

Dictionary definitions of the word “repent” typically include two related ideas, the idea of regretting or being sorry for one’s actions and the idea of changing one’s behavior or actions as a result of sorrow or a sense of guilt. Unfortunately, our society is very good at feeling the former without necessarily doing the latter. Achan’s sin, Israel’s corporate repentance, and the Israelites renewed dependence on God in Joshua 8 provides a good example of how to do the latter.

When Israel is defeated at Ai, it becomes clear that they are functioning independently of God and something is wrong. “The Israelites cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run because they have been made liable to destruction.” Only when they destroy whatever is “devoted to destruction” will God once again be with them (7:12-13). After the Israelites consecrate themselves, God reveals the sin of Achan and the Israelites take care of the stolen items and punish the offender. Their actions demonstrate not only their sorrow and guilt, but also a genuine desire to change their behavior and recommit themselves through consecration and obedience to their covenant with the Lord. With that renewal, the Lord promises Joshua that he will deliver Ai into their hands (8:1-2, 18). After their victory over Ai, the nation once again seals their covenant with the Lord at Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim with a recitation of the entire Law of Moses (8:30-35).

All of the New Testament writers naturally address the topic of repentance, but Luke uses the word most often translated “repent” in Luke and Acts more than any other writer. Peter’s sermon on Pentecost, his address to the Sanhedrin, and his response to Simon Magus are some of the many calls for people to “change their minds” before God. Nevertheless, one of the clearest depictions of repentance and how God patiently pursues it is in Luke 13:1-9 where Jesus addresses a couple tragedies that appear to be judgment.

We don’t know any more than what is said in Luke 13:1, but it appears that Pontius Pilate has killed some Galileans who have traveled to Jerusalem to sacrifice at the Temple. It’s unlikely that Pilate would attack Jews in the Temple itself, so the incident probably occurs elsewhere in Jerusalem. But the location doesn’t matter as much as the fact that it appears to be a divinely punitive act. Why would God allow worshipers to be killed on the way to the Temple if they have not sinned? But Jesus corrects this assumption and warns them that it could just as easily have been them. In fact, they bear as much sin and guilt as Pilate’s victims, and they should take the incident as a warning to repent and recommit themselves to God. The eighteen victims of the Tower of Siloam’s demise are a similar example.

Having warned his hearers, Jesus gives them an illustration that depicts God’s desire for repentance and calls them to return to God and be fruitful. After three years of looking for figs on a tree that doesn’t bear fruit, the owner of the vineyard orders the caretaker to cut it down to allow something else to grow in its place. The caretaker asks for one more year to fertilize it and see if it will bear fruit. The owner and caretaker are patient, giving it several years to produce, and they provide what the tree needs to be productive. Similarly, God is patient with us, desiring that we turn from our own ways to walk with him in obedience so that we might flourish.

### Discussion Questions

The Jews of Jesus’ day assumed that tragedy only struck those with flagrant sin. What do we commonly assume today about guilt, what people can expect, and how it can be addressed?

Who does Jesus say is guilty and needs to repent? What does real repentance look like according to Joshua and Jesus?

What do these stories say about God, his desire for repentance, and what we can expect from him in our decisions to persist in our waywardness or repent?