The background of the entire image is a photograph of a dirt road that splits into two paths, leading into a green field under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. The text is overlaid on this scene.

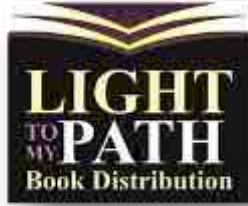
THE RELENTING HEART OF GOD

CAN THINGS REALLY CHANGE?

F. WAYNE MAC LEOD

The Relenting Heart of God

Can Things Really Change?



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PREFACE

This is a study of the relenting heart of God. It is not a topic I have heard much about but one the Lord has led me to consider over these past few weeks. The subject is a delicate one. I fully accept and appreciate the great truth of God's sovereign and unchangeable nature. I have come to see, however, that this does not mean that things in life can never be changed. God is not inflexible. Blessings can be restored where cursing was decreed. Blessings can be removed. Unused gifts can be stripped from faithless servants. Judgement can be replaced by mercy and pardon.

There is a fatalistic view of life that says that nothing can change because it has been determined by God. I have come to appreciate, however, the flexibility of God's purpose and how my experience of God can vary through my obedience or disobedience. I have also come to a deeper appreciation of the impact of prayer and faithfulness.

The fact that God has a relenting heart is an encouragement to us but it is not something to take for granted. In the course of this brief study we will see how God responds to our obedience and prayers but also how our insistence in evil may also cause Him to remove His blessing.

I trust that this study will be an encouragement to you. I have been blessed while examining the various passages of Scripture that speak about this aspect of God's character. I trust that what the Lord has shown me will strengthen and encourage you in your personal walk with our Saviour.

F. Wayne MacLeod

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

10 ... God relented of the disaster that he said he would do to them, and did not do it. (Jonah 3:10)

19 Did not the Lord relent of the disaster that he had pronounced against them? (Jeremiah 26:19)

10 The word of the Lord came to Samuel: "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments... (1 Samuel 15:10-11)

As we begin this study let me introduce the matter before us. The three verses quoted above are among a list of verses that deal with the subject of God's "relenting" or "regretting". I use them here to illustrate the subject of this study. Let's take a moment to consider these verses in their context.

Consider the example of Jonah 3:10. In the book of Jonah we have the story of the prophet Jonah, who was called to go to Nineveh with the word of the Lord. Notice the word Jonah spoke to the people of this city:

Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4)

The word of the prophet was quite clear. Within a period of forty days, God was going to overthrow the city of Nineveh. The word Jonah spoke that day shook the inhabitants of the city. His words moved the entire nation to do something about their sin and rebellion against God. From the lowest servant in the land to the king, the people were moved to repentance. The king decreed a city wide fast and told his people to cry out to the God of Jonah for forgiveness. As they did, the people repented and turned from their rebellious ways. They were sincerely touched by the prophecy of Jonah.

It is in this context that we read in Jonah 3:10:

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and did not do it.

What is striking here is the phrase: "he said he would do... and did not do..." How are we to understand this verse? Did God change His mind? Did He really say He would do something and did not do it?

The second passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter is from Jeremiah 26:19. It comes in the context of the prophet's life being threatened. Through His servant Jeremiah, the Lord prophesied judgement on the nation. Jeremiah told the people of Jerusalem that if they did not repent, God would make the city "a curse for all the nations of the earth" (Jeremiah 26:6). When the people heard the words of Jeremiah, they took hold of him crying: "You shall

die.” (Jeremiah 26:8). Jeremiah was presented to the officials of the city and put on trial for treason.

As the trial of Jeremiah unfolded, the officials began to debate his fate. Among those present that day were some elders who stood up in defense of the prophet and argued using an illustration from history. The illustration used was from the days of Hezekiah, king of Judah. In those days a prophet by the name of Micah of Moresheth spoke out against the people of Judah in a similar way telling them:

“Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.”(Jeremiah 26:18).

The elders pointed to the response of the godly king Hezekiah in verse 19. They reminded those who sat in judgment of Jeremiah that King Hezekiah and the nation received the message as from God and “entreated the favor of the Lord”. Notice the result of this repentance, according to the elders in Jeremiah 26:19:

“... did not the Lord relent of the disaster that he had pronounced against them?”

God chose not to inflict disaster on Jerusalem in that day. Again we are left with the question: “Why would God tell Micah of Moresheth to prophecy that He would plow Zion as a field, when in the end God did not do this? Did this make Micah of Moresheth a false prophet?

Let me conclude this introductory chapter with one final illustration. In 1 Samuel 15 we read the account of how Saul was commanded by God to fight the Amalekites. He was to destroy them completely. Men, women, children, and

animals were all to be slaughtered; they were to take nothing from the city (1 Samuel 15:3). As the battle unfolded, however, Saul spared the king of Amalek and took the best sheep, oxen, calves and lambs. He and his soldiers only slaughtered what they considered to be of no real value. This was in direct disobedience to the Lord.

It is in this context that the Lord spoke to Samuel in 1 Samuel 15:11 saying:

“I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments.”

How is it possible that God could regret an action He took? God knows all things. Nothing takes Him by surprise. Everything He does is good. In this verse, however, God is expressing His regret that He had chosen Saul to be king.

These verses present a challenge to us. They bring up a series of questions that need to be addressed. Does God change His mind? Does He say He will do something and not do it? Does He actually have regrets concerning decisions He makes?

In the course of this study we will examine a series of verses that speak about the “relenting” of God. Our attempt will be to make sense of these verses in light of what we know about God as a sovereign and holy God. I believe that our understanding of these verses will have an impact on our personal lives and our relationship with God. May the Lord be pleased to use this study to challenge us in our understanding of His character. May they serve to draw us closer to Him as a sovereign and holy God.

CHAPTER 2 - THE REGRET OF GOD

And the Lord regretted that he made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. (Genesis 6:6)

In the opening chapter we took a look at some verses that showed that God relented or turned back from doing what He had said He would to do. We also saw how He expressed regret over decisions He had made. The Hebrew word used to express the relenting and the regret of God is the word “*naham*”. It occurs about 108 times in the Old Testament. The word *nacham* has a variety of meanings. In this chapter we will take a look at the word as it is expressed in both Genesis 6:6 and 1 Samuel 15:10-11, 35.

Let's consider Genesis 6:6. The context of this verse is the increasing corruption on the earth. Genesis 6 reminds us that the people of Noah's day were turning from the Lord God. They were inter-marrying with the unbelievers of the land. As God looked at the earth in the days of Noah, notice what He saw:

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the

thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.
(Genesis 6:5)

It is in this context that we read in Genesis 6:6:

And the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.

Of particular importance in this verse is the connection between God regretting and the grief He felt in His heart. The word *naham* can refer to a sense of grief or pain as a result of an action taken. Dictionary.com defines the word regret in the English language as follows:

To feel sorrow or remorse for (an act, fault, disappointment, etc.). To think of with a sense of loss.
(www.reference.com/browse/regret)

We often think of regret as being the fruit of an inappropriate or sinful action. This is not always the case. We can also experience a sense of regret in doing something that is good or necessary. God's regret in Genesis 6:6 was in the fact that "he had made man on the earth." As we look at the creation of human beings, (Genesis 1:27) we see that God made man in His image. Listen to how God described everything He did on that day:

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. (Genesis 1:31)

It is interesting to note that in the account of creation, this is the only time God describes what He did as being "very" good. God speaks of the works of the other days as being

“good” (see Genesis 1:3, 12, 18, 21); but He describes the work of the sixth day as being “very” good.

When God tells us that He regretted making man on the earth He is not telling us that He made a mistake or did something He should not have done. What He did when He created man and woman was "very good". His regret was not in what He had done but in what man had become.

In those days God was feeling the pain of His decision to create man and woman with a free will. He grieved over their choice to wander from Him as their Creator and Sustainer. To regret is to feel the pain of the decisions we have made. God made a decision to create humankind and now He watched them as they turned their back on Him and wandered in rebellion.

