

Eight Steps to Repentance

By Susan Gammage ¹

Repentance is as simple as beseeching (request, ask, implore, beg, plead) God:

Beseech thou the One true God that He may enable everyone to repent and return unto Him. (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 70)

Repentance is between you and God:

...let repentance be between yourselves and God. He, verily, is the Pardoner, the Bounteous, the Gracious, the One Who absolveth the repentant. (Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 30)

As we see in the following quote, it's an 8 Step Process:

Thus have We recounted unto you the tales of the one true God, and sent down unto you the things He had preordained, that haply ye may ask forgiveness of Him, may return unto Him, may truly repent, may realize your misdeeds, may shake off your slumber, may be roused from your heedlessness, may atone for the things that have escaped you, and be of them that do good. Let him who will, acknowledge the truth of My words; and as to him that willeth not, let him turn aside. (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, LXVI, p. 130)

1. ask forgiveness of Him,
2. return unto Him
3. truly repent
4. realize your misdeeds
5. shake off your slumber
6. be roused from your heedlessness
7. atone for the things that have escaped you
8. be of them that do good.

Let's look at each of these one at a time:

1. Ask forgiveness of Him

This is done between us and God, without human intervention.

The ninth Glad-Tidings When the sinner findeth himself wholly detached and freed from all save God, he should beg forgiveness and pardon from God)... The sinner

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should, between himself and God, implore mercy from the Ocean of mercy, beg forgiveness from the Heaven of generosity... (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 24)

There are lots of good reasons to ask God for forgiveness. He's promised that once we ask for forgiveness, it will not only be granted, but that we will receive the healing we need from all pain and sickness as well.

Verily, the breezes of forgiveness have been wafted from the direction of your Lord, the God of Mercy; whoso turneth thereunto shall be cleansed of his sins, and of all pain and sickness. Happy the man that hath turned towards them, and woe betide him that hath turned aside. (Bahá'u'lláh, The Summons of the Lord of Hosts, #131, p. 68)

It will take away our sense of failure and help us to do better in the future

He would advise her to turn her thoughts determinedly and intelligently -- by that I mean unemotionally -- to God, realising that He is forgiving, that in one moment He can, through His Blessed Mercy, take away our sense of failure and help us to do better in the future -- if we sincerely wish to; to turn to Him in prayer and seek to draw closer to Him; and to accept His Will and submit her own desires and opinions to His Wish and plan for her. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 115, #395)

It will also help us solve all of our difficulties:

Pray to God day and night and beg forgiveness and pardon. The omnipotence of God shall solve every difficulty. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 116)

This applies to all of us, without exception. For those who are afraid that your sins are too great for God to forgive, He promises:

The greatness of His mercy surpasseth the fury of His wrath, and His grace encompasseth all who have been called into being and been clothed with the robe of life, be they of the past or of the future. (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, LXVI, p. 131)

He even promised to forgive Mirzá Yahyá, His half-brother who broke the Covenant, and poisoned Him. If he is willing to forgive a covenant-breaker, He is certainly willing to forgive you!

In spite of the harrowing afflictions that the Blessed Beauty suffered at the hand of this half-brother, He, in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas ... counsels him to return to God after his shameful rebellion against His Manifestation, and assures him that God would forgive all his iniquities should he now repent and beg forgiveness from Him. (Adib Taherzadeh, The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh v 3, pp. 373-374)

It is important to note that should a Covenant-breaker recognize his mistakes, become conscious of his transgressions against the Cause of God and find the urge to repent, the Centre of the Cause, when satisfied he is sincerely repentant, will forgive his past deeds and restore his credibility and status as a Bahá'í in good standing in the community. (Adib Taherzadeh, *The Child of the Covenant*, p. 240)

2. Return unto Him

Sometimes our shame prevents us from turning back to God. He doesn't want our fear of Him to get in the way of asking for forgiveness.

