

Turn Their Hearts



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Deut. 5:22–29; Deut. 4:25–31; Deut. 30:1–10; Matt. 3:1–8; Mark 1:15; Acts 2:37, 38.*

Memory Text: “But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul” (*Deuteronomy 4:29, NKJV*).

A simple fact of life follows us all: we are sinful. Occasionally we hear some “expert” bemoan the Christian idea of basic human corruption, but all one has to do is look at the news for a day or so or take a quick survey of human history, and the truthfulness of this Christian doctrine becomes apparent.

Or, even easier, all one has to do is look in the mirror; not that far, actually. Whoever has the courage to take a long look deep inside one's own heart (which can be a scary place to go) knows the truthfulness of Romans 3:9–23, which ends with the words “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (*Rom. 3:23, NKJV*).

Of course, the good news is found in the next verse, about being “justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (*Rom. 3:24, NKJV*). Crucial to this great news is repentance: acknowledging our sin; being sorry for it; asking God's forgiveness for it; and, ultimately, turning away from it. Because we are sinful, repentance should be a central part of our Christian existence. And this week, we will see the idea of repentance as expressed in Deuteronomy.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 27.

Mi-Yitten

Biblical Hebrew, like most languages, is sprinkled with idioms, when specific words are used to mean something different from what they actually say. One idiom in the Old Testament is *Mi-yitten*. *Mi* is the question “who?” and *yitten* means “will give.” So, literally, *Mi-yitten* is “Who will give?”

In the Old Testament, however, the phrase expresses the idea of a wish, of a desire, of someone wanting something badly.

For instance, after their escape from Egypt, the children of Israel, facing challenges in the wilderness, exclaimed, “ ‘If only we had died by the LORD’s hand in Egypt!’ ” (*Exod. 16:3, NIV*). The phrase “if only” came from *mi-yitten*.

In Psalm 14:7 David utters, “Oh that the salvation of Israel were come out of Zion!” The Hebrew doesn’t say “Oh”; it says *mi-yitten*.

In Job 6:8, when he exclaims, “Oh, that I might have my request” (*NKJV*)—“Oh” is, again, from *mi-yitten*.

Read Deuteronomy 5:22–29, focusing especially on verse 29. What does it mean that the word translated as “Oh” comes from *mi-yitten*?

Here is the Lord—the Creator God, the One who made space, time, and matter, the One who spoke our world into existence, the One who breathed into Adam the breath of life—uttering a phrase generally associated with the weaknesses and limitations of humanity. What an example of the reality of free will! Here we see that there are limits to what God can do in the midst of the great controversy. This use of *mi-yitten* reveals that even God can’t trample on free will; for the moment He did, it would no longer be free.

And just as we humans are free to sin, we also are free to choose the Lord, to choose to be open to His leading, to choose, by responding to His Spirit, to repent from our sins and to follow Him. Ultimately the choice is ours, and ours alone, and it is a choice that we have to make day by day, moment by moment.

What are some of the choices that you are going to face in the next few hours or days? How can you learn to surrender your will to God so that, in His strength, you can make the right choices?

Seek Me and Find Me

All through the Bible we find evidence of God's foreknowledge. That is, He knows beforehand all that will happen. Whether the rise and fall of world empires (*Daniel 7*) or individual actions just hours before they occur—"Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times" (*Matt. 26:34, NKJV*)—the Lord knows the end from the beginning. His foreknowledge, even of our free choices, has no bearing whatsoever on the freedom of those choices.

Thus, the Lord knew, even before He brought the children of Israel into the land, what they would do when in the land.

Read Deuteronomy 4:25–28. What did the Lord say that the people would do after they had been in the land promised them?

In the verses before, the Lord tells them specifically not to make idols and not to worship them (*Deut. 4:15–20*). Yet, the following verses pretty much say that making idols and worshipping them is exactly what they are going to do, despite all the warnings.

Notice that in Deuteronomy 4:25 Moses is clear that it won't happen immediately. After all that they just had experienced, they weren't likely to fall into idolatry right away. However, over time, after a generation or so, the tendency to "forget" (*Deut. 4:9*) what the Lord had done for them, and what He had warned them against, would lead them to do exactly what He warned against.

Read Deuteronomy 4:29–31. What does the Lord say He will do for them in this specific situation?

God's grace is amazing. Even after they fall into the horrific evil of idolatry, even after they have received the due consequences of their sins, if they turn to the Lord, He will forgive them and restore them. In short, if they freely choose to repent, He will accept their repentance.

