

Repentance: Transitioning to Grace

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Introduction: Another Book on Repentance?

The issue of repentance and what part it plays in passing from death unto life has been an issue in the church for about 40 years. Many a seeking soul has experienced years of turmoil wondering if, when he came to God, God had really accepted his repentance.

I remember wondering, very early on in my quest for assurance, whether I had repented enough. Had I really turned from every known sin? Had I really surrendered to the Lordship of Christ? Often, I would think of another sin which I had not yet left at the altar; so, the following Sunday, during the invitation, I would go forward again, hoping to turn from this newly discovered sin and finally gain that ever elusive assurance of salvation.

Of course, trying to find the assurance of salvation by a recognition that one had genuinely turned from sin is a recipe for a mental breakdown. Hell is hot, and eternity is forever, and I kept discovering sins in my life from which I had never repented. What about the pride of life? What about covetousness? What about lust? What about selfishness? It seemed that the more I tried to walk the straight and narrow, the more self-condemnation I experienced.

I remember that, when I was at Bible college and still struggling with this idea of repentance, my pastor gave me a book by Richard Seymour entitled, All about Repentance. While I am not sure that I read the entire book, I remember that it immediately made sense that a gospel invitation which focuses on self-reformation is incompatible with grace.

I realized that incorporating a prerequisite turning from sin into the plan of salvation was to add works to God's grace. Moreover, I realized that those who insisted on incorporating a step of self-reformation (repentance from sin) into the saving response to the gospel, did not understand grace THEMSELVES!

The more I studied Scripture, I discovered that the real prerequisite to saving faith was not self-reformation, but, rather, a self-condemnation in which a person turns from any hope in his own righteousness and, instead, embraces a God-provided gift of righteousness: a righteousness consisting of God's own satisfaction with Christ's sacrifice for me, free for the believing. Once I became grounded in that truth, I then realized that those insisting on adding a prerequisite of turning from sin to God's grace, THEMSELVES had the gospel wrong; THEY had not given up on a self-generated source of righteousness as that which could commend them to God. Those who insisted on adding turning from sins as a step to passing from death unto life themselves did not understand the way of salvation.

Believing that repentance from sins is the prerequisite to saving faith is having failed to have come to grips with one's own sin as mentioned in Romans 3:19b:

that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.

The person still focused on all the sins he turned from to be saved is still boasting about his own righteousness.

The Apostle Paul, in Romans 8:7-8, makes the following statement concerning a man's ability to reform his own flesh:

Because the mind of the flesh is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can it be: ⁸ so then, they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

The mind of the flesh is the only frame of reference which a person possesses from birth. From the above context, we can see that it is impossible for an unsaved individual, possessed only with that fallen, human-born frame of reference, to produce within his person the righteousness of God. Yet, that is exactly what is being demanded of the hearer when we demand that he does what Scripture says it is impossible to do: subject his mind of the flesh to the will of God. The unbeliever cannot cease from sinning to a degree which could please God because it is impossible for the mind of the flesh to subject itself to the law of God.

To define repentance as turning from sins as a prerequisite to saving faith is to introduce works and personal merit into the salvation formula. This is a rejection of the grace way of salvation.

As much as God wants a person to be transformed into a Godly, good-works-producing saint, becoming a child of God is not about all the promises a person makes to follow Christ. It is not about cutting a deal with God at the mourner's bench, promising to be a good boy or girl from now on if only He will save them.

The deal is this: God sent Christ to this earth to pay for each individual's sin debt by allowing Jesus, instead of the individual, to be punished for his sins. Christ on the cross has already brokered a person's peace with God through the blood of His cross. As sinners, all are invited to rest their hope for heaven in His good work on the cross, and not one's own good works. That work which merits an eternal standing before God was finished on the cross and is not finished by a person's continued obedience. As Scripture teaches us in Hebrews 9:15,

the invitation to believe on Jesus is an invitation to receive the promise of an eternal inheritance.

that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.

Likewise, in Hebrews 10:14, it is said that Christ has “through one offering perfected forever those who are being sanctified.” Salvation is not about what a person is going to do for the rest of his life; it is about what Christ has already done about his sins on the cross. It not a person’s life in exchange for his salvation, it was Christ’s life on the cross. Nobody cuts a side deal with God at the foot of the cross. There are no side deals in which we offer a lifetime of obedience for the gift of eternal life.

Chapter 1: Repentance in Jewish Contexts

Most of the repenting unto eternal life mentioned in the New Testament is found in Jewish contexts. It is the purpose of this chapter to demonstrate that this repentance was a command to make the transition from the provisional to the eternal: the provisional being the Law of Moses as that provisional sin-cleansing occupation to Christ as God's final solution for sin. The Jew was being called to enter into a new occupation with God in which he no longer focused on the blood of bulls and goats but instead embraced Christ as the antitype of those sacrifices. With the arrival of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the Lord expected the Jewish saint to transition away from bringing an offering for sins to the temple and, instead, to view the sacrifice of Christ as God's once and for all solution to his sin problem. This was the transition that the Jew needed to make: to transition from the provisional to the eternal.

