

BASIC BIBLE PRINCIPLES

REPENTANCE

*“The Lord . . . is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish
but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).*

*“Godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation . . .
but the sorrow of the world produces death” (2 Cor. 7:10).*

Dictionary definition

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines the meaning of the English word ‘repent’ as “feel or express sincere regret or remorse”. It is a word with moral overtones; and even today, in religious contexts, ‘repentance’ is associated with the process of seeking forgiveness for having done something wrong.

Old Testament words for ‘repent’

The Old Testament Hebrew word *nacham* conveys broadly the same meaning as this dictionary definition of ‘repentance’. Job, for example, used the word to describe how wrong he had been to question the justice and wisdom of God. “I abhor myself”, said Job, “and *repent* in dust and ashes” (Job. 42:6). Later on, God Himself used the same word to criticise the people of Judah in the time of Jeremiah because they showed no remorse for their evil doings: “No man *repented* of his wickedness, saying, What have I done?” (Jer. 8:6).

Yet there is much more to Biblical repentance than simply ‘saying sorry’. The idea of *turning back (or away) completely* from the wrongdoing repented of is the real meaning of the Hebrew word *shub*—a word which is used three times in one single powerful call to repent addressed to the people of God through the prophet Ezekiel: “‘*Repent*, and *turn* from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin . . . get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit . . . For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies’, says the Lord GOD. ‘Therefore *turn* and live!’” (18:30-32).

John the Baptist’s call to repentance

It was against this Old Testament background of repentance—in which God required His people not only to be sorry for their sinfulness but also to turn their backs permanently upon it—that John the Baptist first appeared in the deserts of Judea. As the herald of Jesus, who, when he came, would “save his people from their sins” (Mt. 1:21), John was sent to prepare God’s people for both the spiritual and the physical salvation that Jesus would bring them. John’s first recorded words were therefore highly significant: “*Repent*”, he cried, “for the kingdom of [or from] heaven is at hand!” (3:2). Thus repentance was (and still is) the necessary prerequisite for receiving the salvation of God in Jesus Christ: if we want to be in the Kingdom of God, we must repent in the fullest sense.

John’s powerful call to repentance was highly effective at the time, for “Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins” (vv. 5,6). But John insisted that true repentance was not just the washing away of old sins. It involved also the turning away from sin to a new way of life; and that is why he warned the Jewish leaders who came to him that they must go on to “bear fruits worthy of repentance” (v. 8). It is never enough just to *say* to God that we are sorry: we must, if we are truly repentant, go on to *show* it to Him . . .

The gospel of Jesus Christ

The need for true repentance lies right at the heart of the teaching of Jesus. At the outset of his public ministry, Jesus deliberately repeated the selfsame words that John had used: “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*” (4:17). Like John, too, Jesus confronted the self-satisfied Pharisees, and told them, “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to *repentance*” (9:13). His disciples, too, “went out and preached that people should *repent*” (Mk. 6:12). Then, just before Jesus ascended to heaven, he solemnly charged his followers that “*repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem*” (Lk. 24:47).

Christianity itself is thus based upon the need for men and women to recognise their sinfulness, to ‘repent’ of it, and, through faith in Jesus Christ, to be forgiven and ultimately to be saved from eternal death. And the expression of that faith, based on true repentance, is to be made in submission to the rite of baptism into Jesus Christ, as the Apostle Peter made clear to a large number of converts on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. “Cut to the heart” by what they had heard Peter say about the death and resurrection of Jesus, they asked, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?”; to which Peter replied with crystal clarity, “*Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins*” (Acts 2:37,38).

A change of mind

Consistent also with all that went before, the repentance required of the followers of Christ, as the people of God, is expressed throughout the New Testament by the Greek word *metanoia*, meaning literally ‘a change of mind’. In the Baptist’s call to repent, and in the preaching of Jesus and his disciples (both before and after the ascension), *metanoia* is used to signify that *repentance* extends way beyond the necessary recognition of sinfulness, and that it is but the first stage in a life-changing process that will lead, through baptism and a life of faith, to newness of life and a change to immortal nature in God’s Kingdom.

The Apostle Paul understood all this; and his own teaching on the subject of true repentance is therefore most helpful. While he gladly acknowledged that it is “the goodness of God [that] leads [us] to repentance” in the first place (Rom. 2:4), and that we are saved “by grace . . . through faith” (Eph. 2:8), it is nonetheless our part, says Paul, to “*repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance*” (Acts 26:20). Moreover, now that the gospel message of Jesus Christ has spread across the world, men and women are without excuse if they fail to obey the call to repentance, as God no longer ‘overlooks’ the former “times of ignorance”; instead, as Paul insisted ominously to the Athenians, “God . . . now commands all men everywhere to *repent*” (17:30).

True repentance (*metanoia*) is a complete change of mind, which implies a radical change of direction in life. According to Hebrews 6:1,2, “*repentance from dead works*” is one of the “elementary principles” of Christian teaching. It is an integral part of “the foundation”, and its importance needs to be clearly understood.

(All quotations from the New King James Version)

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