The God Who Grants Repentance

By Dennis Pollock

Those who read the Bible very much come to realize that the apostles spoke in a language and terminology that even most of us evangelicals rarely do. One example of this is found in Paul's instructions to Timothy where he warns him not to get involved in meaningless disputes, and to minister to those who opposed him with humility, "If God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth..." It is the words "grant" and "perhaps" that seem somehow foreign to us. Why should God have to grant repentance? And if He must, why is it that He "perhaps" may do so? Does He not want everyone to repent?

Notice the order here: God grants repentance and people come to know the truth. The unrepentant heart always resists the truth. In Romans we read that wicked men "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Romans 1:18). If you are determined to live an ungodly, immoral lifestyle, the last thing you want is to hear the truth of God. The Biblical revelation of God is too high, and He is far too big on morality and uprightness to suit you. Far better to pretend you don't believe the Bible, it is only a book of superstition and myths, Jesus was a good teacher but surely wasn't God, Paul was a bigot, the verses about sexual purity spring from a primitive culture, etc. etc. If you insist on living an ungodly life it is a whole lot more comfortable believing these things, than to condemn yourself and acknowledge that the Bible is true and that you are living under the wrath of a holy God.

It is repentance that prepares the heart for the truth. This is why John the Baptist must come before Jesus. The message is always repent and believe the gospel; never believe and repent. When the hammer of God's law has worked repentance in our hard hearts, we become as a ploughed field, with the fallow ground broken up and ready for the seed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Luke we are told that "the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the will of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him." Because they could not accept the repentance that John preached, they could in no way receive the gospel that Jesus proclaimed. John's ministry of repentance and baptism, short as it was, was of no small importance. As Malachi had prophesied, "Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You" (Malachi 3:1).

Clearly repentance is important. But why must God grant repentance? Why can't people just do it? We see the answer to this by examining the condition of the sinner. In Paul's instructions to Timothy he tells him, "if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will." The Bible gives us two distinct perspectives of sin. First, it is an act of rebellion, a willful disobedience to God's holy laws that is fully deserving of punishment. Jeremiah surely had this view in mind when he said of Israel, "They are all stubborn rebels, walking as slanderers. They are bronze and iron, They are all corrupters..." But there is another view of sin which is just as Biblical and helps engender a little more compassion toward the sinner. This is the idea of captivity. The sinner is a slave, being forced into a lifestyle he may come to despise. Yet despite all his most strenuous efforts, he cannot break free. Sin's grip is too strong; its potency too terrible. Jesus no doubt had this in mind when He declared, "He that sins is a slave of sin."

One thing all prisons have in common are bars. These bars are strong, far stronger than the strength of the strongest man to bend or break them. And while there are a few dramatic prison escapes here and there, for the most part those who enter prison are doomed to serve out their sentence exactly as
prescribed by the judge. The bars do their job well. One of the things about both slavery and prison is that you cannot make yourself free. In the outside world we sometimes get tired of our job and tell our boss to take this job and... well, you get the idea! We quit and walk out of those doors a free man – sometimes free to start scouring the newspapers and look for other work, free to apply for food stamps and be unable to pay our rent, but nevertheless free. The prisoner has no such option. He cannot simply decide prison is too boring or the guards are too mean or the food is too lousy. Regardless of conditions, he will stay put. He is a prisoner.

This is how the Bible describes our captivity to sin. We cannot do what we want, we are forced to do things we don't even like, and there is no getting out! We will serve our time. The sinner's only hope is that God "may perhaps grant him repentance." The question may be asked, "But doesn't God want all of us to repent and be free? If we are simply waiting on Him, it should be a done deal. He surely will just grant us all repentance. First we must understand that God is limited – by His own wisdom and perfection. The Bible tells us it is impossible for God to lie. Likewise it is impossible for Him to ever act unwisely. He must always choose the wisest course. We are not so. When we wake up on Saturday morning we have so many options. We could go to the ball game, we could take our wife shopping, we could go golfing with our buddies, we could mow the lawn... or maybe we'll just sleep in and then watch TV all day. Of course some of these choices are far wiser than others. God, on the other hand, has never had any choices. He will always choose the wisest course. He who is absolutely perfect Wisdom will never act unwisely. And in this matter of how far He will go to draw sinners to repentance and to Himself, He never acts unwisely. He will go so far, and no farther.

