

The Biblical Doctrine of Repentance

By

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Perhaps one of the most de-emphasized and misapplied theological concepts of the church today is that of repentance. In a day and age where Christians are encouraged to blame others for their problems and the unpardonable sin is interpreted to be passing judgment upon others, it is easy to see how this doctrine has become unpopular. Sin is treated as a sickness in which everyone suffers. To admonish these traumatized Christians to repent is equated with telling cancer patients that they are receiving what they deserve. The result is a church that is yoked together with the ungodly. The unrepentant are welcomed into the church since they have prayed a prayer. The unrepentant are allowed to remain in the body, since church discipline is not “seeker friendly.” The result is a weak church that needs to repent of its misuse of the doctrine of repentance. Repentance is absolutely necessary for the salvation of the unbeliever and the execution of the obedient Christian life. With this in mind, this paper will attempt to bring to light a biblical understanding of repentance. Various Scriptures will be examined in order to explore the different elements involved in repentance. This will be combined with an analysis of false repentance as well as personal insights gained by the author as a result of this study.

Repentance Defined

Millard Erickson defines repentance as “godly sorrow for one’s sin together with a resolution to turn from it.”¹ Inherent within this definition are the two Hebrew words for repentance, *nacham* and *shub*. *Nacham* reflects the idea of breathing deeply. It literally means “to regret” or “be sorry.”² When this term is used with man, it carries the

¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*. 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1998), 950.

² William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), 234.

connotation of man being deeply grieved by his own sin (Jer. 31: 19). When used of God, it suggests that, “he relents or changes his dealings with men according to his sovereign purposes.”³ In I Samuel 15: 11, the LORD states, “I regret that I have made Saul king.” The LORD is not stating that He has made a mistake, rather the actions of Saul after he was made king have filled the LORD with grief and sorrow. *Nacham* is the emotional word for repentance, it insinuates heart felt sorrow by the sinner as he understands the depth and magnitude of his sin. However, if left by itself, it would incompletely describe the biblical nature of repentance. For instance, does the sinner grieve over their sin against God, or the results of their sin? This quandary is resolved by the nuance of the word *shub*.

Shub is one of the most often used verbs in the Old Testament complete with twenty-five meanings. The predominant ones include to turn back, return, and turn away.⁴ Two nuances will be highlighted in particular. The first of which carries the idea of physical motion. One returns to the original point of departure. In Gen. 8:7 the raven returns to its original starting point, the ark. The second nuance describes turning away from sin and turning towards God.⁵ *Shub* serves as a wonderful word picture as it characterizes both aspects of repentance. There is a turning away from sin, and a simultaneous turning towards God. Within this fabric of returning from God exists several covenantal usages of *shub*. The first aspect can be seen in the call to turn from one’s idols to God (Ez. 14:6). If one were simply to turn away from a certain sin and not to God, then it would not be true repentance since the man does not reconcile himself with God. Instead, they just switched from one sin to another.⁶ The second aspect includes the individual’s repentance. After being chastised, Ephraim responds to

³ R. Laird Harris, Gleason Archer, and Bruce Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:570 (Marvin R. Wilson).

⁴ Holladay, 362-3.

⁵ R. Laird Harris, Gleason Archer, and Bruce Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:909 (Victor P. Hamilton).

⁶ Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 4: 56 (J. A. Thompson/ Elmer A. Martens).

Jeremiah's admonition to repent (Jer. 31:18-19). The third aspect includes God turning away from the calamity, which He was about to bring upon the Israelites for their sin. All together, the call for the individual to repent, the actual repentance, and God's turning away from his wrath paints a vivid picture of the reconciliation process between God and man. This pattern is seen in the New Testament as well as God calls all men everywhere to repent, the individuals repent, and those who do repent escape the wrath of God, which He promises to the ungodly.

Both *shub* and *nacham* are necessary for true repentance. Many people feel sorrow for their sin, but do they feel enough sorrow to turn away from it? "It is important to realize that mere sorrow for one's actions, or even deep remorse over one's actions, does not constitute genuine repentance unless it is accompanied by a sincere decision to forsake sin that is being committed against God."⁷ True *nacham* drives the sinner to turn back (*shub*) to God, and results in God pacifying His wrath and welcoming restoration.

In the New Testament repentance is expressed by two words *metanoein* (change of heart) and *metamelomai* (experiencing remorse).⁸ The word *metamelomai* is the New Testament synonym for *nacham* as it conveys a sense of deep sorrow. In contrast, *metanoein* serves as a description of conversion. As one author states, "Though in English a focal component of repent is the sorrow or contrition that a person experiences because of sin, the emphasis in *metanoeww* and *metavnoia* seems to be more specifically the total change, both in thought and behavior, with respect to how one should both think and act."⁹ Again, even in the New Testament there exists the

⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*. (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan Publishing House, HarperCollins Publisher, 1994) 713.

