

NATIONAL REPENTANCE

“If My people who are called by My Name will humble themselves, and pray, and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”

2 Chronicles 7:14

Is there such a thing as national guilt? Should we take part in a National Day of Repentance?

Africa Christian Action has been organising National Days of Repentance in South Africa for the last 11 years. Every 1 February ACA marks the anniversary of the legalisation of abortion in South Africa by hiring a hearse and marching in mourning clothes, carrying little coffins, crosses, flowers and simple placards stating: **Abortion Kills Babies**. A huge Pro-Life trailer brings up the rear of the funeral procession marking the milestones of life in the womb and declaring how many babies have been killed so far through abortion in South Africa. The Scriptures are also boldly quoted on the trailer: *“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves.”* Proverbs 31:8 and *“Now CHOOSE LIFE so that you and your children may live.”* Deuteronomy 30:19

When the procession reaches Parliament a Prayer Vigil is held where Scriptures are read, Hymns are sung and Psalms and Prayers of Repentance are prayed for the national sin of abortion.

Is Corporate Guilt Real?

Last year a number of individuals, including some pastors, informed us that they didn't think a National Day of Repentance was Biblical, because they did not believe that there was such a thing as corporate guilt. Some also added that they did not believe that one could pray for the sins of others, we can only confess our own guilt.

Moses Interceded for the Nation

However, Moses prayed for Israel after their sin in worshipping the golden calf (Exodus 32:11-14; 34:6-9; Deuteronomy 9:18-29; Psalm 106:23). Moses identified himself with sins he did not commit: *“Pardon our iniquity and sin, and take us as your inheritance.”* Exodus 34:9

After Israel's rebellious refusal to enter the Promised Land, after the bad report of their scouts, Moses interceded for Israel: *“Pardon the iniquity of this people, I pray, according to the greatness of Your mercy, just as You have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.”* Numbers 14:19

Prayerlessness is a Sin

The prophet Samuel declared that it would be a great sin for him to fail to pray for the nation. *“Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you...”* 1 Samuel 12:23

Ezra Led the Nation in Repentance

Ezra 9 records a Prayer of National Repentance. Although Ezra had not personally committed most of the sins he was repenting of, on behalf of the land, he fully identified with the sins of his people. He tore his garment and his robe, plucked out some of his hair, fasted and fell on his knees, spreading out his hands to the Lord (Ezra 9:3-5). Ezra prayed: *“O my God, I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You my God; for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt is grown up to the heavens... We have forsaken Your commandments...”* Ezra 9:6-10

Nehemiah Repented for the Nation

When Nehemiah, in exile, heard of the trouble and disgrace of Jerusalem, he wept and mourned, fasted and prayed (Nehemiah 1:3-4). Nehemiah prayed: *“Lord God of heaven, O great and awesome God, You who keep Your Covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments... I pray*

before You now...and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against You. Both my fathers house and I have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against You, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded..." Nehemiah 1:5-7

In Nehemiah 9 we read the corporate prayer of the Israelites as they confessed their national sins before the Lord.

Jeremiah Repented on Behalf of his Nation

Jeremiah confessed the national sins of his people: *"For we have sinned against the Lord our God, we and our fathers, from our youth even to this day, and have not obeyed the voice of our God."* Jeremiah 3:25

"O Lord, though our iniquities testify against us, do it for your Namesake; for our backslidings are many. We have sinned against You." Jeremiah 14:7

"We acknowledge, O Lord, our wickedness and the iniquity of our fathers, for we have sinned against You." Jeremiah 14:20