Jesus told the story of a young son who chose to take his inheritance and leave his father's home. While much of the focus of this story in Luke 15 relates to the son and what happened to him, consider the father for a moment. What was the father feeling as he watched his son, the fruit of his own life, leave home and turn his back on all he had been taught? Consider the regret of the father over what was taking place that day. Consider the sorrow and grief he felt for his son.

This is what is happening in Genesis 6:6. God's heart is broken over what He saw. God's regret is expressed in a deep pain over a decision He had made to create man on the earth with a free will. While His decision to create man was very good, it was not without its pain. This was a decision that would cost something. It was a decision that would bring deep grief to the heart of God.

Let's turn our attention now to 1 Samuel 15:10-11, 35. Here we catch a glimpse of God's regret as it pertains to His choice of Saul as king:

10 The word of the Lord came to Samuel: 11 "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments."

35 And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel.

Saul was God's choice as the first king of Israel. Through the prophet Samuel, God revealed this to Saul. Not only did God choose this particular man to be king, but He also filled him with His Spirit and gave him a new heart. Consider what happened to Saul when Samuel announced God's intention for his life:

9 When he turned his back to leave Samuel, God gave him a new heart. And all these signs came to pass that day. 10 When they came to Gibeah, behold, a group of prophets met him, and the Spirit of God rushed upon him, and he prophesied among them. 11 And when all who knew him previously saw how he prophesied with the prophets, the people said to one another, "What has come over the son of Kish? Is Saul among the prophets? (1 Samuel 10:9-11)

God did a wonderful thing in the life of Saul to equip him for the work He had been called to do. In fact the change in Saul was obvious to those who knew him. He was not the same person he had been. Those who knew him well

asked the question: "What has come over the son of Kish?"

The problem, however, was that Saul quickly turned from God and the work of the Spirit in him. Instead he chose to follow his own ways. He compromised in his relationship with God and did not obey the commands of the Lord fully. This grieved the heart of the Lord so that in the end He said of him: "I regret that I have made Saul king."

God's choice of Saul was good. God not only chose him, but He equipped him with everything he needed to excel in his calling. Saul, however, did not walk in the provision of God, but chose his own way. He failed God, did not obey Him wholeheartedly, and ultimately was rejected for his unfaithfulness.

God felt regret over the good decision he had made to choose Saul and equip him for ministry. In a sense this regret is a deep sense of disappointment in His choice of this man to represent Him before the nation.

As we conclude this chapter let's take a moment to consider what these verses teach us about God and our relationship with Him. There are three points I want to make in this regard.

God's Regret is not Because of any Shortcoming on His Part

As we have examined Genesis 6:6 and 1 Samuel 15:10-11, 35 it has become quite clear that God's regret is not because of any shortcoming on His part. We regret bad decisions we have made. We regret sinful actions. Not all regret, however, is the result of a shortcoming. We can

also regret and feel very disappointed in how things turned out even when we have made good decisions.

God's decision to create human beings was a "very good" decision. His decision to choose Saul was also a good decision. God's regret was in what human beings did with what He gave them.

God gives us a Free Will to Obey or to Disobey

This leads us to the second important point of this chapter. God created Adam and Eve with a free will. His heart longed for a people who would choose Him and love Him not because they were forced to or programmed to do so, but because they wanted to from their heart. Forced love is not true love. Forced obedience is slavery. True intimacy can only be experienced through a free and willing choice of both partners.

In creating human beings with a free will, God gave to them the freedom to obey or disobey. We can choose to cling to Him and walk in fellowship with Him or we can turn our back on Him. We can be faithful in our calling and the use of our spiritual gifts or we can misuse or abuse our calling and gifting. Each of us has a decision to make concerning the call of God on our lives. The people of Noah's day chose to live independently of God, walking away from Him. Saul chose to compromise and disobey the commandments of the Lord. These decisions they made themselves and in so doing disappointed the heart of God.

God Feels Deeply the Pain of our Wandering and Wasted Potential

God feels deep regret when we do not choose Him and His purpose for our lives. His heart breaks as He watches

us wander from His excellent ways. He grieves when we do not reach our potential by walking in faithful obedience. He is pained by the loss of fellowship with us. God is not an impersonal God but one who feels pain and suffers greatly when we miss out on His best for our lives.

Understanding that fact that God feels regret helps us to understand just how much He cares for us. It also challenges us to walk in a way that will please Him and bring Him satisfaction and joy. The people of Noah's day caused God to feel deep regret over those He had created. Saul caused God to feel regret and disappointment in His choice of king over His people. How does God feel toward you today? Does He feel regret over what you have chosen to do with your spiritual gifts? Does He feel regret over the way you have chosen to live your life?

When God gave us life, He also gave us freedom to walk in obedience or disobedience. With this freedom, God also accepted the pain and regret He would feel to see lives wasted in rebellion and sin. He does not force us to walk in obedience. Nor does He force us to reach our full potential for Him. Our freedom comes at a cost. The cost to God is the regret He feels as He watches us wander. The cost to us is the loss of fellowship, fruitfulness and the judgment of God for our unfaithfulness.

God feels regret as He watches the untapped potential in His children waste away. He feels regret as He experiences the loss of intimacy with His children. This is not His desire for us. He chooses, however, to suffer the grief and pain rather than take away our freedom to choose obedience from a willing heart. This does not mean that He does not continue to pursue us. His Spirit will woo and convict in an effort to draw us back. He will even block our path or discipline us in an attempt to protect us from wandering

further. May we not harden our heart to this work of God's Spirit. May our lives bring joy to God as we walk in His ways.

I am thankful for a God who regrets. He has my deepest interests at heart. He is personal and intimate with me. He desires to see me become everything I was created and equipped to be in Him.

For Consideration:

- What does it mean to regret? Can we experience regret over something good we have done?
- What does God regret?
- What is the connection between the free will God has given us and His experience of regret over us?
- Consider your life and ministry. Is there anything there that would cause God to experience regret?
- What does the fact that God regrets teach us about the personal nature of God?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to thank the Lord that He feels regret when we do not reach our potential in Him. Thank Him that He has this personal interest in you today.
- Ask God to show you if there is anything in your life or ministry that causes Him to experience regret. Ask for strength to walk in

greater faithfulness to Him in this area of your life.

CHAPTER 3 - COMPASSION AND MERCY

15 And God sent the angel to Jerusalem to destroy it, but as he was about to destroy it, the Lord saw, and he relented from the calamity, and he said to the angel who was working destruction, "It is enough; now stay your hand." (1 Chronicles 21:15)

3 The Lord relented concerning this: "It shall not be," said the Lord (Amos 7:3)

In this study of the regret and relenting of God, we have introduced the Hebrew word "*naham*" as it is translated by the English word "regret". The idea is that God experiences regret in His creation when they do not reach the potential He created them to experience.

As we move on in this study, we encounter a second use of the word. Let's consider some examples of this second use in this chapter.

In the passage quoted above from 1 Chronicles 21:15 we see that David had taken a census of the people of Israel. David had done this in pride and disobedience to the Lord.

The result of this disobedience brought the judgement of God on the nation. While David did repent of his sin, God told him through the prophet Gad that he would still be punished for his rebellion. God sent a plague on Israel which resulted in the death of 70,000 men (1 Chronicles 21:14). As the angel of the Lord approached the city of Jerusalem to destroy it, 1 Chronicles 21:15 tells us that the Lord “relented” and spoke to the destroying angel saying: “It is enough; now stay your hand.” God had decreed a punishment, but He relented and held back the full extent of His judgement.

A similar use of the word “relent” is found in Judges 2:18 where we read concerning the people of Israel:

18 Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. For the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them.

In this verse the Hebrew word “*naham*” (to relent) is translated by the expression “moved to pity.” Consider what is happening in Israel in those days. The people of God would wander from Him and His ways. God would punish them for their sin. The people would then cry out to God in their misery for forgiveness. God would “relent” (be moved to pity) and send a judge to give them relief from their trouble. This cycle of rebellion, repentance, relenting and relief would repeat itself over and over again in those days.