Turn unto Him, and fear not because of thy deeds. He, in truth, forgiveth whomsoever He desireth as a bounty on His part; no God is there but Him, the Ever-Forgiving, the All-Bounteous. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 86)

Here's a short prayer we can say on our return:

Forgive me, O my Lord, my sins which have hindered me from walking in the ways of Thy good-pleasure, and from attaining the shores of the ocean of Thy oneness. (Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh, XXV, p. 29)

3. Truly repent

We entreat God -- exalted and glorified be He -- to aid all men to be just and fair-minded, and to graciously assist them to repent and return unto Him. He, verily, heareth, and is ready to answer. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 35)

Here's a prayer we can say, to ask for repentance:

O God, my God! I beseech Thee by the sun of Thy grace, and the sea of Thy knowledge, and the heaven of Thy justice, to aid them that have denied Thee to confess, and such as have turned aside from Thee to return, and those who have calumniated Thee to be just and fair-minded. Assist them, O my Lord, to return unto Thee, and to repent before the door of Thy grace. Powerful art Thou to do what Thou willest, and in Thy grasp are the reins of all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth. Praise be unto God, the Lord of the worlds. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 107)

4. Realize your misdeeds

I hope that by now you've understood the nature of sin in general and how holding on to fear specifically is not in your best interest.

Whosoever acknowledged His truth and turned unto Him, his good works outweighed his misdeeds, and all his sins were remitted and forgiven. (Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 113)

It is inadmissible that man, who hath been endowed with reason, should consume that which stealeth it away. Nay, rather it behoveth him to comport himself in a manner worthy of the human station, and not in accordance with the misdeeds of every heedless and wavering soul. (Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 62)

5. Shake off your slumber

It's easy to go through life, following the crowd and not thinking too deeply about things. This is what God means by "slumber". It's a kind of sleep-walking through life.

The peoples of the world are fast asleep. Were they to wake from their slumber, they would hasten with eagerness unto God, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise. They would cast away everything they possess, be it all the treasures of the earth, that their Lord may remember them to the extent of addressing to them but one word. Such is the instruction given you by Him Who holdeth the knowledge of things hidden, in a Tablet which the eye of creation hath not seen, and which is revealed to none except His own Self, the omnipotent Protector of all worlds. So bewildered are they in the drunkenness of their evil desires, that they are powerless to recognize the Lord of all being, Whose voice calleth aloud from every direction: "There is none other God but Me, the Mighty, the All-Wise. (Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 33)

Many a day hath passed over thee whilst thou hast busied thyself with thy fancies and idle imaginings. How long art thou to slumber on thy bed? Lift up thy head from slumber, for the Sun hath risen to the zenith, haply it may shine upon thee with the light of beauty. (Bahá'u'lláh, The Arabic Hidden Words 62)

By studying His Writings we discover our marching orders and must be wide awake in order to carry them out.

My sole duty is to remind you of your failure in duty towards the Cause of God, if perchance ye may be of them that heed My warning. Wherefore, hearken ye unto My speech, and return ye to God and repent, that He, through His grace, may have mercy upon you, may wash away your sins, and forgive your trespasses. (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, LXVI, p. 130)

6. Be roused from your heedlessness

We have set forth the whole matter before thee, that perchance thou might realize what thou hast done, might desist from inflicting on others the hurt thou hast inflicted on Us, and might be of them that have truly repented to God, Who created thee and created all things, and might act with discernment in the future. Better is

this for thee than all thou dost possess, than thy ministry whose days are numbered. (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, CXIII, p. 230)

Yea, inasmuch as the peoples of the world have failed to seek from the luminous and crystal Springs of divine knowledge the inner meaning of God's holy words, they therefore have languished, stricken and sore athirst, in the vale of idle fancy and waywardness. They have strayed far from the fresh and thirst-subduing waters, and gathered round the salt that burneth bitterly. Concerning them, the Dove of Eternity hath spoken: "And if they see the path of righteousness, they will not take it for their path; but if they see the path of error, for their path will they take it. This, because they treated Our signs as lies, and were heedless of them. (Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 105)

