

## The Folly of False Repentance, Part 1

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Scriptural Text: Hosea 6, ESV

We have been in a study of this great prophet and what a weighty prophet he is. God presents to us through Hosea some very heavy words to rest upon our soul. I trust the heaviness will not be a burden, but it will ultimately they will be a means by which we enter into a deeper joy in God. That is the intention. God only gives to us heavy burdens and heavy words in order to deliver us and to show us how much we need Him.

Hosea was called to be a prophet to give a message through his family life. He is told to marry a prostitute and after she continues to be unfaithful he is told to go after her and to woo her. Hosea does that and what a great picture of God's grace and love that is toward us. But, then, beginning in Chapter 4 there is a series of sermons Hosea preaches. Again, God is inspiring all of these messages which call Israel, God's people, back to repentance. Certainly that is true in this text.

### Israel and Judah Are Unrepentant

<sup>1</sup> “Come, let us return to the LORD;  
for he has torn us, that he may heal us;  
he has struck us down, and he will bind us up.  
<sup>2</sup> After two days he will revive us;  
on the third day he will raise us up,  
that we may live before him.  
<sup>3</sup> Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD;  
his going out is sure as the dawn;  
he will come to us as the showers,  
as the spring rains that water the earth.”

<sup>4</sup> What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?  
What shall I do with you, O Judah?  
Your love is like a morning cloud,  
like the dew that goes early away.  
<sup>5</sup> Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets;  
I have slain them by the words of my mouth,  
and my judgment goes forth as the light.  
<sup>6</sup> For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,  
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

<sup>7</sup> But like Adam they transgressed the covenant;  
there they dealt faithlessly with me.  
<sup>8</sup> Gilead is a city of evildoers,  
tracked with blood.  
<sup>9</sup> As robbers lie in wait for a man,  
so the priests band together;  
they murder on the way to Shechem;  
they commit villainy.  
<sup>10</sup> In the house of Israel I have seen a horrible thing;  
Ephraim's whoredom is there; Israel is defiled.  
<sup>11</sup> For you also, O Judah, a harvest is appointed,  
when I restore the fortunes of my people.

Recently, Kimberly and I were walking on Boynton Canyon Trail in Sedona, Arizona, a wonderful place. It gives witness to the majesty and the power of the Creator. We were about one mile into our seven mile trek when three men in front of us called out to me, “Could you help us!” “Sure, what can I do for you?” “Well,” they said, “there is a rattle snake curled right by that tree you are approaching. We cannot get by him.” At this, Kimberly freaked out a bit. She quickly backed away. We were about fifty feet from the tree and I could not see the snake yet. As I approached with caution I said, “Okay, I see him now,” about eight to ten feet away.

This part of the trail became very narrow. There is a steep mountain on one side and a big tree on the other. There is only about a two foot width to pass through and this rattle snake was curled right at the base of this tree. I took a rock and tossed it at the snake. It rattled! That rattle is piercing and alarming. Even though I was a safe distance away, about eight feet, it still caused my heart to jump. It turned its head toward me with this “snaky” grin and rattled again. I, of course, stood very still. Then it crawled further down the mountain about four feet and we were safe to pass.

Kimberly gave me many convincing arguments at this point to cut our trek short; she did not want to go by. Eventually, she bravely, and I will say almost voluntarily, continued on.

Why did this snake rattle at me and at others on the trail? Why didn't it just simply strike us and inject its venom into us without warning? The answer is that snake had no more desire for conflict than we did. The rattler warned us so that we would take heed, so that we would not enter into such a conflict. And, what if the men on the trail heard the warning but decided they were just going to walk on by, "That snake doesn't mean business." Likely, one of them would have gotten bit. But, they did not ignore the warning. They were wise and not foolish.

How foolish it is to ignore warnings when they are real and they are true. God is warning His people to turn back from immorality, unfaithfulness, idolatry, deceit, violence, stealing. God communicates in most explicit terms He notices His people's unfaithful rebellion against Him and He will absolutely bring painful judgment upon them if they do not turn back from the path they are on, if they do not stop, if they do not repent,

<sup>4:1</sup> Hear the word of the LORD, O children of Israel, for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land...

In the previous study of Hosea 5, we learned it opened up,

<sup>1a</sup> Hear this, O priests! Pay attention, O house of Israel!...<sup>9</sup> Ephraim shall become a desolation in the day of punishment; among the tribes of Israel I make known what is sure. <sup>10</sup> The princes of Judah have become like those who move the landmark; upon them I will pour out my wrath like water.

We cannot get a clearer word of warning. When I read those verses I hear the rattle of the rattle snake. It is eerie and alarming.

