

Psalm 6
“What It is to Be Penitent”
Ash Wednesday

February 14, 2018
First Lutheran Church, Glencoe, Minn.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[Intro]

Remember the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*? Indiana Jones and his father were in search of the Holy Grail, that chalice Jesus supposedly used when he instituted the Lord’s Supper. They traveled from the United States to Italy and Germany and then to the Middle East. Their search finally led them to a hidden place where they had to face three challenges in order to find the Grail. The first major test in reaching the Grail was coming to an understanding of this clue: “Only the penitent man will pass.”

After several others lost their heads, it became clear to Indiana Jones that he had to kneel to get past the deadly traps that were set. So is that—kneeling—what it means to be penitent?

Sadly, there has been a long and great misunderstanding as to what constitutes true penitence. During the time of the Medieval Church, penitence was defined very strictly to include various outward demonstrations of great remorse over sin—such as crawling on one’s knees (hence, Indiana Jones), self-denial, beating and hurting oneself, fasting, wearing sackcloth and ashes, as well as other demeaning demonstrations before relics of the Church.

You may recall that even Martin Luther, as a young monk, participated in such displays of so-called penitence during his trip to Rome. So in order to avoid purgatory or hell, people were falsely taught they had to make satisfaction for the actual sins they committed throughout their lives by works or deeds of what was called penitence.

Later, Luther had much to say against all of this false penitence. Because few people in his day truly understood what penitence was all about, he spent much time writing and preaching about what true penitence is.

We, too, live in a time when many misunderstand what true penitence is all about. Today, many people have little or no knowledge or understanding of sin, not to mention feeling any genuine remorse over it. Through rationalizing and misguided desire, many have dismissed the concept of sin altogether. And through repeated sinning, many have deadened their consciences so that they feel little or no sorrow over their transgressions of God's Law.

Ash Wednesday begins the penitential season of Lent: forty days (not including Sundays) of reflection and sorrow over our sin and its consequences. During this time, we also meditate on what Jesus Christ suffered for us because of our sins and what his perfect obedience to the Father, even unto death on the cross, brings for us.

Around the sixth century AD, seven psalms were designated as the Penitential Psalms. These psalms were especially used during the season of Lent. Throughout the season of Lent, we will focus on these Penitential Psalms. So, we begin today/tonight with the question: What is it to be penitent?

[Penitence is Despair over Sin]

Psalm 6 is the first of the Penitential Psalms. And yet, surprisingly, there is no specific confession of sins in this psalm. So, why was it included? What King David doesn't say explicitly he shows us implicitly! Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, David demonstrates his sorrow over sin by the grief he expresses in this psalm. He is suffering greatly, and his suffering is a consequence of his sin.

During his reign as king, David experienced the rebellion of two of his sons: Absalom (2 Sam 15–18) and Adonijah (1 Kgs 1). Both sons plotted to overthrow David as king.

David believed that the strife in his family was the result of his own sins: the destruction of Uriah's family by David's own deeds of adultery and murder (2 Sam 11–12). The hostility of his sons and their followers seems to David a punishment of God's wrath, the result of his sin. This makes him sorrowful and sick, even unto death. He believes he is being punished by God for his sins. And although he deserves judgment, David asks God to soften his discipline according to his mercy. David's most urgent need is to be at peace with God. Our psalmist is therefore "a penitent," one who prays that the punitive wrath of the just and righteous God may be changed into the loving chastisement of the God who is, above all, merciful.

As a result of sin, we face trials and afflictions. When Adam and Eve rebelled against God, the result was sorrow and suffering not only for human beings but also for all of creation (Rom 8:22). Trials and afflictions disrupt our lives, bringing us great torment.

As was true for David, there are times when we languish and our bones are troubled (v 2), when our soul is greatly sorrowful (v 3), when we're weary with moaning, when tears and weeping pour forth (v 6), when our eyes waste away and we grow weak (v 7). Finally, this anguish ends in death, the ultimate consequence of sin: "***For the wages of sin is death***" (Rom 6:23). Like David, we can't help but wonder where God is and what his intentions are throughout all the troubles we face: "***O Lord, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath***" (v 1). We wonder "***how long***" God will allow us to suffer so (v 3).

Yet, despite the overwhelming evidence that surrounds us across the globe, despite the evidence we confront daily in our own lives, we live in a society that makes every attempt to cover the consequences of sin or refuses to acknowledge them as such. Instead, we may say phrases such as "my bad", which really means "my mistake," instead of calling it sin. Martin Luther writes: "All God's chastisements are graciously designed to be a blessed comfort, although through weak and despairing hearts the foolish hinder and distort the design aimed at them, because they do not know that God hides and imparts His goodness and mercy under wrath and chastisement" (AE 14:142).

You see, trials and afflictions are intended by God to turn us toward him. When God told Adam and Eve about the suffering they would face as a result of their rebellion, it was not done out of spite or revenge, but rather out of love. In all trials and afflictions, we must turn first to God.