The psalmist reflects on this cycle when he wrote in Psalm 106:42-45:

42 Their enemies oppressed them,
and they were brought into subjection under their
power.

43 Many times he delivered them,
but they were rebellious in their purposes
and were brought low through their iniquity.

44 Nevertheless, he looked upon their distress,
when he heard their cry.

45 For their sake he remembered his covenant,
and relented according to the abundance of his
steadfast love.

Notice the connection between the relenting of God and the abundance of His steadfast love in Psalm 106:45. God's relenting, in this sense, speaks of His compassion and mercy in judgement.

Let me share one more passage that speaks of the relenting of God from this perspective. In Amos 7 the prophet Amos tells us about a vision the Lord had given him. In this vision he saw a swarm of locusts. These locusts came to devour the grain of the land at a very crucial time in the harvest. When he saw this vision, the prophet Amos cried out to the Lord: "O Lord God, please forgive! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!" Notice the response of the Lord to the prayer of Amos for the people of his day:

3 The Lord relented concerning this: "It shall not be," said the Lord (Amos 7:3)

The Lord gave Amos a vision of what would happen, but then chose not to unleash the devastation of this vision when the prophet cried out to God on behalf of the people. The Lord heard the prayer of Amos and had compassion on His people, withdrawing His judgement. This use of the

word “*naham*” (relenting) shows us something very wonderful about the Lord God. It reveals His incredible compassion and mercy toward His people. Where would we be today if God did not relent and show us mercy in our rebellion and sin?

What do we learn about the relenting of God from the verses we examined in this chapter? Let me touch on a number of truths.

God's Relenting Shows That He is a Holy God Who Will Judge Sin

While it is the desire of God to bless His people He would will not hesitate to remove that blessing because of sin and rebellion. When David disobeyed God and took a census of the people of Israel, this resulted in the death of 70,000 men. This was a serious price to pay for disobedience and pride. As a result of their sin, God's people were oppressed by foreign nations. We catch a glimpse of this in Judges 6 where we read:

1 The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and God gave them over into the hand of Midian seven years. 2 And the hand of Midian overpowered Israel and because of Midian the people of Israel made for themselves the dens that are in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds. 3 For whenever the Israelites planted crops, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East would come up against them. 4 They would encamp against them and devour the produce of the land, as far as Gaza and leave no sustenance in Israel and no sheep or ox or donkey.

In Judges 6 the people of God were reduced to living in caves and dens in the mountains to escape the wrath and injustice of their enemies. These enemies stripped them of their crops and animals, leaving them with nothing to eat. Because of their sin, God's people were reduced to poverty and lived in hiding for fear of their enemies. This was a direct result of their disobedience to God and His judgement for their sin. While God had a plan to bless His people He would also judge their sin and strip that blessing from them if they turned from Him.

God's Relenting shows that He Grieves in His Judgement of Sin

While God does judge sin, we need to understand that He takes no pleasure in this. This is quite clear from Ezekiel 33:11 where we read:

11 Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?

God pleads with the wicked to leave their wicked ways in Ezekiel 33:11. He longed for them to turn to Him and be forgiven. He did not delight in punishing them. His heart broke as He unleashed His judgement.

As we have examined the relenting of God in this chapter we have seen that there is a strong connection between God's relenting and His compassion and pity for His people. As God watched the destroying angel approach Jerusalem in 1 Chronicles 21:15 He relented. "It is enough: Stay your hand," He cried to the destroying angel. You can't read this passage without having a sense of the grief

in the heart of God as He punished the people of David's day. As we read about how God sent judges to set His people free from the oppression caused by their rebellion, we are again reminded of His compassion toward them. While this cycle of disobedience was repeated many times in the history of Israel, over and over again the Lord showed compassion and relented in His wrath and judgement. How patient and merciful our God is!

I am encouraged when I read that God relented in His judgement because it shows me that God is merciful. God feels for me and His heart is moved by what He has to do to correct or punish me. God's relenting shows me His personal nature and the reality of the grief and pain He also feels in judging.

God's Relenting Shows That He is Compassionate in His Judgement

God's judgement is very real but it is tempered with compassion and mercy. He feels His people's pain and often withholds the full extent of His punishment. God's mercy is demonstrated in His relenting. He did not give His people all they deserved. God could have destroyed the nation of Israel for their sin. In the midst of their punishment, however, God relented and chose to hold back the full extent of His wrath. When God relents, He shows mercy and compassion.

Where would we be today had God not relented in His judgement, tempering it with compassion and mercy? He is not obliged to relent. We read in Jeremiah 4:28:

28 "For this the earth shall mourn,
and the heavens above be dark;

for I have spoken; I have purposed;
I have not relented, nor will I turn back.”

The words of the Lord through Jeremiah are quite clear. “I have not relented, nor will I turn back.” God has every right to punish sin without relenting or showing compassion. While His grace and mercy are abundant, there does come a time when His full wrath is unleashed. Listen to what the Lord said through Jeremiah again in Jeremiah 15:6:

6 You have rejected me declares the Lord;
you keep going backward
so I have stretched out my hand against you and
destroyed you—I am weary of relenting.

God does show wonderful compassion and mercy toward us in our sin. There is a time, however, when God grows weary of relenting and chooses to unleash the full fury of His wrath. How thankful we need to be that God does relent in judgement and show compassion, but we should never take this for granted, for God is just in punishing to the full extent all rebellion and sin.

For Consideration:

- How is God’s relenting an expression of His mercy and compassion?
- Does God always unleash the full extent of His judgement? Does He always punish us as we deserve?
- What does the relenting of God teach us about how God feels when He must punish sin?

- Take a moment to consider how God has relented in punishing you as you deserved.
- Is God obligated to relent?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He feels our pain and shows compassion in judgement.
- Thank the Lord for the way He has relented and chosen not to show you the full force of His wrath.
- Ask God to help you never to take His relenting for granted. Ask Him to help you to live forever grateful for His relenting mercy in your life.
- Do you know someone who is wandering from the Lord today? Ask God to relent from judging them as they deserve. Ask Him also to help them to realize that He may not always relent.

CHAPTER 4 - CONDITIONAL SENTENCES

It may be they will listen, and every one turn from his evil way, that I may relent of the disaster that I intend to do to them because of their evil deeds (Jeremiah 26:3)

... Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. (Joel 2:13)

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it. (Jonah 3:10)

In the previous chapter we saw that God relents and does not always unleash the full extent of His wrath upon us. We see in this the mercy and compassion of God toward those who do not deserve it. In the passages quoted above we see yet another way in which God relents.

Let's consider Jeremiah 26:3 in this context. As chapter 26 opens we see that the Lord has called Jeremiah to the courtyard in the temple with a word for the nation. The word of the Lord was very shocking and strong:

You shall say to them, "Thus says the Lord: If you will not listen to me, to walk in my law that I have set before you, and to listen to the words of my servants the prophets whom I send to you urgently, though you have not listened, then I will make this house like Shiloh, and I will make this city a curse for all the nations of the earth." (Jeremiah 26:4-6)

Notice here that the Lord tells His people what would happen to them if they chose to continue in disobedience. He would not hesitate to make the city of Jerusalem a "curse for all the nations" (verse 6), before He sent Jeremiah to preach this word the Lord God told him in verse 3:

It may be that they will listen, and every one turn from his evil way, that I may relent of the disaster that I intend to do to them because of their evil deeds.

God made His intentions very clear concerning the message. Judgement was not yet final. Everything depended on the response of the people to the word of Jeremiah. If they refused to listen to his message, God would make the city a curse to the nations as He promised. The house of the Lord would be abandoned. If, on the other hand, they listened and turned from their evil ways, God would relent and spare them this judgement.

We notice the same thing in the book of Jonah. Jonah was to go to the city of Nineveh with the word the Lord had

given him to speak (Jonah 3:2). In obedience to the command of the Lord, Jonah went to the city and proclaimed the message God had given him:

“Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”
(Jonah 3:4)

Again, notice how definite these words are. We see in these words what would happen to Nineveh—it would be destroyed. We also see when this would happen—forty days.

The response of the people of Nineveh, however, was one of deep repentance. The king removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes (Jonah 3:6). He issued a proclamation that no one in the city (either man or beast) was to eat or drink anything. Instead, they were all to mourn, turn from their sinful ways and call out to the God of Jonah for mercy. The reason they did this is stated in Jonah 3:9:

Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.

