On Repentance (De Paenitentia)

Eusebius of Emesa (c. AD 300–360)

SermonIndex.net / Church Fathers

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The Text

1. Rejecting the arrogance of those who dare to remove repentance from the midst, the brother most worthy of all respect gave us another commandment in which, observing this pride, he stretched out his wise right hand to his brothers to repent. And this word is most useful to men. For no man is without sin. For concerning only one man is witness given that he committed no sin. So we will speak of repentance, both from the Old and from the New Testament. For these are the treasures of the Church. Now we recommend repentance, not to promote the sin of our brother, (since we do not want to lead the sinner into sin in the hope of repentance), but to endeavour to raise up the fallen. For the despair which is introduced by the adversaries, drives him who has once fallen to wallow in his sins: but the expectation of repentance incites the fallen man to arise and to sin no more.

"But who are we to impose a law on God? If God wants to send away, is there anyone who can prevent it?" We say, not what they dare to, but what God commands: "Shall he who falls not rise again?" They contradict God. "He who falls does not rise again." He did not lead you to believe by a thin word, he will lead you to believe by a clear example. For what is so difficult to wash as red? But what is white with us like snow, or like clean wool? But he who founded these things says: If your sins are like colours that cannot be washed away, if you only wash them, they will change into purity in the snow. "But this remission is not after baptism. For He said, 'Wash, be clean.'" Nevertheless this above all, if you had asked us, we could show from the Scriptures, namely, that there is forgiveness and remission after baptism. For it is not necessary to contradict in such a way that we may choose the easy ones: but against those things which appear to be strong, we must rise up with a contrary word. For as long as obstinacy is not removed from the mind, the patient cannot be cured.

2. But there is no room for sweetness in things steeped in salt, so now we bring forth words from the Old Testament; let us compare what they oppose against what is said from the Old. For they say that "if you read to us something from the Old Testament about penance, before the Saviour's passion, before that sacred blood was shed for us, we say that in the Old Testament sins were forgiven, but in the New because of the passion there will

be no forgiveness." But if we show from the New Testament that after baptism and the participation of the Spirit, that he who has sinned is called back by the grace of repentance, it is clear that there is a place for penitence even after baptism for those who have fallen away, so that what is read in the Old Testament will have strength and authority to build onto repentance. (I speak as if they were present and listening.) Hence I touch on even more serious matters, so that once we have fallen, having conceived the good hope, we may by no means continue in sin. You did not believe this by the example of proving; believe the oath of God. God says: "As I live, says the Lord." Now it is appropriate for God to swear this. For since he had no ancestor himself, he swears because of the unbelief of those who abolish repentance. "As I live," says the Lord," but let no one be deterred, since "I do not want the death of the sinner, but rather that he should be converted and live." He who lives wants you to live. Is it that, even when God swears, he is unworthy to be believed?

Do you believe neither word, nor example, nor oath? believe the facts. Nineveh was not overthrown, for she did penance. The prophet indignantly declared that she had not been overthrown: the ivy had sprouted. He excuses himself to you, so that you may remember that He is good. But I fear that you will not hear from him: "Is your eye evil, because I am good?" Who is described as more wicked than Ahab? (I speak as if to the readers.) Besides the rest of the spoils, having killed the master, he seized the vineyard: he came down to take the inheritance; he came down rejoicing. He came to meet him who would bring sorrow, who would rebuke him, the prophet, indeed, not an enemy, but as if sparing him, he pronounced not his own judgement, but the judgement of God. Accepting the judgement, he puts on his sackcloth and puts off his rulership. For it is written that the prophet himself, who had been sent to pronounce the sentence, will hear from God that what I have said would not happen in his days, because Ahab prayed, fearing the dangers. I am forced to wish for a good cure.

The holy David, or holy after sin, transgressed three of the ten commandments in one case. Since we are addressing you, let us speak more clearly. There was adultery, and murder, and lust for another's wife. The righteous man sinned, and God appointed him the judge of his own sin. And since we do not see a beam in our own eye, but we see a speck in a stranger's eye, he sets forth his crime as a stranger's, and says: "There were two men in one city, one rich, the other poor. One was very rich: but only one lamb for the poor, which slept in his arms," (and this was a mystery to his wife!) "It ate with him and drank from his cup. There came," he says, "a guest to the rich man," (indeed rightly called "guest"), evidently David was not used to these. "So the guest came to him: sparing," he said, "to slaughter for the guest one of those he had," he said, "he slaughters the stolen lamb of the poor man."

Of course, no matter how hard a man falls, he rises quickly. David bears the matter with difficulty, for David was also fallen. "As the Lord lives, he who did this is worthy of death." He took the decision on himself. When he came out with these things, the prophet declared who that man was. David immediately came to the cure: he saw the wound, he fled to the doctor. "I have sinned," he said, and immediately the doctor was at hand. "And the Lord

took away your sin." For what do you want, one sin to be imputed to the holy, or many righteousnesses? He committed sin, but he also committed many righteousnesses. What is just with a just God, not to remember a few, or to forget many? Let there be a set of scales, and according to the measure that we measured, let it be measured out to us. If the sins are many, let him be a sinner: the righteousness are many, let him be righteous. One and one.