In another passage He saith: "Woe to every lying sinner, who heareth the verses of God recited to him, and then, as though he heard them not, persisteth in proud disdain! Apprise him of a painful punishment." The implications of this verse, alone, suffice all that is in heaven and on earth, were the people to ponder the verses of their Lord. For thou hearest how in this day the people disdainfully ignore the divinely-revealed verses, as though they were the meanest of all things. And yet, nothing greater than these verses hath ever appeared, nor will ever be made manifest in the world! Say unto them: "O heedless people! Ye repeat what your fathers, in a bygone age, have said. Whatever fruits they have gathered from the tree of their faithlessness, the same shall ye gather also. Ere long shall ye be gathered unto your fathers, and with them shall ye dwell in hellish fire. An ill abode! the abode of the people of tyranny. (Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 206-207)

None of us like to think of ourselves as truly bad, when in fact, most of us are failing in our duty to God with almost every breath! He's addressing most of us in pretty strong tones, when He says:

O SON OF BOUNTY!

Out of the wastes of nothingness, with the clay of My command I made thee to appear, and have ordained for thy training every atom in existence and the essence of all created things. Thus, ere thou didst issue from thy mother's womb, I destined for thee two founts of gleaming milk, eyes to watch over thee, and hearts to love thee. Out of My loving-kindness, 'neath the shade of My mercy I nurtured thee, and guarded thee by the essence of My grace and favor. And My purpose in all this was that thou mightest attain My everlasting dominion and become worthy of My invisible bestowals. And yet heedless thou didst remain, and when fully grown, thou didst neglect all My bounties and occupied thyself with thine idle imaginings, in such wise that thou didst become wholly forgetful, and, turning away from the portals of the Friend didst abide within the courts of My enemy. (Bahá'u'lláh, The Persian Hidden Words 29)

O YE THAT ARE LYING AS DEAD ON THE COUCH OF HEEDLESSNESS!

Ages have passed and your precious lives are well-nigh ended, yet not a single breath of purity hath reached Our court of holiness from you. Though immersed in the ocean of misbelief, yet with your lips ye profess the one true faith of God. Him whom I abhor ye have loved, and of My foe ye have made a friend.

Notwithstanding, ye walk on My earth complacent and self-satisfied, heedless that My earth is weary of you and everything within it shunneth you. Were ye but to open your eyes, ye would, in truth, prefer a myriad griefs unto this joy, and would count death itself better than this life. (Bahá'u'lláh, The Persian Hidden Words 20)

7. Atone for the things that have escaped you

To atone for something means:

- To compensate
- To apologize
- To recompense
- To make amends
- To say you're sorry
- To do penance

It's not optional, but a commandment:

Arise, and, under the eyes of God, atone for your failures in duty towards Him. This is My commandment unto you, were ye to incline your ears unto My commandment. (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, CXXXV, p. 293)

There's no bargaining with God on this one – you have to do it with a pure heart:

When, at a later time, Bahá'u'lláh had been banished to Baghdad, Husayn Khan sent Him a letter in which he expressed repentance and promised to atone for his past misdeeds on condition that he should regain his former position. Bahá'u'lláh refused to answer him. Sunk in misery and shame, he languished until his death. (Shoghi Effendi, The Dawn-Breakers, p. 197)

There seems to be some urgency attached to this notion:

Night hath succeeded day, and day hath succeeded night, and the hours and moments of your lives have come and gone, and yet none of you hath, for one instant, consented to detach himself from that which perisheth. Bestir yourselves, that the brief moments that are still yours may not be dissipated and lost. Even as the swiftness of lightning your days shall pass, and your bodies shall be laid to rest beneath a canopy of dust. What can ye then achieve? How can ye atone for your past failure? (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 321)