The contrast between the Law of Moses as the provisional and Christ as the eternal can be seen many places in the New Testament. John starts out his Gospel by making this contrast in the following verse:

John 1:17: For the law was given through Moses, *but* grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

The contrast between the Law of Moses and the grace of Christ is not a contrast of error versus truth; it is, rather, a contrast of provisional versus eternal. The Jew needed to transition from the provisional Law

of Moses unto the life-giving offering of Christ if he was to enter the kingdom of Christ.

The contrast between the provisional and the eternal can also be seen in this extended passage from Hebrews chapter 10:

Hebrews 10:1-10: For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, *and* not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect.

² For then would they not have ceased to be offered? For the worshipers, once purified, would have had no more consciousness of sins.

³ But in those *sacrifices there is* a reminder of sins every year.

⁴ For *it is* not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins.

⁵ Therefore, when He came into the world, He said: "Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, But a body You have prepared for Me.

⁶ In burnt offerings and *sacrifices* for sin You had no pleasure.

⁷ Then I said, 'Behold, I have come -- In the volume of the book it is written of Me -- To do Your will, O God.' "

⁸ Previously saying, "Sacrifice and offering, burnt offerings, and *offerings* for sin You did not desire, nor had pleasure *in them*" (which are offered according to the law),

⁹ then He said, "Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God." He takes away the first that He may establish the second.

¹⁰ By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once *for all*.

This contrast between the provisional and the eternal can be seen in the preaching of John the Baptist, who was preaching a baptism of repentance for the remissions of sins. This baptism was not a baptism so

that sins could be remitted; rather, the remission of sins is the Biblical term used to define the results of the cross work of Christ. It is a term which is used to contrast the result of the animal sacrifices offered under the Law of Moses with the perfect sacrifice of Christ.

Hebrews 10:18: Now where there is remission of these, *there is* no longer an offering for sin.

The basic meaning of the word “remit” is “to dismiss or to send away.” The effect of the work of Christ on the cross is that sins are dismissed or sent away as that insurmountable barrier between God and the sinner to such a degree that now the underlying consideration of God in His salvific dealings with men is no longer their sins which Christ has accounted for on the cross. The underlying consideration is now the perfect sacrifice of Christ and whether or not a person will rest the eternal destiny of his soul in that cross work for himself. The effect of the work of Christ is not that sin is just provisionally atoned for, as it was under the Law of Moses. Now, because of the perfect sacrifice of Christ, sin is once and for all settled to the Father's satisfaction so that it is taken away as the obstacle to God's salvific dealings with men. This contrast can clearly be seen in the preaching of Paul in Acts 13:38-39. Here is the verse as it literally reads in the Greek:

Therefore let it be known to you, men, brethren, that through this one the remission of sins is proclaimed, even from all which ye were not able to be justified in the law of Moses, in this all the believing are justified.

Notice, in this context, that the remission of sins is to be proclaimed. The proclamation of the remission of sins is at the heart of the gospel message, “Your sin debt is settled. It has been assumed by and settled by your substitute, The Lord Jesus Christ”. That is core message of the Gospel.

The result of the cross work of Christ is the remission of sins. Repentance unto the remission of sins was a change of mind (repentance) in which the believer transitioned away from the sacrifices of the law of Moses as God's means of addressing sin unto Christ as the once and for all solution. Baptism was the public testimony that one had made that transition of faith. So, in the final analysis, John's preaching of a baptism of repentance unto (or into) the remission of sins was an exhortation to make the transition from the provisional to the eternal and to publicly testify of that faith through baptism.

That this understanding of the preaching of John the Baptist is correct can be demonstrated in Acts 19:4, when Paul confronts the questionable disciples of Ephesus.

Acts 19:1-5: And it happened, while Apollos was at Corinth, that Paul, having passed through the upper regions, came to Ephesus. And finding some disciples

² he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" So they said to him, "We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit."

³ And he said to them, "Into what then were you baptized?" So they said, "Into John's baptism."

⁴ Then Paul said, "John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus."

⁵ When they heard *this*, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Notice here that Paul says that the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins was an exhortation of John the Baptist to believe on Jesus. The Jews were to repent, that is, they were called to transition from the provisional to the eternal by embracing Christ as God's once and for all provision for their sin.

As a result of the offering of Christ, the remission of sins was to be proclaimed as accomplished.

Luke 24:47: "and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."

