

## What Is Repentance

Repentance is a condition for receiving (and retaining) salvation. Jesus says that “*unless you repent, you will all likewise perish..*” (Luke 13:3). Our only choices are “*to perish*” or “*to come to repentance*” (2 Pet. 3:9). Sinners in need of salvation are called to repentance (Matt. 3:2; Luke 5:32; Acts 8:22; 17:30; 26:20), and repentance is specifically linked to forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 8:22). Repentance leads to life (Acts 11:8) and to salvation (2 Cor. 7:10). If men did not repent, God pronounced certain doom and destruction upon them. (Luke 12:3; Rev. 2:5; 2:16; 3:3). We see that God promises great things to the penitent and terrible things to the impenitent.

What is repentance? In the New Testament we see the word “repentance” as [ “the noun *metanoia* and the verb *metanoco*, from a combination of the Greek word *meta*, meaning *after*, and *noeo*, meaning *to perceive, know, understand, think*. Thus the basic meaning is to *know after* in the sense of reconsidering or rethinking a past act or opinion. In essence, then, repentance is a *change of mind*, a *turning* from one attitude or viewpoint to another.”]<sup>1</sup>

Thayer’s definition of “Metanoia” is: “*To change one’s mind for better, heartily to amend with abhorrence of one’s past sins.*” (Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, p. 405).

Repentance is a change of will (or mind) caused by sorrow for sin and leading to a reformation of life. This changed mind is first of all a hatred of sin. This is the heart and

---

<sup>1</sup> Cottrell, Jack. **The Faith Once For All**, (Joplin, Missouri., College Press., 2002) pg. 353, 354

\* All Scriptures are used from the **New Analytical Study Bible KJV.**, (Grand Rapids, MI. Word Publishing., 1973)

core of repentance: instead of loving sin, we hate it. Some hate the punishment that comes from sin, but not the sin itself. This is not repentance. Thus even though they may outwardly avoid sin, they are still lost, because they continue to love and treasure the thought of sin in their hearts. But the repentant (saved) person has come to despise sin because the Holy God himself despises it, because it is counter to and destructive of true human nature, and because this is what sent the Savior to the cross. The mind that has changed toward sin also includes *remorse* (sorrow, grief) for having committed sins against God. When David repented of his sin with Bathsheba, he spoke of his “broken spirit,” his broken and contrite heart (Psalms 51:17). Paul relates repentance to godly sorrow (2 Cor. 7:9,10).

Repentance as a change of mind toward sin also includes a sincere *desire* to be rid of it (the kind of desire David expresses in Psalms 51), as well as a *determination* to forsake it. The biblical concept of repentance is sometimes expressed as a *turning* from sin.

[“In the Old Testament the Hebrew word *shub* is used often to refer to the sinner’s turning from his transgressions (Isa. 59:20; Ezek. 14:6; 18:21,30) and his turning to the God of salvation (Isa. 55:7; Jer. 3:12,22; Hos. 6:1; 12:6).”]<sup>2</sup>

*“Repentance should not be confused with fear. It is true that fear of judgment is one motive that leads to repentance. Fear alone, however, is not repentance.”*<sup>3</sup>

In the New Testament the Gospel call is likewise a plea to turn. The Gentiles are exhorted to “turn from these vain things (idols) to a living God” (Acts 14:15). Christ

---

<sup>2</sup> Cottrell, Jack. **The Faith Once For All**, (Joplin, Missouri., College Press., 2002) pg. 354

\* All Scriptures are used from the **New Analytical Study Bible KJV.**, (Grand Rapids, MI. Word Publishing., 1973)

<sup>3</sup> Sizemore, Denver. **13 lessons In Christian Doctrine**, (Joplin, Missouri., College Press., 1987) pg. 75

commanded Saul (Paul) to preach to the Gentiles “that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18). Through Peter’s ministry many “turned to the Lord” (Acts 9:35). In Antioch “a large number who believed turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:21). “Repent and turn to God,” is the call (Acts 3:19; 26:20: see also Ezek. 14:6; 18:30).

To speak of repentance as a turning from sin does not mean that repentance itself includes the actual change of lifestyle or reformation of life that flows from regeneration and constitutes sanctification. Faith does not include obedience, and neither does repentance. “*Repentance is a change of mind about sin, a new mental or spiritual attitude toward sin: hatred, remorse, desire and determination to be rid of it.*”<sup>4</sup> The turning that constitutes repentance takes place in the heart, and it *leads to* a change of life, as we “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt. 3:8), “performing deeds appropriate to repentance” (Acts 26:20). Godly sorrow (sorrow and grief over sin) leads men to repentance (2 Cor. 7:10).