The word in Deuteronomy 4:30, often translated "turn," really means "to return." That is, they are going *back* to the Lord, to where they were supposed to have been all along. The Hebrew word *teshuvah*, from that same root word for "to return," means "repentance."

Thus, at the core, whatever else is involved in repentance, it is a return to God after we have been separated from Him by our sins.

Teshuvah

All through the book of Deuteronomy, a key theme appears: obey the Lord and be blessed, disobey and you will suffer the consequences. It's no different in the New Testament. "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life" (*Gal. 6:7, 8, NKJV*).

Unfortunately, at least after the Fall, sin seems as easy and as natural as breathing. And despite all the warnings and promises—" 'For this commandment which I command you today is not too mysterious for you, nor is it far off' " (*Deut. 30:11, NKJV*)—many of the people did precisely that: they fell into the sins that God had warned them about.

And yet, even then, God was willing to take them back if, using their free will, free choice, they repented and returned to Him.

Read again Deuteronomy 30:1–10. What is the Lord saying He will do for His people, despite all the wrong that they have done? What, though, is *the condition* upon which these wonderful promises rest?

The idea is simple and straightforward: if you mess up, terrible consequences will result for you and your family. That's what sin does. However, even then, you can repent, and the Lord will take you back and bless you.

Numerous times the same Hebrew root word behind *teshuvah* appears in these verses. In Deuteronomy 30:2, the text says " 'and you *return* to the LORD your God' " (*NKJV, emphasis supplied*); in Deuteronomy 30:8, though it is often translated, and correctly so, "you will *again* obey the voice of the LORD" (*NKJV, emphasis supplied*), it could be translated literally, "And you *return* and obey the voice of the LORD." Finally, in Deuteronomy 30:10, where it reads " 'and if you *turn* to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul' " (*NKJV, emphasis supplied*), again the word "turn" is really "return."

In other words, despite all that happened to them, despite their utter violation and breaking of the covenant, the Lord was not through with these people, and if they didn't want Him to be through with them, they could manifest that desire by repentance.

Though dealing with the nation as a whole, how do these texts, despite the different context from ours today, still reflect the reality of how central true repentance is to us as believers who, at times, violate the covenant we have made with God, as well?

With All Your Heart

Deuteronomy 30:1–10 reveals the grace and goodness of God for backsliders and sinners, even when those sinners and backsliders were previously blessed by God in unique ways: “ ‘For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the LORD our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him?’ ” (*Deut. 4:7, NKJV*). Despite all that He had done for them, and despite the fact that they had no real excuse or justification for their sin, they sinned anyway (can anyone relate?).

And yet, even then—what?

In Deuteronomy 30:1–10, focus on what repentance, returning (*teshuvah*) to God entailed. What was required, and what should that teach us today about what true repentance involves?

Ultimately, they had to make the choice to return to Him, and to obey Him, *with all their hearts*. In one sense, the real issue was their hearts, because if their hearts were right with God, their actions would follow; that is, they would be obedient.

This is why they were given the wonderful promise that if they “returned” to the Lord, sincerely turned to Him, then He would work in them and would “circumcise” their hearts. They would have to make the choice, amid their captivity, to return to God, and He would then bring them back to Himself and to the land. And then there, in the land, He would bless them. And part of the blessing is that He would work in them to change their hearts even more toward Him, so that they and their children would “love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live” (*Deut. 30:10, NKJV*).

In the end, responding to the promptings of God (*see Acts 5:31*), they would have to truly repent of their sins. And, although dealing with a different historical context, Ellen G. White wrote: “The people mourned because their sins had brought suffering upon themselves, but not because they had dishonored God by transgression of His holy law. True repentance is more than sorrow for sin. It is a resolute turning away from evil.”—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 557. And this is a truth that we can see in Deuteronomy 30:1–10.

How can we know the difference between being sorry for the consequences of our sins, which anyone can do, and being sorry for the sins themselves? Why is this distinction so important?

Repent and Be Converted

The New Testament, of course, is filled with the idea of repentance. In fact, John the Baptist began his ministry with a call to repentance.

Read Matthew 3:1–8. How does the idea of “return” appear in these verses? In other words, what is John the Baptist telling them to do that reflects what was found in Deuteronomy? Why, also, would his words have special relevance for the Pharisees and Sadducees?