Daniel Repented on Behalf of his Nation

The great prophet Daniel also prayed a prayer of national repentance on behalf of his people, confessing sins which he was not personally guilty of. *"O Lord, great and awesome God, who keeps His Covenant and mercy with those who love Him and with those who keep His commandments, we have sinned and committed iniquity, we have done wickedly and rebelled, even departing from Your precepts and Your judgments. Neither have we heeded Your servants the prophets who spoke in Your Name...O Lord, to us belong shame of face, to our kings, our princes and our fathers, because we have sinned against You...we have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God, to walk in His Laws, which He set before us by His servants the prophets. Yes, all Israel has transgressed Your law, and has departed so as not to obey Your voice; therefore the curse and the oath written in the Law of Moses, the servant of God, has been poured out on us, because we have sinned against Him...Let Your anger and Your fury be turned away from Your city Jerusalem, your holy mountain; because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and Your people are a reproach to all those around us...O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and act!..."* Daniel 9:4-19

The Scripture records that Daniel's vicarious prayer of national repentance led to a dramatic Spiritual breakthrough. The angel Gabriel appeared to him with instructions from the Lord (Daniel 9:20-23). Daniel received a tremendous vision and prophecy. He also was informed about a great Spiritual conflict which had raged with demonic forces (Daniel 10:13). When we engage in national Repentance we are involved in Spiritual warfare (Daniel 10:20).

God is Looking for Intercessors

The Word of God is clear: *"So I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land that I should not destroy it..."* Ezekiel 22:30

The Prophet Hosea taught that spiritual bondage comes from national sins: *"My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; because you have forgotten the Law of your God, I will also forget your children...Harlotry, wine and new wine enslave the heart. My people ask counsel from their wooden idols, and their staff informs them. For the spirit of harlotry has caused them to stray, and they played the harlot against their God. They offer sacrifices on the mountain tops and burn incense on the hills, under oaks, poplars and terebinths, because the shade is good. Therefore your daughters commit harlotry, and your brides commit adultery...Therefore people who do not understand will be trampled."* Hosea 4:6-14

National Guilt was Taught by the Lord and His Apostles

The principle of national sin is taught by the Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 23:31-38.

The Apostle Paul accepted the reality of national guilt (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16). The Apostle Peter also wrote of the “*corruptible things...received by tradition from your fathers...*” 1 Peter 1:18

The National Repentance in Nineveh

A most dramatic example of national repentance is found in the Book of Jonah. The Prophet Jonah was a reluctant missionary, but he finally went to proclaim God’s Word to his enemies, the Assyrians, in the great capital city of Nineveh. Incredibly, “*the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them...*” Jonah 3:5

The king himself put on sackcloth and ashes and issued a decree: “*But let man and beast be covered with sackcloths and cry mightily to God; yes let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?*” Jonah 3:8-9

God’s Word to a Nation

The Word of the Lord came to Jeremiah to go down to the potters house and there it was revealed to him: “*The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down and to destroy it; if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from it’s evil, I will relent of the disaster I thought to bring upon it. And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, if it does evil in My sight, so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said would benefit it.*” Jeremiah 18:7-10

Almighty God, our Creator and Eternal Judge, controls the destinies of nations. National problems are not primarily political, but Spiritual (we get the government we deserve). We create and aggravate our own problems through disobedience to God’s holy Law. It is human greed, pride, lust, hatred and selfishness that underlies the corruption, immorality and crime in society. It is man’s desire to be independent of God, free of moral restraint and liberated from ethical considerations that has led to the breakdown of moral standards, the break up of modern families and the sell out of countries to terrorism and tyranny.

Our problem is sin. We have violated the Laws of God.

Sins to Repent of

God says: “*Thou shalt not commit murder.*” Abortion is murder. Since 1 February 1997 the ANC government of South Africa has been responsible for the killing of over 700,000 babies – with tax payers money – illegally. An average of 20,000 other South Africans are also murdered every year.

God says: “*Thou shalt not commit adultery.*” The present South African government has legalised pornography and prostitution and abused tax payers money to fund *Love Life* in schools – to teach children to be fornicators and whoremongers. Child abuse and rape have exploded and tens of thousands of families have been split apart by rampant divorce.

God says: “*Thou shalt not steal.*” Along with the crime wave of house break-ins, armed robberies and car hijackings, has come an unprecedented tidal wave of corruption with Black Economic Empowerment scams, fraud and extortion, tearing the economic foundations of the country apart.