When men get convicted of their sins, they either mourn or weep over them to the point of turning away from them, or they do their utmost to drown that conviction that they might continue in them unmolested. “*To equate repentance as a condition for salvation with the change that results from it compromise grace and is equivalent to salvation by works.*”<sup>5</sup> The goodness of God upon a sinner has broken many a sinner’s heart and caused him to cry out for mercy for his sins. “*Many a man has taken sides with*

---

<sup>4</sup> Cottrell, Jack. **The Faith Once For All**, (Joplin, Missouri., College Press., 2002) pg. 354

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 354

\* All Scriptures are used from the **New Analytical Study Bible KJV.**, (Grand Rapids, MI. Word Publishing., 1973

*God against his own sins because the love of God demonstrated upon Calvary compelled him to do so.*"<sup>6</sup>

Why is repentance a condition for salvation? First of all, the very nature of salvation requires it. Salvation is salvation from sin, and we cannot be saved from our sin while we are still holding on to it in our hearts. *"When confronted with the gospel, one must make a choice between sin and salvation; to accept salvation one must repudiate sin. The repudiation of sin is the essence of repentance."*<sup>7</sup>

Second, the very nature of saving faith requires that it be accompanied by repentance. On the one hand, faith includes a belief that Jesus died for our sins (assent), and a personal commitment to rely upon his death for salvation (trust). The point is that we cannot sincerely accept what Jesus did for us on the cross without hating the sin that put him there. Every sin is like another nail in the hands or feet of our Savior. If we have the right attitude toward Jesus and his cross (faith), we cannot help but have the right attitude toward our sin (repentance).

On the other hand, faith includes believing that Jesus is who he claims to be: not just our savior, but also our Lord, as accomplished and demonstrated by his resurrection (Acts 2:24-36; Phil. 2:9-11). This is part of our assent. But faith also includes the personal surrender of our very lives and bodies to Christ as Lord; this is part of our trust. Accepting him as our Savior requires the repudiation of sin, because we cannot be slaves of sin and slaves of Christ at the same time (Rom. 6:15-22). "No one can serve two

---

<sup>6</sup> Hunt, Donald. **52 Simple Stimulating Studies**, (Ottumwa, IA., The Voice of Evangelism.,) pg 118

<sup>7</sup> Cottrell, Jack. **The Faith Once For All**, (Joplin, Missouri., College Press., 2002) pg. 355

\* All Scriptures are used from the **New Analytical Study Bible KJV.**, (Grand Rapids, MI. Word Publishing., 1973)

masters” (Matt. 6:24). Thus we conclude that faith is a condition for salvation, so also must repentance be a condition.

This raises a serious question: if repentance is also a condition for salvation, how do we explain all the biblical texts that mention faith *alone* as a condition? One approach is to say that faith *includes* repentance, that repentance is a part of faith or the core of faith or in some sense the “*flip side*” of faith. This approach must be rejected; the integrity of both faith and repentance as distinct mental states must be preserved, as in Mark 1:15 and Acts 20:21.

Another approach is to focus all attention on the “faith alone” texts, making faith the sole condition for salvation and eliminating repentance as a condition except as redefined as a simple change of mind as to who Jesus is. “*Repentance, as a change of mind and heart about sin and as a commitment to live under the lordship of Christ, is rejected as a condition.*”<sup>8</sup> Those who take this view call themselves the “free grace” movement. We cannot ignore or explain away the repentance texts so easily. “*The fact is that there are many biblical texts which mention repentance alone or without faith as a condition for salvation.*”<sup>9</sup> It is true that faith is often mentioned by itself, but this is because faith is the one act that is the specific means (instrument, vehicle, and channel) through which God’s saving grace is received. All means are conditions, but not all conditions are means.

