

## Repentance as Cosmological Address

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In Matthew chapter 6, Jesus showed that our physical needs are real, and that they must be addressed. But how we address those needs is crucial. We can either address them cosmologically or in a pagan manner.

When we use the word cosmological, we are referring to how the universe works. Christians, as we have seen from our lesson on discontinuities, believe that the universe operates under the direct supervision of God. Though we certainly participate in some of its functions (we plant crops, we earn a living, we repair our cars), whether or not our actions are ultimately successful depends not on our efforts or expertise but ultimately on the will of God as He responds to us. One of the most stunning descriptions of this is Leviticus chapter 26.

But “pagan” or unbelievers don’t think cosmologically. They believe that direct action on their surroundings is the only way to go:

**25"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? 26Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? 27Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life[b]?**

**28"And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. 29Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. 30If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? 31So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' 32For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. 33But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. – Matthew 6:25-34**

So, in any material situation on this earth, we have a choice to either “run after” what we need, or seek the kingdom of God and let Him supply us. But does that apply to other situations than food and clothing?

What about illness? Pain? Death? Enemies? Relationship problems? Political problems? Marital problems? Difficulty with children?

We have mentioned already how Jehoshaphat dealt with an invading army. He did not do it in a pagan manner, but addressed the problem cosmologically—he showed that he understood how things REALLY work.

When Abraham tried to “help God out” by sleeping with the slave girl Hagar so as to produce the heir God had promised him, he was acting in a pagan way. Only when he addressed the situation of childlessness by sleeping with his 90-year-old wife, with a cosmological understanding – did God introduce a discontinuity –an unheard-of miracle - -into his years and years and years of continuous infertility. Isaac was born. (Genesis chapters 16-21.)

The ten spies of Deuteronomy chapter one saw the situation of entering the Promised Land through the same eyes as the pagans around them. They measured the height of the walls and the strength of the troops and their own lack of ability, and came up with an assessment: God must hate them and wanted to kill them. But Joshua and Caleb looked at the situation cosmologically. They knew how things really worked for believers! They said, “It is a good land the Lord is giving us.” They were expecting a discontinuity. And they were the only ones who lived to see it, because of their faith in discontinuities and the God who causes them.

Today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, God wants us to believe in discontinuity as a way of life, as an explanation of how the world works – a cosmology. Beyond just the idea of persistent prayer, He gives us even more access to His heart and His desire to help introduce discontinuities into our lives through repentance, another of the strands of holiness that we seek.

We haven’t done it in detail, but at this time we should look closely at a biblical definition of holiness. Holiness means being set apart, separate, from the pagan world. Being separate from the world also means trying to be like God who commanded, “Be holy, because I am holy:”

*13Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. 14As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. 15But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; 16for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy." 17Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear. (1 Peter 1:13-16)*

Spend time this week with a Bible concordance and see how this idea of holiness not only reflects a moral stance, but also the idea of being separated from other things. We often think that we are to be separated from the world, and that’s true –not because we wall ourselves off from it and don’t interact; but because the world should be able to see in us that there is something different – and better—about our outlook.

(However, it’s also true that this kind of holy mindset will also separate us from many in the body of Christ who will likewise see a difference in us. For instance, it is very hard

for many Christians to pray to and put trust in a God of discontinuities.) Our challenge is not to be “holier than thou” but to recognize that we are always less holy than our holy God and therefore in no position to judge others.)

### **The Role of Repentance in Spiritual Renewal**

If persistent prayer is the stimulus to discontinuity, then repentance is its handmaiden. We can see this most clearly in Solomon’s dedication of the temple in 1 Kings 8.

In this passage, Solomon describes the temple as a place where people can come to ask for a discontinuity. He mentions all kinds of trials and troubles, and asks God to bring about changes. But before any of the situations, he asks God to hear and to forgive. *Just as the people had to step over a threshold to enter the temple to ask for these discontinuities, so we, today, can use the threshold of repentance as a starting place for asking for God’s help.*

This passage begins at the place where Solomon has sacrificed thousands of animals and a great part of his own personal wealth to celebrate the completion of the temple. He begins to pray:

**20 "The LORD has kept the promise he made: I have succeeded David my father and now I sit on the throne of Israel, just as the LORD promised, and I have built the temple for the Name of the LORD, the God of Israel. 21 I have provided a place there for the ark, in which is the covenant of the LORD that he made with our fathers when he brought them out of Egypt."**

**22 Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in front of the whole assembly of Israel, spread out his hands toward heaven 23 and said:**

**"O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below—you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way. 24 You have kept your promise to your servant David my father; with your mouth you have promised and with your hand you have fulfilled it—as it is today.**

**25 "Now LORD, God of Israel, keep for your servant David my father the promises you made to him when you said, 'You shall never fail to have a man to sit before me on the throne of Israel, if only your sons are careful in all they do to walk before me as you have done.' 26 And now, O God of Israel, let your word that you promised your servant David my father come true.**

**27 "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! 28 Yet give attention to your servant's prayer and his plea for mercy, O LORD my God. Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence this day. 29 May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, 'My Name shall be there,' so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place. 30 Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. *Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.***

31 "When a man wrongs his neighbor and is required to take an oath and he comes and swears the oath before your altar in this temple, 32 then hear from heaven and act. Judge between your servants, condemning the guilty and bringing down on his own head what he has done. Declare the innocent not guilty, and so establish his innocence.