God could have sent judgment without giving any warning, but instead, the Lord, in His grace, sends His prophets to warn us of the judgment that will certainly fall upon us if we do not repent and turn back. God sends His warning so we will avoid death.

We are fools to ignore God's clear warning. God is not a rattler we can scare down the mountain by tossing at Him a rock. He is sovereign and infinite, all mighty, holy. He is One who controls our future destiny. What should we do when God warns us of His righteous judgment? Shall we ignore Him? Shall we respond with shallow confession, or shall we truly humble our self before God, confess our sins, and seek His face?

These are the questions the people of Israel have to be asking themselves at this point as God has given them warning, "What shall we do in response to the warning Hosea is presenting to us?" The answer appears in our text,

<sup>1</sup> "Come, let us return to the LORD; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. <sup>2</sup> After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. <sup>3</sup> Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD; his going out is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth."

At first blush, this seems as though we would say, "Wow! What a great response." It is the exact response God is calling them to, is it not? The condition God requires in order for us to be delivered from His wrath and His righteous response to our sin is faith in Him and repentance of our sins, these two. They are two sides of the same coin. They are a constant call of the Gospel upon the sinner who needs mercy. We have learned, all through Scripture, the path that leads us into God's mercy and away from His righteous judgment is the path of humble repentance and sincere faith.

Without humble repentance God does not grant anyone His mercy. No other response opens the door to God's mercy and to God's grace. It is not the labors of our hands, not our passionate promises, not tears of remorse, not our own aching regrets, not our loving acts toward others, not our service to the poor. There is nothing that opens the door to God's mercy other than this: faith in God. This is His provision for our salvation through His Son Jesus and repentance from our sins.

In Ezekiel 18, we find the same message given through a different prophet,

<sup>30</sup> “Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, declares the Lord GOD. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin.”

There is the rattle and warning and the condition of the response.

When Jesus began His ministry, the Gospel tells us He came preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom. What is the Gospel of the Kingdom? Matthew and Mark tell us,

Mark 1:15b *“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”*

What is Jesus calling people to do from the very beginning? Repent of sin and believe the Gospel. Peter, in his sermon in Acts 3, calls for a response to the Gospel in the same way. After giving the message of the Gospel, he says,

<sup>19</sup> “Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, <sup>20</sup> that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus...”

The door to God’s blessing is marked, “Repentance”. If you are Satan and you are considering how you might steer men and women away from the blessing of God, if you knew if men and women repented of their sins and turned to faith in God, God would have mercy upon them, and that they would become worshippers of God now and forever more, what would you do to keep men and women from repentance? If you wanted men and women to die in their sins and never give glory to God for His grace and His salvation and new life found in Christ, what strategy would you employ? Perhaps you would convince them God’s threats are empty and He does not really mean what He says. Perhaps you would divert their attention away from the ugly wickedness of their sin and onto the pleasure of their sin. Perhaps you would cast doubt whether God is even truly God. Indeed, you would employ dozens of strategies to keep people from true repentance.

One strategy of Satan I believe is the darkest and most pervasive, specifically within the church, is that Satan loves to convince men and women they have already repented when they have not and they have already met the condition in order to receive God’s mercy when they have not. He does this by enticing them to embrace a kind of repentance that is not true.

Both Saul in the Old Testament and Judas in the New Testament are examples of false repentance over sin. Both of these, if we read the account of Saul and of Judas, confess with deep remorse. They were emotionally pained about their sin and they both said, “I have sinned.”<sup>1</sup> But, it was not true repentance and they did not receive God’s mercy.

I believe this is the situation with Israel in our text. We read these words and it seems as though they have repented, but I believe their repentance in Verses 1 through 3 is human and it is hollow. It has no more value than a Monopoly game \$500.00 bill. Someone will ask, “Pastor, what makes you believe their repentance is false? It seems like such great words.”

Clue Number One is God’s response to their confession. They give these great words, “let us return to the Lord. He has torn us and He might heal us. Let us press on to know the Lord.” How does God respond?

<sup>4</sup> What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away. <sup>5</sup> Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of my mouth, and my judgment goes forth as the light.

We remember Ephraim is a synonym for Israel. Their love is superficial. This is God’s response to their repentance. We come to understand they must not be truly repentant because if they are truly repentant God would not respond that way.

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<sup>1</sup> Judas: Matthew 27:4a.

God is expressing exasperation over Israel's faulty repentance. He loves His people, but they are not willing to turn from the path. They want to believe they are returning from the path but they are really continuing on their merry way down the path they have chosen of idolatry, sexual immorality, deceit, violence, and stealing. God's exasperation is that kind a parent has when they are pulling their hair out wondering when their wayward son or daughter will finally see the depth of their problem and experience real change in their life.

