

AL GHAZALI ON PENITENCE

[Early in 1925 the American Press of Beirut published a pamphlet of forty pages containing selections from Al Ghazali's chapter on the subject of penitence in his *Ihya'-ulum-id-Din*. The pamphlet is beautifully printed (though not without misprints) and has on the margins of the pages some well-chosen parallels from Christian Scripture. The publication of these selections suggested the translation of them for the use of students who do not read Arabic with sufficient ease. Apparently no English translation of this part of Al-Ghazali's works has ever been published.

The following selections comprise about two-thirds of those in the pamphlet. The translation has been made after careful comparison with the text published by the Maimaniyeh Press, Cairo, and the text with commentary by Al-Zabadi. These two texts do not often differ in any important point. For convenience of reference the pages of each have been indicated with the capital letters T (= text, vol. 4), and C (= Commentary, vol. 8).—C. G. N.]

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THE NATURE OF REPENTANCE

(T. 3 C. 500) You should know that the meaning of penitence comprises three parts, a knowledge, a state, and an action (C. 501). The knowledge comes first, the state second, the action third. The first causes the second, the second causes the third in a chain of consequence essential to the consistency of the law which expresses God's rule and sovereignty.

Knowledge is the recognition of the great harmfulness of sin, and of the fact that it is the veil between the servant and all that he loves. If his knowledge of this is certain and sure, and his heart is convinced, there springs from this knowledge a heart-felt grief for the loss of what he loves. For the heart grieves whenever it perceives the loss of its beloved; and if that loss is the result of its own act, it grieves over the act which caused it; and our name for this grief over the past act which has caused the loss of the beloved, is remorse. If this pain constrains the heart and holds it in thrall, then another state is produced in the heart by this pain, and this is called will, or purpose of action, and it has a connection with past, present and

future. Its connection with the present is renunciation of the sin with which it has been associated. Its connection with the future is its resolve to abandon till the end of life the sin which has caused the loss of the beloved. Its connection with the past is to make amends for the past by reparation and performance of duty, if the case admits of reparation.

(C. 502) The first element, then, is knowledge: it is the way of approach to all these blessings. By this knowledge I mean belief and assurance. For belief is admission of the truth that sin is a deadly poison, and assurance is additional certainty of this admission, and negation of all doubt of it, and its absolute hold over the heart. Whenever the light of this faith shines on the heart it kindles the fire of remorse, and this gives pain to the heart, since by the shining of this light it perceives that it is separated from its beloved. This is like the case of a man who has been in darkness when the sun rises. The light gleams upon him and disperses clouds or draws aside a veil, and after being near to destruction, he sees his beloved, and the fires of love are kindled in his heart, and those fires spring up in him in a glowing purpose of reparation.

So then these three, knowledge, remorse and resolve, (connected with the present and the future in renunciation of sin, and with the past in making reparation) are three separate elements of one idea. The word "penitence" should be applied to the whole idea: though often it is used to mean remorse only. In this sense knowledge is an introduction and preparation; and renunciation of sin is a fruit and a subsequent result. It was in this sense that he himself (peace to him) said "Remorse is penitence," since remorse cannot occur without knowledge, which is its cause and of which it is the fruit, nor without resolve, which follows it subsequently. So remorse is supported on both sides; I mean by its cause and by its result. (C. 503) In this sense also penitence has been defined as a melting of the emotions caused by previous iniquity.

This, however, refers only to the pain of penitence, which has also been called a blazing fire in the heart and contrition of soul beyond the power of healing.

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But all the various definitions of penitence are too many to collect. If you understand these three elements of its meaning, and their essential connection and their relative order, then you know that all that has ever been said in definition of it is insufficient to compass its full meaning. The search for the true nature of things is, after all, more important than the search for mere words.

