

Confession of Sin

Everyone professing to be a Christian knows that “by grace you are saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is a gift of God, not of works lest any man boast.”

(Ephesians 2:8) But there can be no “faith” through which to be saved, unless there is an acknowledgement that there is a need to be “saved,” and an understanding of what it is you need to be saved. A drowning man shouts for help, knowing that he can’t save himself, because he can already feel the water filling his lungs; and so it is with the soul. Every soul is drowning in a sea of sin, and will surely die, unless saved. But unlike the unmistakable sensation of suffocation afforded by water entering the lungs, the deadly suffocation of the soul through sin can seldom be felt. It is discerned by only a few, and of these there is only a remnant who call with sincerity on the only One who can save them, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In order to be saved by the grace through faith, the faith must be a saving faith. This is a faith which first acknowledges that it cannot be a saving faith unless it has the prerequisite admission and confession of sin, and the recognition of the hopelessly sinful nature of the soul.

Proverbs 28:13 tells us that “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper; but whoso confesseth them shall have mercy.” That confession must be all encompassing, unqualified and sincerely felt and believed by the mind, soul and spirit if it is to lead to a true saving faith. Belief and confession by the mind alone is not enough and can only lead to a fictitious faith and thwarted salvation. All would-be-saved Christians should look carefully into their hearts and examine the true nature of their “confessions” and their forsaking of their sins. It can do much in the way of establishing in their own hearts whether or not their “faith” is genuine.

The great English pastor of the 19th century, Charles Spurgeon, preached a wonderful sermon titled “Confession of Sin,” using seven Scriptural verses, each of which included the words “I have sinned” as illustrative of how differently, and with what degree of sincerity this admission by various people has been expressed. The following will be an

attempt to summarize, paraphrase, comment, and most often quote his brilliant, inspired insights on the subject.

1. In Exodus 9:27 Pharaoh says, "I have sinned." This first case is one of a hardened sinner who when under great stress will confess, "I have sinned." This is like the "fox hole believer in battle." He confesses passionately while the battle rages, but soon forgets his "faith" once back where it is safe. Spurgeon observed:

"How many of the same sort of confessions, too, have we seen in times of cholera and fever and pestilence? Then our churches have been crammed with hearers, who, because so many funerals have passed their door, or so many died in the street, could not refrain from going up to God's house to confess their sins. And under that visitation, when one, two and three have been lying dead in the house, or next door, how many have thought they would really turn to God! But, alas! When the pestilence had done its work, conviction ceased; and when the bell had tolled the last time for a death caused by cholera, their hearts ceased to beat with penitence, and their tears did flow no more."

Since September 2002 a far more timely and relevant analogy for this type of "believer," would be the "9-11 believer." Praying was suddenly in great fashion, even in the media. Churches were filled, even politicians switched from preying to praying. How long did this sudden piety last? About as long as the media could attract viewers by its coverage of the event, and until the sitcoms could get back on schedule.

2. In Numbers 22:34 Balaam says, "I have sinned." Here is a perfect example of the double-minded man referred to in James 1:8 "a double-minded man is unstable in all his ways." It seems evident that Balaam tried to serve the Lord and felt deeply in his confession, yet he was worldly-minded and he loved the wages of unrighteousness. He was truly a prophet through whom God spoke, but while he steadfastly refused to curse the Hebrews as Balak,

King of Moab hired him to do, he nevertheless instructed the king on how to entice their young men to sin and thus to hopefully incur God's wrath on the whole nation. He offered sacrifice to God, but did so on a pagan alter.