"When are they going to get it," is God's exasperation,

Hosea 7:10 The pride of Israel testifies to his face; yet they do not return to the LORD their God, nor seek him...

In pride Israel testifies to the face of God, "God, we are returning," yet they do not return and they do nothing about it nor seek Him,

7:16 They return, but not upward; they are like a treacherous bow...

Their return is on a horizontal, downward plane. Have you ever tried to shoot a crooked bow? It does not shoot straight and there is no value to it.

Hosea 6 is written for our instruction and it helps us to evaluate our own repentance. I believe this is very significant and important. If the door to God's blessing is marked "Repentance" it is very important we actually walk through that door and not through some other door we believe to be repentance when it really is not. Those doors marked "False Repentance" lead us to death and into God's judgment and away from His blessing.

This is not trifling thing; it is a matter of life and death. The genuineness of our repentance upon this hinges the treasure of one's knowledge of God and the eternity of joy with Him. We will consider five characteristics of false repentance found in the first six verses.

**First, false repentance often looks very similar to true repentance.** It is like a good counterfeit. It looks very much like the real deal. We will not go to the Grand Prairie Mall and present them with a \$100.00 Monopoly bill. That would be silly and they would scoff at us. If we were a counterfeiter wanting to pass off false cash, we would present them with something that looked very, very similar to the real currency.

There are some really great characteristics behind Israel's repentance in Verses 1 through 3. There are some things that are very commendable, but their repentance is wholly unacceptable. First, they recognized their need for the Lord. They acknowledged God's sovereign hand is the one righteously judging them.

They employed some very correct words. They used the word "return" and what a beautiful word that is. It is a picture of that unfaithful wife returning home to a reconciled relationship. They used the right and precious language, "Let us press on to know the Lord."

They had emotional grief, or sorrow, over their sin. False repentance is often emotional grief over the condition sins brings us to. They believed God was merciful. Finally, they said they wanted to know God. They spoke of their repentance with intensity and zeal and an appearance of sincerity. I believe they even felt sincere as they were crying this out. I do not believe that in their hearts they were saying, "We are going to trick God. We know we are not sincere, but we are going to pretend we are." They felt sincere and false repentance feels sincere. That is why it is so dangerous because we can be deceived by it our self. It is not a matter of us deceiving others. The worst condition is when we are self-deceived.

While there is much to be commended in their repentance, their repentance is absolutely unacceptable to God. What is missing? **Second, false repentance acknowledges the consequences of sin, but not the sin itself.** They knew the Lord has wounded and afflicted them because of their idolatry at sin. And, they were ready to acknowledge the outcome of their lives is miserable. They are receiving heartache upon heartache, calamity upon calamity all because of their sin, but notice how they avoided any reference to the sin itself. They do not mention anything, "We sinned against You by...", "We are turning from..."

God has been very explicit with regard to their sin. He has not been dealing with generalities. Earlier, God gave a list of what it means that they do not have any faithfulness or steadfast love or knowledge of God,

<sup>2</sup> there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.

God is very explicit in His confrontation with sin. This people cannot claim ignorance regarding God's indictment. Yet, in this repentance there is no confession of any sin. They do not cry out, "O Lord, we have sinned against You by bowing down to idols. We have sinned against You by committing sexual immorality. We have sinned against You by stealing stuff from others. We have sinned against You by being violent in our hands and by lying." There is none of that.

Sins in false repentance are named only if they are wrestled from a hardened heart and never willingly. False repentance grieves over the affects of sin, but never over the sin itself. Repentance without grieving over sin itself is a lifeless thing that opens no doors to God's blessing.

Imagine for a moment we are at a murder trial and it is a trial of a murderer who killed someone in our family, someone we loved. It is a horrible thing to imagine. They are convicted and pronounced "guilty" and now they are in the sentencing phase. It is time for them to talk after hearing all the accusations and how they have affected family. It is time for them to talk and have their last plea before sentencing. They say something like this, "Please, I know I have been convicted, but I am pleading for leniency on sentencing. I ask the court for mercy and to allow me to go free. Please remove this guilty blemish from my record and I will be a great citizen from here on out." How would you feel at hearing that? Would you not be outraged? After all of this, this person never once said, "I was wrong for killing your relative." Would you not be outraged at that kind of plea, "How dare he ask for leniency without even acknowledging his own sin!"