Jesus, too, began His ministry with calls for repentance.

Read Mark 1:15. What does Jesus say, and why does He relate repentance with the gospel?

Whether it be John the Baptist talking specifically to the religious leaders or Jesus to the nation as a whole, the idea is the same. We are sinners, and though Christ came to save sinners, we must repent of our sins. And that repentance—whether as a backslider or as a faithful Christian who falls into sin or as a new convert—includes a turning from our old sinful ways. We must acknowledge our sinfulness and, expressing repentance for our sins themselves (and not just the consequences of them), we must make the conscious choice to put away those sins and, relying wholly on the merits of Jesus, “ ‘obey the voice of the LORD your God’ ” (*Deut. 15:5, NKJV*).

Some biblical scholars see in the New Testament echoes of the idea of repentance as expressed in Deuteronomy. For example, when Peter accuses the nation of having crucified Jesus, many of the people “were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’ ” (*Acts 2:37, NKJV*). That is, being aware of their sin, they were sorry for it (“cut to the heart”), and they wanted to know what they should do now to be right with the God whom they had offended.

Is this not pretty much the same situation as with all of us: sinners who have offended God?

Read Acts 2:38. How did Peter respond to their question, and how does this episode reveal the principle behind true repentance?

Further Thought: “At every advance step in Christian experience our repentance will deepen. It is to those whom the Lord has forgiven, to those whom He acknowledges as His people, that He says, ‘Then shall ye remember your own evil ways, and your doings that were not good, and shall loathe yourselves in your own sight.’ Eze. 36:31. Again He says, ‘I will establish My covenant with thee, and thou shalt know that I am the Lord; that thou mayest remember, and be confounded, and never open thy mouth any more because of thy shame, when I am pacified toward thee for all that thou hast done, saith the Lord God.’ Eze. 16:62, 63. Then our lips will not be opened in self-glorification. We shall know that our sufficiency is in Christ alone. We shall make the apostle’s confession our own. ‘I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing.’ Rom. 7:18. ‘God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.’ Gal. 6:14.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 160, 161.

“ ‘The goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance.’ Rom. 2:4. A golden chain, the mercy and compassion of divine love, is passed around every imperiled soul. The Lord declares, ‘I have loved thee with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee.’ Jer. 31:3.”—Page 202.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Though we must repent, how can we be careful to avoid the trap of making repentance into something meritorious, as if the act of repenting itself is what makes us right before God? What is the only way we can be right before God?
- 2 “Then Judas, His betrayer, seeing that He had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, ‘I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.’ And they said, ‘What is that to us? You see to it!’ Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and hanged himself” (*Matt. 27:3–5, NKJV*). No doubt Judas was sorry for what he had done to Jesus (after all, he killed himself). Why, though, are his actions not deemed true repentance?
- 3 How should the reality of human sinfulness, even our own sinfulness, keep us humble before others (in that we don’t judge them) and before God? Why should the fact that it took the cross (i.e., the death of the Son of God) to save us show us just how bad sin really is?

Missionary Shares Faith on TV

By CHANMIN CHUNG

Carlos Biaggi, an Argentine missionary in Lebanon, was flooded with messages and prayers from around the world after a powerful explosion rocked Beirut, killing about 200 people, in August 2020.

One of the messages that Carlos received came from an Argentine pastor with whom he previously had served as a missionary in Paraguay.

“I have contacts with the media in Buenos Aires,” the friend wrote. “If someone wants to interview you, would you be willing?”

Minutes after Carlos said he was willing, the friend wrote that a journalist from C5N television, a 24-hour national news channel, wished to conduct an on-air interview the next day. “When you see an appropriate time during the interview, give your personal testimony,” he said. “Because it’s a major television channel, I believe that the interview will be short, most probably five minutes at the most. It will be a miracle if it lasts ten minutes.”

The interview, broadcast live across Argentina and other parts of the Spanish-speaking world, lasted an astounding nine minutes and fifty seconds. During that time, Carlos, dean of the business administration faculty at the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s Middle East University, described the wave of hot air that struck his face moments after a warehouse exploded in Beirut’s port. He spoke about efforts by the Adventist Church and the Adventist Development and Relief Agency to respond to the tragedy. At the request of the television host, he also shared his personal testimony about how God called him to work in Lebanon.

Carlos said he had followed God’s leading to Beirut after receiving a doctorate in business from the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies in the Philippines.