While the word of Jonah was very clear, the inhabitants of Nineveh cried out to God, and repented of their sins in the hope that He would relent and not do what He said He was going to do to them.

According to Jonah 3:10 this is exactly what happened:

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

The words “He said he would do to them, and He did not do it” are striking particularly because they speak of God. Is it possible for God to say He will do something and not do it? How are we to understand these verses in light of what we know about God and His character?

The answer to this comes in the nature of the words God is speaking here. God was pronouncing a conditional judgement on the people of Jonah’s day. A conditional judgement is a word from the Lord concerning what would happen if people continued in their rebellion without repenting and turning from their sin. This judgement was not final but it was very definite. If there was no repentance, and if the people refused to listen, the wrath of the Lord would indeed have fallen on them exactly as God said through His servant Jonah.

In the case of the people of Nineveh, the inhabitants of the city chose to repent and remove the offense. When God saw the response of the people He relented of the evil He intended to do to them and they were spared from His judgement.

When Jonah preached that God would destroy the city of Nineveh in forty days and it did not happen, was he a false prophet? Definitely not—these things would have happened had nothing changed in the hearts of the people of Nineveh. In forty days the judgement of God would have been unleashed and the city destroyed. The people of the city were under the judgement of God and unless things changed they would suffer the consequences.

In both of these illustrations (Jeremiah and Jonah) the people of God were under His wrath. Their sin was an offense to God. The sentence for their rebellion was that their city

would be destroyed. Unless they repented, this sentence would be carried out.

In a similar way, we were under the sentence of death because of sin (see Romans 6:23). This sentence was already passed and we were already under its curse. While the sentence was passed, God did make a way of escape. We are released from this judgement when we turn to His Son Jesus Christ, surrender to Him and receive His forgiveness. On this condition alone can we know the forgiveness of God and be set free. If we refuse this condition, we will continue under His wrath. God does provide a solution, but until we avail ourselves of that solution we are guilty and remain under the sentence. God relents only when we embrace the solution He provides.

In Jeremiah 26, the prophet proclaimed the judgement of God on the nation. God was going to make His house in Jerusalem like Shiloh. Shiloh had been the centre of Israel's faith at one point but now it was abandoned. God would turn from Jerusalem and it would become a curse for all the nations of the earth. These words of Jeremiah were not well received by the inhabitants of the city. In fact, they called for the death of the prophet for speaking against their nation. Jeremiah would not go back on his words, however, and in Jeremiah 26:12-13 he said:

Then Jeremiah spoke to all the officials and all the people saying, "The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the words you have heard. Now therefore mend your ways and your deeds, and obey the voice of the Lord your God and the Lord will relent of the disaster that he has pronounced against you.

Notice that the disaster had already been pronounced against Jerusalem. God had already judged them for their sin and rebellion. This judgement had already been pronounced and was moving toward them quickly. If they did nothing, it would crash on their shore like a great, overpowering wave, destroying everything in sight. Jeremiah reminded the people, however, that even though that judgement had been passed, there was a way of escape. If they listened to the word of the Lord, repented, and changed their ways, God would relent and turn this disaster from them. Everything depended on their repentance.

The prophet Joel also prophesied of a great day of judgement coming for the people of God. Listen to what he tells the people of his day:

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
for the day of the Lord is coming; it is near,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains
a great and powerful people;
their like has never been before,
nor will be again after them through the years of
all generations.
Fire devours before them,
and behind them a flame burns.
The land is like the garden of Eden before them,
but behind them a desolate wilderness,
and nothing escapes them. (Joel 2:1-3)

The vision was very clear. Great devastation was even now marching like a great army toward the people of God.

God's people were already judged for their sin. God's wrath was already unfolding against them.

What is the advice of the prophet in light of this terrible judgement of God unleashed against them? Listen to what he tells his people under the inspiration of the Spirit of God in Joel 2:12-14:

“Yet even now,” declares the Lord,
“return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
and rend your hearts and not your garments.”
Return to the Lord your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;
and relents over disaster.
Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain offering and a drink offering
for the Lord your God?

Again we see that while the sentence had already been passed and God's people were under the sentence of death, there was still hope. There was one final appeal. By turning from sin and seeking the face of the Lord, they could cast themselves on His mercy and call upon Him to relent and forgive.

Let me conclude this chapter by mentioning several things we learn from the verses we have examined here.

God's Judgement is Already on Us

One of the things that is very striking about the verses we have examined in this chapter is the way in which God pronounces a very particular judgement on His people. God

had determined what the sentence for each group was going to be. For the people of Jeremiah's day, their temple would be abandoned and their city would become a curse for the nations. For the inhabitants of the city of Nineveh, in forty days their city would be destroyed. In the case of the people of Joel's day a great army was coming to destroy them. God had a very particular judgement for each situation and people. He considered their case and determined their sentence. The judgement of God was suited to the rebellion. Sentence had been passed.

This is also the case for us today. God's judgement does not wait until the final day. We are already under His wrath. He has already considered our case and pronounced His sentence.

God Announces His Conditional Sentence

The second lesson we need to see in these verses is that through His prophets the Lord announced His conditional sentence on the people concerned. I say that these sentences were conditional because they could be changed. If God's people did nothing, they would suffer the full consequences of the sentence passed against them. If, on the other hand, they listened to God and took this warning seriously, the final outcome would be very different.

In our day, God continues to warn those who are under His judgement. Through the Scriptures He shows us our need and warns us of the seriousness of our condition. He still sends His prophets in the form of evangelists, preachers, and teachers to speak to us about our ways. His Holy Spirit will convict us and God will bring circumstances into our lives to warn us of the judgement we are under. His purpose in all of this is to challenge us to repent and turn from

our evil to Him. The sentence of death is upon us but it does not have to remain. There is a way of escape.

There is a Way of Escape

Jeremiah, Jonah and Joel all pleaded with the people of their day to listen, repent and change their ways. They told them that the sentence of death and judgement would be lifted and God would relent if they would only listen and make things right with Him.

We do not have to perish. God is a relenting God. He takes no delight in punishing the wicked. He provides us with a means of escape. We do not have to suffer the consequences of God's judgement if we will only listen, repent and turn to Him. The only way to escape this terrible judgement is to face our Judge and cry out for mercy by repentance and obedience.

Our Response Opens God's Heart

Finally, we discover in these verses that God was willing to relent of the disaster He intended to do when those who were under His wrath listened to Him and changed their ways. God is looking for more than just a change of behaviour here. Through Joel, He challenged His people to rend their hearts and not just their garments (Joel 2:13). God delights to relent of the disaster He intends if we will return to Him with all our hearts.

We do not have to remain under the sentence of judgement. Because God is a relenting God, He is willing to reverse the curse on our life. His greatest act of relenting is seen in the sacrifice of His Son, the Lord Jesus, to offer forgiveness to all who will come to Him through His Son. The relenting of God gives us great hope. Even though we

are under the curse of sin and rebellion, there is still a way of escape. If we will cast ourselves upon His mercy, He may still relent and turn back His wrath.

For Consideration:

- The passages we have considered in this chapter show us that God's people had already been judged for their sin. How is knowing we are already judged different from believing that we will one day be judged? How does this impact our response?
- What is a conditional sentence? Should we take such a sentence seriously? What makes a sentence conditional?
- How is a conditional sentence reversed according to the verses we have examined in this chapter?
- How does God warn us today of our judgement?
- Jonah prophesied that God would destroy Nineveh in forty days. This did not happen. Was Jonah a false prophet? Did he proclaim the truth? How does understanding the conditional nature of God's judgement help us see that Jonah was a true prophet?
- What encouragement do you find in the fact that God is willing to relent if we turn to Him?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to thank the Lord for His willingness to relent in judgement when we turn to Him and seek His face.
- Thank the Lord for the way in which He has spared you from the judgement you were under.
- Take a moment to consider the people and the circumstances that opened your mind to the reality of your judgement. Thank the Lord for how He brought those people and circumstances into your life to warn you.

