

# Repentance and forgiveness



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## Introduction

In the beginning of Acts, we are told that the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and those waiting and praying in the upper room in Jerusalem. People from all over the region had come to Jerusalem on pilgrimage for the Feast of Pentecost, and were amazed to hear the wonders of God being praised in their own languages. Mistaking their joy and exuberance for drunkenness, some made fun of them. Peter stood up from among the disciples and spoke to the gathered crowd, and summarised by saying,

Act 2:36-38 ESV

36) Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

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

38) And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

*"Repent and be baptised!"* is the fundamental command that has been preached from the very beginning of the Christian Faith. Yet today, the idea of repentance has lost its importance in the message of the Gospel. Some preachers will not even talk about it because it puts people off, or makes them uncomfortable. *"Invite Jesus into your life!"* they prefer to say, as if pleading with you to get a cleaner for an untidy house.

When Peter stood up and preached at Pentecost, he ensured that the crowd knew exactly what he was talking about: "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom *you* crucified..." He was for them both Lord and Messiah – The Christ: The Holy One of God, who's death they had been responsible for a few weeks earlier. Peter didn't invite them to make Him Lord- he took it as a given that Jesus was already Lord. What he did do was personalise their part in His death in order to force them to face their complicity in the crucifixion of an innocent man who was God in the flesh. It was at this point, when they realised the enormity and consequence of their actions, that the result was a sincere heart cry: "Brothers, what must we do?"

And it was here, as they were forced to confront and acknowledge their own guilt, that Peter answered them: "Repent and be baptised." And so it is that we too need to take a look at what is meant by 'repent.' When we realise and accept the reality of sin in our lives, and understand the implications and consequences, we too face that question: "What must we do to be saved?" The answer remains the same: we too must repent.<sup>[1]</sup>

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As A.W. Tozer wrote, "Faith rests upon the character of God, not on demonstrations of laboratory or logic" (Tozer 1978). For this reason, I want to look at repentance itself in detail from the Scriptures, as it is one of the foundational teachings in Christianity. We will also look at forgiveness to see how it affects our understanding of Christ's work for us and in us.

We know that the result of repentance is forgiveness, which in turn leads to a change of heart in the one forgiven. This is demonstrated by a public display of baptism: a symbolic dying to self and resurrection to a new way of life. But it is not baptism that saves; - it is the forgiveness of God brought about by the work of His Son Jesus in His death and resurrection. "Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved," Peter had told the crowd earlier. They would have understood that to call upon someone's name meant to rely upon their reputation. Reputations are built up over time, and it was partially for this reason that the Old Testament was written: that we may know what we base our belief and faith upon

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## Some Definitions

You may skip this section, but it sets up some of the ideas found later on.

All of these words have been commonly translated as *repent*, or *forgive* in different places in scripture. I have taken the definitions from several different sources, including *Strong's*, *Thayer's* and *Mounce's* dictionaries, and *Brown-Driver-Briggs* Definitions to find the best or most succinct definition from the several available.

## Repentance

### Hebrew:

נָחַם *Nâcham*

To pant, sigh, or groan. To lament or grieve, regret, be sorry, to pity, to console, to have compassion, to empathise or console. Signifies deep emotion.

Genesis 6:6, Ex 32:12 ("Relent" in NIV) Deut 32:36, Ps 106:45, Jer 18:10

שׁוּב *Shub*

To turn back, return, fetch, answer, recall, make restitution or restoration, put back, revoke, take back.

Gen 40:13, Ex 32:12 ("Turn" in NIV) 2Sam 9:7, Psalm 51:12, Eze 33:15

### Greek:

Μεταμέλλομαι *metamellomai*

To change one's judgment on past points of conduct; to change one's mind and purpose; to repent or regret. (This word emphasises the emotional aspect and is similar to remorse)

Matt 21:29; Heb 7:21; Matt 27:3; 2Co 7:8.

Μετανοέω / μετάνοια *metanoëō / metanoia*

To undergo a change in frame of mind and feeling, to repent; to make a change of principle and practice, to reform. cf Act 2:38 Peter replied, "*Repent* and be baptized..."

Matt 3:2; Luke 17:3-4

ἐπιστρέφω *epistrephō* A word emphasising transition or change: to turn towards; to turn round; to bring back, to change or convert, Luk\_1:16-17; Jas\_5:19-20; To turn one's self upon or towards, Act\_9:40; Rev\_1:12; to turn about, Mat\_9:22; to turn back, return, Mat\_12:44; to be converted, Act\_28:27.