⁸ Gerhard Kittel, and Gerhard Friedrich, Editors, *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985).

⁹ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains*, (New York: United Bible Societies 1988, 1989).

dichotomy of emotion and action. A heartfelt godly sorrow compels the penitent to turn towards God.

Scriptural Passages

As the Holy Spirit moved various authors, the words of reconciliation to God were revealed to a lost and dying world. Scripture testifies to the dynamic of both sorrow and turning to God in several instances throughout the Bible. This study will focus on five significant passages.

Jeremiah 31:18-19

The book of Jeremiah records the prophet's tireless plea to the people of Israel to repent of their sin and return to God. Chastised for their brazen idolatry, God unleashed the armies of Babylon to execute His divine judgement. Jeremiah repeatedly points to this punishment as a direct result of their spiritual adultery. However, God is moved by the confession of Jer. 31:18-19 which leads Him to declare, "I will surely have mercy on him" (Jer. 31: 20).

God approves of this confession for five reasons:

- (1) **Israel expresses faith.** Jeremiah 31:18-19 records the penitent response of Ephraim to God's discipline. "You have disciplined and I was disciplined." Ephraim acknowledges that the divine wrath of God has successfully humbled them to the point that they realize that the only way to be freed from the rod of God's discipline is to repent. Ephraim supplicates God to "Bring me back that I may be restored." As surely as God delivered them into the hands of the Babylonians, he can bring them back to the land. A penitent not only realizes that only God can restore him, but they trust God to do so.

(2) **Israel sought reconciliation and not simply insurrection.** The desire of going back to the land is not rooted in escaping the consequences of their sin, but rather to restore a right relationship with God. Some may argue with this interpretation insinuating that “Bring my back that I may be restored” is a reference to a physical return.¹⁰ The immediate context may suggest simply a geographical homecoming as verse 16 and 17 speak of Israel returning from the land of their enemy to their own territory. However, one has to examine this passage in light of the rest of the book of Jeremiah. Throughout the book it is clear that restoration to the Land will only come about if God relents from His wrath. Secondly, God will only relent from His wrath if Israel repents of apostasy and turns to God.¹¹ This is evidenced by a list of actions in vs. 19 where Israel repented, changed their mind (figured it out), slapped their thigh, and felt shame and disgrace. God would not delight in Israel if they simply wanted to escape His punishment and not return to Him with a whole heart (Jer. 24:7). Israel is simply responding to the repeated calls of Jeremiah to repent knowing that true repentance means a restoration to the Land. This is not the only circumstance where a physical return is synonymous with spiritual reconciliation. In Luke 15 the prodigal son returns from a life of wild living to be with his father.¹² A penitent individual seeks to return to God out of a sincere heart to be right with Him and not to escape temporal pain.

(3) **Israel cried out to God.** They did not appeal to other armies or Jewish leaders in authority to bring them back to the Land but “the LORD my God.” A penitent person, acknowledges that God is their only hope.

¹⁰William Mckane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah, Volume 2* (ICC), (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1986), 800.

¹¹It should be noted that Jer. 29: 10 does make it clear that Israel has to wait for 70 years before they return. However, God will only relent from calamity with a repentant Israel (29:10). This results in a repentant remnant waiting to return while in exile (i.e. Daniel).

¹²Bernard W. Anderson, *The Lord Has Created Something New*, CBQ, Vol. 40, No. 4, (Oct. 1978) 472.

(4) **They had a new outlook on sin.** Vs. 19a is better translated, “For after I turned away, I repented. After I figured it out, I struck my thigh.” *Nacham* was their response to turning away from God. They were sorry that they ever strayed. Secondly, once they realized what they did, and contritely slapped themselves. Much like a reformed drug addict contemplating his shattered life, Ephraim realized how blind she once was and wishes that it would have heeded the instruction of God. A penitent person does not celebrate their past sin, rather they bemoan and despise such insidious actions.

(5) **They acknowledged responsibility.** The reason for their suffering is that they bore “the reproach of my youth” (19b). Ephraim does not pretend to be a victim of circumstance. The reason that she sinned is not because the devil made her do it. Her sin is rooted in her own wickedness. A penitent person knows that “Its nobody’s fault but mine.”