For all our things are judged from something more abundant. And one white thing is surpassed by another whiter thing; and with a sweet thing, if you compare something else, it is sweeter. Thus also we are righteous as men, not that sin is righteousness. Hence the Son of God is called righteousness: but we are righteous by participation in righteousness. And Moses spoke something with a tongue, which, however, is not included in history. And Abraham is found to have been faithful, and yet there was a time when he was unbelieving. I do not accuse the righteous, but I give glory to God. I do not want anyone to sin. Enoch was approved by God, says the Scripture, after he had begotten a son. If he is approved by Him afterwards, he can be approved by those who he was not. 3. But let us come to the New Testament, although we will still encounter many things from the Old. For even Manasseh, who had placed idols with fourfold faces in the temple of God, so that wherever anyone entered, they would worship the idols, was recalled from captivity after doing penance. Let's move on to the New. For it is from that, from which they want above all to exclude repentance, that repentance is above all proclaimed. We will ask the Saviour. "Why did you come?" and He answers: "I did not come to save the righteous, but to call sinners," he says, "to repentance." Let us learn from him, "What are you carrying on your shoulders?" "A lost sheep," he says. "Upon what is there joy in heaven?" "Over some sinner," he says, "doing penance."

The angels rejoice, and you envy? God receives with joy, and you forbid? Let us take refuge in the good God with greater zeal. There were two, he says, both sons (you cannot tell me that this repentance was of the gentiles: but they were both sons, who had divided the property equally.) The junior consumed what he had: righteous as he was, he fell. But when he had consumed everything, he came to do penance, and hastened to his father, and when he was about to meet his father, he thought what he was going to say to him. "I have sinned," he said, "against you, before heaven." He decided this with himself, and the Good Father did not hide away. He approached to excuse himself: He went to meet him, having honour to him. You only express a wish, and He runs ahead. He begins to speak, and the father receives him. Consider your inmost feelings, and don't give up hope. He accepted him, and said: "Kill the bull, and bring the best robe, and the ring into his hand."

All these things are set forth in another judgement: but however I abbreviate, they signify a good encouragement to those who receive, not what I want, but what He says. But if this one is accepted, after he has fed the pigs, after he has consumed everything, you say this is wrong, he is accepted wrongly, and his brother: who rightly objected to him.

4. And the fig tree which was cultivated, and which had not borne fruit for three years, was let go, and was not cut down for the hope of future fruit. The Lord forgives, and you contradict? Is there anyone who steals things that already belong to him? But if God indulges, who is it that contradicts? In any case, let us learn to pray: "Forgive us our sins, for we have also forgiven ourselves." You forgive, and God does not forgive? He made you a better doctor! With the measure you have measured, it will be returned to you. Let it go: He lets you go. You, bad as you are, act kindly; does not He who is good do much more so? Jesus deals with sinners, the doctor with the sick. The Pharisees were indignant, the fathers of those who are indignant now. The merciful is not turned away. He entered the house of the Pharisee, by invitation: a sinful woman who was not called came in after him. She saw her sin, she went to righteousness: she saw the disease, she went to where the doctor was. She did not come to His face, for she was not so bold, she did not take hold of his hand, for she did not dare: but at the feet, which she washed with tears, she loosened her hair then only for honourable reasons; having revealed herself indecently, she then laid herself open honestly. You have been given an example to take refuge at the feet of Jesus. He returned to the Father, but He says: "I am with you." Whenever he pleases, he is near; flee to him confidently, water his feet. And he comes in person, and he leaves in person.

These things which are taken from the New Testament are identical and related to those which are found in the Old. What does John preach? the baptism of repentance. And he teaches in parables, not once, not twice, so that although you are taught often, you learn. Peter denies Him three times, yet He is placed as the foundation. Paul, from being a persecutor, became a preacher.

But here is the question. What in fact does he say? "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst. He declares his own crime, in order to show the greatness of His grace. And Peter had spoken, and had obtained the blessing; he had said: "You are the son of the most high God; and when he had heard: "You are the rock," he was ennobled by the announcement. But although he is a rock, he is not as Christ is a rock, but as Peter is a rock. For Christ is truly an unshakable rock. But he became Peter because of the rock. For Jesus bestows his honours, and does not run out, but what he gives, he keeps. He is the light. "You are the light of the world. He is a priest, he makes priests. He is the sheep: "Behold, I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves. He is a rock, he makes a rock, and he gives him to his servants. For this is the sign of the rich, to have and to give. It is true that those who are rich among us, when they give generously, diminish what they have. For we are not rich, for we possess other people's property. But he is so rich, that no matter how much he has given away, he remains rich, nothing lessened, he covers a perennial source. No matter how much you draw, the flow does not decrease.

No, not like a spring, for no example in nature among us can be compared to him. Hence, when we have nothing appropriate, we make use of lesser things, in order that we may somehow know the unknown. Peter denies three times, not so that Peter may fall, but that you too may have comfort. He wept; the tears fell on him who pities us. For he alone

reveals everywhere that the intention of the soul was good. ”The spirit is indeed willing; but the flesh is weak. He who invented, knows the invention, and He bears out infirmities, pardoning our offenses.