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## Forgive

### Hebrew:

#### **Sawlach** סלח

Turn back, return, pardon - forgive. It is very similar to the Hebrew word, *Shub*, (above) meaning to turn away from, reverse or withdraw.

2Chron 7:14, Psa 25:11, Ps 103:3, Isa 55:7

#### **Kippur** כִּפּוּר

To cover over, or atone

#### **Naw-saw'** נָשָׂא

A root word meaning *to lift up*, in a great variety of applications, both literally and figuratively, absolutely and relatively: - To accept, advance, arise, to be able to, To allow, endure, bear (up), bring forth, burn, carry (away), throw, contain, desire, ease, exact, exalt, extol, fetch, forgive, furnish, further, give, go on, help, high, hold up, To deem honourable, lift up, lofty, magnify, needs, obtain, pardon, raise (up), receive, regard, respect, set (up), spare, stir up, yield.

### Greek:

#### **Ἀφίημι** aphīēmi

The most commonly used New Testament word; *To send*; an intensive form of εἶμι (to go); to send forth, in various applications: - cry, forgive, forsake, lay aside, to leave or leave behind, abandon, let (-alone, -be, -go), omit, put or send away, remit, yield up.

To see how the same word is used in different contexts, compare Matt 4:20 ("They left their nets and followed Him") and Matt 6:12 ("Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors")

A final note on word usage: R.W. Yarbrough, in his entry on *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, New Dictionary of Biblical Theology (Alexander and Rosner 2000), points out that the translators of the Septuagint (the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century B.C. Greek translation of the Old Testament), used many different Greek words to get to the intended meaning, where generally only a few Hebrew words were used in the original Hebrew text, also known as the Masoretic text.

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## Faith and Repentance

Heb 11:6 NIV

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

When Paul addressed the philosophers in the Areopagus in Athens, he began by pointing out that they had an altar to an unknown god, just in case they had missed one (Acts 17). It was that "Unknown" God that he wanted to tell them about. In some ways, it was easier for him. In his day, there was no question that there was a spiritual world; the Greeks were simply ignoring the only true God. In the modern world of the 21st century, spirituality is a very different proposition. Today, spirituality is said to be where you find it, whether that be in God, gods, or seeking alignment with the forces of nature. Into this mix we now have a different type of worship: Humanism, the belief that Man and the physical world are all there is, and should therefore be honoured and celebrated. Atheism denies that there is a God or gods, while its more honest sibling, Agnosticism denies that we can know with any certainty whether there is a God or not. Add to this the popular caricatures of the early 20th century "Hellfire and brimstone" preacher, or even worse, the popular modern speaker who only preaches motivational messages on universal love and forgiveness without mentioning *why* forgiveness is required, and one can understand why people are confused, or show little interest in doing open honest business with God.

Yet, looking through God's word, we see that repentance is not optional. In the same passage of Scripture, Paul advised the philosophers,

Acts 17:30 NIV

In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

This brings us to another issue that many in today's Post-Modern world find difficulty with: the simple fact that the Bible actually means what it says and is not subject to subjective or personal interpretation. Much does ride on this concept, and without it we cannot fully appreciate such straightforward scriptures such as:

1 John 5:9-10 NIV

9) We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son.

10) Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son.

The testimony the Apostle John is speaking of here is simple: God has offered all the gift of eternal life through Jesus, His Son. Not accepting Jesus as "the Way, the Truth and the Life" is tantamount to calling God a liar. And no one wants to consider the implications of that. To be fair, few do.

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Yet, repentance was the main message of Jesus' preaching from the start, (Matt 4:17) and it was also the subject of His final message to His Disciples (Luke 24: 44-46). Repentance and forgiveness of sins go hand in hand in these accounts and cannot be separated, but first one must understand what one is doing when one asks for forgiveness.

Louis Berkhof lists three elements to repentance that we may find useful (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 1958) :

1. **Intellectual.** We need to recognise our own personal guilt (Rom 3:20). Without recognition of personal sin, there is no repentance, only regret. Regret often shows as fear of punishment, not hatred of the sin itself. Recognising our own guilt confronts us with our own personal responsibility for those sins we commit.
2. **Emotional.** Being genuinely sorry for sin committed against a Holy God, and the possible negative consequences to other people. (2Cor 7:9-10)
3. **Volitional.** A deliberate change of purpose: An inward turning away from sin, and a desire to seek forgiveness, pardon and cleansing. (Ps 32:1-5)

