The Purity of Reality

Mark Swarner · Repentance For the Rest Of Us · Isaiah 6:1-7; Isaiah 6:8; 1 John 1:5-7; 1 John 1:8-10

AT A GLANCE

In the series Repentance for the Rest of Us, Mark Swarner reclaims confession as the everyday practice of repentance: not shame or self-punishment, but the relief of dropping the mask before God, trusted others, and ourselves. Reading Isaiah's throne-room vision alongside John's claim that God is light, he argues that we contribute only honesty to our cleansing, and that forgiven honesty opens into fellowship, freedom, and calling.

- Confession is not self-punishment but the simple recognition of reality: choosing to stop hiding from God, from trusted others, and from ourselves.
- Isaiah did nothing to earn cleansing. He told the truth in God's presence and God atoned, so forgiveness is received, never achieved.
- Grace received is grace sent: Isaiah's cleansed lips became his calling, and forgiven people become vessels of grace in a broken world.

> *"Confession isn't how we earn forgiveness. It's how we open our hands and our hearts to receive it."*

EXPOSITION

Scripture engaged

> Isaiah 6:1-7 — [1]In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a very high and wonderful throne. His long robe filled the Temple. [2]Seraph angels stood around him. Each angel had six wings. They used two wings to cover their faces, two wings to cover their bodies, and two wings to fly. [3]The angels were calling to each other, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord All-Powerful. His Glory fills the whole earth." [4]The sound was so loud that it caused the frame around the door to shake, and the Temple was filled with smoke. [5]I was frightened and said, "Oh, no! I will be destroyed. I am not pure enough to speak to God, and I live among people who are not pure enough to speak to him. But I have seen the King, the Lord All-Powerful." [6]There was a fire on the altar. One of the Seraph angels used a pair of tongs to take a hot coal from the fire. Then the angel flew to me with it in his hand. [7]Then he touched my mouth with the hot coal and said, "When this hot coal touched your lips, your guilt was taken away, and your sins were erased. " (ERV)

> Isaiah 6:8 — Then I heard the Lord’s voice, saying, “Who can I send? Who will go for us?” So I said, “Here I am. Send me!” (ERV)
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> 1 John 1:5-7 — [5]We heard the true teaching from God. Now we tell it to you: God is light, and in him there is no darkness. [6]So if we say that we share in life with God, but we continue living in darkness, we are liars, who don’t follow the truth. [7]We should live in the light, where God is. If we live in the light, we have fellowship with each other, and the blood sacrifice of Jesus, God’s Son, washes away every sin and makes us clean. (ERV)
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> 1 John 1:8-10 — [8]If we say that we have no sin, we are fooling ourselves, and the truth is not in us. [9]But if we confess our sins, God will forgive us. We can trust God to do this. He always does what is right. He will make us clean from all the wrong things we have done. [10]If we say that we have not sinned, we are saying that God is a liar and that we don’t accept his true teaching. (ERV)

The argument

Pride Keeps the Mask On, and Confession Is Simply Choosing to Stop Hiding — Repentance made daily and ordinary

Mark Swarner begins with superheroes, who nearly all wear masks, and whose real journey is the loneliness behind them. We wear our own, and 'this pressure to be a superhero, to only show our strengths and hide our weakness, it's an impossible task.' Confession, he says, 'is simply choosing to stop hiding.' He grants that these words have been used to shame people, and apologizes if that happened to them. Then he turns the lens on himself: his resistance is pride. He wants to be 'the superhero in my story,' and he admits, through a thin disguise, that he would wander a supermarket rather than ask where the pepperoncinis are. If ego resists that, admitting 'I am lost, and I am broken' comes harder still.

> **Insight —** *The smallest refusals to ask for help expose the pride that makes repentance hard, and naming that pride is where honesty starts.*

Confession Is Recognition of Reality, and the Cleansing Belongs to God — Isaiah at the rim of the throne room

Mark Swarner sets Isaiah 6 in crisis: Uzziah dead after what he calls a fifty-year reign, Assyria rising. The vision's point 'is not to teach us about seraphim'; it is that 'this is no earthly throne room.' Isaiah knew God's holiness in his head, like knowing the Grand Canyon from a postcard, until he stood at the rim. He does not straighten up and present himself; he cries 'Woe to me.' 'This isn't beating himself up. This is a recognition of reality.' Then the coal: fire purifies, but 'what work did Isaiah accomplish to scrub away his own guilt? Absolutely zero.' Atonement is God's work, made possible through Jesus. Confession is how we open our hands to receive it.

