



"To see what is right and not to do it is cowardice."
—Confucius

18-Mar-11

Repentance: The Genuine Article (Part Three)

Last time, while discussing the Hebrew word *naham*, frequently translated as "[repentance](#)" in the Old Testament, we saw that sorrow for [sin](#) may be nothing more than self-pity. A person may be sorry that he did something that will have harmful repercussions. He may feel shame that his dirty laundry has been exposed or fear for his reputation among his fellows. But does his emotion produce anything good—actions that bring about godly change? We learned that emotion is not the essence of repentance but only part of it. Change is the heart of repentance.

Here, the second Hebrew word that underlies "repentance" becomes important. It is *shûb*, which means "to turn" or "to return." In English, we might use a more colorful term such as "about face," bringing to mind soldiers marching in a column and suddenly turning around and heading back the way they had come. In modern lingo, we might speak of "doing a one-eighty." When we repent, we are turning off the path that leads to destruction and onto the narrow path—through the strait gate—that leads to life in the [Kingdom of God](#) (see [Matthew 7:13-14](#)). Thus, on the heels of godly sorrow must proceed the act of turning onto the path of righteousness.

In Ezekiel 33, the well-known chapter on the Watchman and his message, we find a typical use of the word *shûb*. Each time "turn" or "return" appears in this passage, it is a form of this word:

So you, son of man: I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; therefore you shall hear a word from My mouth and warn them for Me. When I say to the wicked, "O wicked man, you shall surely die!" and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand. Nevertheless if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul.

Therefore you, O son of man, say to the house of Israel: "Thus you say, 'If our transgressions and our sins lie upon us, and we pine away in them, how can we then live?'" Say to them: "As I live," says the Lord GOD, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?" ([Ezekiel 33:7-11](#))

[God](#) describes the Israelite's way of life as evil, wicked, and leading to death, and He implores them to leave it and turn onto the path that leads to life. He tells them, "If you live the way that I live, you will truly live!" God lives forever in [peace](#) and [joy](#). However, they had to turn from their destructive ways and begin walking the path that God approves.

The churches of God also use Ezekiel 18 to explain repentance. The chapter begins with the false proverb about a father who eats sour grapes, yet it is his children's teeth that are set on edge. This encapsulates the idea that children receive the penalties for their fathers' sins. God, however, says that it does not work that way. The fathers' sins may affect their children, but God certainly does not hold the children responsible for them. Those sins lay squarely on the fathers' own heads. As before, "turn" and "repent" translate *shûb*:

"Again, when a wicked man turns away from the wickedness which he committed, and does what is lawful and right, he preserves himself alive. Because he considers and turns away from all the transgressions which he committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. . . . Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies," says the Lord GOD. "Therefore turn and live!" ([Ezekiel 18:27-28](#), 30-32)

Notice that God says, "Because he considers and turns away . . ." (verse 28). This should help us better understand the process of repentance. We have seen the necessity of emotion and action, but this brings in another element: a rational, mental factor. Not only are our hearts and feet to be involved, but our minds must also be engaged in the process.

Believe it or not, a person can claim to be repentant without really thinking about it. This sometimes happens when the penalty for a sin descends immediately, and the sinner instantly regrets what he has done. He feels the pain of a loss. But is this true repentance? Sorrow without consideration is mere reaction, not godly repentance. It is turning without understanding what one is turning toward and what this change will require.

As an illustration, suppose an argument rages between a man and his wife, and he shoots and kills her. He sees her lying in her blood on the floor and immediately regrets what he has done. Has he really repented of his murder? His reaction is entirely emotional at this point; he has not truly considered the ramifications of his crime. He may wish he were dead and wail that he will never kill anyone again, but he still has not produced any real change.

Godly repentance requires deep thought. When doing so, a sinner considers what he has done and the whole process of his sin: what tempted him to start down the road to sin, what led him onward, and how he reached the point where he could see it was not good. He thinks about how his sin has hurt him and others, feeling sorrow and regret for his actions and their consequences and pledging never to do it again. Finally, he diligently embarks on a program of doing what he knows to be good, right, and pleasing to God.

This entire process is concentrated in the Hebrew word translated "considers" in [Ezekiel 18:28](#): *ra'ah*, which typically means "to see" or "to observe." However, like our verb "to see," it has many metaphorical meanings, such as "to understand," "to realize," "to examine," "to search," "to witness,"

etc. It can also mean "to admit" or "to accept," as we might say, "I see that I have a problem." All of these actions are contemplated in *ra'ah*.

These Hebrew words help us to understand how repentance works. When we sin, we must seek to understand what we have done as fully as possible and then admit our guilt. The Bible commands us to confess what we have done to Him and to seek forgiveness ([I John 1:9](#); [Psalm 32:5](#); [51:2-4](#)). Once we truly comprehend what we have done and what we are, we should be motivated, with "a new heart and a new spirit" ([Ezekiel 18:31](#)), to turn, to change—to choose to forsake evil and to pursue what is good. With God's help, we can do it!

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

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by John W. Ritenbaugh

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by Bill Onisick

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