The Christian writer C. S. Lewis wrote about the need and the method for change. He noted that repentance involves “being put back on the right road. A wrong sum can be put right,” he said, “but only by going back till you find the error and working it afresh from that point, never by simply *going on*.”⁶ Changing our behavior and returning to the “right road” are part of repentance, but only part. Real repentance also includes a turning of our heart and will to God and a renunciation of sin.⁷ As explained in Ezekiel, to repent is to “turn from ... sin, ... do that which is lawful and right; ... restore the pledge, ... [and] walk in the statutes of life, without committing iniquity.”⁸

Yet even this is an incomplete description. It does not properly identify the power that makes repentance possible, the atoning sacrifice of our Savior. Real repentance must involve faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, faith that He can change us, faith that He can forgive us, and faith that He will help us avoid more mistakes. This kind of faith makes His Atonement effective in our lives. When we “perceive afterwards” and “turn around” with the Savior’s help, we can feel hope in His promises and the joy of forgiveness. Without the Redeemer, the inherent hope and joy evaporate, and repentance becomes simply miserable behavior modification. But by exercising faith in Him, we become converted to His ability and willingness to forgive sin.

President Boyd K. Packer affirmed the hopeful promises of repentance in April 2015 at his last general conference. He described the power of the Savior’s Atonement to heal in what I consider the distillation of the wisdom gained in half a century of apostolic service. President Packer said: “The Atonement leaves no tracks, no traces. What it fixes is fixed. ... It just heals, and what it heals stays healed.”⁹

He continued:

“The Atonement, which can reclaim each one of us, bears no scars. That means that no matter what we have done or where we have been or how something happened, if we truly repent, [the Savior] has promised that He would atone. And when He atoned, that settled that. ...

“... The Atonement ... can wash clean every stain no matter how difficult or how long or how many times repeated.”¹⁰

The reach of the Savior's Atonement is infinite in breadth and depth, for you and for me. But it will never be imposed on us. As the prophet Lehi explained, after we "are instructed sufficiently" to "know good from evil,"¹¹ we "are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death."¹² In other words, repentance is a choice.

We can—and sometimes do—make different choices. Such choices may not seem intrinsically wrong, but they prevent us from becoming truly penitent and thus preclude our pursuit of real repentance. For instance, we may choose to blame others. As a 12-year-old in Göteborg, I could have blamed Steffan. He was the one who brought the big firecracker and the matches to the church in the first place. But blaming others, even if justified, allows us to excuse our behavior. By so doing, we shift responsibility for our actions to others. When the responsibility is shifted, we diminish both the need and our ability to act. We turn ourselves into hapless victims rather than agents capable of independent action.¹³

Another choice that impedes repentance is minimizing our mistakes. In the Göteborg firecracker incident, no one was hurt, no permanent damage occurred, and the meeting was held anyway. It would have been easy to say that there was no reason to repent. But minimizing our mistakes, even if no immediate consequences are apparent, removes the motivation to change. This thinking prevents us from seeing that our mistakes and sins have eternal consequences.

Yet another way is to think that our sins do not matter because God loves us no matter what we do. It is tempting to believe what the deceitful Nehor taught the people of Zarahemla: "That all mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble, ... and, in the end, all men should have eternal life."¹⁴ But this seductive idea is false. God does love us. However, what we do matters to Him and to us. He has given clear directives about how we should behave. We call these commandments. His approbation and our eternal life depend on our behavior, including our willingness to humbly seek real repentance.¹⁵

Additionally, we forgo real repentance when we choose to separate God from His commandments. After all, if the sacrament were not sacred, it would not matter that the smell of the firecracker was disruptive to that Göteborg sacrament meeting. We should be wary of discounting sinful behavior by undermining or dismissing God's authorship of His commandments. Real repentance requires recognizing the Savior's divinity and the truthfulness of His latter-day work.

Instead of making excuses, let us choose repentance. Through repentance, we can come to ourselves, like the prodigal in the parable,¹⁶ and reflect on the eternal import of our actions. When we understand how our sins can affect our eternal happiness, we not only become truly penitent but we also strive to become better. When faced with temptation, we are more likely to ask ourselves, in the words of William Shakespeare:

*What win I, if I gain the thing I seek?
A dream, a breath, a froth of fleeting joy.
Who buys a minute's mirth to wail a week,
Or sells eternity to get a toy?¹⁷*

If we have lost sight of eternity for the sake of a toy, we can choose to repent. Because of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, we have another chance. Metaphorically, we can exchange the toy we so ill-advisedly purchased in the first place and receive again the hope of eternity. As the Savior explained, "For, behold, the Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh; wherefore he suffered the pain of all men, that all men might repent and come unto him."¹⁸

Jesus Christ can forgive because He paid the price for our sins.¹⁹

Our Redeemer chooses to forgive because of His incomparable compassion, mercy, and love.

Our Savior wants to forgive because this is one of His divine attributes.

And, like the Good Shepherd He is, He is joyful when we choose to repent.²⁰

Even as we feel godly sorrow for our actions,²¹ when we choose to repent, we immediately invite the Savior into our lives. As Amulek taught, "Come forth and harden not your hearts any longer; for behold, now is the time and the day of your salvation; and therefore, if ye will repent and harden not your hearts, *immediately* shall the great plan of redemption be brought about unto you."²² We can feel godly sorrow for our actions and, at the same time, feel the joy of having the Savior's help.

The fact that we can repent is the good news of the gospel!²³ Guilt can be "swept away."²⁴ We can be filled with joy, receive a remission of our sins, and have "peace of conscience."²⁵ We can be freed from feelings of despair and the bondage of sin. We can be filled with the marvelous light of God and be "pained no more."²⁶ Repentance is not only possible but also joyful because of our Savior. I still remember the feelings that washed over me in the branch president's office after the firecracker episode. I knew I had been forgiven. My feelings of guilt vanished, my gloomy mood lifted, and my heart felt light.

Brothers and sisters, as we conclude this conference, I invite you to feel more joy in your life: joy in the knowledge that the Atonement of Jesus Christ is real; joy in the Savior's ability, willingness, and desire to forgive; and joy in choosing to repent. Let us follow the instruction to "with joy ... draw water out of the wells of salvation."²⁷ May we choose to repent, forsake our sins, and turn our hearts and wills around to follow our Savior. I testify of His living reality. I am a witness and repeated recipient of His incomparable compassion, mercy, and love. I pray that the redeeming blessings of His Atonement may be yours now—and again and again and again throughout your lives,²⁸ as they have been in mine. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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