CHAPTER 5 - I WILL NOT RELENT

I am the Lord. I have spoken; it shall come to pass; I will do it. I will not go back; I will not spare; I will not relent; according to your ways and your deeds you will be judged, declares the Lord (Ezekiel 24:14)

For thus says the Lord of host: "As I purposed to bring disaster to you when your fathers provoked me to wrath, and I did not relent, says the Lord of hosts (Zechariah 8:14)

In the previous chapters we have seen the wonderful compassion and mercy of God as it is reflected in the Hebrew word "*naham*" translated by the English word relent (repent, KJV). We find in this word a source of great hope and freedom. Our God is a forgiving God who is willing to restore all who will come to Him in repentance.

Having said this, however, it falls on us to also examine some other verses containing the Hebrew word "*naham*" (relent). These verses remind us that God is not obligated to relent or show compassion and forgiveness.

Let's begin by looking at Ezekiel 24:14. Before saying anything about this verse, let's look at the context of Ezekiel 24. God gave the prophet Ezekiel a word to speak to the people of Israel. That word came in the form of an illustration, comparing His people to a cooking pot. Listen to what the Lord says about this cooking pot (the nation of Israel).

Therefore thus says the Lord God: Woe to the bloody city, to the pot whose corrosion is in it, and whose corrosion has not gone out of it! Take out of it piece after piece, without making a choice. (Ezekiel 24:6)

Israel was like a cooking pot filled with corrosion. Not even fire would get rid of the corrosion in the pot. This is how God saw His people. They were filled with sin and even though He had disciplined them in the fire of His judgement, they had still not turned to Him. This grieved the Lord God but it also aroused His fury. Through His prophet Ezekiel, the Lord said to His people:

On account of your unclean lewdness, because I would have cleansed you and you were not cleansed from your uncleanness, you shall not be cleansed anymore till I have satisfied my fury upon you. I am the Lord. I have spoken; it shall come to pass; I will do it. I will not go back; I will not spare; I will not relent; according to your ways and your deeds you will be judged, declares the Lord. (Ezekiel 24:14)

The continual resistance of God's people to the work of His Spirit in their lives resulted in their final judgement. In this case God made it clear to the people of Ezekiel's day that there would be no relenting in His judgement. He would

satisfy His fury and they would perish in their sin and rebellion. He would not show any more compassion toward them.

Zechariah 8:14 is another passage that speaks to the fact that God will not always relent. The prophecy of Zechariah was written after the city of Jerusalem was destroyed and its inhabitants sent into exile. For seventy years the people of God were held in captivity. Most of those who had lived in Jerusalem when the city was captured by the enemy had died in exile, never to return. The once great city of God lay in ruins. Its temple, which had been the centre of the worship of Jehovah, was desecrated. Its wealth had been plundered and its important buildings burnt to the ground.

Through the prophet Zechariah, the Lord told His people that better days were coming. He would restore His people to their land:

For thus says the Lord of hosts: "As I purposed to bring disaster to you when your fathers provoked me to wrath, and I did not relent, says the Lord of hosts, so again have I purposed in these days to bring good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah; fear not. (Zechariah 8:14-15)

God was going to renew His mercy to the next generation. Those who had never seen the city of Jerusalem would be given the opportunity to return. God makes it quite clear, however, that He had refused to relent or show mercy to their fathers because they had provoked Him to wrath. This resulted in the loss of their land, their temple and their freedom in a foreign land.

If we are to understand the relenting Spirit of God, we must do so in the context of these two verses. God does relent in judgement. He does show mercy and compassion, but this is not something He is required to do. In the examples we have before us we see how God's people presumed that they would be forgiven and safe. They felt no urgency to repent. This was their undoing. In an instant, the judgement of God fell and they lost everything they had.

It is a serious thing to take the relenting Spirit of God for granted or to presume that He will always show compassion toward us even when we persist in our rebellion. Listen to the words of the apostle Paul in Romans 2 on this subject:

Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgement will be revealed. (Romans 2:4-5)

Notice what Paul says about those who "presume on the riches of His kindness" (assume that they can do what they want and be guaranteed God's mercy). He tells them that the reason for God relenting and not unleashing the full measure of His wrath on them was so that they would be given time to repent. If they refused to repent, they would store up wrath for themselves "on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgement will be revealed."

The relenting Spirit of God does not mean that God will not judge sin. If anything, it increases our obligation to repent and turn from sin. It ought to stir up within us a sense of urgency. Imagine that you were in a burning house. The

fire surrounds you on every side and you don't know where to turn. In your despair you hear a loud crashing sound. You look up and see that a section of wall has fallen down offering you a temporary means of escape. To delay, even for a moment will mean you will be trapped forever. This, however, is a means of escape, offered for a few seconds of time. If you take advantage of this opportunity, you will be safe. If you reject it you will perish. The relenting of God is like those few seconds of hope in a desperate situation. For a moment of time, He breaks down the wall and shows you a means of escape. How foolish it would be not to take advantage of this grace. We are under His judgement but in this brief instant, the relenting Spirit of God reveals a single avenue of escape. We dare not delay. There may never be another opportunity. This is the moment to repent. This is the moment to cast ourselves on His relenting Spirit and receive the forgiveness and mercy He offers.

The passages above show us that God's relenting Spirit will not keep Him from judging sin and rebellion. For a time, He relents, to give us an opportunity to repent and be saved from judgement. This relenting, however, will not last forever. To persist in sin when His relenting Spirit gives us a means of escape, will only "store up wrath for ourselves" on the Day of Judgement.

For Consideration:

- Is God obligated to relent and show compassion on those who sin?
- Give some Biblical example of times when God refused to relent.

- What does the apostle Paul tell us in Romans 2:4 about the purpose for God's relenting?
- How does the relenting Spirit of God create a sense of urgency in us? What is the result of not taking advantage of this offer of God?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He does relent for a time so that we have opportunity to repent and be restored to fellowship with Him.
- Thank the Lord that while He is a God of mercy and compassion, He is also a holy and just God who will judge sin and rebellion.
- Has God been offering you a means of escape? Ask Him to help you to take advantage of this opportunity before it is too late. Ask Him to give you grace to turn from the sin He is speaking to you about today.

CHAPTER 6 - THE RELENTING OF GOD AND PRAYER

"Furthermore, the Lord said to me, 'I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stubborn people. Let me alone, that I may destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven... 'So I lay prostrate before the Lord for those forty days and forty nights, because the Lord had said he would destroy you. (Deuteronomy 9:13-14, 25)

"... O Lord God, please forgive! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!" The Lord relented concerning this: It shall not be," said the Lord (Amos 7:2-3)

Then he said to me, "See, I assign to you cow's dung instead of human dung, on which you may prepare your bread." (Ezekiel 4:15)

So far we have examined the relenting Spirit of God from the perspective of God and His character. In the last chapter we began to look at the practical application of this truth. We spoke about not taking this offer of forgiveness

and release for granted. God is not obligated to offer us pardon. He does so willingly and freely from a heart of compassion and mercy. He relents for a time so we can repent and be restored to fellowship. To refuse this offer, however, is to heap up wrath on ourselves in the Day of Judgement. There comes a time when God will cease to relent.

There is another important application of this truth about the relenting Spirit of God. An understanding of this truth ought to affect how we pray. Let me offer some Scriptural examples of this.

In Deuteronomy 9, Moses shares a conversation he had with the Lord when he was on Mount Sinai. The Israelites did not know what had happened to Moses and so they called Aaron and asked him to make them a god they could see. They were afraid of the God of Israel and His power. Aaron made for them a golden calf and the people fell down to worship it.