God says: “*Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.*” Much of the state news media and history books are bearing false witness, rewriting history, to glamorise mass murderers such as Vladimir Lenin, Mao Tse Tung, Fidel Castro, and Che Guevarre; while vilifying Christians with false accusations. It is as Karl Marx declared: “*The first battlefield is the rewriting of history.*”

God says: “*You shall not covet your neighbour’s goods.*” But greed, envy, malice and covetousness are officially sanctioned and promoted. Many have a sense of entitlement for things they have not worked for. Senior cabinet ministers have gone on record enthusiastically praising and supporting Marxist dictator Robert Mugabe’s ZANU-PF regime and the national suicide in Zimbabwe. Senior government officials

have publicly stated their desire to see similar confiscations of productive white farms in South Africa, just like the land invasions of Zimbabwe.

In the Bible, sin is very specific. It is a violation of the laws of God (Exodus 20). We are guilty when we disobey one of God's commandments. Sin is failing to worship God alone, it is making or worshipping an idol, taking God's Name in vain, desecrating the Sabbath, dishonoring our parents, taking an innocent life, committing adultery, stealing, bearing false witness and covetousness.

The Blessings of Obedience

In Leviticus 26 we read God's commandments and warnings to a nation. The blessings of obedience are spelt out, and the disastrous consequences of disobedience. *"You shall not make idols for yourselves; ...You shall keep My Sabbaths...Walk in My statutes and keep My commandments...Then I will give you rain in it's season, the land shall yield it's produce and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit...I will give peace in the land...And the sword will not go through your land...For I will look on you favorably and make you fruitful, multiply you and confirm my covenant with you..."*

The Curses of Disobedience

However, Leviticus 26:14-46 spells out some of the catastrophic consequences of violating God's commands: *"But if you do not obey Me, and do not observe all these commandments, and if you despise My statutes,...terror...wasting disease and fever...Those who hate you shall reign over you...Your highways shall be desolate...You shall be delivered into the hand of the enemy...I will scatter you among the nations and draw out a sword after you; your land shall be desolate and your cities waste; you shall perish among the nations, and the land of your enemies shall eat you up and those of you who are left shall waste away in their iniquity in your enemies lands...But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers, with their unfaithfulness in which they were unfaithful to Me, and that they also have walked contrary to Me...If their uncircumcised hearts are humbled and they accept their guilt – then I will remember My Covenant..."*

Warnings to the Nation

Deuteronomy 28 also lists the national blessings of obedience and curses of disobedience. *"If you diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the Lord your God will set you high above the nations of the earth. And all His blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obeyed the Voice of the Lord your God."*

Deuteronomy 28:1-2. Those nations that are obedient to God's Law are promised peace and prosperity, productivity and fertility, rain at the right times and victory in battle.

However, *"If you do not obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all His curses will come upon you and overtake you."*

Deuteronomy 28:15

Catastrophic Consequences for National Sin

Some of the national consequences of national sin include: infertility, famine, drought, poverty, confusion, defeat and disaster. *"The Lord will strike you with...fever, with inflammation, with severe burning fever...the alien who is among you shall rise higher and higher above you, and you shall come down lower and lower...moreover all these curses shall come upon you and pursue you and overtake you, until you are destroyed, because you did not obey the voice of the Lord your God, to keep His commandments and His statutes which He commanded you...Then the Lord will bring upon you and your descendants extraordinary plagues – great and prolonged plagues – and serious and prolonged sicknesses..."*

Bloodshed Pollutes the Land

The Word of God warns us not to pollute the land in which we live: *"For blood defiles the land, and no atonement can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of Him who shed it. Therefore do not defile the land which you inhabit..."* Numbers 35:33-34

In Deuteronomy 21 a case of an unsolved murder is dealt with. *“If anyone is found slain...and it is not known who killed him, then the elders of the surrounding towns are required to carefully investigate and if they cannot bring the murderer to justice they need to solemnly declare: Our hands have not shed this blood, nor have our eyes seen it. Provide atonement, O Lord, for your people of Israel, whom you’ve redeemed, and do not lay innocent blood to the charge of your people Israel...so you shall put away the guilt of innocent blood from among you when you do what is right in the sight of the Lord.”* Deuteronomy 21:7-9

Abortion is an Abomination

Life begins at conception and abortion is the violent taking of an innocent life. How can we pray for national blessings when our nation is guilty of the shedding of innocent blood?