It is important in this discussion that we properly translate the word "preached." In the Greek, it means "to herald forth" a message from God. From Luke 24:47, we can see that repentance and remission of sins was to be proclaimed.

Moreover, while it is true that Gentile nations were not called to make a transition from the provisional to eternal, they were called to transition from the absurd to the sensible. They were called to transition from a people who were not directly accountable to special revelation to people to whom the gospel message is now specifically committed.

Acts 17:30: "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent,"

God tolerated some of the foolish things Gentile nations used to worship; but now, since they are accountable to the message of the gospel, they, too, are called to transition, not from the Law of Moses to Christ, but from ignorant idols to Christ.

That Jewish repentance was transitioning from occupation with the provisional Law of Moses to the eternal perfect sacrifice of Christ can also be demonstrated from the Epistle to the Hebrews. In Hebrews chapter 6 we read the following:

Hebrews 6:1: Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary *principles* of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God,

In the above context, the beginning of faith is cited as repentance from dead works. Dead works, in this context, are not specific sins; but, rather, that means of commending oneself to God through the now defunct animal sacrificial system. Offering God a sacrifice for one's sin as specified under the Law of Moses was no longer an operable method of dealing with sin. That method had been abrogated to the past by the once and for all offering of Christ.

Several other passages in the book of Hebrews make the above understanding certain.

Hebrews 9:13, 14: For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh:

¹⁴ How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

Once again, this verse speaks of the vehicle of sanctification under the Law of Moses. Because of the perfect sacrifice of Christ, the Old Testament saint no longer needs to recount and offer sacrifices for sins. That method of expiation of sins was and is no longer operable. Those sacrifices are now considered to be dead works. They are no longer an operable means of re-establishing oneself into a harmonious relationship with God.

That this truth is a primary theme of the book of Hebrews can also be seen in the following context:

Hebrews 10:24, 27: And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works,

²⁵ not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as *is* the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

²⁶ For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,

²⁷ but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.

The sin which this context contemplates is not sin in general. When the Scripture mentions a sin, the sin has to be determined by the context in which it is mentioned. The sin which this context anticipates

is a reversion back to the Law of Moses as the Jewish saints' sanctifying occupation.

Here is what was going on with these backsliding Hebrew believers: they were experiencing persecution and they were tired of it. So, they were thinking, "Hey, we would have a whole lot less trouble if we were to just reintegrate back into the Jewish assembly, participate in that sacrificial system and forget the fact that we were ever believers in Christ." If they would have done that, they would have put Christ to an open shame (Heb. 6:6). They would have committed the sin of Hebrews 10:26 which was reverting back to Judaism and integrating back into the sacrificial system. The author of Hebrews states that that plan will not work; it will only yield a judgment worse than that of those who transgressed the Law of Moses.

In conclusion, repentance unto (or into) the remission of sins is not repenting in order that one's sins might be remitted. The remission of sins is the universal result of the sacrifice of Christ, as contrasted to the revisiting of sins continually under the Law of Moses. The sin debt of all people for all time has been imputed to Jesus, and settled to the Father's satisfaction. That is the remission of sins. Repentance unto the remission of sins is a change of mind which decides to rest the eternal destiny of one's soul in the sufficiency of that work.

Chapter 2: Repentance and the Offer of the Earthly Kingdom

Sooner or later, every diligent student of the Word of God is going to discover that there is something different between the future salvation being offered to the Jews and the future salvation being offered to the Gentiles. Moreover, he is going to see that distinction when contrasting the preaching of Jesus and John the Baptist with the teaching of Paul. For starters, the location of the blessing of the Jew was in an earthly kingdom while the Gentile was looking for a citizenship in heaven. These two citizenships would eventually be combined at the end of the age to come. It is the salvation in this earthly kingdom, this regenerated land of promise, which is constantly being mentioned in Jewish salvation contexts. What follows are just some of the features of this kingdom. For a complete discussion of this topic, get my book entitled, [The Age to Come](#).

The earthly kingdom will be that time in the history of the world during which the Lord Jesus Christ will be reigning on the earth, on top of mount Zion, over the inhabitants of the earth with a rod of iron; they will be subjugated, willing or otherwise, to His authority. The nation of Israel will be exalted above all nations of the earth as the center of world government. The curse will be removed from the land of Israel; the borders of Israel will be expanded in every direction; and Jewish saints, both living and resurrected, will enjoy the presence of the Lord on Mount Zion, helping Him call the shots over other nations. Meanwhile, the church will dwell in the New Jerusalem (which will be a heavenly expanse on top of Mount Zion, surrounding the throne of Christ) in glorified bodies, likewise helping the Lord call the shots over the rest of the conquered world.