Take that on our human level and our own human outrage at that kind of sin, and here is God, this infinitely holy being looking at the sins of man who are infinitely ugly and grievous and wicked and He sees them and He knows them truly and He hears this repentance, "Return to us the blessing," without any mention of the ugly, wickedness of their own sin.

True repentance always brings to us a keen awareness of personal sin inside our own soul. These are specific sins identified by the Holy Spirit and then they are mourned over. True repentance leads us to see sin itself as in infinitely ugly thing displeasing to God.

One of the problems with repentance in much of Christianity today is that we do not see our sin the way God sees our sin. We view it as a light and harmless thing while God views it as shameful and soul-destroying and infinitely evil. We ask for forgiveness in order to avoid Hell, but we do not ask for God's forgiveness so that we would stop sinning. We want to continue in our sin and be forgiven at the same time and that is not possible. If you are saying, "I want to continue in this life I am living, but I also want God's forgiveness," those two are incongruous. It is impossible to have those two things at the same time. Until we become transparent before God and confess specific sins, our repentance will not count.

**The third characteristic of false repentance focuses on recovery and not on cleansing,**

<sup>1</sup> "Come, let us return to the LORD; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up."

What is the goal of this repentance? It is personal peace and prosperity. We want to be bound up; we want to be healed; we want to be whole. These folks are only sorry for their sin because now they are experiencing painful consequences, "Lord, I am hurting so bad. Would you remove the consequences of my past decisions?" They are crying crocodile tears of grief over their suffering but no tears of grief over their sin. They do not want to be clean before the Lord, holy in their life. They simply want to have the consequences of God's judgment and punishment and discipline removed.

False repentance is motivated by our desires for God to put the physical affairs of our life back in order. False repentance seeks a change in one's circumstances, but not a cleansing of one's soul. It desires temporal success without eternal sanctification.

Contrast their repentance with David's true repentance when he committed adultery and murder against Bathsheba. He writes,

<sup>Psalm 51:3</sup> For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. <sup>4</sup> Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight... <sup>7</sup> Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow... <sup>10</sup> Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

This is what matters to David the most. He knows he may suffer the rest of his life as a result of his sin, but what really matters, and what he is really asking for, is a clean soul. That is what he desires.

**The fourth characteristic of false repentance presumes the God will respond quickly to the correct outward steps,**

<sup>2</sup> "After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him."

They believe God is going to restore them as soon as they say these words and utter this prayer of confession. I believe the Israelites believed they had figured out God. They had reduced God's forgiveness into a nice, little formula, "If we say these words and we take these actions God is going to forgive us." They believed they could manipulate Him like a cosmic soda machine, "If we put the right quarters in and we press the right button we will get the blessing of our choice and we will get it quickly." They thought of God as mechanical and not relational in the way He interacted with them.

Voltaire, the famous skeptic, was asked whether he believed God would forgive him for his sins. This is how he replied, "Forgiveness! That is His job!" In other words, He must do that. He has to because that is His job. He believed he had God figured out, "God cannot do anything but forgive if I say these words." Many modern believers live in this same kind of idea about their sin and about seeking God's blessing, "If I go to church and I pray a prayer, and if I say, 'God, please forgive me,' then God has to because that is His job. That is what He does."

All the while, God is saying, "It is not about a mechanical process. It is about a covenant relationship. That is what I care about. Are you communing with Me? Do you know Me? That is the issue because My people are destroyed and ruined for a lack of knowledge. The real issue is: are you connecting truly and really and wholly, day-by-day, moment-by-moment with Me the Living God?"

Many believe God must surely forgive them, after all they prayed the sinner's prayer<sup>2</sup> when they were children. After all, they go to church on Sunday. They have been baptized. They believe if they give to God a few trinkets of religious response, then God must forgive in return.

James Boyce writes, "It is always an error to presume thus on God. We try to force Him into our little boxes, thinking we can somehow control Him and to get Him to do what we want, but God cannot be thus controlled. We are never in greater danger than when we assume that He will always forgive us as long as we go through the outward forms of repentance."

We do this in relationship with one another. A spouse sins grievously against another spouse and they say, "You know, I am sorry." The other spouse still has a problem and the sinning spouse says, "How come you are not forgiving me? I said I am sorry. How dare you not forgive me. That is supposed to be the deal. I say I am sorry and you are fine with it. What is going on?" They believe that somehow the spouse who still has a problem with the grief of their sin is the one who is at fault. What pride and what arrogance that is.

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 18:13, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

False repentance teaches if we say specific words of confession God will forgive us,

<sup>3</sup> “Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD; his going out is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth.”