“They invited me to work here and said, ‘The truth is that it wouldn’t be easy,’ ” he said. “But I said, ‘If God wants me to go to Lebanon, I will go. If He doesn’t want me to go, I won’t go.’ No matter what family or friends said, God had to show me that this was the place where He wanted me to be.

“That day I prayed and opened my Bible to Isaiah 6,” he concluded. “What I read confirmed God’s plan for me because Isaiah replied, ‘Here I am, send me.’ I knew that this was a sign, and I thanked God.”



This mission story illustrates Mission Objective No. 2 of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s “I Will Go” strategic plan: “To strengthen and diversify Adventist outreach in large cities, across the 10/40 Window, among unreached and under-reached people groups, and to non-Christian religions.” Learn more at IwillGo2020.org.

Key Text: *Deuteronomy 4:29*

Study Focus: *Deut. 30:1–10; Deut. 4:25–31; Matt. 3:1–8; Acts 2:37, 38.*

Part I: Overview

As the Israelites are about to enter the Promised Land, Moses makes the prophecy that one day, because of their unfaithfulness, they will be “vomited” from the land (*compare Lev. 18:25, 28*). The image suggests, or teaches, that God’s people have a constant need for repentance. Just as the land repents and returns its inhabitants, they will have to repent in order to return to the land. The temptation of the Israelites as they settle in the land is to think that they have reached their destination and do not need to be careful anymore. Little by little, they may lose touch with God and the demands of His law. Thus, thinking that they have arrived at their destination, they will venture outside the old paths. This is precisely what will happen to the people, who will be deceived by their false prophets. These prophets will give them the illusion of peace, “ ‘saying “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace’ ” (*Jer. 6:14, NKJV*). The prophet Jeremiah will, then, urge them to wake up and repent: “Ask for the old paths” (*Jer. 6:16*). There is an irony in the biblical idea of repentance: progress means going back.

Lesson Themes:

In this lesson, we will study the structure of repentance, “return to God,” an important principle in the book of Deuteronomy, which will confront us with the following themes:

- Seeking God
- God’s Forgiveness
- The Return
- The Fulfillment of Prophecy

Part II: Commentary

At the door of the land, Moses repeats his warnings. The fact that God took Israel there does not mean that the people will stay in this land forever. Moses sees the Israelites’ potential failures and, hence, their exiles

in the future, and he wants to assure them. When they go astray and are in distress, resulting from judgment, the Israelites will have to seek their Lord, who will then forgive them. They will then return to their walk with God on the “old paths.” God will then bring them back to the land.

Seeking God

This first step on these “old paths” to God emerges from a situation of distress. When the people understand that they are in a hopeless situation, which is the result of their unfaithfulness and their idolatry, the only solution to their distress is to turn to God “ ‘with all your heart’ ” (*Deut. 4:29, NKJV*). They should not be afraid to turn to God, and completely rely on Him. Why? Precisely because God is ready to receive them. Moses’ main argument to convince his people of God’s readiness to respond consists in describing God’s profound thinking. The Hebrew phrase *mi yitten*, translated “ ‘Oh . . . !’ ” (*NKJV*), is an idiomatic expression that means literally “who will give” (or “who will make it happen”), which is often used to introduce a profound desire, some kind of rhetorical question for an impossible outcome. God wishes in the depth of His heart that “ ‘they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me’ ” (*Deut. 5:29, NKJV*). By revealing God’s secret wish, showing His good disposition and hence His love for them, Moses encourages his people to seek God and repent. The problem of Israel is that they realize the gravity of their sin—and, therefore, fear to come to the divine Judge who just crushed them. The case of Job illustrates perfectly this mysterious process. After having acknowledged God’s heavy hand on him, Job makes an incredible confession of faith: “ ‘Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him’ ” (*Job 13:15, NKJV*). Job knew that God was the only way out of his tragic condition. Paradoxically, Job flees from God to God. Moses encourages his people to do the same.

Discussion and Thought Questions: What aspect of God’s character is revealed through the idiomatic expression *mi yitten*? What does the impossibility of realizing this wish teach you about God? What is the condition that triggers Israel to move to seek God, and why? What does it mean to seek God? Why did Israel need to seek God?