Because of Israel's nearly universal rejection of Christ, they were about to experience a divine expulsion from their beloved homeland, with that homeland about to be overrun by Gentile nations. This expulsion from the land of promise was to be the response of God to His nation if they refused to hear and embrace His salvation. It was the desire of God to, through Christ, gather Israel together into the land of promise, with Christ in their midst. However, the possibility of this happening to Israel was rapidly being brought to a close. Christ had already said that their house was left desolate (Matt. 23:38). We also see in the opening chapters in the book of Acts, one final opportunity for the Israelites to repent and receive their kingdom.

Israel was collectively guilty of a unique transgression before the Lord from which they needed to be dismissed. They were guilty of rejecting their Messiah. Because of this rejection, there loomed over the Israelites a certain national destruction from which they needed to be delivered. It is deliverance from this unique transgression and subsequent destruction which is quite often mentioned as the deliverance that a national Jewish repentance would bring.

Jesus warned that impending destruction awaited the nation of Israel if they, as a nation, did not transition to faith in Him.

Luke 13:1-9: There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

² And Jesus answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all *other* Galileans, because they suffered such things?

³ "I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.

⁴ "Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all *other* men who dwelt in Jerusalem?

⁵ "I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish."

⁶ He also spoke this parable: "A certain *man* had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none.

⁷ "Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?'

⁸ "But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize *it*.

⁹ 'And if it bears fruit, *well*. But if not, after that you can cut it down.' "

From this teaching, we can see that a destruction awaited the nation of Israel if they did not, as a nation, embrace Jesus as their Savior and Christ.

We likewise see in the book of Acts the need for Israel to repent if they wished to experience their blessed salvation in their land of promise.

Acts 3:19-26: "Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord,

²⁰ "and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before,

²¹ "whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began.

²² "For Moses truly said to the fathers, 'The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear in all things, whatever He says to you.

²³ 'And it shall be *that* every soul who will not hear that Prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.'

²⁴ "Yes, and all the prophets, from Samuel and those who follow, as many as have spoken, have also foretold these days.

²⁵ "You are sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

²⁶ "To you first, God, having raised up His Servant Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one *of you* from your iniquities."

The times of refreshing of which this context speaks is the regeneration of the land of promise, with that land being restored to full productivity, to a pre-curse state, with the Israelites enjoying that blessing with their Savior and with Christ dwelling in their midst. The Jews were to first experience these divine blessings of salvation and then, from Jerusalem, the plan of salvation was to be heralded to the ends of the earth; but, before that could happen, the Jews themselves needed to become children of God through faith in Christ. Apart from such a universal conversion of the Jews, such a national salvation would not be possible.

If the Jewish nation, as a whole, did not make this transition to faith in their Messiah, then Jews, as individuals, could be dismissed from the collective guilt of Israel by, as individuals, believing in Jesus and confessing him publically. Believing on Jesus would result in them being accounted eternally righteous before God, while confessing Him would be the individual Israelite's way of being dismissed publically from the collective guilt of an apostate Israel and the earthly calamity which would soon befall them.

This unique deliverance of Israel can also be seen in a very famously misunderstood passage of Scripture: Acts 2:38-40. Practically every grace denying cult in the world uses this passage as an underlying

text in their gospel presentation. It, therefore, deserves careful consideration.

Acts 2:36-40: "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

³⁷ Now when they heard *this*, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men *and* brethren, what shall we do?"

³⁸ Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

³⁹ "For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

⁴⁰ And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation."

It is very important to notice that, in Acts 2:38, there are two exhortations being made: One addressed to the Israelites collectively and one addressed to believing Israelites individually. This fact can be demonstrated by the use of plural, and then singular, pronouns in the verse. Here, the exhortation to the Israelites, collectively, is "repent ye (plural), and ye (plural) shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit," for the promise (of the giving of the Spirit) was to be first experienced by the Jew. This promise was for the national regeneration and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit which had been prophesied by Ezekiel and Jeremiah. However, Acts 2:38 also contains an exhortation to the believing Jew as an individual: "and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins." This parenthetical exhortation to the individual Jew was to publically associate him with the proclamation of the remission of sins, which is also what John the Baptist was preaching.

This remission of sins, as we have already seen, was the result of the work of Christ which, once and for all, satisfied the Father with reference to sin. The believing Jew publically acknowledged his faith in that work by baptism.

As we have also seen elsewhere, repentance and baptism did not accomplish the remission of sins. The remission of sins was accomplished on the cross of Christ. A person was not baptized in order that his sins could be remitted; a person was baptized because he already believed that the remission of sins, which Christ accomplished on the cross, was sufficient to serve as his basis for an eternally right relationship with God. Baptism was the public testimony of a faith that he already possessed.