As surely as the sun rises up the next day, they believe God is going to do exactly what they expect Him to do. As surely as the spring rains come, God is going to forgive them if they just say the words and go through the actions. And, God says,

<sup>4</sup> “What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away.”

In other words, their repentance is primarily emotional and ritualistic. It does not endure. There is no substance. It is unstable. It is shaky. It is fleeting. It disappears from view after just a short time. It vanishes like the morning cloud.

#### **The fifth characteristic of false repentance fails to make for God the central goal,**

<sup>6</sup> “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”

This is a beautiful verse is reiterated over and over. God is not impressed by our external religious actions if our heart is not broken over our own sin. God desires a love relationship and that is what He is moving us toward,

<sup>37</sup> And he said to him, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”* <sup>38</sup> *This is the great and first commandment.*

God is not saying that rituals were wrong or worthless. He is teaching us rituals in worship have meaning only if they flow from a heart of love for God. Otherwise, it is worthless. He does not desire sacrifice; He desires love. He desires a relationship rather than burnt offerings.

Consider the teenager whose father is absent from the home. He does not call his son. He does not visit. He does not write. He does not show any concern for his son’s life whatsoever, but on his birthday, this young man receives a check, maybe some flowers, and a note that says, “Happy Birthday, Son.” How do you believe that teenager is going to respond to that kind of gift from a father? That gift will become more hurtful. It would have been better if there was nothing at all rather than an impersonal note after no relationship whatsoever, “Do not send me a birthday card, dad. Give me a call. Talk to me.” This is what God is saying.

He does not desire sacrifices and He does not desire prayers and singing. All of that is great if there is a context of a relationship. The birthday card is awesome if there is a context of a love relationship,

<sup>21</sup> “I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. <sup>22</sup> Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. <sup>23a</sup> Take away from me the noise of your songs... <sup>24</sup> But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

God is telling them their singing in worship is noise and it is grating to His ears. He wants it taken away and He does not want to listen to it. God is after our hearts and not just our religious habits.

False repentance asks the question: What is the minimum requirement to pass this class? Have you ever taken a class and wondered that? You just want to get by and pass it. True repentance asks: How can I commune with God? How can I have a soul clean before Him? How can I become a worshipper?

Friend, do not be mistaken about the requirements of God to receive His grace and forgiveness. It is faith and repentance, but it is not a false faith and it is not a false repentance,

Romans 10:9 because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. <sup>10</sup> For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.

The Israelites pursued a kind of repentance that was very emotional and expressive, but it did not result in life change. They wanted God to forgive them without having any life change. They were fine with the path and the idolatry. They loved it. They were fine with their sexual immorality. They were fine with their stealing and their selfishness. They were fine with all of these things. They did not want to change those things, but they wanted to change the outcome of that kind of life. God says, “You cannot do it.”

Satan deceives us into believing we can hid our sins from God if we simply go through the right religious formula, but we cannot. In the Apostle Paul’s second letter to the church in Corinth, he talks about a grief over sin that is worldly and there is a grief over sin that is godly,

<sup>10</sup> For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. <sup>11</sup> For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter.

Do you believe Judas grieved over his sin? Absolutely, he did, but he did so without repentance. He did so in a worldly way. What shall we do? The condition God has for us is so very clear. It is repent of our sin and believe in Jesus. It is a matter of life and death. It is the way we connect to God. It is the way we connect to His mercy, His blessing.

As we read through this list of the characteristics of false repentance, we may say, “That is the way I repent all of the time. I believe that is the only way I have repented. That has been my practice. What can I do? What is the solution to that?” I urge each of us, first, know God is merciful to those who seek Him. If we are asking that question it is because there is something stirring in our heart that says we want something more than this external, religious life with God. We want to know Him. We want to walk with Him, but false repentance is standing in our way. What can we do about that?

First, repent of your repentance. In other words, say, “God, the way I have been repenting and treating my sin has been an affront to You. I thought You were pleased with hearing me say, ‘Forgive me of my sins,’ but I recognize this is an affront to you and I am not really dealing with sin. I am not turning from it. I am not willing to have You completely change my life and cleanse me. I am still holding onto these sins, even as I am asking for forgiveness of them.”

Second, ask God to grant you true repentance. Repentance is not something we can manufacture in our own heart. It is not something we can produce out of our own will. Forgiveness has to be granted to us and given to us by God. What do we do if we need that gift of genuine repentance? We say, “Lord, I am going to seek after You, calling upon You to give to me true repentance so my repentance reflects the conditions You have described in Your Word for me to be blessed.” If you seek the Lord and ask Him for true repentance, hold on because God will bring it in a way that will shake your life to its very foundation. But, it shakes us so as to restore us. That is what God does.