> **Insight —** *We bring honesty to God's presence and nothing else, because the scrubbing has always been his work and never ours.*

Walking in the Light Restores Fellowship, Since Darkness Is Only Light's Absence — John's two paths and the wisdom of layered disclosure

Mark Swarner draws out John's claim that God is light: darkness 'isn't the opposite of light. It's the absence of light.' Hiding, then, is simply standing where the light is not, and stepping in restores fellowship with God and with one another. After a cave tour's total darkness, the lights came back and people could see each other again: 'living in the light means dropping the masks.' That happens in circles more than rows. He offers layers: everyone may know something about us, some people more, and one fully disclosing friend, yet 'we do not confess everything to everyone.' He concedes this is hard for the betrayed, says 'I've been there too,' and mentions his own counselor.

> **Insight** — *Fellowship deepens in proportion to honesty, so find at least one trusted person who can see behind the mask.*

The Hardest Mask to Drop Is the One We Wear for Ourselves — Self-deception and the finished work of the cross

Reading 1 John 1:8-10, Mark Swarner asks, 'Notice who's getting deceived.' Not God, who already knows; others perhaps for a while; but eventually ourselves, because we get so good at hiding. It is always easier to audit someone else's life than our own, as Jesus' speck and plank imply. John's contrast is stark on purpose: claim no sin and we make God a liar, or confess and be forgiven. Citing Paul David Tripp, he insists there is nothing we will ever need to admit that grace has not already addressed. 'There is nothing you can admit to yourself that God doesn't already have.' So 'you don't have to be afraid to look in the mirror.'

> **Insight** — *Self-honesty becomes safe when we remember that every failure we might uncover has already been carried to the cross.*

Forgiveness Is a Commissioning, Not a Destination — Isaiah's 'Here am I' follows immediately on his cleansing

Mark Swarner returns to Isaiah one last time. Right after the coal touches his lips, he hears the Lord ask, 'Whom shall I send?' and answers, 'Here am I. Send me.' The moment of confession and forgiveness 'also marked the beginning of Isaiah's calling.' His healing carried a new purpose, because 'we cannot share grace in a broken world until we've received it.' Quoting Tim Keller, he says God does not clean us up to sit on a shelf admiring our purity; he purifies us to deploy us. 'As recipients of grace, we become vessels of grace. And in confession, we actually find our calling.'

> **Insight** — *Cleansing is given for sending, so confession frees us not only from guilt but toward a purpose.*

Cross-references

- Romans 3:23 — Paul's verdict that all fall short of God's glory names the reality Isaiah recognized
- Matthew 5:21-22 — Jesus' teaching that anger brings judgment, showing how all of us violate the commandments
- John 1:4 — Christ as the life that is the light of all people, tying Isaiah's vision to John's
- John 8:12 — Jesus as the light of the world, so that those who follow him never walk in darkness
- Matthew 7:3-5 — The speck and the plank, on how easily we audit others rather than ourselves

DEVOTIONAL

In a cave somewhere in the foothills, a guide reaches for the switch and the dark arrives whole. You cannot see your own hand. You cannot tell whether anyone is beside you. Every mask, every careful arrangement of the face, becomes useless, not because it has been torn away but because there is nothing left to show it to. Then the lights return, and what you notice first is one another. This is the quiet argument of the morning. The darkness we hide in is no rival kingdom. It is only the place where light is not. And Isaiah, standing at the rim of a throne room too large for any postcard, had no place to hide and no defense to offer. He said the true thing, woe to me, and found that the truth was not the end of him. A coal, a touch, a word: your guilt is taken away, your sin atoned for. He scrubbed nothing. He brought his open hands. Most of us carry armor we were never meant to wear, heavy in the car, heavy in the shower, heavy at the end of the day. The invitation is not to fix everything at once. It is to say, God, this is me, the good, the bad, the ugly, and to meet not a harsh judge but a God whose kindness heals. And when the lips are cleansed, a voice is still asking. Whom shall I send? Forgiven hands are made to be lifted.

Reflection

- Where do you practice the pepperoncini kind of pride, refusing small help to avoid being seen as lost, and what might that reveal about how you approach God?
- Of the layers Mark Swarner named, everyone, a few friends, one fully disclosing person, which is thinnest in your life, and what has made it so?
- If nothing you could admit to yourself is news to God or unaddressed by the cross, what honest thing might you finally be free to look at?

Closing prayer

God, you are good and gracious, and you know us completely. We confess that we so often hide in the shadows. Thank you that in confession and repentance we find not shame but strength, not despair but hope, not death but new life. Thank you, Jesus, that you gave your life for ours so that we might be forgiven. Help us walk not in darkness but in your light, step by step and day by day, until we stand in your glorious throne room and praise you forever. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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One thing to remember

You need not fear looking in the mirror, because nothing you could ever admit to yourself has not already been fully answered by the grace of Jesus.

This week

This week, pick one step Mark Swarner offered. Go somewhere vast, under the redwoods, by the ocean, beneath the stars, and remember how great God is. Then name to him the burden you carry: 'God, this is me, the good, the bad, the ugly.'

Return to **1 John 1:9**