As we also saw in Acts 3, an earthly salvation for the Israelites could be experienced collectively by a national repentance or, if that did not happen, then the individual believing Jew could disassociate himself from that perverse, Christ rejecting generation of Jews and be dismissed from that association. The second option can be seen in the concluding statement concerning Peter's sermon in Acts 2:

Acts 2:40: And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation."

The wrath of God was soon to fall upon an Israel that was guilty of a terrible rejection of their Messiah. Peter's message to individual Jews was: Get yourself excluded from that earthly judgment! Publically disassociate yourself from them!

The apostle Paul seems to make reference to this need for the Jews to publicly confess in order to experience this dismissal from the collective guilt of Israel in Romans chapter 10:

Romans 10:9, 10: that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

¹⁰ For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

The apostle Paul cannot possibly be teaching here that being accounted eternally righteous before the Father is contingent upon a public oral profession of faith. This very context explains that “with the heart one believes unto righteousness.” This passage is a Jewish salvation context which anticipates, as in other Jewish salvation contexts, deliverance from an association with an Israel upon whom the judgment of God was imminent. How this deliverance was to be carried out for the believing Jew is not certain; however, in this passage, it is called a "salvation."

One final thought: It is interesting to note that, in most of these Jewish repentance contexts, the word “repent” is present but the word “believe” is not. This is because repentance, that is, making the transition from the provisional to the eternal, includes believing in Christ. Moreover, as we will see in the final chapter of this book, the word "repent" is seldom used in Gentile evangelistic contexts. This is because to them was committed no previous revelation from which they now needed to transition.

Chapter 3: True Versus Provisional in John Chapter 15

In John 15, we have another contrast between provisional and eternal. This time, it is the provisional vine of Israel, versus the true vine of Christ, through which fruit was to be produced. Many places in Scripture, Israel is likened to a vine from which the Lord (the Husbandman) was always desiring to see fruit. However, the Husbandman was always disappointed in the fruit that the provisional vine produced. The analogy of Israel as the disappointing vine is probably best portrayed in the following context.

Isaiah 5:1-7: Now let me sing to my Well-beloved
A song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard:
My Well-beloved has a vineyard
On a very fruitful hill.

² He dug it up and cleared out its stones,
And planted it with the choicest vine.
He built a tower in its midst,
And also made a winepress in it;
So He expected *it* to bring forth *good* grapes,
But it brought forth wild grapes.

³ " And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah,
Judge, please, between Me and My vineyard.

⁴ What more could have been done to My vineyard
That I have not done in it?
Why then, when I expected *it* to bring forth *good* grapes,
Did it bring forth wild grapes?

⁵ And now, please let Me tell you what I will do to My vineyard:
I will take away its hedge, and it shall be burned;

And break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down

⁶ I will lay it waste;

It shall not be pruned or dug,

But there shall come up briars and thorns.

I will also command the clouds

That they rain no rain on it."

⁷ For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts *is* the house of Israel,

And the men of Judah are His pleasant plant.

He looked for justice, but behold, oppression;

For righteousness, but behold, a cry *for help*.

This context constitutes a negative prophecy of the fate of Israel if it did not produce the fruit desired by the Husbandman. It would no longer be the recipient of His tending, but would be abandoned and burned. This threat can also be seen in the following context:

Ezekiel 15:6-8: " Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: 'Like the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so I will give up the inhabitants of Jerusalem; ⁷'and I will set My face against them. They will go out from *one* fire, but *another* fire shall devour them. Then you shall know that I *am* the LORD, when I set My face against them.

⁸'Thus I will make the land desolate, because they have persisted in unfaithfulness,' says the Lord GOD.

From the above passage, we can see that the analogy of the unproductive vine and fire is a very common analogy of Scripture. With this in mind, let us us look now at the analogy of the vineyard of John 15.

John 15:1-8: "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.

²"Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every *branch* that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

³"You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.

⁴"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

⁵"I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.

⁶"If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw *them* into the fire, and they are burned.

⁷"If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.

⁸"By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.

Our analogy starts out with Christ calling Himself the true vine. Once again, this is in contrast to the provisional vine of Israel, which continually produced disappointing fruit. Israel was the provisional theocratic institution of God designated to secure Israel until Christ could come along and cause Israel to produce fruit; not through an occupation with the law, but by a new power which would be made available upon the resurrection of Christ: the divine enablements of the Holy Spirit. These enablements to produce fruit unto God would be available to the one who, through faith, transitioned from the provisional to the true vine. Those members of Israel who did not make the transition were destined for destruction from the vineyard.

Galatians 3:23-25: But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed.

²⁴ Therefore the law was our tutor *to bring us* to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.

²⁵ But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.

Again, we see the provisional nature of the Law of Moses. It provided to Israel a fear based check on the old sin nature until Christ could come and establish a model of communion, based upon an indwelling Spirit of God, teaching grace truths to a newly created person created in the image of God.