33 "When your people Israel have been defeated by an enemy because they have sinned against you, and when they turn back to you and confess your name, praying and making supplication to you in this temple, 34 then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your people Israel and bring them back to the land you gave to their fathers.

35 "When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because your people have sinned against you, and when they pray toward this place and confess your name and turn from their sin because you have afflicted them, 36 then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel. Teach them the right way to live, and send rain on the land you gave your people for an inheritance.

37 "When famine or plague comes to the land, or blight or mildew, locusts or grasshoppers, or when an enemy besieges them in any of their cities, whatever disaster or disease may come, 38 and when a prayer or plea is made by any of your people Israel—each one aware of the afflictions of his own heart, and spreading out his hands toward this temple- 39 then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Forgive and act; deal with each man according to all he does, since you know his heart (for you alone know the hearts of all men), 40 so that they will fear you all the time they live in the land you gave our fathers.

41 "As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name- 42 for men will hear of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm—when he comes and prays toward this temple, 43 then hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name.

44 "When your people go to war against their enemies, wherever you send them, and when they pray to the LORD toward the city you have chosen and the temple I have built for your Name, 45 then hear from heaven their prayer and their plea, and uphold their cause.

46 "When they sin against you—for there is no one who does not sin—and you become angry with them and give them over to the enemy, who takes them captive to his own land, far away or near; 47 and if they have a change of heart in the land where they are held captive, and repent and plead with you in the land of their conquerors and say, 'We have sinned, we have done wrong, we have acted wickedly'; 48 and if they turn back to you with all their heart and soul in the land of their enemies who took them captive, and pray to you toward the land you gave their fathers, toward the city you have chosen and the temple I have built for your Name; 49 then from heaven, your dwelling place, hear their prayer and their plea, and uphold their cause. 50 And forgive your people, who have sinned against you; forgive all the offenses they have committed against you, and cause their conquerors

to show them mercy; 51 for they are your people and your inheritance, whom you brought out of Egypt, out of that iron-smelting furnace.

52 "May your eyes be open to your servant's plea and to the plea of your people Israel, and may you listen to them whenever they cry out to you. 53 For you singled them out from all the nations of the world to be your own inheritance, just as you declared through your servant Moses when you, O Sovereign LORD, brought our fathers out of Egypt."

54 When Solomon had finished all these prayers and supplications to the LORD, he rose from before the altar of the LORD, where he had been kneeling with his hands spread out toward heaven. 55 He stood and blessed the whole assembly of Israel in a loud voice, saying:

56 "Praise be to the LORD, who has given rest to his people Israel just as he promised. *Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through his servant Moses.* 57 May the LORD our God be with us as he was with our fathers; may he never leave us nor forsake us. 58 May he turn our hearts to him, to walk in all his ways and to keep the commands, decrees and regulations he gave our fathers. 59 And may these words of mine, which I have prayed before the LORD, be near to the LORD our God day and night, that he may uphold the cause of his servant and the cause of his people Israel according to each day's need, 60 so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God and that there is no other. 61 But your hearts must be fully committed to the LORD our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands, as at this time."

Solomon gives a cosmological address to many kinds of problems. He says, "This is the way the world really works – if you have relationship, or health, or political, or agricultural, or catastrophic problems, come to the Lord. Repent of what put you into the mess you're in, and let God create a discontinuity for you."

This isn't a magic charm or a mental game. If your heart isn't truly committed to the Lord, to accept His cosmological view of life and address your problems by appealing to Him first, you won't be able to stimulate a disruption of your distress, you won't be able to influence Him to produce a discontinuity that will give you a more "just" future.

*The lesson is unmistakable: God is always causal. My role is not causal, it is obedience. The only way I can truly affect the future in a way that will bring about what's best is to be obedient, persistent, and repentant. Repentance is a gateway into the temple of God, where God Himself effects changes.*

When it comes to dealing with God, we have to not take no for an answer. He may refuse again and again and again, but He is always in the process. We go back to Him again and again until the discontinuity appears. We have to, by an act of the will, take on an attitude of faith that understands that repeated injustice, repeated refusals, and the passage of time with no changes--this didn't change the discourse of the persistent widow even though her circumstances and experience of the material situation didn't change. Her faith overcame her experience of the material dimension.