During this life, prior to our death, all trials and afflictions we face are from God as a kind Father, temporally, intended to turn us toward him. When we face such afflictions, we may fear that they come from God as if from a stern Judge, an eternal punishment meant to drive us away. That is what Adam and Eve thought after they had first sinned. Feeling shame, they hid themselves. Yet God, in love, came searching for them. God's eternal judgment comes only if and when we reject his grace. As true penitents, like David, we pray that God's afflictions and discipline are not done in anger, but in love and mercy.

Martin Luther explains it like this: “God chastens in two ways. At times He does so in grace as a kind Father, temporally; at times He does so in wrath as a stern Judge, eternally. . . Therefore all saints and Christians must recognize themselves as sinners and fear God’s wrath, for this psalm is general and excludes no one. Therefore woe to all those who do not fear, do not feel their own sins, and walk about smugly in the face of the awful judgment of God, before whom no good work can avail!” (AE 14:140–41).

The truly penitent comes to abhor not only sin, but also all those who continue to persist in their sin—both those who openly flaunt their sin and those who try to cover their sin in self-righteousness. That’s why David calls out, “***Depart from me, all you workers of evil***” (v 8). On the Last Day, our Lord Jesus Christ will quote these words of David to those who boast of their own deeds, deeds they supposedly did in Jesus’ name (Mt 7:23) but deeds not done in penitent faith.

There is no boasting before God. So to be penitent is, first, to despair over sin.

[Penitence is trust in God’s Deliverance]

Then God’s deliverance does come to the penitent, and his deliverance is based solely on His grace and mercy. This grace and mercy came to Adam and Eve when God promised one from the seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent. This grace and mercy came to Abraham when God promised that from his offspring all the nations of the world would be blessed. This promise came to David when God said that from his offspring would come one who would sit on an eternal throne. This promise came through Isaiah, who said that the Lord’s Suffering Servant would be despised and rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. He would even bear our grief and carry our sorrows. God’s deliverance centers in Christ Jesus, who underwent all afflictions and trials for us.

Consider the sorrow Jesus faced in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he felt the full weight of the sins of the world, where Jesus sweated great drops of blood, where Jesus was abandoned by even his closest friends. Consider the suffering Jesus faced before the Sanhedrin and before Pilate, where he was mocked, spit upon, beaten, and scourged mercilessly. Consider the anguish and death that Jesus faced on the cross of Calvary, where he was not only slowly tortured until he breathed his last breath, but he was also forsaken by God the Father as he carried our sins and bore the judgment that we deserved. And he did that for you! He did that for me! He did that for all people!

Because of Jesus, the Lord hears the sound of our penitent weeping. Because of Jesus, the Lord hears our plea and accepts our prayer. In Jesus' perfect life, suffering, death, and resurrection, God shows his steadfast love for us. We have a gracious God who is not unacquainted with our suffering. He has suffered all that and so much more for us. He did it to deliver us from sin, death, and the power of the devil.

The penitent is one who trusts in God's grace through Christ Jesus—and in God's grace alone. We can do nothing before God but acknowledge our wretched sinfulness. And by God's grace, the Holy Spirit works penitent faith in us. The Spirit works through Baptism, through the Gospel message of Christ, including the word of Absolution, and through our Lord's Supper. He works to bring us to faith in Christ, trusting in God's grace and mercy, convincing us that through Christ, our sins are forgiven and we are indeed at peace with God.

And so, Psalm 6 shows us not only, first, that the penitent despairs over sin, but also, second, that the penitent trusts in God's gracious deliverance through faith in Jesus Christ: ***“The Lord has heard my plea; the Lord accepts my prayer”*** (v 9). Luther writes: “These words refer to a soul that is poor in spirit and has nothing left but crying, imploring, and praying in firm faith, strong hope, and steadfast love. The life and behavior of every Christian should be so constituted that he does not know or have anything but God, and in no other way than in faith” (AE 14:145–46).

David concludes this penitential psalm by showing that in confident faith, the penitent expresses concern beyond self: ***“All my enemies shall be ashamed and greatly troubled; they shall turn back and be put to shame in a moment”*** (v 10). This is not a statement of revenge, not about getting even with those who caused him grief and sorrow. David is praying that his enemies face shame and sorrow, even as he has faced shame and sorrow. Hopefully, this will result in their repentance and faith, even as it has for the penitent David. Otherwise, it will result in their judgment in eternity. All of this is to the glory of God, who has been merciful to the penitent David, to you, the penitent that you are, and to the penitent me. Hopefully, it will lead to penitent faith for others as well.

Today/Tonight, Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, we come before God as penitents. As we have seen in Psalm 6, a true penitent is one who, first, has sorrow and despair over sin, while also, second, having true confidence and trust in God's mercy and deliverance through Jesus Christ. The penitent confidently trust in God's deliverance through the cross of Christ. Throughout these next weeks, as we consider each of the Penitential Psalms, I pray that our understanding of true penitence grows, even as our confident faith in Jesus Christ, our merciful Savior, grows. And so, in Jesus' precious name we pray in penitent faith. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.