

## Rejoicing over Repentance

### **Introduction**

Luke chapter 15 contains the three famous parables about things that are “lost” – the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost (or “prodigal”) son. All three of those parables involve a precious item (or person) becoming “lost” in one way or another – but finally being “found”. When the item in question is found, there is naturally much cause for rejoicing.

The very end of the “lost sheep” parable contains a rather “intriguing” statement from Jesus, however. Here is the verse in question:

#### **Luke 15:7 (ESV):**

<sup>7</sup> Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

At first glance, the above statement may be rather startling. In particular, it may seem a bit “unfair” for there to be more joy about one sinner who repents – as compared to 99 people who never needed to repent in the first place!

So, let’s investigate Scripture, to see if we can glean any additional information about this “rejoicing over repentance” issue. In particular, let’s examine how the process of repentance relates to dealing with **trials**.

### **The Value of Trials**

To begin with, in many places Scripture tells us that undergoing trials is **valuable** to believers. The apostles, in particular, wrote extensively on that very subject. For example, consider the following passages:

#### **James 1:2-4 (ESV):**

<sup>2</sup> Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup>for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. <sup>4</sup>And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

#### **1 Peter 5:8-10 (ESV):**

<sup>8</sup> Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. <sup>9</sup> Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. <sup>10</sup>And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

#### **Romans 5:3-5 (ESV):**

<sup>3</sup>More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup>and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup>and hope does not put us to

shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

In all of the above passages, the apostles tell us that facing trials allows believers to **strengthen their character**. That is, a believer is able to develop good qualities, through the process of enduring trials.

### **The Danger of Complacency**

As shown above, facing trials provides believers with the opportunity for spiritual growth. As it turns out, the inverse is *also* true. In other words, if a person is **not** faced with trials, then it will be difficult for him to develop Godly characteristics.

In essence, the **absence** of trials can lead to complacency – and that, in turn, can end up leading people *away* from God.

One of the primary items that can lead to complacency is **wealth**. There is nothing “intrinsicly evil” about money; but great wealth “insulates” people from many of the normal trials of life. As a result, if a person becomes very rich in material things, then he will face an enormous temptation to rely on his own resources – even to the point of *neglecting* God. Jesus demonstrated this danger in the “Rich Fool” parable:

#### **Luke 12:16-21 (CJB):**

<sup>16</sup> And he gave them this illustration: “There was a man whose land was very productive. <sup>17</sup> He debated with himself, ‘What should I do? I haven’t enough room for all my crops.’ <sup>18</sup> Then he said, ‘This is what I will do: I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and I’ll store all my wheat and other goods there. <sup>19</sup> Then I’ll say to myself, “You’re a lucky man! You have a big supply of goods laid up that will last many years. Start taking it easy! Eat! Drink! Enjoy yourself!” <sup>20</sup> But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night you will die! And the things you prepared — whose will they be?’ <sup>21</sup> That’s how it is with anyone who stores up wealth for himself without being rich toward God.”

The same principle applies to **military power**. A strong military also “insulates” the people in a nation from some trials – and that can also end up turning people *away* from God.

An example of this principle occurred during the time of the prophet Isaiah. At one point, the southern kingdom of Judah actively sought to become allied with Egypt – *precisely* because Egypt had a strong military. In essence, Judah thought that Egypt’s strong military would provide them with protection from Assyria. In other words, Judah based their safety upon military power – rather than on following God. Isaiah explicitly prophesied *against* this line of thinking:

#### **Isaiah 31:1 (ESV):**

<sup>1</sup> Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the Lord!

Interestingly, the Torah explicitly states that Israel's **kings** must not become extremely wealthy, and they must not build up a very powerful military (symbolized by many horses) – precisely because that can lead to complacency:

**Deuteronomy 17:16-17 (ESV):**

<sup>16</sup> Only he [the king] must not acquire many horses for himself or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since the Lord has said to you, 'You shall never return that way again.' <sup>17</sup> And he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold.

