



"Sin forsaken is one of the best evidences of sin forgiven."  
—J.C. Ryle

25-Mar-16

## What Is Repentance? (Part One)

[The gospel](#) accounts show that [God](#) gave John the Baptist the responsibility to "prepare the way of the LORD, make His paths straight" ([Matthew 3:3](#); [Mark 1:3](#); [Luke 3:4](#)). When he preached the good news of God's Kingdom—fulfilling his commission of preparation—John's basic message was, "Repent, for the [kingdom of heaven](#) is at hand!" ([Matthew 3:2](#)). He preached a [baptism](#) of [repentance](#) for the remission of sins as the foundation of the gospel message ([Mark 1:4](#); [Luke 3:3](#)).

When [Jesus Christ](#) began to preach a short time later, He began with the exact same words: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" ([Matthew 4:17](#)), and "Repent, and believe the gospel" ([Mark 1:15](#)). After He began drawing disciples to Himself, He reiterated His message, saying that He did not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance ([Matthew 9:13](#); [Mark 2:17](#); [Luke 5:32](#)).

After Christ's death and resurrection, He told His disciples that it was necessary "that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" ([Luke 24:46-47](#)). Years later,

preaching to the men of Athens, the apostle Paul informed them that "God . . . now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge [the world](#) in righteousness . . ." ([Acts 17:30-31](#)).

On the whole, repentance has fallen out of favor in mainstream Christianity. It is commonly elbowed into the shadows, with the spotlight shining brightly on accepting Jesus and believing that God will forgive all of one's sins. But using the Word of God as our guide, we find that neither genuine baptism nor remission of sins can occur until the individual repents. He cannot genuinely accept Jesus Christ as Savior until he repents. What is more—as we will see in Part Three—the [book of Revelation](#) shows that repentance is a critical issue for the end-time church.

[Jeremiah 31:18-19](#) provides a basic sense and example of repentance:

I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself: "You have chastised me, and I was chastised, like an untrained bull; restore me, and I will return, for You are the LORD my God. Surely, after my turning, I repented; and after I was instructed, I struck myself on the thigh; I was ashamed, yes, even humiliated, because I bore the reproach of my youth."

These verses appear amidst a sobering yet encouraging prophecy about the [northern tribes of Israel](#). The prophets often refer to Ephraim, the chief tribe of the northern kingdom, in a way that encompasses all ten of the northern tribes. This particular prophecy concerns the [Second Exodus](#), when a humbled remnant of Israel will return to the Promised Land and make the New Covenant with God. But, as verse 19 shows, a major part of the process of Israel returning to God is repentance.

The Hebrew word for repent here, *nacham*, means "to relent; to change one's mind; to be grieved." In this passage, Ephraim is grieved by his sorry spiritual state after having turned away from God, and he begins to change his mind—and thus his approach to life. After being chastened severely in the Great Tribulation, Ephraim asks God to restore him, not to wealth or power or prestige, but to the covenantal relationship from which he has strayed.

All of the actions in verse 19—punishing oneself and feeling shame and humiliation—are part of repentance. From this, we can see that the grief involved in repentance is of such a quality that it leads to a change of mind, resulting in a change in direction and behavior. Simply feeling remorse is not repentance, because such a reaction never goes beyond an emotional response into concrete action.

Verse 19 also mentions that Ephraim accepted God's instruction, which indicates that he sought an explanation for how the tribes of Israel have deviated from God's standard. As a result of knowing and acknowledging the correct standard, they will, as it says, beat themselves in penitence. Israel will be ashamed and humiliated because of what he allowed himself to do in the foolish days of his youth. His repentance, due to God's chastening and forthright instruction, will motivate the remnant of Israel not only to be sorry, but also to turn from its previous, sinful ways and back to God's righteous way of life.

It may be surprising to learn that repentance is mentioned five times more frequently in the New Testament than in the Old, giving an indication of its continued relevance under the New Covenant. A rich example is found near the end of Paul's testimony to King Agrippa:

Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance. ([Acts 26:19-20](#))

Paul recounts that he followed Christ's instruction, preaching repentance, turning to God, and performing appropriate works everywhere he went. Verse 20 is unwelcome testimony for those who think that Paul taught a "no works" theology, because out of his own mouth he testifies that the repentant need to do specific works.

This verse contains both the verb and noun forms of the Greek word for "repent" (*metanoeo*; *metanoia*). Both forms denote a radical, moral turn of the whole person, away from [sin](#) and to God. Like the Hebrew word, the Greek words give the sense that repentance involves turning, changing, not

merely "feeling sorry." Paul preached a repentance that involves turning away from sin and to God, then continuing on that path by performing appropriate works.

Other translations render the last part of verse 20 in a variety of ways. *The English Standard Version* ends the verse with "performing deeds in keeping with their repentance." The *Holman* translation offers "do works worthy of repentance." *The New English Translation* reads "performing deeds consistent with repentance." And finally, *The New International Version* translates the last clause as "prove their repentance by their deeds." They all agree on and underscore the fact that real repentance will *always* include a change in behavior. A measure of individual exertion will always be involved in changing the way a person conducts his life.

In Part Two, we will consider the reason we must repent: sin.

- David C. Grabbe

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## From the Archives: Featured Sermon

### [The Fruit of Repentance](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

We are continually in need of repentance. The churches in Revelation 2 and 3 were warned to repent, prefiguring the identical conditions which would be extant in the current greater Church of God. Like faith, repentance must exist in the end times. We are admonished to change our mind and attitude, bringing about a total about-face in behavior, in which we abhor our human nature and diligently seek God's nature. Repentance must be motivated by a Godly sorrow which leads to a dramatic change of behavior. The Corinthian congregation was beset with myriad sins, including party-spirit and porneia, even though they were puffed up with pride because of their spiritual 'gifts.' Paul addressed the Corinthian congregation as carnal, even though its members were converted. The congregation in Paul's letters to the Hebrews had become dull of hearing, losing their spiritual maturity. Faith and repentance are inextricably linked as we move on to perfection. Godly

sorrow leads to perfection, while worldly sorrow leads to death. Repentance has seven distinct fruits: 1) diligence (the motivation to accomplish), 2) clearing of self (washing away), 3) indignation (anger at injustice and sin, especially at ourselves), 4) fear, 5) vehement desire (a strong and persistent craving for righteousness and a burning desire to change), 6) zeal (wholehearted ardor for accomplishing a task), and 7) vindication (setting things right). We must, in repentance, voluntarily surrender the self, striving to imitate our Heavenly Father and our Elder Brother.

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## **From the Archives: Featured Article**

### **[Are We Ready for Change?](#)**

by Bill Onisick

The apostle Paul describes the Christian life as a process of change: from the old man to the new man. Human beings, though, typically resist change because it is difficult. Bill Onisick provides advice on how we can make the process of change more organized and perhaps a bit easier too.

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