THE NECESSITY AND VIRTUE OF PENITENCE

You should know that the necessity of penitence is clearly shown both by experience and by proof-texts. It is plain to spiritual perception, if that faculty in any man is open, and when God has enlarged his heart by the light of faith, so that he is able to walk by the light which he possesses in the midst of the darkness of ignorance, and needs no guide to lead him at every step. For every traveller either is blind, and needs a guide for his steps, or has sight and may be directed to the entrance of the path, from which point (C. 504) he can guide himself (T. 4). In the path of religion also men may be divided into the same two classes. The man whose spiritual perception is immature cannot dispense with tradition to guide his feet. He needs to hear at every step a pronouncement from God's book or from the prophet's law. If ever he is left without that, he is perplexed. Such a man's progress, though his life be long and his diligence¹ great, is limited, and his steps are uncertain. But the blessed man whose heart God has enlarged by submission (Islam) and who walks in the light of his Lord, fixes his attention on the straight path, and overcomes wearisome obstacles; and in his heart shines the light of the Koran and the light of faith. Such is the power of the light within him that he

¹ So text. Com. reads "his good fortune."

makes his venture on the least indication of a light scarcely kindled, no flame of which has actually reached him. But if the flame does reach him, it is light on light to him (God guides whom He will to His light). Such a man does not need a pronouncement quoted for every event. He who is in such case, if he wishes to know the duty of penitence, looks first with his spiritual perception at penitence as it really is; then at the true meaning of duty; then combines the two ideas, duty and penitence. He will not waver in his adherence to penitence, because he knows that the meaning of duty is that which is necessary to the attainment of eternal bliss, and salvation from eternal destruction. (For there would be no meaning in describing anything as duty, if it were not for the close connection of bliss and misery with doing it or leaving it undone). The saying "Duty is what is enjoined on us," is an empty phrase, for there is no meaning in our using the words, "another enjoined it on us," or "did not enjoin it on us," unless we have an immediate or eventual purpose in doing something or leaving it undone.

If then a man knows the meaning of duty, and that it is a means to attain eternal bliss: if he knows that there is no bliss in the eternal home but in meeting God Almighty, and that every one who is separated from Him is inevitably wretched, since there is an impassable barrier between him and his desire, and is consumed in the fire of separation and the fire of hell: if he knows that nothing prevents us from meeting God but the pursuit of desires, and association with this fleeting world and clinging to the love of what we are absolutely certain to lose: if he knows that nothing brings us near to God but severance of the bonds that tie the heart to the vanities of this world, and whole-hearted endeavour towards God, seeking for companionship with Him by continuous remembrance of Him, and for love to Him by knowledge of His glory and beauty, as far as is in man's power: if he knows that his sins (which are the turning aside from God and the

following of the desire of devils, the enemies of God, banished from his presence) are the cause of his being excluded and banished from God Almighty; if he knows all this, then he doubts not that to turn from the way of banishment is essential to the attainment of nearness, and that such turning is accomplished only by knowledge (C. 505) remorse and resolution. For if he does not know that sins are the cause of banishment from the beloved, he has no remorse, and his walk in the way of banishment gives him no pain, and without this pain he cannot be converted. The meaning of conversion is renunciation of sin, followed by good resolve. He now has no doubt that these three things are essential to his reaching the beloved. Such is the faith which results from the light of spiritual perception.

But there is also the man who does not aspire to this condition (indeed its heights are far above the powers of most men); he has in tradition and in its observance a wide field through which to arrive at salvation from destruction. In this he should mark the utterances of God and of his prophet, and of other good men of the past. God Almighty has said, "Repent all of you before God, oh believers; mayhap ye will prosper." This command applies universally. God Almighty has also said, "Oh ye who have believed, repent before God with a genuine repentance," where the meaning of "genuine" is "sincere toward God Almighty, free from all blemish," a word derived from a root "pure." Another indication of the merit of repentance is God's utterance, "God loves those who repent; God loves the pure." (C. 506) The prophet (peace upon him) said, "The penitent is beloved of God; and he who repents of sin is as he who has no sin." The prophet also said (the prayer of God and peace upon him), "God rejoices more (C. 507) over the repentance of the believing servant than does a man who goes forth into a deadly desert with a camel to carry his food and drink, and who lays down his head and sleeps, then