Imagine a mother and father who have just learned their teen-aged son is starting to smoke cigarettes. They are horrified and immediately begin to strategize about how they can prevent him from this nasty habit. They could show him a film about lung cancer or they could send him to a Smoker's Anonymous class. Or they could purchase a shiny new pair of handcuffs and handcuff him to his bed. Keeping him locked in his room and handcuffed to his bed would surely work. Or perhaps the dad could beat the son to a pulp every time he comes home with smoke on his breath. The last two ideas, besides being illegal, are certainly foolish. Though they might accomplish the intended effect the parents know they could never go that far. Their own sense of decency forbids them to take these actions, which although effective would be most unwise.

This is where God finds Himself. Yes, if He turned up the pressure high enough, He could surely bring about repentance and faith in every single soul on this planet. He could send a hundred million angels to preach the gospel to every human, He could pour out His Spirit all over the earth at a level a zillion times greater than that which was experienced on the day of Pentecost, and we would quickly have an all-Christian planet. But these things He refuses to do. As marvelous as the results might be, it would not be wise. We know this must be the case because He has not done this. It this were the wisest course He would have.

Repentance and salvation are made possible by two primary means: the activity of the Holy Spirit upon the hearts of men and women, and the proclaiming of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is through these two means that God grants repentance unto us. When the Jews learned from Peter how the Holy Spirit had fallen upon Cornelius and his friends, they declared, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life..." We must remember two things: first God does not force us to repent, and secondly He does not do our repenting for us. He makes repentance possible through the preaching of the gospel of Jesus and the working of His Spirit. Both are vitally necessary and utterly indispensable in producing repentance and faith.
Suppose a car is driving the wrong direction down a one-way street, headed for a sure crash. You might call for a helicopter which would use cables to pick up the car as it drove, turn it around, and set it back on the highway. But it would be far more reasonable for you to stand by the roadside and wave your arms frantically. As the car pulls over to investigate you could then tell them, "You're going the wrong way! Don't you see the one-way sign?" As the car makes a u-turn and starts going the right direction, you might say that you have just granted the driver repentance. You have made it possible for him to turn around with a few reasonable words and pointing out the appropriate sign. Of course this illustration is imperfect because here the agent of change was simply you and a brief message. In eternal matters of sin and righteousness, we need not only the right message, we need the power of the Holy Spirit behind the message. This is why Paul writes to the Thessalonian Church, "For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance."

As we study the Scriptures we discover that God clearly prefers that all men repent. He "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). Secondly none will be saved apart from His grace which opens men's eyes, tenderizes their hearts, and draws them to His Son. The reason Lydia was saved in Acts 16 is that "The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul." And finally He limits Himself as to how far He will go in this process to those ways and means that are in accord with His own perfect wisdom. He instructs His children to share the gospel and make disciples of all nations, He pours out His Spirit where His children pray and praise, but still we must do the repenting and we must do the believing. He will not do our repenting for us.

There is a fascinating little story in the book of Acts where Paul is preaching and notices a lame man whose eyes were apparently shining with faith as Paul ministered. The Bible tells us that "Paul, observing him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, said with a loud voice, 'Stand up straight on your feet!' And he leaped and walked." The thing I find so amazing is that the man had faith to be healed and yet was still sitting on the floor, distinctly "unhealed." The word had been preached, the Holy Spirit was moving, and faith had come to this lame man. Yet still something was lacking. It took one further word from Paul to complete that which Jesus was wanting to do. He had to exhort the man to take a step of faith. "Stand up straight on your feet!" did the job. Attempting to do that which he could not do, the man struggled to his feet and the healing was accomplished. Even when conditions are nearly perfect we must do our part. We must step out boldly with our eyes fixed upon Jesus.

Though it is God that grants repentance and makes faith possible, still we must repent, we must believe, and we must take that first step of faith. For the sinner it may be baptism, or walking forward in response to an evangelistic invitation, or confessing Christ publicly at a gathering of believers. For Christians ensnared by some sinful habit, it may involve throwing those pills away, burning that pornography, or flushing your liquor down the toilet. The act itself is not magical, but when it is done with our gaze upon the Lord Jesus, we will find power. Within Christ's command to repent will be the ability to do that very thing. And we will discover that God has granted us repentance.