Spurgeon, in his precious way, puts this double-mindedness into personal perspective:

“This man seemed to have the voice of an angel at one time, and yet the very soul of a devil in his bowels. He was a terrible character; he was a man of two things, a man who went all the way with two things to great extent. I know the Scripture says, “No man can serve two masters.” Now this is often misunderstood. Some read it, “No man can *serve* two masters.” Yes he can; he can serve three or four. The way to read it is this: “No man can serve two *masters*.” They cannot both be masters. He can serve two, but they cannot both be his masters. A man can serve two who are his masters or twenty either; he may live for twenty different purposes, but he cannot live for more than one master purpose; there can only be one master purpose in his soul. But Balaam labored to serve two; it was like the people of whom it was said, “They feared the Lord and served other gods.” Or like Rufus, who was a loaf of the same leaven; for you know our old king Rufus painted God on one side of his shield, and the devil on the other, and had underneath the motto: “Ready for both; catch who can.” There are many such, who are ready for both. They meet a minister, and how pious and holy they are; on the Sabbath they are the most respectable and upright people in the world, as you would think; indeed they affect a drawling in their speech which they think to be eminently religious. But on a weekday, if you want to find the greatest roughest and cheats, they are some of those men who are so sanctimonious in their piety. Now, rest assured, my hearers, that no confession of sin can be genuineness, unless it is a whole hearted one. It is of no use for you to say, “I have sinned,” and then keep on sinning. “I have sinned,” say you, and it is fair, fair face you show; but alas! Alas! For the sin you will go

away and commit. Some men seem to be born with two characters. I remarked when in the Library at Trinity College, Cambridge, I saw a very fine statue of Lord Byron. The librarian said to me, "Stand here sir." I looked and I said, "What a fine intellectual countenance! What a grand genius he was!" "Come here," he said, "to the other side." "Ah, what a demon!" There stands the man that could defy the deity." He seemed to have such a scowl and such a dreadful leer in his face; even as Milton would have painted Satan when he said – "Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven." I turned away and said to the librarian, "Do you think the artist designed this?" "Yes," he said, "he wished to picture the two characters; the great, the grand, the almost super human genius that he possessed, and yet the enormous mass of sin that was in his soul."

3. In Samuel 15:24, Saul says, "I have sinned." Saul is the classic example of the insincere man. While Balaam could seem to be sincere in two things Saul was not sincere in anything. His sincerity floated along with his circumstances, there was no sincerity in him. Over and over he expressed love for David only to then plot and vigorously seek to kill him. He molded lying excuses for his every sinful act, whenever it served him to do so. Spurgeon very skillfully connects this type of man with the Christian assembly, by the following:

"How many such we have in every Christian assembly; men who are easily molded! Say what you please to them, they always agree with you. They have affectionate dispositions, very likely a tender conscience; but then the conscience is so remarkably tender, that when touched it seems to give, and you are afraid to probe deeper; it heals as soon as it is wounded. There are some men who seem to have India-rubber hearts. If you do but touch them, there is an impression made at once; but then it is of no use, it soon restores itself to the original character.

O sirs, too many of you have done the same; you have bowed your heads in church, and said, “We have erred and strayed from thy ways.” And you did not mean what you said. You have come to your minister, you have said, “I repent of my sins.” You did not then feel you were a sinner. You only said it to please him. And now you attend the house of God: no one more impressive than you; the tear will run down your cheek in a moment, but yet, notwithstanding all that, the tear is dried as quickly as it is brought forth, and you remain to all intents and purposes the same as you were before. To say, “I have sinned.” in an unmeaning manner, is worse than worthless, for it is a mockery of God thus to confess with insincerity of heart.

Balaam was the great bad man, great in all that he did; Saul was little in everything, except in stature – little in his good and little in his vice; and he was too much of a fool to be desperately bad though too wicked to be at anytime good.”

4. In Joshua 7:20, Acan says, “I have sinned.” Here we have what Spurgeon calls, the case of the doubtful penitent. While he and all the people had been instructed to take no spoil from Jericho, the temptation to keep some gold and silver and a garment was too much for him. Because of this single bit of disobedience, the whole tribe was condemned to defeat in their next battle. When God informed Joshua that there was leaven in the loaf, he sought out the culprit, and of course found Acan and the loot. Because Acan confessed, and because Joshua spoke kindly to him, some believe that even though he was stoned to death his soul may well have been saved. Other expositors are certain that his soul perished as well. But who knows. The saving quality of his confession cannot be verified through any available evidence, because he had no opportunity to provide a “track record.” Thus it is, as with the thief on the cross, only God knows the condition of the heart.