when he wakes finds that his camel has disappeared, seeks it till thirst or heat or whatever God appoints overpowers him, and says, 'I will return to the place where I was and lie down and die,' then lays his head down on his arm to die and wakes again and finds his camel loaded with food and drink by his side—God Almighty rejoices more over the repentance of the believing servant than does this man over his camel." In some versions of this story the man says in his extreme joy when he intends to return thanks to God, "I am thy Lord, and thou art my servant." El Hasan el Bosri, it is related, said that when God, great and glorious, repented over Adam (peace upon him), the angels congratulated him, and Gabriel and Michael (peace upon them) came down to him and said, "Oh Adam, great is your bliss in God's repentance over you." But Adam, (peace upon him) said, "Oh, Gabriel, if there is any further question after this repentance, what is my position?" And God revealed this to him, "Oh Adam, you have given your descendants not only a heritage of trouble and toil but also a heritage of repentance, and whosoever of them calls upon me, I will answer him as I have answered you, and whosoever of them asks forgiveness of me, I will not grudge it to him, for I am (C. 508) near, I answer. Oh Adam, I will gather from the tombs all the penitent, glad at heart, laughing, for their appeal is answered."

Innumerable are the assurances and indications of this; and the general consensus of Imams agrees upon the necessity of repentance, since the meaning of that consensus is the knowledge that sins and transgressions destroy us and separate us from God Almighty. This belongs to the subject of the duty of belief: but the way it is sometimes neglected is amazing. The meaning of this knowledge is to put an end to that neglect, and there can be no opposite opinion about the necessity of that.

URGENCY OF THE DUTY OF REPENTANCE

(T. 7, C. 513) So the transgressor is necessarily lacking in faith. Transgressions are to faith what harmful foods are to the body. They continue to collect in the stomach until they change the composition of its elements, while the stomach does not perceive them until its composition is damaged, and the man first falls ill, then dies. So with transgressions: if a man is afraid of destruction in this finite world, he must shun poisons and harmful foods in every circumstance and immediately. The man who fears eternal destruction must surely do likewise. He who has partaken of poison and regrets it, must vomit it up, cease to partake of it, counteract it, and remove it from the stomach immediately and energetically in order to make reparation to his body which has been in danger of destruction (though that would deprive him only of this fleeting world). But he who has partaken of the poison of religion, that is, sin, must the more diligently turn from it by making all possible reparation while a respite (that is his remaining life) is still offered to him. What is to be feared from this poison is the loss of the other, the abiding world, in which is eternal bliss, and great possession, which to lose is the fire of hell and eternal torture. Many, many lives in this world are cut off in less than the minutest fraction of its span, since to that span there is (C. 514) no limit whatever. Oh, haste then, haste to repent, before the poison of sin producē in the spirit of faith an effect which passes the skill and experience of doctors, which makes all protection unavailing, all advice useless, and all exhortation of friends vain; so that it can justly be said of the patient that he is lost.

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NECESSITY OF REPENTANCE COMMON TO ALL

(T. 8, C. 516) Now the proof that penitence is obligatory continuously and in every condition is that no human being is free from transgression in any part of his body,

since even prophets are not so. * * * This is stated in the Koran and the accounts of the sins of the prophets (peace upon them), and their repentance, and their tears over their sins. If in any condition a man were free from transgression in every part of his body, he still would not be free from anxiety over his sins; and if in any condition he were free from anxiety, yet he would not be free from the insinuations of the devil, who puts into his mind suggestions which dissipate his thoughts and make him neglectful of the remembrance of God; and if he were ever free from that, he would not be free from negligence and shortcoming in the knowledge of God and of His attributes and His works. All this is shortcoming for which there are certain causes. To abandon these causes and to be occupied with their opposites is conversion from one path of life to the contrary one. In fact the meaning of penitence is conversion. That man should be absolutely free from this shortcoming is inconceivable. (C. 517) However varied the fate of different individuals may be, there is no escape from this fundamental fact. About this the prophet said, (peace to him) "There is an oppression on my heart until I ask pardon of God seventy times every day and night." Therefore God Almighty honoured him by saying, "May God forgive your former and your latter sins." If this was the case with the prophet, what must be the condition of other men? * * * As to the meaning of the words, "Penitence is a duty in every circumstance," you should know that we have already shown that man, as he is originally created, is never free from the pursuit of his appetites; and that not only does penitence mean that he must renounce them, but complete penitence also includes reparation for the past. Whenever man follows his appetite, there rises from it a darkness which clouds his heart, just as from a man's breath there rises a cloud on a polished mirror: and if the darkness of the appetites accumulates, it becomes a corruption like the vapour of breath on the surface of a mirror, when the tarnish accu-