Romans 7:4: Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another -- to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God.

We can also see, in the above verse, the necessity of the Israelite to make the transition from the provisional (Law of Moses) to the eternal (union with Christ). This was the repentance that Israelites needed to perform, if they were to continue as the people of God. Those who did not make the transition were removed from the vineyard and destroyed. Those who insisted on trying to bear fruit in the provisional vine would be removed from the vineyard.

Now let us look back to John 15.

John 15:2: "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every *branch* that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit."

By the way, I think it is most instructive to consider the Geneva Bible translation of this context. The Geneva Bible was the Bible of the English people immediately before the King James Bible was translated.

John 15:2: Euery branch that beareth not fruite in me, he taketh away: and euery one that beareth fruite, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruite.

In the Geneva Bible, the prepositional phrase “in me” becomes the indirect object of the sentence. This is a perfectly valid alternate rendering of the context (dative of the indirect object). If we allow this translation of this verse, it fits the analogy of the true versus the provisional and the need for the Israelite to transition his fruit bearing from the former to the latter. Those Israelites who did not make this transition would be taken away in judgment. Those who made the transition from the provisional to the eternal would enter that living relationship with the true vine, characterized by the loving, pruning hand of the Father.

This translation also addresses the tension created in verse 6 of this context, which will be addressed later.

John 15:3: "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.

Because the eleven apostles had already responded favorably to the light and had made the jump from the Law to Christ, they were already clean in a positional sense. In other words, the explanation of what was about to happen to the fruitless branches did not apply to them.

The Lord Jesus, between the last verse and this verse, makes sure that the disciples are distinguishing between fruit bearing and positional

righteousness. Their position in Christ was set apart and secure. Now, He is going to talk about the next step after positional righteousness: bearing fruit.

John 15:4-5: "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

5 "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing"

Even though the eleven apostles were already positionally secure in Christ, they needed to remain in communion with Christ if their relationship was to bear fruit. This verse introduces a new concept for the eleven apostles: if they were to bear fruit, they would need to continue in a fruit bearing relationship with Christ; Christ would have to remain in them. Without Christ continuing to dwell in their hearts by faith (Eph. 3:17), there would be no way that the eleven could bear fruit unto God. Just like believers today, they needed a daily reorientation to grace. They needed to daily exercise their understanding afresh in the Word of God in order to experience the purifying effects of the Word of God upon their hearts.

John 15:6: "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw *them* into the fire, and they are burned.

It is important to note that, in this passage, there are actually two "abidings" (or remainings) in mind: transitioning from the law to Christ, and the abiding of the believer in a fruit bearing relationship with Christ. It is also important to follow the transitions between the second and the third person pronouns. When speaking in the third person, the "abiding" of which Christ is speaking is making the transition from the

law to Christ. It is speaking of a continuing (abiding, remaining) into the next age because the Israelite has made the transition from the provisional to the eternal. However, when addressing the apostles in the second person, His exhortation is for the apostles to stay in fellowship if they want to bear fruit. With this rule in mind, we can see that verse 6 is an explanation of what happens to the Israelite who fails to transition from the provisional vine to the eternal vine.

The harsh nature of this statement goes beyond a mere warning for believers to stay in a fruit bearing relationship with God. It is an explanation of what would happen to Jewish citizens (branches) who do not make the jump from the provisional vine to Christ.

We know that John the Baptist warned that Christ had come to do one of two things: to baptize either with the Holy Spirit or with fire. The baptism of the Holy Spirit was to be the divine enablement that the Jewish believer needed in order to qualify as a citizen of the kingdom. The baptism of fire was the destruction and exclusion of unrighteous Jews from that kingdom.

Matthew 3:10: "And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

If we allow the branch its most common symbolic representation as it occurs in the Scriptures (to represent citizens of Israel), then the branches that are taken away represent those Israelites who, during the time of Christ, do not change from the Law to Christ. This understanding presents less tension in the context than trying to explain how a genuine believer who doesn't abide in fellowship is taken away from the vine and burned.

John 15:7: "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.

Again, the Lord here shifts from the third person back to the second person. In other words, He is again addressing the necessity of believers to abide in fellowship if they are to partner with God in ministry.

This verse is really an expansion on the concept in verse 5, and is in contrast to verse 6. Instead of being told that Christ needs to abide in the believer, the Lord Jesus uses a form of speech similar to Hebrew poetry, instructing His disciples of the necessity for the words of Christ to abide in their hearts. Through this word play, He equates the word abiding in their hearts to Himself abiding in their hearts.

As we can see from this passage, transition from the provisional to the eternal is a common theme in the New Testament. Understanding Jewish contexts mentioning repentance in this light will alleviate much of the confusion which exists today over the concept of repentance.

