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So it was, when Ahab heard these words, that he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth on his body, and fasted and lay in sackcloth, and went about mourning. And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, 'See how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? I will not bring the calamity in his days; but in the days of his son I will bring the calamity on his house.' 1 Kings 21:27-29

One of the major problems of the church today is 'phoney repentance'. Multitudes have walked down the aisle, mouthed the right words, and joined the church only to become what is delicately called 'inactive members'. All kinds of explanations have been offered for this sad state of affairs. Some attribute the problem to ineptness in 'follow up'. They argue that these inactive members came to church really wanting to serve the Lord, but no one told them how to go about it and they became discouraged and dropped out. Others say the problem is due to failing to teach new converts about a second level of Christian living. Often, we are told, we simply tell people to accept Jesus as Saviour and we fail to tell them they must also accept him as Lord. Many, therefore, have settled down in something of a halfway house. They are not lost, but neither are they living for the Lord. They are, the argument goes, 'carnal Christians' — saved, but living as unbelievers live.

The common assumption in both of these explanations is that those who have made a profession of faith are genuinely saved. Very few seem willing to allow the possibility that many of our 'inactive members' have simply never truly come to know God at all; that their repentance was superficial and incomplete; and that, therefore, they remain in their sins.

The reluctance to talk about phoney conversions is surprising, because Scripture has so much to say on the subject. There are, for instance, the teachings of Jesus: in the Sermon on the Mount, he explicitly warned about the danger of being deceived on our standing with God (Matt. 7:21-23); in his parable of the sower, he spoke about the 'stony ground' where the seed is sown who receives the word with joy but in whom the word does not take root (Matt. 13:20-21). In addition, we have clear warnings from Paul (2 Cor. 13:5), Peter (2 Pet. 1:10-11), John (1 John 2:18-19; 5:13), and the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews (6:4-6; 10:26-39) on the danger of being deceived about being converted.

We also have several notable examples of spurious conversions. The names of Esau (Heb. 12:16-17), Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:16-20), Simon Magus (Acts 8:9-24), and Demas (2 Tim. 4:10) are all inextricably linked to 'phoney repentance'. And here in the Old Testament we have the case of Ahab. As hard as it may be to believe, this passage says Ahab, upon hearing Elijah's message of judgement, tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, fasted, and went about mourning. It also tells us that because of this self-humiliation, God delayed sending the promised judgement.

Many would have no doubt that these verses tell us that Ahab, the arch-enemy of God and godliness, had a true and genuine conversion experience and lived for the Lord for the rest of his life. Certainly, every child of God would like to believe this. We would all like to see Ahab and Elijah strolling together on heaven's golden streets. Yet even though some of the greatest sinners in history have been plucked out of hell at the very last moment, the evidence is overwhelming that Ahab was not one of them.

Ahab's demonstration of repentance was very striking and impressive, but consider for a moment what he did not do. First, he did nothing to repudiate Jezebel or to reduce her evil influence in the kingdom. Second, he took no action to restore Naboth's vineyard to his heirs or next of kin. Third, he did not break with his idols — when he and Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, decided to go to war against the Syrians, Ahab consulted with four hundred false prophets (1 Kings 22:6) If Ahab had been truly converted, it is safe to say that he would have addressed each of these situations, but he did not.

We should also consider what Ahab said after the four hundred false prophets assured him of success in the battle against Syria but Jehoshaphat asked to hear from 'a prophet of the Lord'. There was such a prophet, Ahab conceded, but 'I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad' (22:7-8). The fact that this prophet, Micaiah, had nothing good to say about Ahab indicates that the king of Israel had not truly repented of his sin; and Ahab's confession of his hatred for a servant of God ought to remove all question about his spiritual condition.

But if Ahab's repentance was not genuine, how are we to explain his tearing his clothes, putting on sackcloth, fasting and mourning? The answer is that these actions were all induced by fear of judgement, not by true sorrow for sin. Ahab knew Elijah extremely well by this time. He knew whatever Elijah said would most certainly come true, and he was distraught because God's judgement was hanging over him and he could not escape it. What could possibly be wrong with Ahab fearing judgement? The Bible says we must all eventually stand before God to give account of ourselves (Rom. 14:12; Heb. 9:27), and it even warns us to fear him who has the power 'to cast into hell' (Luke 12:5). So at first sight it seems somewhat unfair to criticize Ahab for being motivated by the fear of judgement.

Yet the point we must keep in mind is that the Bible tells us about judgement so we will hate our sin and turn from it. Sin is what leads to judgement. Ahab feared judgement but he did not hate his sin. He believed the Word of God but, as we have noted, would not and did not forsake the sin. He wanted to escape judgement while hanging on to his sin—and that cannot be done.

Because Ahab did not truly hate his sin, he resorted to mere outward rituals to stave off the judgement while clinging to sin within his heart. The Lord says it is all right to fast and weep and mourn, as long as these things are done with the whole heart. But if the heart is not broken there is absolutely no point in someone rending their garments (Joel 2:12-13). Ahab tore his garments, but his heart was the same as ever.

Many today are in exactly the same position. They believe the Word of God, but they will not do what it prescribes. They believe there is a God, and they believe they must some day stand before him, but they try to prepare for that day by going through the external motions of religion, and not by making a complete break with their sins. How many sit in church each Sunday with the hope that their religious observances will somehow appease God, and all the while they stubbornly refuse to turn from their sins?

But this leaves us with a tricky question. If Ahab's repentance was 'phoney', why did God take note of it and decide to withhold his judgement for a time?

God was simply demonstrating again the greatness of his mercy. The prophet Isaiah tells us judgement is God's 'strange' or 'unusual' act (Isa. 28:21), which shows us that God receives no pleasure or delight from judgement. His judgement is always a last resort.

By delaying Ahab's judgement, God was also giving comfort to all those who read these pages. If God was good enough to spare for a while someone who had, at best, only partially repented, what will he do for the one who sincerely repents? Matthew Henry puts it like this: 'If a pretending partial penitent shall go to his house reprieved, doubtless a sincere penitent shall go to his house justified.' But as much as God delights in showing mercy, he will never compromise his word in order to show mercy. The temporary reprieve given to Ahab did not change one iota God's promise to judge Ahab and his family. The judgement finally came just as God promised.

Jesus' parable of the fig tree perfectly pictures the blend of God's mercy and judgement. In the parable, God is the owner of the fruitless fig tree. Because he is merciful he agrees to give the fig tree another year to bear fruit, but at the end of that year of mercy the fig tree is to be cut down. The message is clear. God's mercy is great, but there is an end to it (Luke 13:6-9). Ours is a time in which people seem to come lightly and easily to Christ. Deep knowledge of sin, and sincere sorrow over it are increasingly rare. Churches and preachers are so anxious to gain a following that they willingly accept all professions of faith at face value. How we need to be reminded of Ahab and his phoney repentance! Ahab teaches us two very serious and powerful lessons:

It is possible to go a long way in religion and not be truly converted.

True repentance will always evidence itself in a change of attitude toward sin and in changed behaviour.

May God help each of us who has made a profession of faith to bring these lessons home to our hearts and to make sure that our profession is the genuine article.