mulates. God has said, "Nay, but what their deeds have earned them is a corruption on their hearts." If this corruption accumulates it becomes deeply imprinted on the heart like tarnish on the surface of a mirror, which, if it accumulates for a long time, eats into the substance of the iron and destroys it, so that it can never be polished again. * * * Just as darkness proceeds from rebellious acts and appetites and clouds the heart, so a light rises from acts of obedience and renunciation of the appetites, and the cloud of rebellion is wiped out by the light of obedience. The prophet (peace to him) referred to that in the words, "Pursue evil with good; it will obliterate it."

Thus the servant can in no condition of life be free from the duty of effacing the marks of evil from his heart by good works, whose effect is the opposite of the effect of that wrong. * * * (T. 9, C. 520). Oh beware lest this world should deceive you! Oh, beware, beware, one-thousand thousand times, lest you should fall into error about God! These things are mysteries, but he who catches the faintest whiff of their meaning will know that the duty of sincere penitence is, to the servant who walks in the ways of Almighty God, continuous at every breath of his life, though he should live as long as Noah, and that this is an imperative and immediate duty.

How true are the words of Abu Suleiman Darani when he said, "If the wise man were to weep for the remainder of his life over nought but his past disobedience, that alone would cause him grief till his death. Then what of the man who occupies the rest of his life in folly like that of his past?" The saying means just this. The wise man who has a precious jewel and loses it without getting any use from it will undoubtedly grieve over it: but if, with its loss, his own destruction is involved, his weeping will be the more bitter. But every hour of life, nay, every breath, is a precious jewel which has no substitute or equivalent, and is able to bring you to everlasting bliss and save you from everlasting misery. What jewel is

more precious than this? If you lose it by negligence your loss is manifest. * * * And if you do not weep over that calamity, that only shows your folly. The greatest of all calamities has befallen you. Between it and the knowledge of it lies the sleep of negligence. Men are asleep; but after death they will awake; then every bankrupt's insolvency will be revealed and the calamity of every wretched wight. Then will all hope of reparation vanish. * * * God's word points to this when He says, "Give alms of what we have given you, ere death come to any one of you, so that he says, 'Oh my Lord, if Thou wilt grant me respite for a little, I will give alms and be one of the good.'" But God will never respite a soul which has reached its term." [A commentary on this verse says] (C. 521) At that point he will say, "Oh angel of death, delay death for me one day in which I may repent toward my Lord and procure provision of goodness for myself." But the angel will say, "Your days are passed: not a single day!" Then he will say, "Respite me one hour!" But the angel will answer, "Your hours have passed: not a single hour!" and will shut before him the gate of penitence; his soul will flutter, and his breath will rattle in his throat. * * * To such a man God saith, "Penitence is not for those who do evil, then, when they come to the day of death say, 'Now I repent.'" God says also, "Penitence before God is confined to those who do evil in ignorance and soon repent." Which means that soon after the sin the sinner regrets it and obliterates its mark by a good deed which recompenses for it, before corruption accumulates on his heart and removes the possibility of obliteration. Therefore the prophet said (prayers of God and peace upon him), "Pursue evil with good: it will obliterate it." * * *

TRUE PENITENCE ACCEPTABLE TO GOD

T. 10, C. 522) You must know that, if you really understand the meaning of acceptance, you will not doubt

that all true penitence is accepted. They who see by the light of insight, and trust the light of the Koran, know that every pure heart is accepted by God Almighty, and in the next world has the joy of being near Him, and is prepared to look with the imperishable eye at the face of God Almighty. They know too that the heart is originally created pure, and every child born is born into the true religion and loses its purity only when it is contaminated by the dirt and darkness of sin. They know also that the fire of remorse burns out this dirt, and that the light of good obliterates evil from the heart, and that the darkness of transgression has no power before the light of good deeds, just as the darkness of night has no power before the light of day, or rather, as the defilement of dirt has no power before the cleansing power of soap. A king will not accept a dirty garment as his clothing; nor does God Almighty receive a darkened heart into His company. The use of a garment in unclean occupations soils it; but washing it with soap and hot water is certain to cleanse it; so the application of the soul to bodily appetites defiles it, but washing it in tears and the flame of remorse cleanses and purifies it. Every heart that is pure and holy is accepted just as any clean garment. Your duty then is to cleanse and purify; but acceptance is a free gift which is appointed by eternal decree (C. 523) of which there is no reversal.