Job. 40: 3-5 and 42: 2-6

If anyone had a right to complain about his or her circumstances it was Job. A righteous servant of the Lord, he had to endure the loss of his wealth, children, and health. Surrounded by his four friends, he engages in a dialogue regarding his suffering. In the process they told him that this calamity has come upon him because he sinned (4:8, 8:6), he is wicked and only getting his due (18:5), and that he was not faithful (25:1-6). In Job’s quest to vindicate himself, he began to develop a misperception of God. Instead of the Sovereign ruler of all, God’s actions began to be viewed as a reaction to man’s deeds. Secondly, “Job accused God of a number of things. He said God oppressed him while he smiled on the schemes of the wicked (10:3 {Job 10:3}), attacked him in anger and shattered him (16:9,12 {Job 16}), wronged him and counted him an enemy (19:6–11 {Job 19}), denied him justice (27:1 {Job 27:1}) and maltreated him ruthlessly (30:19–21

{Job 30}).”¹³ By questioning God’s judgment, Job is insinuating that his judgment is superior to God’s. Thus he supplants himself upon God’s throne. It was for these reasons that Job was confronted by God.¹⁴

There are three major lessons to be learned from Job’s repentance:

- (1) **Job had his thinking corrected.** Initially, he responds to the discourse in stunned silence. He silences himself and dares not to speak anymore of God. This is about as much as can be expected from Job, since he suspected that his erroneous conjecture is what got him in trouble to begin with. He sits and waits for God to further correct his thinking. It was not enough to be silent and stop speaking lies, Job’s mind had to be filled with a proper theology of God. Once God’s second speech commences, he realizes the fuller extent of his sin. A repentant person seeks to restore his thinking to a right view of God, understanding that the lies of the world led to a distorted view which led to his sin.
- (2) **Job apologizes to God.** In vs. 6 he states, “Therefore I retract.” Job humbles himself before God and takes back all of his deluded expressions of who God is. A penitent person regrets that they have sinned against God.
- (3) **Job Sought restoration.** Not only did he seek reconciliation with God, but also with his friends. His bitterness departed from him, as he was overwhelmed with the magnitude of God’s forgiveness towards him. A repentant person who understands that he is forgiven, is forgiving of others as well (cf. Matt. 18: 28-35).

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B. Lynne Newell, *Job: Repentant Or Rebellious?*, WTJ, Vol. 46 No. 2 (Fall 1984), 303.

¹⁴ Larry J. Waters, *Reflections on Suffering from the Book of Job*, Bsac, Vol. 154, No. 616 (Oct 97), 436-451.

Psalm 51

King David was described as a man after God's own heart. However, he was not without his fault. While his army was in battle David stayed home. Strolling along the rooftop he spotted a beautiful woman bathing. He invited her to his palace where he engaged in an adulterous relationship. Upon discovering that she was pregnant he summoned her husband home so that he might be able to cover up the conception. Her husband being a true patriot could not bring himself to have sexual relations with his wife while his countrymen were in battle. Subsequently, David sent Uriah out to battle with his own death orders (2 Sam 11-12). This sin was unconfessed for several months until the prophet Nathan rebuked David. Psalm 51 serves as David's confession.

Within the Psalm there are three elements of repentance.

- (1) **David acknowledges his sin against God.** Matthew Henry states it well, "He here sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah, against his own soul, and body, and family, against his kingdom, and against the church of God, and all this helped to humble him; but none of these were sinned against so as God was, and therefore this he lays the most sorrowful accent upon: *Against thee only have I sinned.*"¹⁵ A truly penitent person sees the vertical implications of his own sin.
- (2) **David acknowledges the depth of his sin.** The real sense of *nacham* comes out here as David relishes in his own shortcomings. He realizes that there is nothing righteous within him. This reflects a broken man who realizes that the only hope for restoration is God. A truly penitent person recognizes the completeness of their depravity, and indirectly acknowledges their own inability to right their wrong.

¹⁵ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Bible*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers 1997).

(3) **David seeks a pure heart.** David does not simply roll around in the gutter. He turns to God and petitions him to purify his filthy heart (2, 7, and 10). Unlike Saul who grew increasingly distant from God, David seeks to reconcile with God. Furthermore, David realizes that if anyone is going to give him a clean heart it will have to be God. David understands that he cannot wash his own sin away anymore than a filthy rag can wipe the dirt off his face. Acts of penance are fruitless (17) as David realizes that his corrupt nature can only be cured by the renewing work of God. Similarly a penitent sinner asks God to purify himself.