Nothing, therefore, is subject to continuity in our realm.

What exists today, has nothing to do with the future.

Our faith has to transcend selfish results. The widow never quit believing that the judge could do something and could respond. It wasn't just a personal agenda: it was about justice. She never decided that the process didn't work. She must have always kept feeling a sense of being on the verge, a sense of eschatology (the study of "last things,") of things about to change.

Solomon knew that the armies or the plagues or the insect infestations or the famine or the drought or *complete personal failure and sinfulness leading to disaster and despair* were continuities that only God could disrupt, and change through discontinuities.

In the same way, the widow of Luke 18 knew that her adversary had nothing to do with the outcome. Her future situation of justice – and ours--is a function of the judge, not the adversary. She didn't count faithfulness in terms of minutes, hours, days, months, years. Faithfulness, she demonstrated and Jesus agreed – is about persistence when you see nothing in your past experience nor in your present circumstances that resembles the future you're asking for. She put absolutely *no* faith in the godless thought that something has gone on so long that it can't be changed.

Faith, prayer, and persistence are the best tools a Christian has to stimulate a rupture between an undesirable present, and a future in which things are put right, in which justice is served: a future that can properly be seen as a cooperative matter between God and the person of faith. Again, we are never causal. God responds to us—either to our obedience and submission; or to our ignoring Him or our rebellion.

Jesus asked: Will I find faith on the earth? Will I find faith in the middle of difficult circumstances, in spite of unchanged situations, in spite of repeated refusals?

Perhaps the first thing we need to repent of, is *our lack of faith in discontinuities!*

*The Christian responds: "The Lord's repeated refusals will have no effect on my faith."*

"We have to get to the temple. We have to seek the threshold. Repentance changes, in an indirect way, the nature of time and experience," says our brother Mike Strawn.

What if a group of Christian women committed to this understanding of time, and how to bring about changes? We can ask God for help – for discontinuities to affect the futures of those we love. Can we not dedicate ourselves to prayer and repentance, and ask the Lord to make obvious discontinuities in the lives of those we pray for? (And we can ask Him to disrupt the present state of those who cause injustice in this world: Isn't that the purpose of the imprecatory psalms—to persuade God to make a wavy line for those whose successful present state is hurting others??)

Prayer is one of the most powerful indicators of faith, says Jesus, who pleads with us to pray and not give up, like the widow.

Here is a reading from Spurgeon's notes on Psalm 30. Though the language is archaic, listen to its power:

**Verse 8. I cried to thee, O Lord; and unto the Lord I made supplication.** Bernard, under a fiction, proposes a fable well worthy of our beholding: therein the kings of Babylon and Jerusalem, signifying the state of the world and the church, always warring together; in which encounter, at length it fell out, that one of the soldiers of Jerusalem was fled to the castle of Justice. Siege laid to the castle, and a multitude of enemies entrenched round about it, Fear gave over all hope, but Prudence ministered her comfort. "Does thou not know," saith she, "that our king is the King of glory; the Lord strong and mighty, even the Lord mighty in battle? Let us therefore despatch a messenger that may inform him of our necessities." Fear replies, "But who is able to break through? Darkness is upon the face of the earth, and our walls are begirt with a watchful troop of armed men, and we, utterly inexpert in the way into so far a country." Whereupon Justice is consulted. "Be of good cheer," saith Justice, "I have a messenger of especial trust, well known to the king and his court, Prayer by name, who knoweth to address herself by ways unknown in the stillest silence of the night, till she cometh to the secrets and chamber of the King himself." Forthwith she goeth, and findeth the gates shut, knocketh again, "Open, ye gates of righteousness, and be ye opened, ye everlasting doors, that I may come in and tell the King of Jerusalem how our case standeth." Doubtless the trustiest and most effectual messenger we have to send is Prayer. If we send up merits, the stars in heaven will disdain it, that we which dwell at the footstool of God dare to presume so far, when the purest creatures in heaven are impure in his sight. If we send up fear and distrustfulness, the length of the way will tire them out. They are as heavy and lumpish as gads of iron; they will sink to the ground before they come half way to the throne of salvation. If we send up blasphemies and curses, all the creatures betwixt heaven and earth will band themselves against us. The sun and the moon will rain down blood; the fire, hot burning coals; the air, thunderbolts upon our heads. Prayer, I say again, is the surest ambassador; which neither the tediousness of the way, nor difficulties of the passage, can hinder from her purpose; quick of speed, faithful for trustiness, happy for success, able to mount above the eagles of the sky, into the heaven of heavens, and as a chariot of fire bearing us aloft into the presence of God to seek his assistance. --- John King.