It's possible that there could only be a small window of opportunity and you wouldn't want to miss it, as this man found out:

Siyyid 'Abdu'l-Báqí sat and listened to the Báb. He heard His voice, watched His movements, looked upon the expression of His face, and noted the words which streamed unceasingly from His lips, and yet failed to be moved by their majesty and power. Wrapt in the veils of his own idle fancy and learning, he was powerless to appreciate the meaning of the utterances of the Báb. He did not even trouble to enquire the name or the character of the Guest into whose presence he had been introduced. Unmoved by the things he had heard and seen, he retired from that presence, unaware of the unique opportunity which, through his apathy, he had irretrievably lost. A few days later, when informed of the name of the Youth whom he had treated with such careless indifference, he was filled with chagrin and remorse. It was too late, however, for him to seek His presence and atone for his conduct, for the Báb had already departed from Kashan. In his grief, he renounced the society of his fellowmen, and led, to the end of his days, a life of unrelieved seclusion. (Shoghi Effendi, *The Dawn-Breakers*, p. 221)

Atonement is not the same as asking another person for forgiveness.

... Confession of sins and transgressions before human beings is not permissible, as it hath never been nor will ever be conducive to divine forgiveness. Moreover such confession before people results in one's humiliation and abasement, and God -- exalted be His glory -- wisheth not the humiliation of His servants. ... (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 24)

We can acknowledge we've done something wrong and ask someone for their forgiveness, but we aren't obliged to do so:

... "if we spontaneously desire to acknowledge we have been wrong in something and that we have some fault of character, and ask another person's forgiveness or pardon, we are quite free to do so. The Guardian wants to point out, however, that we are not obliged to do so. It rests entirely with the individual." (Shoghi Effendi cited by the Universal House of Justice in a letter to a National Spiritual Assembly, 19 March, 1973. https://bahai-library.com/uhj_alcoholics_anonymous.html)

8. Be of them that do good

Once God has forgiven us, we need to strive to change our behavior so that day by day we'll be able to bring our behavior more in line with God's will for us.

God hath forgiven what is past. Henceforward everyone should utter that which is meet and seemly, and should refrain from slander, abuse and whatever causeth sadness in men. Lofty is the station of man! (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 219-220)

Even our good deeds can be cause of God's pardon and forgiveness:

If a wealthy man at the time of his death bequeaths a gift to the poor and miserable, and gives a part of his wealth to be spent for them, perhaps this action may be the cause of his pardon and forgiveness, and of his progress in the Divine Kingdom. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 231)

And even the very act of asking for forgiveness will transmute our sins into good deeds:

Thy generous Lord will ... forgive thee thy sins and change them to good deeds. Verily the Lord is the Forgiving, the Merciful. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 164, #141)

Here's another story that shows how good deeds are part of atoning for our sins:

The Báb answered and said: 'What you have witnessed is true and undeniable. You belittled this Revelation and have contemptuously disdained its Author. God, the All-Merciful, desiring not to afflict you with His punishment, has willed to reveal to your eyes the Truth. By His Divine interposition, He has instilled into your heart the love of His chosen One, and caused you to recognize the unconquerable power of His Faith.'" This marvellous experience completely changed the heart of Ali Khan. Those words had calmed his agitation and subdued the fierceness of his animosity. By every means in his power, he determined to atone for his past behaviour. 'A poor man, a shaykh, he hastily informed the Báb, "is yearning to attain Your presence. He lives in a masjid outside the gate of Máh-Kú. I pray You that I myself be allowed to bring him to this place that he may meet You. By this act I hope that my evil deeds may be forgiven, that I may be enabled to wash away the stains of my cruel behaviour toward Your friends.'" His request was granted, whereupon he went straightway to Shaykh Hasan-i-Zunuzi and conducted him into the presence of his Master. (Shoghi Effendi, The Dawn-Breakers, p. 247-248)