Chapter 4: Verses on Gentile Repentance to Salvation

In this chapter, we will examine those passages in the New Testament which include Gentiles in the discussion on repentance unto life. As you will soon discover, there are not many. In fact, Paul rarely includes the concept of repentance in his Gentile evangelistic contexts; however, when he does, the word "believe" does not occur, which goes to demonstrate that in the theology of the Apostle Paul, repentance was synonymous with believing.

The Gentile was not called to transition from the Law to Christ, since they were never under that covenant relationship with God. They were, rather, called to transition from the absurd to the reasonable. They were to turn from worthless idols to the one true God. Two contexts should suffice to make this point.

Acts 14:15: and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them,

Acts 17:29, 30: "Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising.

³⁰ "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent,"

In the above two verses, it can be seen that it was sometimes necessary to point out to the Gentiles the worthlessness of the objects of their worship and how that they needed to transition their worship to the one true God, which act would lead them to faith in Christ.

Turning from worthless idols was a common theme when Paul discussed the conversion of the Gentiles.

1 Thessalonians 1:9: For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,

As we have seen in the book of Acts, this turning from idols was repentance. It was a transitioning away of the Gentiles from a worthless object of worship to the one true God.

This next verse on Gentile repentance was not actually proclaimed by an apostle or by prophets, but was actually the response of believing Jews to the recounting of Peter of the Cornelius household's conversion experience. Peter is recounting back to a skeptical group of Jewish believers - Jewish believers who, up to this point, rejected the idea that salvation was also for Gentiles. Let us break into the middle of Peter's recounting of the Cornelius household conversion experience.

Acts 11:15-18: "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning.

¹⁶ "Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, 'John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'

¹⁷ "If therefore God gave them the same gift as *He gave* us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?"

¹⁸ When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life."

Notice here that the Jews do not call the saving response of the Gentiles "faith" but "repentance unto life." This is because "repentance unto life" is how the Jewish mindset understood coming to faith in Christ. However, in the previous verse, Peter does say that the Cornelius household had believed on the Lord Jesus Christ. So, to the Jewish mindset, repentance and faith were one and the same.

While we are on the topic of the conversion of Cornelius, it might be worth asking a question to those who still believe that repentance in salvation contexts equates to turning from sins. Such people need to be asked, "How much turning from sins did Cornelius need to do?" Let us look at the description of Cornelius in Acts 10:

Acts 10:1, 2: There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, ² a devout *man* and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always.

Let us examine the reputation of Cornelius: He was "a devout man, one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people and prayed to God always". Yet, the Jews, in Acts 11, state that Cornelius exercised repentance unto life. Well, if we define "repentance" as "turning from your ramblin' and gamblin'," then the statement of the Jewish believers makes no sense. Quite frankly, it does not appear that Cornelius had anything that he had to "repent of" before he could be saved. However, if repentance is synonymous with believing, then truly Cornelius did transition from not believing to

appropriating to himself the grace of God. So, once again, at least in this Gentile conversion context, repentance is equated to believing.

Here is the next passage of Scripture which mentions repentance in a Gentile evangelistic context:

Acts 20:21: "testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ."

In the above verse, it is important to recognize that Paul is speaking to the elders of Ephesus concerning his evangelistic endeavors toward two audiences: Jews and Greeks. This makes the meaning of "repentance towards God" become more uncertain. Certainly, Jews needed to make the transition from the provisional to the eternal but Gentiles needed to change their minds concerning the nature of God; that is, as we have seen in previous examples from the book of Acts, Gentiles needed to stop carving their own Gods out of wood and stone. They needed to change their minds concerning the fundamental nature of God. As we approach this and the next passage, we need to allow other remote contexts of Scripture to help us interpret this one.

Let us look now at the next passage which mentions repentance in a Gentile conversion context. In this context, Paul is summarizing before Agrippa his evangelistic endeavors. Keep in mind that it does not constitute a detailed accounting of Paul's gospel presentation.

Acts 26:19-21: "Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision,

²⁰ "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.

²¹ "For these reasons the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill *me*.

Paul is not trying to lay out an orderly presentation of the Gospel; but is, rather, summarizing to Agrippa his evangelistic efforts among the Jews and also among the Gentiles. Jews needed to repent; Gentiles needed to turn to God; and they both, as a result of their new living relationship with God, needed to perform good works which would flow out of a new relationship with God. How could Agrippa oppose that? What king would not want people doing works befitting repentance? As we can see, this summarization of Paul's evangelistic efforts before Agrippa was meant to show the harmlessness and even the benefit of Paul's ministry to the king. Moreover, Paul's defense before Agrippa worked. Agrippa, after hearing Paul's defense, came to the following conclusion:

Acts 26:31: and when they had gone aside, they talked among themselves, saying, "This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains."