Spurgeon has the following very unsettling observation to contribute to the matter, one that should give all of us serious concern.

“Ah! Dear friends, it has been my lot to stand by many a deathbed, and to see many such a repentance as this. I have seen the man, when worn to a skeleton, sustained by pillows in his bed, and he has said, when I have talked to him of judgment to come, ‘Sir, I feel I have been guilty, but Christ is good; I trust in him. And I have said within myself. I believe the man’s soul is safe.’” But I have always come away with the melancholy reflection that I had no proof of it beyond his own words; for it needs proof in acts and in future life, in order to sustain any firm conviction of a man’s salvation. You know the great fact, that a physician once kept a record of a thousand persons who thought they were dying and whom he thought were penitents; he wrote their names down in a book as those who, if they died would go to heaven. They did not die, they lived, and he says that out of the whole thousand he had not three persons who turned out well afterward, but they returned to their sins again, and were as bad as ever. Ah! Dear friends, I hope none of you will have such a death-bed repentance as that; I hope your minister or your parents will not have to stand by your bedside, and then go away and say, “Poor fellow! I hope he is saved. But alas! Death-bed repentances are such flimsy things, such poor, such trivial grounds of hope that I am afraid, after all his soul may be lost.” O! To die with an abundant entrance leaving a testimony behind that we have departed this life in peace! That is a far happier way than to die in doubtful manner, lying sick, hovering between two worlds, and neither ourselves nor yet our friends knowing to which of the two worlds we are going. May God grant us grace to give in our lives evidences of true conversion, that our case may not be doubtful.”

5. In Matthew 27:4, Judas says, "I have sinned." Here we have the repentance of despair. We all know his story only too well. Judas, the thief and traitor, who betrayed our Lord for 30 pieces of silver. Later he repented and brought again the 30 pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, "I have sinned in that I have betrayed innocent blood," and cast down the pieces in the temple and went...and hanged himself." Spurgeon has this to say:

"Here is the worst kind of repentance of all; in fact, I know not that I am justified in calling it repentance; it must be called remorse of conscience. But Judas did confess his sin, and then went and hanged himself. O! That dreadful, that terrible, that hideous confession of despair."

Those of us who love Jesus, as did Spurgeon, have no compassion for Judas. He has been branded the epitome of villainy, the personification of evil, and without doubt is now (we hope) agonizing in one of the hottest spots in hell. But as I was writing this, it came to me very strongly, that I should not end my reporting of the matter without offering at least a summary of some other observations that suddenly leaped into my heart.

We all piously pay lip service to the premise that we are not to judge who is saved and who is not. For only God knows what is in the heart, and it is what is in the heart that determines whether or not one is saved. Yet does anyone doubt that the souls of Hitler, Stalin and Lenin were condemned to hell, or that all the Apostles are in Heaven? We do make judgments of this sort, when it seems so obvious. But is it always so obvious that we should ever reserve that right to ourselves? Read 2Kings 21:1-18. Here we learn of the reign of Manasseh, reported to be one of the most sinful of all the kings in Judah. Verse 2 says, "...he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, after the abomination of the heathen. He rebuilt all the high places and alters to Baal which his father, the good king Hezekiah did destroy; he worshiped all the idols and served them; he used enchantments and set up graven images; he seduced his people to do more evil than even the nations which the Lord destroyed; and moreover he shed innocent blood very much,

till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another besides his sin wherewith he made Judah to sin..." It is also understood that he is the one who had Isaiah sawed in two. How bad can you get? Surely this man must be in hell! Can't we safely make that judgment? Well, if 2 Kings is all that we know about Manasseh, maybe so. But when we read 2 Chronicles 33 we find that "...when he was in affliction he besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers and prayed unto him...then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God!" From the rest of the narrative, we are led to conclude that he was forgiven, and is therefore probably now in heaven.