Theologian Wayne Grudem lists three very similar aspects of repentance. The intellectual element must recognise not only that God exists, but that we are personally responsible for the sins we have committed. Without this, when confronted by the consequences, we can only face shame and regret that we were caught. Without recognising our own guilt and responsibility, we cannot recognise our part in the offence to God that sin really is; our fear of God is merely for the punishment He will bring us as sinners. It is as the Apostle John said,

1 John 1:8-9 NIV

8) If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

9) If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

10) If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar and his word is not in us

John makes the point that denying or trivialising our sin is self-deception. It will be punished. And denying that He will do so is effectively calling God a liar, with all the consequences that brings. Coincidentally, the Greek word *confess* (homologeo) carries with it the idea of ceasing to deny something, and to agree and say the same thing as the other person. This is what we do when we confess our sins to God. This is what Job did in the Old Testament when he recognised his own arrogance in God's sight: "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:5-6)

Once we see things God's way and acknowledge and confess our sin, we can do something about it. Psalm 51 is an example of David's response to the revelation of his sin. "I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only have I sinned," he wrote. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit and contrite heart O God You will not despise" he went on, giving hope to millions through the ages.

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When Jesus began His public ministry, he taught both His disciples and the crowds in the Sermon on the Mount:

Mat 5:3-4 ESV

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Another theologian, Don Carson explains it this way:

Poverty of spirit is a personal acknowledgement of spiritual bankruptcy. It is a conscious confession of unworth before God. As such, it is the deepest form of repentance. (Carson, D.A. *Jesus Sermon on The Mount and his Confrontation with the World*. 2001. P18)

Berkhof points out that many never experience this true contrition, that is, being sorry for the offence itself, and so therefore are content to atone for their own sin by "making good" for their sin by accepting the punishment, doing penance, or enduring purgatory etc to balance the scales. These acts are effectively an attempt at salvation through works, which we are told categorically, is not possible (Ephesians 2:8-9, see also Romans 3:20 Romans 4:5 and Hebrews 6:1). It shows a misplaced faith in one's own ability to make amends, not a faith in the work of God's own Son, who has already provided forgiveness based on His own work of atonement for our sins. What is required of us is an acknowledgement of sin, contrition for having sinned, and a total God-honouring trust in His ability and willingness to forgive. Simply put, one who tries to pay for their own sin in any way does not understand the depth of the offensiveness of their sin to God, or the price Christ paid for our atonement. As C.S. Lewis once wrote, "Fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who needs to lay down his arms."

When we commit ourselves to His forgiveness, we also commit ourselves to turn away from the sin in our lives and keep short accounts with God, constantly confessing and repenting of our sins. We will look into this later, but it must be stressed that if our hearts are right with Him, we need not fear a word out of place or an occasional bad thought.



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## The difference between Forgiveness and Repentance

A point to note on the two words. As noted earlier, forgiveness is the *result* of repentance. The two do not automatically follow each other. In the Book of Exodus, God warned Moses not to take forgiveness for granted: The Angel working on God's behalf would not pardon sin (Exodus 23:20-21)<sup>[2]</sup>. In Hebrews 12:17, we are told that Esau found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears (c.f. Genesis 27:38). By the time he realised he had been cheated by his brother, it was already too late; his father Isaac could not withdraw the blessing he had given his younger son Jacob over Esau. In his heart, Esau regretted the consequence of his actions, but if he wanted time to get himself to the place of repentance, he never got there.

In essence, the two words, *repent* and *forgive* in their original context are fundamentally different. Repentance holds the idea of accepting liability for the wrongs, and totally rejecting and abandoning those wrongs. Forgiveness holds the idea of bearing it, or putting up with it<sup>[3]</sup>. Essentially, it is removing the liability from someone. It is not a stretch to see therefore that forgiveness must be an attribute of the greater party. It is also fairly clear that in this context, it is normally the offended party who needs to put up with the offence, and therefore has the power to bear the offence or punish it (See 2 Cor 5:18-19.)

To understand the offence that we, mankind, have caused God, we need to understand a little of who God actually is. He is a Holy and pure Being. Every sin therefore is an affront and a personal offence. He cannot abide sin, but being all-powerful, He does not turn or shy away from it. Rather, He exposes, confronts and punishes it in a just and righteous manner. It must be stressed that all sin is sin to Him; there are no degrees of sin. To understand that anything that goes against God's express wishes is a sin is to understand what Paul meant in Romans 3:23: all have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God. There are no negotiations or loop-holes: sin is defined by a Holy God Himself, not society, tradition, or even the Church itself. All sin, and sinners will be punished and exiled from Him. It is only those who wilfully repent whom He forgives on their acceptance of the atoning work of His Son. This is what Isaiah was trying to say in Chapter 53 vs 6: All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him [the Messiah] the iniquity of us all.