This is very significant for understanding the condition of salvation. Many texts mention only faith as a condition for salvation does not mean that faith is the only

---

<sup>8</sup> Cottrell, Jack. **The Faith Once For All**, (Joplin, Missouri., College Press., 2002) pg. 355

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 355

\* All Scriptures are used from the **New Analytical Study Bible KJV.**, (Grand Rapids, MI. Word Publishing., 1973)

condition, any more than the texts that mention only repentance mean that it is the only condition. *“Since faith is mentioned in some texts and repentance in others, good hermeneutics requires us to put all the texts together to get the total picture.”*<sup>10</sup> Thus we can assume that where one is specifically mentioned, the other is implicit or assumed. But we must understand that *“both repentance and faith are gracious works of God in the life of the believer.”*<sup>11</sup>

When Paul preached to Felix in Acts 24:25, he reasoned of righteousness and self-control and the judgment to come. After Paul had left, and his fear had subsided, Felix gave no evidence of a change of mind or a reformation of life. Many men thinking they were dying have fearfully and tearfully claimed to have repented, but upon recovery, very few ever exhibit a life that would indicate they had repented. Fear is not repentance. God does all within His power without destroying man’s own will and choice to bring him to repentance. He has revealed in His Word for our information some of those things that He has designed to lead men to repentance.

Repentance is not the conviction of sin but what one resolves to do about it. Godly sorrow may also arise out of consideration of God’s goodness (Rom. 2:4). Godly and worldly grief also have different ends. As Paul says, “Worldly grief produces death” (Rom. 2:10). An extreme example is Judas. In regret and sorrow for his betrayal of Jesus, he took his life (Matt. 27:3-5). Worldly sorrow does not always lead to suicide, but it does lead to spiritual death. Godly grief, however, “produces a repentance that leads to

---

<sup>10</sup> Cottrell, Jack. **The Faith Once For All**, (Joplin, Missouri., College Press., 2002) pg. 355

<sup>11</sup> Erickson, Millard., **Introducing Christian Doctrine**, (Grand Rapids, MI., Baker Book House., 2001) pg. 311

\* All Scriptures are used from the **New Analytical Study Bible KJV.**, (Grand Rapids, MI. Word Publishing., 1973)

salvation and brings no regret” (Rom. 2:10). “*Repentance demands making past wrongs right. Where necessary and possible, this would require restitution of what was wrongly acquired (Luke 19:1-10).*”<sup>12</sup> The Golden Rule (Matt.7:12) demands restitution, for we would want those who wronged us to correct the situation. The turning to God finds expression in the deeds of a reformed life. The proof of repentance is seen in a changed life.

The literal meaning of turning suggests an illustration of the place of repentance in conversion. A person is walking in one direction, stops (the conviction of sin; godly sorrow), decides to turn around (repentance), turns around (conversion), and walks in the opposite direction (reformation of life). There is involved a change in understanding, in feeling, in will, and in actions. Real repentance is “*sorrow for one’s sin because of the wrong done to God and the hurt inflicted upon Him. This sorrow is accompanied by a genuine desire to abandon that sin.*”<sup>13</sup> In order to bring men to repentance, we need preachers who will so preach that sinners might know the love and goodness of God, that they may be made sorrowful because of their sins, that the fear of judgment will so grip their souls that they cannot do otherwise.

One last note. Repentance is not forgiveness. Many honest people have believed that because they have repented of their sins, they were forgiven of their sins. Repentance is a change of a person’s own heart. “*Forgiveness is something that takes place in the mind of*

---

<sup>12</sup> Sizemore, Denver. **13 lessons In Christian Doctrine**, (Joplin, Missouri., College Press., 1987) pg. 77

<sup>13</sup> Erickson, Millard., **Introducing Christian Doctrine**, (Grand Rapids, MI., Baker Book House., 2001) pg. 309

\* All Scriptures are used from the **New Analytical Study Bible KJV.**, (Grand Rapids, MI. Word Publishing., 1973)

*him who was offended.*"<sup>14</sup> Man has sinned against God. He must repent and seek God's forgiveness. But we must remember that repentance is not forgiveness but a condition of forgiveness. Repentance leads us to confess before men that Christ is God's Son, and that we wish Him to be our Savior. Repentance leads us to be baptized for the remission of our sins.

---

<sup>14</sup> Reese, Gareth L., **New Testament History of Acts** (Joplin, MO., College Press., 1976) pg. 149

## Works Cited

Cottrell, Jack. **The Faith Once For All**, Joplin, Missouri., College Press., 2002

Erickson, Millard J., **Introducing Christian Doctrine**, Grand Rapids, MI., Baker Books 2001

Hunt, Donald. **52 Simple Stimulating Studies**, Ottumwa, IA., Published by The Voice of Evangelism.

Reese, Gareth L., **New Testament History of Acts**, Joplin MI., College Press., 1976

Sizemore, Denver. **13 Lessons In Christian Doctrine**, Joplin, Missouri., College Press., 1987

\* All Scriptures are used from the **New Analytical Study Bible KJV.**, (Grand Rapids, MI. Word Publishing., 1973)