As these events unfolded, the Lord God spoke to Moses and said:

..."I have seen this people, and behold it is a stubborn people. Let me alone, that I may destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven, and I will make of you a nation mightier and greater than they." (Deuteronomy 9:13-14)

The Lord was angry with the people. That day He declared to Moses that He was going to destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven. Moses left the presence of the Lord on the mountain to see what was happening in the Israelite camp. Notice the response of Moses to what he saw that day:

Then I lay prostrate before the Lord as before, forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all the sin that you had committed, in doing what was evil in the sight of the Lord to provoke him to anger. For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure that the Lord bore against you, so that he was ready to destroy you. But the Lord listened to me that time also. And the Lord was so angry with Aaron that he was ready to destroy him. And I prayed for Aaron also at the same time. (Deuteronomy 9:18-20)

Something quite remarkable happened in those days. Moses stood between God and the people and for forty days fasted and prayed to the Lord, begging Him for mercy on the people He was ready to destroy. Judgement had been passed on the people for their rebellion. When Moses prayed, however, the Lord listened and relented. This resulted in the lives of many people being saved.

What was true in the case of Moses was also true in the ministry of the prophet Amos. In Amos 7 the Lord showed the prophet a vision of a great swarm of locusts that was going to invade the land at a very crucial point in the harvest. This would have meant great hardship for the people of God. While this event had been triggered by the rebellion of God's people, Amos cried out to the Lord:

"O Lord God please forgive!
How can Jacob stand?
He is so small!"
The Lord relented concerning this:
"It shall not be," said the Lord. (Amos 7:2-3)

The Lord God then gave the prophet a second vision. This time it was a vision of a great fire coming to devour the land. Again the prophet cried out to God:

"O Lord God, please cease!

How can Jacob stand?

He is so small!"

The Lord relented concerning this:

"This also shall not be," said the Lord God. (Amos 7:5-6)

What do we see in these examples? In both cases the judgement of God was ready to fall on His people. The Lord relented, however, when His prophets stood in the gap and prayed for mercy and forgiveness. We are left with the distinct impression that were it not for the prayers of Moses and Amos, the judgement of God would have fallen and many people would have perished.

This truth comes out very clearly in Ezekiel 22. In this case, however, there was no one to intercede for the people of God.

The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery. They have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the sojourner without justice. And I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it, but I found none. Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them. I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath. I have returned their way upon their heads, declares the Lord God. (Ezekiel 22:29-31)

Here in Ezekiel we see the result of not having anyone stand in the gap. The passage tells us that God looked for a man to stand in the breach but could not find one so He poured out His wrath. Again we are left with the impression that had there been someone to intercede for the people of God, the fierceness of His wrath could have been avoided.

While this passage in Ezekiel may speak to the need of the Messiah, taken with the other passages we have quoted above, we see that there is an application for us as well. God has called us to stand in the gap. Our prayers and our actions can have a dramatic impact on our land and the lives of those around us. God's mercy is released by prayer and intercession. He hears the cries of His saints for mercy on their nations and responds to those prayers.

What is true on a large scale is also true for individuals. Consider Ezekiel 4 for instance. God called the prophet to symbolize the siege of Jerusalem by foreign armies. The prophet was to build a model of the city and put up siege works against it. When he had built this model he was to lie on his side for a period of days to symbolize the time Israel would be under the judgement of God. God then told Ezekiel what he was to eat during those days:

"And your food that you eat shall be by weight, twenty shekels a day; from day to day you shall eat it. And water you shall drink by measure, the sixth part of a hin; from day to day you shall drink. And you shall eat it as a barley cake, baking it in their sight on human dung." (Ezekiel 4:10-11)

Ezekiel was quite willing to follow this diet but objected to cooking it on a fire fueled by human dung. He spoke to God about this:

Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Behold, I have never defiled myself. From my youth up till now I have never eaten what died of itself or was torn by beasts, nor has tainted meat come into my mouth."

Ezekiel was in reality telling God that he did not want to eat his bread cooked over human dung. This would have made him unclean. He respectfully brings his objections to God. What is interesting in this passage is to see the response of God to Ezekiel's objection:

Then he said to me, "See, I assign to you cow's dung instead of human dung, on which you may prepare your bread." (Ezekiel 4:15)

There is something quite amazing here. God hears the request of His prophet. Through He had commanded him to prepare his bread on a fire made with human dung; God is sensitive to the wishes of Ezekiel. God changes His requirement when Ezekiel objected.

What do these verses teach us about the relenting Spirit of God? They show us that God is not a hard and uncaring God. He is sensitive to our cries for help. There is flexibility in God's plan. He relents by showing mercy and compassion when we ask Him.

The fact that God has a relenting Spirit shows us that things can change. There are those whose view of God's sovereignty is such that there is no room for change. If the events and circumstances of life are predetermined so that they cannot change, what is the need for prayer? We can pray expecting change because God has a relenting Spirit. He is not inflexible but will consider our requests and answer us when we cry to Him.

While God does relent by changing our circumstances, we need to realize that He remains God. We have seen in a previous chapter that God is under no obligation to relent. Prayer does not give us power over God; it merely casts us upon His mercy. It is not our way of telling God what to do but humbly begging for compassion.

Moses learned this lesson in Numbers 12:13 when his sister was judged by God for opposing him. God struck Miriam with leprosy for questioning the authority of Moses and his call from God. When Moses saw that his sister was filled with leprosy as a result of her sin, he cried out to God: "O God, please heal her –please" (Numbers 12:13). Notice the repetition of the word "please" in the verse. This was an indication of the despair Moses felt. While God saw the sincerity of Moses' plea, listen to His response:

But the Lord said to Moses, "If her father had but spit in her face, should she not be shamed seven days? Let her be shut outside the camp seven days, and after that she may be brought in again." (Numbers 12:14)

God does not give Moses everything he wanted here. He demanded that Miriam pay the price for her sin and so for seven days she would be cast aside as a leper so that she would learn her lesson.

The same principle is seen in the life of the apostle Paul. In 2 Corinthians 12:7-8 the apostle told the Corinthians that he had prayed three times that God would remove a particular "thorn" in his flesh. God refused to do this telling him instead: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

The prophet Jeremiah was commanded by God not to pray for the welfare of the people to whom he has been called:

The Lord said to me: "Do not pray for the welfare of this people. Though they fast, I will not hear their cry, and though they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept them. But I will consume them by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence."
(Jeremiah 14:11-12)

While God is not obligated to answer our prayers as we want, He is not inflexible. He is willing to change our destiny as we cry out to Him and repent of our sin. He is willing to meet us in our need, extend our lives by healing our afflictions or empower us for greater service as we call out to Him in prayer. This flexibility in God means that the color and texture of our lives can change when we pray or learn to walk in obedience. The apostle James makes this clear when he says: "You do not have because you do not ask" (James 4:2).

There are things we will never experience because we do not pray. There are victories we will never know because we do not ask God for them. There are levels of fruitfulness we will never attain simply because we have never been willing to seek God for them. The day is coming when we will answer to God for this.

While prayer moves the heart of God, it does not put us in control. We do not pray like a military commander issuing orders to God but as humble servants seeking mercy and compassion. We come to Him who is in control, seeking strength to do His will. We cast ourselves on His mercy seeking His favor in our time of need and pain. He is not insensitive to our cries. He is willing to relent and extend His grace. The fact that God has a relenting spirit ought to

give us confidence to come to Him with our requests and pleas.

For Consideration:

- Is there flexibility in God's purpose? Can our circumstances change as a result of our prayers?
- How does an understanding of the relenting Spirit of God give us reason to pray?
- Is God insensitive to our needs and preferences? Is He willing to meet us in this area of our lives? What does the example of Ezekiel teach us about this?
- What is the difference between seeing prayer as having power over God and seeing it as casting ourselves upon His mercy?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He is willing to hear your requests and change your circumstances when you come to Him in prayer.
- Ask God to forgive you for the times you have accepted things the way they were and not asked Him to change them for His glory.
- Ask God to help you to see prayer as a means of casting yourself on His mercy. Ask Him to forgive you for times you felt like you could command Him to serve you and your needs.

- Thank the Lord for His relenting spirit that is willing to hear your request and change your circumstances as a result.

CHAPTER 7 - THE RELENTING OF GOD AND HUMAN DECISIONS

When Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest saw it, he rose and left the congregation and took a spear in his hand and went after the man of Israel into the chamber and pierced both of them, the man of Israel and the woman through her belly. Thus the plague on the people of Israel was stopped. (Numbers 25:7-8)

And he said to him, "Well done, good servant! Because you have been faithful in a very little, you shall have authority over ten cities." (Luke 19:17)

In the previous chapter we saw that God is willing to relent and show mercy and compassion when we ask Him. We also spoke briefly about how the relenting Spirit of God gives us hope that things can change through prayer.