Probably the most troubling usage of the word "repentance" in a salvation context is found in Romans 2. The issue is not so much with the usage of the word "repentance" but with, what appears from the context, to be a works based path to eternal security. Let us look at this passage in more detail.

Romans 2:1-10: Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.

² But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things.

³ And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God?

⁴ Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?

⁵ But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God,

⁶ who "will render to each one according to his deeds":

⁷ to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality, eternal life

⁸ but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness -- indignation and wrath,

⁹ tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek;

¹⁰ but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

The primary source of tension for free grace believers in this verse is not the usage of the word "repentance", but what appears to be a pathway to eternal life base upon works: "to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality, eternal life."

This tension, however, can be dismissed when we understand that the words "eternal life" in Scripture do not always refer to the duration of that life but to the quality of that life. When we are born again, we have a life which is eternal in its duration because, at the core of our being, is a new man who has the capacity to commune with God. When we are participating with the Holy Spirit by occupying ourselves with those grace-provided enablements, bought and paid for by the finished work of Christ, the believer's life experience is said to be one of "eternal life." The believer who, "by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality," will have a blessed experience in this life, which the Bible refers to as "eternal life." If we skip ahead to verse

10 of this context, Paul enumerates additional benefits of the glory, honor and immortality seeking lifestyle: "but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good." God honors, both in the here and now and in eternity, His children whose lifestyle is characterized by priorities which will be rewarded at the Judgement Seat of Christ.

This view of eternal life as a blessed life experience is common in the New Testament: "He who sows to the spirit will of the spirit reap eternal life" (Gal. 6:8) and "Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life" (I Tim. 6:12) are not exhortations to strive to secure a home in heaven. Instead, they are instructions that the pathway to a blessed life in the here and now is by ordering one's earthly life with a priority for glory and honor at the judgment seat of Christ.

An additional observation about this context: the word "immortality" in verse 7 is not a reference to never experiencing death; but it speaks of life priorities which will not perish at the judgment seat of Christ. The wood, hay and stubble some are setting their affections on in this life will perish at the judgment seat of Christ. However, believers whose priorities honor the Lord will receive everlasting honor and distinction (immortality) at the Judgment Seat of Christ. A believer who consistently functions with eternal priorities in mind will have an earthly sojourning characterized by a peaceable and fruitful life. As the author of Hebrews also said, "There remains a rest for the people of God" (Hebrews 4:9). The believer who lives a life with a focus on what the Lord values will experience joy and peace in this life and everlasting distinction (immortality) in the age to come.

In contrast to this divine favor of God is that displeasure with which God views the person who refuses to consider the light. The wrath of God abides on an individual, not because of an untransformed life; what arouses the wrath of God towards the unbeliever is a refusal to give God's grace a hearing. As we read in the above context, the wrath

of God is "in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart." In other words, the degree to which a person spurns the light is the degree to which the anger of God against him is aroused. The person whose impenitent heart refuses God an honest hearing accrues unto himself a wrath which will be revealed in a future judgment. The child of God who continues in His grace is a recipient of His loving watch care now and everlasting distinction in the age to come.

1 Timothy 4:8b: godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come.

God has so wonderfully provided a grace way of salvation which the sinner can freely experience. God requires that the sinner bring no moral capital of his own to the table of grace but men refuse to hear it. What arouses the wrath of God is the fact that the average man will spend two million minutes of his life with his affections set on his sports viewing schedule, and yet will not give 15 minutes of his time to even give God's grace-way invitation a hearing. It is unreasonable to God for a person who faces a certain death to not even investigate preparations for what is, at best, an uncertain eternity.

Final Thoughts

The underlying truth which has guided my conclusion in this book is the meaning of the remission of sins as used in the New Testament. The phrase “remission of sins” is used to identify that, unlike the Law of Moses where sin was not truly put away, the sin issue has been resolved and put away once and for all.

Repentance unto the remission of sins was not to repent in order that one's sins could be remitted. Rather, it is a change of mind, a belief that Jesus accomplished a perfect sacrifice which satisfied God to such a degree that it is no longer necessary to continue to offer sacrifices according to the Law. The Jew was called to transition from the provisional to the eternal. They were called to believe in Christ, who accomplished the remission of sins.

Viewing the remission of sins as an accomplished fact instead of as something to be gained by baptism and repentance eliminates the seeming contradiction of two apparent ways to salvation: repentance unto the remission of sins and believing unto eternal life. As we have seen in the teaching of Paul in Acts 19:4, John the Baptist's baptism of repentance was an invitation to believe on Jesus. Therefore, both of the invitations must be reconciled to form one unified gospel invitation. This book has accomplished that. It is my prayer that it has strengthened your handle on God's perspective concerning the doctrine of repentance.

Dan Lash
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