God’s Forgiveness

It is because of God’s merciful character that the Israelites will be forgiven, not because of their merits. There is not any reason that would justify God’s forgiveness. And yet, He will forgive them in a very exceptional manner. To prove this point, Moses reminds the people of how God spared them and how they survived before Him, in spite of their sinful nature (*Deut. 5:24, 25*). In the preceding chapter, Moses had used the same reasoning: “ ‘Did any people ever hear the voice of God . . . as you have heard, and live?’ ” (*Deut. 4:33, NKJV*). It is the

conviction of God's grace that would help the people of Israel dare to approach God in spite of their sinful nature.

Discuss This True Story: Simon Wiesenthal, the Nazi hunter, tells the story of his encounter with a former Nazi officer who was dying in a hospital. The Nazi asked Wiesenthal to forgive him for the horrific crimes he had committed against Jewish civilians, without which, he claimed, he could not die in peace. Wiesenthal, who kept silence throughout the encounter, walked away without responding to the Nazi's request. Wiesenthal concludes the story with a question: "What would you have done?"—Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower* (London: W. H. Allen, 1970), p. 99.

Discussion and Thought Questions: Was it possible for Wiesenthal to forgive? "What would you have done?" Discuss the dimension of grace in the victim's forgiveness. Why is it that sin is forgiven only when it is unforgivable?

The Return

Note that the movement of return begins only after the Israelites found God or, rather, after God responded to them. The Hebrew verb *shuv*, "return," consists in paying attention to God's voice and in obeying His commandments (*Deut. 30:2, 8*) and in "circumcis[ing]," or changing, their hearts (*Deut. 10:16*). Interestingly, the root *shuv* combines in itself both requirements to turn from evil and to turn back to God, who will be found again on "the old paths." This parallel movement implies a profound insight: the best way to resist evil is to do good. Because Israel has shown itself incapable of circumcising its heart, it is God Himself who will do that operation (*Deut. 30:6*). He is the one who will change His people's heart—and, thus, create the conditions for them to turn to Him, hear His voice, and to obey Him " 'with all your heart and with all your soul' " (*Deut. 30:2, NKJV*). It is this profound repentance and thorough conversion that will lead to the rejoicing of God: " 'For the LORD will again rejoice over you for good as He rejoiced over your fathers' " (*Deut. 30:9, NKJV*). These passages from the book of Deuteronomy will inspire the message of the latter prophets that the people of Israel are incapable by themselves of repenting on their own (see *Jer. 4:22; Jer. 13:23; Hos. 5:4, etc.*).

Discussion and Thought Questions: Why was it impossible for the Israelites to change their hearts and proceed by themselves to the circumcision of their hearts? On what basis could Moses say that it was impossible for Israel to repent? If, indeed, Moses thought so, why is he urging the people to repent? Is the situation different for Christians?

Explain. Looking at the history of the church, and looking at yourself, do you think that Christians were (are) more capable of repenting? Why, or why not?

The Fulfillment of Prophecy

It is clear that we have here a Messianic prophecy that refers to the coming of Jesus Christ, God's incarnation, who will come down to initiate the movement of repentance that will bring the new covenant into the hearts of God's people. Only God's descent into our hearts, into our sphere, will allow the miracle of the circumcision of the heart, as Paul explains: "In Him you were all circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ" (*Col. 2:11, NKJV*). Only the Cross, which manifests "the working of God" (*Col. 2:12, NKJV*), through grace, will make the impossible possible. The wish of God implied in the idiomatic expression *mi yitten* will then be fulfilled.

Discussion and Thought Questions: How do these promises of the book of Deuteronomy apply to the first coming of Jesus and/or to His second coming? Why is it necessary for God's people to repent before the second coming of Jesus Christ? How does the Hebrew idea of repentance, which implies the return to "old paths," inform the notion of repentance of God's people at the time of the end? Considering the lessons of Deuteronomy, how will the circumcision of their hearts be performed?

Part III: Life Application

Test Your True Repentance:

Remember the stories of your experience of repentance. How many times did you ask for the forgiveness of someone you hurt, and explain the reasons for why you behaved that way? When you say "sorry," do you add a "but," accusing the person you hurt?

Test Your Searching of God:

Discuss the following pedagogical advice: If you search and do not find, you will not believe; if you do not search and you find, you will not believe; only if you search and you find, will you believe. How does this paradoxical observation apply to the experience of searching for and finding God? How true is it? Why do some people seem to find God while searching for Him, while others seem to find Him, although they did not search for Him?

Practice Repentance:

- *Team Exercise:* Find a partner (your spouse, son, daughter, or close