As we continue our reflection on the relenting Spirit of God, I want to touch on another application of this truth to our

lives. In the passages quoted above, we see that the decisions we make in life touch the relenting Spirit of God. Let me explain what I mean by this.

In Genesis 2:16-17 we read the account of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. When the Lord God created them, He created them to live in harmony with Him forever. Death did not exist prior to the fall into sin. He also gave them a free will to choose Him and to walk in obedience. In the Garden of Eden the Lord planted a tree. He called this tree the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. While Adam and Eve could eat from any other tree in the Garden, this tree was off limits.

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." (Genesis 2:16-17)

God told Adam and Eve that if they ate from this tree they would "surely die." What is important for us to note in this context is that there was a choice for Adam and Eve to make. God had created them perfect. They were living in communion with Him. They would have lived forever in the presence of God. The only thing that could separate them from God was their own decision to disobey and eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Communion with God was wonderful in those days. There in the garden their relationship with God was unhindered by sin. When Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the forbidden tree, however, everything changed. Because of their decision to disobey the command of God, the relenting Spirit of God stripped them of the good He had intended for them. Pain, struggle and death would now be their lot in

life. The holy God who created them relented of the good He had planned for them and cursed them instead.

Numbers 25 recounts the story of Israel's rebellion against God. In those days there was great idolatry and immorality in the land. The people of God worshipped the gods of the Midianites. This aroused the anger of the Lord against them. As a result of their sin, the Lord sent a great plague on the nation that would ultimately take the lives of 24,000 people. As this plague was ravaging the land one of the men of Israel brought a Midianite woman home with him and took her to his tent to have sexual relations with her. He did this in the sight of Moses and the people, without shame.

When Phinehas the priest saw what had taken place, he determined to do something about it. Numbers 25:7-8 tells us what he did:

When Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose and left the congregation and took a spear in his hand and went after the man of Israel into the chamber and pierced both of them, the man of Israel and the woman through her belly. Thus the plague on the people of Israel was stopped. (Numbers 25:7-8)

The plague that ravaged Israel was taking thousands of lives. Only when Phinehas took a spear and killed this man and woman in their act of open rebellion against God, did the plague stop. His action caused God to relent and stop the judgement on the land.

King Ahaz was a very evil king. Under his reign the doors of the temple were closed (2 Chronicles 28:24). Idol worship filled the land. This resulted in the judgement of God

falling on the nation. Listen to the description of the land when Ahaz's son Hezekiah took the throne:

Therefore the wrath of the Lord came on Judah and Jerusalem, and he has made them an object of horror, of astonishment, and of hissing, as you see with your eyes. For behold, our fathers have fallen by the sword, and our sons and our daughters and our wives are in captivity for this. (2 Chronicles 29:8)

King Hezekiah, however, unlike his father Ahaz, chose to walk in the ways of the Lord. He opened the temple doors his father had closed and charged the priests and the Levites to purify the temple so that worship of the Lord God could be restored in the land. As part of this restoration, King Hezekiah sent out letters to invite the people of God to the temple for a celebration of the Passover. Part of that invitation read as follows:

Do not now be stiff-necked as your fathers were, but yield yourselves to the Lord and come to his sanctuary, which he has consecrated forever, and serve the Lord your God, that his fierce anger may turn away from you. For if you return to the Lord, your brother and your children will find compassion with their captors and return to this land. For the Lord your God is gracious and merciful and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him. (2 Chronicles 30:8-9)

What is important to note in these verses is what Hezekiah tells us about the Lord God. He told his people that if they returned to the Lord, "His fierce anger may turn away." If they returned to the Lord their children and brothers would

"find compassion with their captors and return." If they returned to the Lord, he would return to them. The people were currently under the judgement of God. 2 Chronicles 28:8 tells us that they had become "an object of horror, of astonishment and hissing." Hezekiah believed that all this could change because God was a merciful and compassionate God who would relent of this judgement if they returned to Him. For God to relent, however, they needed to change their ways and learn to walk in obedience. Their decision would have an impact on what happened to them as a nation. God would be moved by their decision to turn to Him. While prayer is important and it does move God to relent, our actions are also of utmost importance. We cannot expect to see a change in our situation if we are not willing to walk in obedience to God. Hezekiah's desire was to see God relent of the disaster He had brought on them when He saw the sincerity of the hearts of His people to walk in obedience.

In Luke 19 Jesus told the parable of a nobleman who went away on a journey and left money with his servants to engage in business until he returned. Upon his return, the nobleman demanded an accounting of what his servants had done with this money while he was away. The first man reported that he had multiplied his money tenfold (Luke 19:16, 17). He received the commendation of his master and was given authority over ten cities. The second servant multiplied his master's money five times. He too received the master's approval and was given authority over five cities (Luke 19:17, 18). The third servant kept his master's money in a handkerchief. When asked to give a report, he returned only what the master had given him. The master reprimanded this servant, took what had been given to him and gave it to the one who had increased his money ten times (Luke 19:24).

We see how the decisions of each of the servants affected the master. To the one who was faithful even more was given. To the one who was unfaithful, what he had was taken from him and given to another. What is the lesson for us in this parable? Is it not that God is the giver of all gifts and holds us accountable for all He has given us? Beyond this, however, do we not see that the Giver of all gifts may also relent and take the gifts He has given us away if we are not faithful with them?

Our actions touch the relenting Spirit of God. On the one hand our unfaithfulness may mean that He relents and takes from us the privileges and blessings He had intended. On the other hand, our obedience and repentance may also move His relenting Spirit to extend mercy and compassion and give us even greater responsibility.

What are we to understand from these examples? We have a sovereign God who is in control of all things. He has a purpose and plan. He is not inflexible, however. He can accomplish His plan through us or through someone else. While God does have a plan for our lives, the decisions I make in life can have an impact on the unfolding of that plan. God is not a harsh taskmaster forcing me into submission. He gives me a free will to walk fully in His purpose or to choose to disobey. Adam and Eve disobeyed and walked away from the purpose of God in the garden. The history of Israel is a clear example of how God's people did not walk fully in the blessings He intended for them.

Our decisions in life will touch the relenting Spirit of God. He may relent of the good He intended to do to us or He may relent of the judgement He intended to bring. He may relent and take away the blessing He had intended or He may relent and pour out even more. My decisions and actions can touch this relenting heart of God.

What is both encouraging and challenging here is the fact that God interacts with His servants in the unfolding of His purpose. As the sovereign master, the Lord may show mercy to those who repent. He may increase our responsibility or take away those blessing we have not been faithful to use for Him. It is amazing to consider the fact that the purpose of God moves forward despite our shortcomings and failures. God punishes and shows mercy, withdraws His blessings from some and blesses others. In all this God's purpose continues to advance. The question is not whether God will accomplish His purpose, but what part will I be given the privilege to part of that great purpose. Will I by my faithfulness be and instrument of great blessing or will I miss the mark He has for me. How will my decisions touch the relenting heart of God?

For Consideration:

- How did the decision of Adam and Eve affect what God did to them in the Garden of Eden?
- How did the decision of Phinehas the priest break the curse of God on the land?
- What did Hezekiah believe would happen if the people of God repented of their sin and made things right with God?
- According to Luke 19, how does our faithfulness or unfaithfulness touch the relenting heart of God?
- What do we learn in this chapter about how God interacts with us in the unfolding of His purpose?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to thank the Lord that He is moved by our repentance and will at times reverse the curse of disobedience on our lives.
- Have you been faithful with what the Lord has given you? Ask the Lord to give you grace to be faithful to use what He has given for His glory.
- Thank the Lord that He is sovereign over the affairs of this life even when you are unfaithful.
- Ask the Lord to give you a heart that seeks to be part of the great unfolding of His purpose in this world. Thank Him for the privilege He gives for us to play a role in this wonderful plan.