Luke 19: 1-10

As Jesus journeyed through Jericho, a little man by the name of Zaccheus sought to catch a glimpse of Jesus by ascending a sycamore tree. A tax gatherer by trade his profession was even more unpopular with the people then, than the modern day IRS. “The tax collectors were as a class, detested not only by the Jews, but by other nations also, both on account of their employment and of the harshness, greed, and deception, with which they did their job.”¹⁶ Upon being confronted with the Messiah, Zaccheus announces that he will give up half of his possessions to the poor, and that he will pay back anyone he has defrauded four fold (19:8). Pleased with Zaccheus’s change of heart God incarnate announces his salvation to the masses.

Three lessons can be extracted from this account.

(1) **Zaccheus submits to the law.** Realizing that he has defrauded his brethren, Zaccheus applied Numbers 5:7 which dictates that when a man defrauds his brother he is to give him 120 % of his money back. He sought to abide by the law of the land despite the potential consequences of losing his wealth. A truly repentant murderer

¹⁶*Enhanced Strong's Lexicon*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc. 1995).

does not retract his repentance when he finds out that he has to go to the electric chair. A penitent sinner does not see the forgiveness of God as a means to escape the consequences of his sin on earth.

- (2) **Zaccheus seeks restoration.** Realizing that he has done his brothers wrong, he sought to make things right with them by excessively compensating for the money that he wrongfully stole from them. A penitent person seeks to reconcile horizontally as he expresses the great joy of vertical reconciliation.
- (3) **Zaccheus is more attached to Jesus than his own wealth.** In relinquishing half of his money to the poor Zaccheus demonstrated that money is not longer his master. Unlike the rich young ruler who couldn't bear to part with his wealth (Luke 18: 22-23), Zaccheus realized that all of the wealth in the world is about as valuable as the contents of a garbage can compared to Christ. A penitent person has a new perspective on sinful lust.

2 Cor. 7: 5-13

Tension arose between the apostle Paul and the Corinthian Church. False prophets infiltrated the church and "To create the platform to teach their false gospel, they began by assaulting the character of Paul."¹⁷ The church was slow to come to Paul's defense and in the process entertained these heretics' false accusations. The result was that Paul had to write a sorrowful letter (2 Cor. 2: 1-4). The fruit of which were extremely positive as Paul rejoices in the news that he has heard of their response via Titus (7: 6).

The positive fruit of the Corinthian Repentance was demonstrated by the following:

¹⁷ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing 1997), 1761.

- (1) **They were thankful that their sin was exposed.** God produced a repentance in the Corinthian church that they did not regret (10). In the world today, God uses circumstances to break sinners. A student is caught cheating on a test and consequently is expelled from school. Yet, during that time he comes to grips with his own sinfulness and repents. He rejoices that he got caught, since it led to his ultimate salvation and repentance. Penitent people are thankful that the sorrowful circumstances occurred because it led to reconciliation to God.
- (2) **They were diligent in reconciling with Paul.** Paul mentions their earnestness that was spurred on by godly sorrow (10). Penitent people reconcile with as much determination as they sinned.
- (3) **They were determined to vindicate themselves to Paul.** Similarly, a repentant person, volitionally commits himself to reconciling with God. The state of their hearts is displayed by their actions. Penitent people seek to prove their sincerity.
- (4) **They were indignant at their own sin.** They viewed their own sins with righteous indignation (11). The Corinthians shared in God's wrath at their own sin. A repentant person views their sin as God does, with indignation.
- (5) **They were in fear of God's judgment.** They recognized that their treatment of the Apostle Paul merited divine discipline (11). The unrepentant strays from this mind set as they mistakenly believe that their selfish actions have no consequences. The penitent person has a sober outlook on the consequences of their sin.
- (6) **They longed to be restored.** The rebuke affected them on two levels; first of all they longed to be restored with Paul. The Corinthians sought to avenge all wrong and rid themselves of their sin and wrongdoing against God. They responded to Paul's letter with a determination to pursue sanctification. The Corinthians longed to

be restored to Paul as a soldier longs to return during his tour of duty. This longing led the Corinthians to reconcile with both parties that they offended zealously, God and His faithful apostle Paul. Similarly, a repentant person deeply longs to be restored with God and all others offended.

Conclusion

It is plain to see from all of these Scripture passages that the penitent turns from their sinful ways and pursues God in faith. Each individual passage brings a different nuance to the doctrine of repentance. Ephraim recognized that it is only God who can restore her. David expresses the depth of his contrition and desire to be purified. Job demonstrates the necessity of having thoughts corrected. Zaccheus is an example of a man who submits to the consequences of his sin. The Corinthians exemplify the determination of a sinner trying to make things right. In all of these cases, God graciously welcomes them back, and brings about the tremendous blessing of spiritual restoration.