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(T. 11) To imagine that genuine repentance can be rejected is as foolish as to suppose that the darkness will not vanish at sunrise, or that the dirt will not disappear, when a garment is washed with soap, unless the dirt by reason of its long accumulation has destroyed the fabric of the garment. In that case the soap has no power to remove it. This is like the accumulation of sins so that they become deeply imprinted and eat like rust into the heart. A heart like that would never be converted or repent. Yes, a man might say with his lips, "I repent," and

it might be like a fuller saying with his lips, "I have washed the garment." That would not cleanse the garment in the least. If he does not change the condition of the garment by using something to counteract that condition which is firmly established, the case is the same as the complete impossibility of penitence.

THE KNOT OF OBSTINACY, AND ITS RESOLUTION

(T. 42, C. 627) [First] Some believe that retribution will be delayed. [The remedy for this is that man] should know that all that will happen will happen, and that the morrow is near for all who look for it, and that death is nearer to every man than his shoe lace is, though he know it not; and mayhap the hour is near. * * *

Second. Postponement of penitence. The remedy for this is contemplation of the fact that the lament of those tortured in the fire is mostly about their procrastination, for the procrastinator builds upon a foundation which does not exist—that is, length of life. Perhaps he will not live long, and even if he does, he can renounce sin no more easily tomorrow than he can today. I presume his present inability is due only to appetite, and appetite will not leave him tomorrow, but will be the stronger, since it will be confirmed by habit. Appetite confirmed by habit is very different from appetite unconfirmed. This is how procrastinators are (C. 628) lost. * * * (T. 43) The procrastinator is like nothing so much as a man who needs to pull up a tree, and perceives that it will yield only to great strength. So he says, 'I will postpone it for a year, then return to it,' though he knows that all the time the tree stays there its roots grow stronger, while he himself, as he grows older, becomes weaker. * * *

Third. Trust in God's leniency. The remedy for this has already been stated. It is like a man spending all his money and leaving himself and his family in poverty, in the hope that God Almighty in His bounty will allow him to stumble on a treasure in a desert land. If this can hap-

pen, then God can be lenient about sin. It is as if a man were expecting a night raid of robbers in his country, and left his hoard of money in the court of his house: then, after deciding to hide it by burying it, neglected to do so, saying, "I will await God's favor in making the robbers miss it, either by their not reaching my house, or by their dying at the door if they arrive there." * * *

Fourth. Doubt, which is atheism. * * * This should be cured by direct knowledge suitable to the limits of the doubter's intelligence. You should say to him, as the prophets who were supported by miracles said, "Is it conceivably possible; or do you assert that you know it is absolutely impossible, like the impossibility of a man being in two places at once?" If he answers, "I know that it is absolutely impossible," he is a perfect imbecile. Probably no such person exists among intelligent beings. But if he says, "I am doubtful about it," then say, "Well, if you had left some food for a moment in your house, and a stranger told you that a snake had lapped it and poisoned it, and if you thought it possible that he was speaking the truth, would you eat it or leave it, even if it were the most delicious food?" He will say, "I should certainly leave it, for I should say, 'If he is a liar I shall lose only this food; and abstinence from it, though difficult, is a short matter; but if he is speaking the truth I shall lose life itself, which would be far more appalling than the pain of doing without food'" * * * * (C. 629). If he is a sane man, he will have no hesitation over this idea, since there is no comparison between the span of life and the eternity of eternities. Suppose that the world were full of seeds and that a bird picked up one every million years. The seeds would all be gone at last, but the eternity of eternities would have suffered no diminution. How then can any sane man grow weary of abstinence from indulgence of the appetites, even for a hundred years for example, for the sake of a bliss which lasts for the eternity of eternities? * * *

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