5. ”Remember, Lord,” he said, ”that we are dust.” For what is our righteousness? Abraham was truly great. He was so great, seeing that he is earth and ashes. For he, who knows how far there is between God and men, knows himself. Listen to the other Beatitudes. ”Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, whose sins are covered.” God preaches that they are blessed, and you forbid? If the Scriptures do not say what we wish, must we not obey it as it is written? and these things against us. Contention that cuts off hope is not good. But because we promise forgiveness after baptism, (for this is especially common against vice), the Apostle writes in the previous letter to the Corinthians: ”Fornication is definitely spoken of among you, and such fornication as is not spoken of even among the Gentiles.” You have heard the magnitude of the evil, also hear the intensity of the firm judgement: ”Gather together,” he said, ”and by my spirit, in the power of Christ, let him who is of this sort be delivered up to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved.” He punishes, for he does not reject as an enemy. In the former verse, indeed, he delivered to Satan: in the next verse, however, he writes nothing contrary to the former: ”Reaffirm your love for him, so that he who is like this may not perish from excessive sorrow.” The apostle also solves the insoluble. For he orders such a man to be handed over to Satan, and later writing about the same, and giving forgiveness, he says: ”That we may not be surrounded by Satan.” For if he has seized one of us, then he has already surrounded us. The sheep comes out of the sheepfold, it becomes fodder for the wolves. Enter to escape the trap.

Thus good shepherds, even if a sheep is stolen, at least try to recover the wool. If it is good to take away the dead body’s hair, is it worth nothing to rescue the soul from the wolf’s mouth? And the victor is wounded in war, and because of that is not crowned, because he is wounded: but being exhausted by many labours, he received wounds. God does indeed consider the one thing is bad, but does He not consider the many things as good? How many martyrs who at first denied, when the battle resumed again, reversed the defeat? but they denied, not with their heart, but with their tongue. For the flesh is weak. He who denies is cut off; again when he confesses, he is restored. For God does not observe the bad things, indeed he does not count the good things in any place.

And when a man was tortured, he generally yielded when he could not bear it, not changing the purpose of his will, but overcome by the struggle. But when he was released and rested, he was restored. Will what was said in that moment be held against him, but the torments will not be counted? But God is the judge, not the impudence of men. Do you dare to prescribe a law to God, who knows weakness, and supplies help, and gives victory? How many are there who, after living a bad life, sustained martyrdom? Because they were lured by desire, will they be deprived of their labours? We are not angels, but men, and we fall and we rise again, and that often at the same hour. ”And star differs from star in glory.” Why? Indeed, if there is a certain measure of justice, all must be equally righteous: if some shine

like the sun, others shine like the moon, and others twinkle like the stars, it is clear that one is surpassed by another; but whoever is surpassed, it is clear that he is guilty of small sins. But if forgiveness were granted to no one who had sinned, there would be a difference in variety.

6. But since it is necessary to demonstrate that those who have fallen after baptism obtain salvation, I do not speak without fear, lest you should object to the judgement of my mind: for I absolutely desire that those who receive baptism do not sin. But those who have at any time fallen against their will, I do not agree with those who annul their repentance, not wanting us to dwell together on the cross: but what the apostle wants is for us to be buried together with it, and no longer to live in sin; I want this very thing. ”So I do not reject the grace of God,” said the Apostle, writing to the Galatians that had received the Spirit. Are you looking for something more obvious than this? But he carries on: ”You are so foolish that you began with the Spirit, and now finish with the flesh.” Therefore they had indeed received the Spirit. And again: ”I only want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit from the works of the law, or from the hearing of faith? You were running well.” See how many privileges they have. Listen to the sins. ”Now let’s finish with the flesh. You have fallen away from Christ.” You saw that they had the Spirit: you heard it, ”You have been purged out by Christ”; likewise, ”You have fallen from grace.” What happens afterwards, giving place to restoration? ”My children, to whom I will give birth again.” He had once given birth to them; but he who has given birth once does not refuse to give birth again for salvation. But if anyone does anything else, with an evil mind, he himself has been wicked. But men who have received the Spirit, who have run well, have suffered so much, have been in danger, have endured adversities in vain, have fallen and been purged, are yet again regenerated, so that they may again receive the form of God.

Is there anything left for you that you oppose to repentance? Who formed us? God. He made us a body, he made us a soul. Does he hate it? Who gave us the medicine of life? Why are readings used? so that we may desist from sins. Why are we watered? so that we may bring forth fruit. What do we pray for? that our sins may be forgiven. Let us put an end to the prayer. To whom is there no repentance? This one: he who does wrong with the intention of repentance, has a habit of evil, and is deprived of repentance. There is hope even after sin, there is healing even after a wound, but the scar remains. Blessed was he that did not even falter: a second blessing, that he was restored to health after the plague. But to God, who created us in the beginning, then comes down to our weakness, and keeps the purpose, and grants repentance, through him who bestows good things on us, Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory and dominion forever and ever, Amen.

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator’s own. Square

brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.

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