True Repentance vs. False Repentance

True repentance is characterized by an attitude of contrition and brokenness, but the penitent does not simply sulk, instead they turn from their sin towards God. The penitent is grieved over their sin against God and not simply the consequences. Thus, they diligently seek to be restored to God. False repentance is an incomplete expression of this. People either grieve, and not turn away from sin, or turn away from sin for selfish reasons. Worldly sorrow manifests itself in several forms. For instance, a hardened prisoner may express no remorse over his crime during his wait on death row. Yet, once he is escorted to the chair tears of sorrow fill his eyes as he mourns over the consequences of his sin. Members of the Mafia may feel bad about taking ten percent of

the revenues of the districts' businesses. So they attempt to assuage their guilt with a generous donation to the local parish. They feel bad, but not bad enough to give up their sin. In both cases, the individuals' level of sorrow is not great enough to commit themselves to restoration towards God and Man.

Another form of false repentance involves the cessation of certain sin, but without godly sorrow. Thomas Watson gives three forms of this false repentance:¹⁸

(1) **Legal terror, fear of the consequences of sin.** Many people are stricken with the fear of hell. This leads to various forms of penance as people seek to justify themselves before God. These acts of penance contain some of the vital aspects of repentance. For instance, Judas in Matt. 27:3 was filled with remorse and gave back the money. Yet he did not return to God like Peter did. By not turning to God people attempt to assuage the guilt of their conscience while they are rebelling against God. This Godless penitence denies the authority of God and His Word as He commands all men everywhere to repent for the forgiveness of their sins. To attempt to atone for your own sin is to view your own works with such righteousness that they have the possibility of pleasing almighty God. Or even worse, it is to bring the righteousness of God to such a blasphemously low level, that the dirty deeds of the sinner seem righteous to Him. Such a God is not the God of the Bible, but a mental counterfeit formed in the darkened chambers of the sinful mind. A penitent individual needs to turn from this idol to the God of the Bible.

(2) **Repentance is not making a vow not to sin.** This is due to the fact that sin is painful. The sin of murder can lead to the death sentence, the sin of sexual promiscuity can lead to death, and sin in general to painful consequences. Words of commitment are simply empty unless they are followed up by a changed life. And

¹⁸ Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance*, (Carlisle, Pa: The Banner of Truth Trust 1994), 15-17.

the only real change agent is the Holy Spirit. No one can break the habit of sin without the sanctifying grace of God.

(3) **Repentance is not simply the leaving of sinful ways.** This happens for a variety of reasons. First of all it does not serve their own self-interest. A politician may find it in his own best interests to clean up his life, in order to make himself more electable. A father may decide that he wants to be a better example for his children. Secondly, people may exchange one sin for another one. A cocaine addict may relinquish the habit and reapply the money he spent on the drug to buy heroin. Finally, he may part from some sins but not all. A member of the mob may swear off drugs, adulterous relationships, and murder, but still maintain his livelihood by stealing.

True repentance involves an emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and volitional commitment. It effects every area of the human life as it demands a complete change of heart. To simply offer up token acts of penance to assuage the guilt of sin, is to quench the work of the Holy Spirit to change lives. Man trusts in himself and not God. The truly penitent man is awakened by a sense of godly sorrow, which drives them to place his faith in God for their reconciliation. This reconciliation means more to them, than the sin ever did to begin with. In the words of Thomas Watson, “We are to find as much bitterness in weeping for sin as we ever found sweetness in committing it.”¹⁹

Conclusion

The doctrine of Repentance is a life changing principle. Repentance restores the sinner to God. It refreshes the backslidin believer to a renewed intimacy with the Lord. A failure to call people to repent is to deny them of complete reconciliation with God. To

¹⁹ Watson, 24.

not preach repentance to the lost, is to give them the mistaken impression that they can partake of God and keep their sin. Such a proclamation, betrays Christ's purpose to reconcile God and Man. The failure of the church to admonish its members to repent, through the institution of Church discipline, allows for sinners to persist in their sin on the way to dire consequences. At best, they will only suffer the temporal consequences as their sin catches up to them. At worst, the sinner never repented at all, and will suffer the consequences of their sin in eternity. To call people to repentance is a courageous action. It may cause difficulty in the relationship, but once they repent and are restored, they will be thankful for it. A faithful church must center its ministry on the doctrine of repentance, calling all men every where to repent, and exhorting the believers to continue to repent of sins for the sake of their sanctification. For the church to fulfill its calling it must adhere to the doctrine of repentance to truly proclaim the ministry of reconciliation.

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