All we know of Judas is that he did confess his guilt, gave back the blood money and hung himself. We do not know the timing of these events. This could have been before or after the crucifixion or the ascension. Nor do we know what was in his heart as he died. We do know, however, from John 13:27 that "Satan entered into him" as he sat at the last supper. But did Satan stay there? I doubt it. If he had, would Judas have returned the money and confessed his guilt while Satan was still in him? Also remember that at the time of Jesus' betrayal, it is doubtful that Judas did know who Jesus really was; none of them did. Even though Peter stated that Jesus was the Son of God, it seems very unlikely that he really believed this, or how could he have denied him as he did? How could all of the others have run for their lives? Suddenly Jesus' weak submissive nature, as He was arrested and carried away, must have undermined whatever confidence in Him they might have had. They evidenced no sense of His divine nature at that moment. Only after the resurrection did they know with certainty who He was. Perhaps that's when Judas also found out and began suffering that profound remorse. Remember it was only 4 days after the betrayal that He was walking among them. I do not believe that we are told enough in the Scriptures to be able to make this judgment of him simply by his actions. Because it happened to be the betrayal of our Lord, we tend to react almost entirely with our emotions and not with our minds. We see the consequences of his betrayal, and are outraged. Remove the identity of the betrayed and examine the act itself. How many millions under Hitler and Stalin and Mao betrayed their friends and kin in a similar manner and with similar consequences for the betrayed? Surely such betrayal is an awful sin, expressive of a weak, despicable soul, but nevertheless, it is not an

unforgivable sin of a truly contrite heart. When we are inclined to judge, we ought to remember Manasseh. Had the Scriptures ended its recording of his life with 2Kings 21, our judgment of his status would have been much different than it is having read 2Chronicles 33.

This is no way intended to be a defense of Judas but merely a call to temperance in our willingness to hastily judge the actions of others, as indications of what is in the heart. Jesus on the cross said, “forgive them Father, for they know not what they do.” Could He have included Judas in this request?

Probably not, because in John 17:12 Jesus refers to Judas, as the “son of perdition.” This word perdition in the Greek is derived from “apollumi” meaning destroyed fully.

Perhaps than, he was one of those in Romans 1:28 whom “God gave over to a reprobate (castaway, worthless) mind,” and therefore is surely in hell.

6. In Job 7:20, Job says, “I have sinned.” Spurgeon calls this “ the repentance of the spirit” In reading Job we find it difficult to discern a sinful nature of any kind. Yet when God was through with His 77 questions, which incidentally contained numerous scientific facts not re-discovered by science until recent centuries, we find Job confessing that he had sinned. It seemed to have been one of presumption or perhaps complacency. At any rate, it would seem that Job was fully exonerated and surely saved. Here is what Spurgeon had to say about Job.

“And now I come into daylight. I have been taking you through dark and dreary confessions; I shall detain you there no longer, but bring you out to the two good confessions, which I have read to you. The first, is that of Job in the 7th chapter at the 20th verse: “I have sinned; what shall I do unto thee, O thou preserver of men?” This is the *repentance of the saint*. Job was a saint, but he sinned. This is the repentance of the man who is a child of God already, an acceptable repentance before God.

David was a specimen of this kind of repentance, and I would have you carefully study his penitential Psalms, the language of which is ever full of weeping humility and earnest penitence.”

7. In Luke 15:18, The Prodigal says, “I have sinned.” Spurgeon calls this the blessed confession. Until I read Spurgeon’s commentary on this, I didn’t appreciate the full significance and meaning of this parable. So rather than insert my own blather, I’ll simply share with you the full text of this portion of his impassioned sermon:

“Here is that which proves a man to be a regenerate character – “Father I have sinned.” Let me picture the scene. There is the prodigal; he has run away from a good home and a kind father, and he has spent all of his money with harlots, and now he has none left. He goes to his old companions, and asks them for relief. They laugh him to scorn. “O,” says he, “you have drunk my wine many a day; I have always stood paymaster to you in all your revelries; will you not help me?” “Get you gone”, they say; and he is turned out of doors. He goes to all his friends with whom he had associated, but no man gives him anything. At last a certain citizen of the country said, “You want something to do, do you? Well, go and feed my swine.” The poor prodigal, the son of a rich landowner, who had a great future of his own, has to go out to feed swine; and he a Jew, too! The worst employment (to his mind), to which he could be put. See him there, in squalid rags, feeding swine; and what are his wages? Why, so little that he “would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat, but no man gave to him.” Look, there he is, with the fellow-commoners of the sty, in all his mire and filthiness. Suddenly a thought, put there by the good Holy Spirit, strikes his mind. “How is it,” says he, “that in my father’s house there is bread enough to spare, and I perish with hunger? I will arise and go to my father, and say unto him, father I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy

son; make me one of thy hired servants.” Off he goes, He begins his way from town to town. Sometimes he gets a lift on a coach perhaps, but at other times he goes trudging his way up barren hills and down desolate valleys all alone. And now at last he comes to the hill outside the village, and sees his father’s house down below. There it is; the old poplar tree against it, and there are the stacks round which he and his brother used to run and play; and at the sight of the old homestead all the feelings and associations of his former life rush upon him, and tears run down his cheeks, and he is almost ready to run away again. He says, “I wonder whether father’s dead. I dare say mother broke her heart when I went away, I always was her favorite. And if they are either of them alive, they will never see me again; they will shut the door in my face. What am I to do? I cannot go back, I am afraid to go forward.” And while he was thus deliberating his father had been walking on the housetop looking out for his son; and though he could not see his father his father could see him. Well, the father comes down the stairs with all his might, runs up to him, and whilst he is thinking of running away, his fathers arms are round his neck, and he falls kissing him, like a loving father indeed, and then the son begins, “—Father, I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son,” and he was going to say, “make me as one of thy hired servants.” But his father put his hand on his mouth. “No more of that,” he says; “I forgive you all; you shall not say anything about being my servant, I will have none of that. Come along, he says, “come in, poor prodigal. “Ho,” said he to the servants, “bring hither the best robe, and put it on him, and put shoes on his poor bleeding feet; and bring hither the fatted calf and kill it; and let us eat and be merry.” O, what a precious reception for one of the chief sinners! Good Matthew Henry says, “His father saw him, there were eyes of mercy; he ran to meet him, there were legs of mercy; he put his arms round his neck; there were arms of mercy; he kissed him; there were kisses of mercy; he said to him – there

were words of mercy, wonders of mercy – all mercy. O, what a God of mercy He is.

Now, prodigal, you do the same. Has God put it into your heart? There are many who have been running away a long time now. Does God say, “return?” O, I bid you return then, for as surely as ever thou dost return he will take thee in. There never was a poor sinner yet who came to Christ, whom Christ turned away. If he turns you away, you will be the first. O, if you could but try Him. Ah, sir, I am so black, so filthy, so vile.” Well, come along with you – you cannot be blacker than the prodigal. Come to your Father’s house, and as surely as he is God He will keep His word. – “Him that cometh unto me I will no wise cast out.”

Charles Haddon Spurgeon was one of the most, if not the most fruitful and respected pastors of the nineteenth century. He filled to overflowing every church in which he spoke, several times a day. It is recorded that he sometimes spoke out of doors to as many as twenty thousand at one time. He apparently wrote out all, or most, of his sermons, and they have been preserved in many huge volumes. I have read over 6000 pages of them and have many more thousands yet to read, God willing. Each one is a testimony to a past era, when God’s Word was preached unabashed, uncensored, in its entirety, and without fear of offending tender sensibilities with such words as repent, obey and hell. He filled the churches even with his occasional “hell, fire and brimstone” messages. His was an era when the whole truth of the Scriptures was preached, not just the touchy-feely inoffensive parts, which seem today to be the only parts which Pastors perceive are able to draw and hold people in church. This sermon was by no means one of these, but it was one, I believe worthy of being heard again, because so much of it is as applicable today as it was when given 150 years ago. In its timelessness as a useful spiritual message, nothing has changes except the calendar.