Sadly, King Solomon violated **every one** of the commands above – and that eventually led him to turn his heart away from God.

### Overcoming Trials

From the above two sections, we can see that Scripture states that *facing* trials allows us to grow spiritually – and that the *absence* of trials prevents us from having that opportunity.

As a result, it appears that it is necessary for a person to face trials, in order for that person to experience true, **heartfelt** repentance. That is, *overcoming difficult trials* is required, in order for a person to develop fervent, wholehearted repentance.

For example, Scripture explicitly *condemns* the abuse of alcohol; and as a result, believers should **avoid** abusing alcohol. For most people, that is not particularly difficult – it is just a matter of *deciding* not to overindulge in alcohol. So, most people will not need to perform *heartfelt* repentance, in order to stop abusing alcohol – because most people do not have an “unnatural attraction” to alcohol.

However, a small minority of people are addicted to alcohol – i.e., they are alcoholics. By definition, alcoholics are people who have *extreme* difficulty with alcohol – in particular, they are extraordinarily prone to abuse alcohol. As a result, a very long, intense, **dedicated** effort is usually required, in order for an alcoholic to avoid abusing alcohol. So, when an *alcoholic* stops abusing alcohol, in order to follow God, he has definitely performed *wholehearted* repentance!

The same principle applies to gambling. Scripture condemns gambling, at least when it causes *financial problems*. It is a trivial matter for most people to *avoid* that situation; because most people are not overly “attracted” to gambling. However, a small minority of people are addicted to gambling – and people in that situation are going to have to make an *extremely* dedicated effort to change their behavior. So, a person who is addicted to gambling – but who stops gambling for the sake of God – has also executed *heartfelt* repentance.

Of course, alcohol abuse and gambling are just two *examples* – there are many different types of sinful behavior that people can be “susceptible” to, so to speak. The underlying point is that if a person is is susceptible to any given type of sin, then **fervent** repentance will be required in order for that person to avoid that particular sin. On the other hand, if a person is **not** vulnerable to that type of sin, then it will not be very difficult for that person to avoid it – and that, in turn, means that heartfelt repentance will not be required.

## Conclusion

The “intriguing” verse in the introduction (Luke 15:7) states the following: “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance”. Also, as mentioned above, it appears that in order for a person to experience “fervent” repentance, it is necessary for that person to face *difficult* trials – and to overcome them.

As a result, it appears that Luke 15:7 is contrasting two *different types* of people: people who **face** trials and **overcome** them; and people who **never** face trials in the first place. Consider the following example:

- One person is an alcoholic, and therefore he has had *severe* problems with alcohol abuse for most of his life. However, after a very long, **dedicated** effort, he finally stops abusing alcohol – because he *sincerely* desires to follow God.
- Ninety-nine other people do not even *like* alcohol at all. So, those people never had *any* problems with abusing alcohol in the first place.

Needless to say, it is **much** more appropriate to rejoice over the one alcoholic who stopped abusing alcohol – through *wholehearted* repentance – than it is to rejoice over the ninety-nine people who never needed to repent in the first place.

One of the reasons why this is important is because if a person *never* faces a particular type of trial, then he will not be able to understand how *difficult* it is to overcome that trial. For example, in the scenario above, the ninety-nine people who do not even like alcohol will have a hard time comprehending the *severe* trials that the one alcoholic faced.

As it turns out, the “prodigal son” parable illustrates the above point. In that parable, the younger son was susceptible to the temptation of reckless, immoral living – while the older son was not particularly vulnerable to that specific sin. The younger son then went through many trials, as a result of his sinful behavior – and those trials eventually convinced him to perform **wholehearted** repentance.

Unfortunately, the older son did not appreciate the trials that his brother went through – because he never experienced those types of trials. As a result, the older son did not rejoice *at all*, when his brother returned – and in fact, he **resented** his father rejoicing over his brother’s return!

Of course, the father in that parable represents God. We can definitely be assured that our Heavenly Father does understand *all* of the types of trials that we go through – and that He does rejoice over our *wholehearted* repentance!