CHAPTER 8 - A WORD OF CAUTION

But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us." And Samuel prayed to the Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, "Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. (1 Samuel 8)

Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the Lord, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Behold, I will add fifteen years to your life. (Isaiah 38)

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen (Romans 1)

In this brief study we have attempted to look at a number of verses that speak about the relenting heart of God. We have seen that God is not inflexible in His purpose. We find great hope in the fact that God is willing to relent in

judgement when I repent and return to Him. In this final chapter, however, I want to examine a few passages of Scripture that challenge us to exercise great caution concerning this truth about God.

We have already seen that our actions can impact the decisions God makes. In Jesus' parable of the servants who received money to invest for their master (Luke 19) we saw how the unfaithfulness of one servant caused the master to take away his money and give it to someone who would be faithful in its use. We also see that while it is the purpose of God to bless those who walk in obedience, God may relent and withdraw His blessing from those who choose to disobey. This truth should challenge us to walk in faithful obedience to the Lord.

As we conclude this brief reflection, I want to examine three passages of Scripture that challenge us to never take this relenting heart of God for granted. The first passage is found in 1 Samuel 8. Here in this chapter we discover that Samuel the prophet was quite old. He had two sons who were judges in Israel but those sons did not walk in the ways of the Lord. 1 Samuel 8:3 tells us that they "took bribes and perverted justice."

The elders of Israel approached Samuel and told him that they were not happy with his sons as rulers. Instead they wanted to have a king like the other nations around them. What is important for us to understand here is that the Lord God was Israel's king. Israel, however, wanted a human king like the nations around them.

This request displeased Samuel very much and he went to the Lord about it. The Lord spoke to Samuel that day and told him:

And the Lord said to Samuel, "Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. (1 Samuel 8)

God went on to tell Samuel that he was to warn the people, however, about what would happen if they continued in this path. A king would take their sons and daughters for his army and as servants. He would demand a tenth of their grain, vineyards and flocks to feed his army and servants. God warned the people through Samuel that the day would come when the people of Israel would cry out to God because of the oppression of their king but God would not answer them. (1 Samuel 8:11-18).

God makes is quite clear what the results of choosing a king would be. These kings would ultimately become a curse to them. They would cry out to God but He would not answer their prayers because they had chosen this path for themselves. In choosing a king they were also choosing the consequences. Israel persisted in their decision for a king and so God relented and gave them the desire of their heart. God allowed Israel to reject Him as their king and replace Him with an earthly king knowing that in the end these kings would not be for their good.

Consider another example in Isaiah 38. This passage tells the story of Hezekiah the king. He became king at a time of deep rebellion against God. The worship of God had ceased and the temple doors were closed. Hezekiah restored the worship of God and cleansed the temple of all its impurities. Despite these good works, a day came when Hezekiah became very sick. Isaiah 38:1 tells us that he was at the point of death as a result of this sickness:

... And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came to him, and said to him, "Thus says the Lord: Set your house in order, for you shall die, you shall not recover." (Isaiah 38:1)

This was a very clear word from the Lord, "you shall not recover." This news grieved Hezekiah greatly and resulted in his crying out to God. Isaiah 38:3 tells us that he "wept bitterly" and reminded God of how he had faithfully served Him. God heard those prayers of King Hezekiah and sent Isaiah back to him with another word:

"Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the Lord, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Behold, I will add fifteen years to your life.

God relented and extended the life of Hezekiah for fifteen years. What is important to note here is what would happen in those fifteen years. When Hezekiah died his son Manasseh would come to the throne in his father's place. Notice in 2 Kings 21:1 that Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king. This means that Manasseh was born during those fifteen years God gave to Hezekiah. Listen to the description of Manasseh's reign in 2 Kings 21:10-16:

And the Lord said by his servants the prophets, "Because Manasseh king of Judah has committed these abominations and has done things more evil than all that the Amorites did, who were before him, and has made Judah also to sin with his idols, therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Behold, I am bringing upon Jerusalem and Judah such disaster that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. And I will stretch over Jerusalem the

measuring line of Samaria, and the plumb line of the house of Ahab, and I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. And I will forsake the remnant of my heritage and give them into the hand of their enemies, and they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies, because they have done what is evil in my sight and have provoked me to anger, since the day their fathers came out of Egypt, even to this day."

Moreover, Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another, besides the sin that he made Judah to sin so that they did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. (2 Kings 21:16)

King Hezekiah pleaded with God for healing. God relented from taking his life and gave him fifteen more years to live. In those fifteen years Manasseh, his son, was born. Manasseh, would reverse all the good his father Hezekiah had done and fill Jerusalem from one end to another with innocent blood (2 Kings 21:16). He would provoke the Lord to such anger that the Lord said: "I will forsake the remnant of my heritage and give them into the hand of their enemies" (2 Kings 21:15).

God relented and gave Hezekiah what he wanted, but it came with a cost. All his reforms for good were reversed by the son born in those days and the blessing of God would be stripped from the nation. Had Hezekiah accepted the initial purpose of God, Manasseh would never have been born. We do not know what the outcome would have been had this been the case. What we do know, however, is that God will sometimes grant our request but make us face the consequences.

Listen to what the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:22-24 about the people of his day:

Claiming to be wise they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen

Like the people of Israel demanding a king, the people of Paul's day demanded freedom from the laws and principles of God's Word. They claimed to be wise and believed they knew better than God. They chose their own path—a path that would draw them away from the purpose of God for their lives. It was not God's heart that these individuals worship idols and dishonor their bodies among themselves. Their insistence in doing things their own way, however, caused God to give them up to their own desires. They would suffer the consequences of their actions in their society and personal lives.

What do these passages teach us? They teach us that we must never take the relenting heart of God for granted. What a wonderful privilege it is to know that as we pray God hears our prayers and relents in judgement when we have truly repented. What hope we have to know that God will restore blessing and health stripped away from us when we cry out to Him. God is not inflexible in His purpose for our lives. What we need to understand, however, is that when we begin to feel that we know what is best for our lives and persist in this (contrary to the purpose of God) God may grant us what we demand but it will not be for our

good. Israel received her king, Hezekiah's life was extended and the people of Paul's day were granted freedom to practice their immorality but each one suffered the consequences.

God relents to bless His people but He also relents to punish them. As we approach a holy and sovereign God with a relenting heart, we must do so respectfully seeking His will. We must learn to cry out for His purpose to be accomplished in us and through us. We must learn to put Him before our own plans and desires. Somehow, I believe that there is more that God wants to accomplish through us as His people. The barrenness we feel can be changed. The strongholds of sin can be broken. The curse can be shattered. I am not destined to live in defeat. As I take God's Word seriously and learn to walk in prayerful obedience things can change. The relenting heart of God is touched by my faithful and prayerful obedience and blessing is poured out.

Will you not cry out today to God? Are there things in your life that you need victory over today but have simply resigned yourself to defeat? Will you not ask God about these things today? Will you not cry out to Him for the victory you need to walk in greater victory and fruitfulness? The relenting heart of God is touched by our sincere cries to do His will. Be careful, however, lest you take this heart for granted. Those who come to God with their requests must seek His heart, lest in demanding their own will they suffer the consequences of their insistence.

For Consideration:

- Who was Israel's true King? What was the sin of Israel in asking for a human king? Does God give them their request? What were the consequences?
- How does Hezekiah's request for healing cause problems for Israel in the year to come?
- Will God sometimes give us what we stubbornly insist on, even if it is not good for us? Give some examples from Scripture.
- What do we learn here about God relenting in order to punish those who persist in sin?
- Why is it important for us to seek God's heart in prayer and service?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He is a sovereign God who has a purpose and plan for your life.
- Ask God to give you a heart to seek His will. Ask Him to give you grace to surrender to His will and to seek His grace to become everything He wants you to be.
- Take a moment to examine your personal life. Are there areas of your life that are not in tune with the perfect will of God? Surrender these areas of your life to the Lord and ask for grace and wisdom to live in victory.
- Have you been seeking your own purposes and not the Lord's? Ask the Lord to forgive you. Take a moment now to confess this to the Lord. Ask Him to help you to seek His purpose alone for your life and service.

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