“Deliver those who are drawn toward death, and hold back those stumbling to the slaughter. If you say, ‘surely we did not know this’, does not He who weighs the heart consider it? He who keeps your soul does He not know it? And will He not render to each man according to his deeds?” Proverbs 24:11-12

“Open your mouth for the speechless, in the cause of all who are appointed to die.” Proverbs 30:8

Confession of Sin is Commanded

“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” 1 John 1:8-9

Personal Guilt and Responsibility

The Prophet Ezekiel teaches that the sins of the father will not bring judgment on those who turn away from that sin and repent of their personal sin, and of their parental or ancestral sins. Children must not be punished for the sins of their parents, unless they choose to walk in those sins (Ezekiel 18).

Both the Prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah address the false assumption of Judean exiles in Babylonia that they were exiled from the land of Israel because of their parents sins and not because they personally deserved it. Ezekiel made it clear that the exiles had been walking in those very same sins as their fathers which had brought on the judgment of exile from the land. Those who refuse to repent of, and turn away from, their sins, and the sins of their parents, will not escape judgment.

We are a Royal Priesthood

God’s people are *“a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness and into His marvelous light.”*

1 Peter 2:9

We may not personally have been involved in the sin of abortion, but as priests of God we can intercede on behalf of our friends, family members and neighbours. And we can identify with the selfishness, complacency, lust, greed, unbelief and hard-heartedness that leads to the sin of abortion.

“He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy.”

Proverbs 28:13

The Book of Common Prayer includes the Reformation tradition of Corporate Confessional prayer, including for national sins. When Moses had interceded on behalf of the people of Israel *“the people mourned greatly...For we have sinned!”* Numbers 15:39-40

National Days of Repentance

I remember shortly after my conversion to Christ in 1977, South Africa experienced a severe drought. The President called for a **National Day of Repentance and Humiliation before God**. As a new Christian I was most impressed when I joined the masses of people pouring out of the workplaces during lunch hour and filling the churches in Central Cape Town to overflowing. It was the first time that I had ever

experienced such an intense time of earnest heart-searching prayers of repentance. And when the rains came just a couple of days later I was awestruck!

Yet, it is a sad fact that despite some serious times of drought experienced at different times over the last twenty years, none of the last three Presidents of South Africa have seen fit to call for a National Day of Prayer and Repentance.

My father, who fought in the Second World War, remembered that King George VI had called the people of Great Britain to National Days of Prayer and Repentance four times. Yet, sadly, his daughter, Queen Elizabeth II, in 55 years as the Queen of England, has not once called for a National Day of Prayer. The last time Britain had a National Day of Prayer was during the Second World War.

Reformation and Revival

It is time for us to look at God's Law and His Words to a nation afresh. We need to structure our repentance according to the Ten Commandments. And we need a Biblical understanding of repentance. Repentance is not merely "*feeling sorry*" for our "*failings and weaknesses.*" What God calls wicked, we should not try to redefine as some kind of "*mistake.*"

Biblical repentance involves: conviction, contrition and conversion. A change of mind. A change of heart. And a change of life. Repentance involves a change of lifestyle and a change of behaviour.

"Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon." Isaiah 55:6-7

"Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die...?" Ezekiel 18:31

"Repent therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord." Acts 3:18

God's Mercy or God's Judgment

"See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commands, decrees and Law; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land...this day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life so that you and your children may live. And that you may love the Lord your God, listen to His voice and hold fast to Him." Deuteronomy 3:15-20

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