One of the fundamental ideas behind forgiveness is the idea of bringing restoration and reconciliation between two parties. Paul likens Christians to Ambassadors of Christ. As ambassadors, it is the role of the Christian to represent our Sovereign, and so we appeal on God's behalf to others to be reconciled to God, as Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:18-19. There is no negotiating or playing with words and meanings when standing before a pure and holy, all-knowing God. Only those who are forgiven have had their sins removed by the death of Jesus. Only those without sin may stand in God's presence. This is why Paul calls for reconciliation between the two parties: that in extending forgiveness, we may receive life with God through Jesus. The reality is that the "transaction"- Jesus' death for our life was set in motion before the beginning of the world. As Paul wrote,

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2 Timothy 1:8-9 NET

8) So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me, a prisoner for his sake, but by God's power accept your share of suffering for the gospel.

9) He is the one who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not based on our works but on his own purpose and grace, granted to us in Christ Jesus before time began

As we consider the implications of sin, and what it means to God, we must consider not only the consequences of the punishment stored up for the sinner, but also the affront and offence that it has caused God Himself. As mentioned earlier, repentance is more than regret over the consequence incurred, but begins with seeing one's own thoughts and actions from God's point of view. Remorse and contrition for both the offence itself, and the offence caused to God must follow if one understands this. The full depth of this offence and dishonouring of a Just and Holy Creator is something that perhaps we will never know, and it is certainly not something that one who does not follow Christ would be expected to grasp. It is the work of the Holy Spirit working in the life of one who has understood the fact of their sin and wants to make right that brings one to the place of repentance. And so we see that forgiveness follows true repentance, because repentance is an attitude of heart. Simply saying a prayer does not save one; it is the attitude expressed in that prayer that leads to forgiveness.

## Jesus as Lord: Christ on Christ's Terms.

While many are quick to quote Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 11 verse 28 saying, "*Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*" It is obvious that He was not talking of physical rest when speaking of giving rest to one's soul. Rather, His command was to come to Him, and learn from Him:

Mat 11:29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

Mat 11:30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

In case we have forgotten what a yoke was, it was a wooden harness to fasten oxen together so that they could pull a plough. Clearly, physical rest was never the issue here. He was alluding instead to submission to God and His calling just as the oxen submit to the direction of the farmer. Compared to the demanding rules and traditions of the Pharisees and religious rulers, submission to God out of love is an easy and light burden. We must not make the mistake of thinking that there is no burden at all. "Take my yoke upon you and learn of me" clearly speaks of willingly submitting *to*, and learning *from* Him- a reference to the ongoing process of discipleship. Submitting and yielding to Him also takes the burden off of us, so to speak, as we realise that submitting to His direction and guidance means we are not expected to do it all ourselves.

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Discipleship is more than just learning from someone- it is an intensive personalised experiential learning. This necessarily involves a deep personal faith and trust in that Teacher. One simply cannot call themselves a disciple without a willing submission to one's teacher and their teaching. As Jesus' message was one of repentance, we cannot ignore his command to take up His yoke in submission to His discipleship. Wayne Grudem makes the point that it is contrary to the New Testament to speak about the possibility of someone accepting Christ "as Saviour" but not "as Lord" if that means simply depending on Him for salvation but not committing oneself to forsake sin and to be obedient to Christ from that point on (Grudem 1999 p.310). In simple terms, turning *to* Christ is also a turning *away* from sin, although this is a part of the very process of discipleship, or sanctification, as we will see later. Tozer makes the point that if the Prodigal Son had accepted his father's forgiveness, yet remained amongst the pigs, it would have remained pointless. (Tozer 1978) The process involves a willingness to change and a commitment to see it through, just as the Prodigal needed to get up, leave the pigs, and journey back to his father. Knowing how difficult the process of putting the old nature to death could be, Jesus likened it to his own impending death: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23) The truly repentant sinner must be aware of this and still be committed to the process. We need to consider the words of another theologian, Millard Erickson, who says bluntly, "Any attempt to increase the number of disciples by making it as easy as possible ends up diluting the quality of discipleship instead" (Erickson 1998 p 951.) "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." Jesus taught in Luke 14:27-28. "For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?"

## The Role of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is to be found everywhere in the process of reconciling a sinner to God. As we hear the Word of God and understand it, we are compelled to speak of it. For some, this is a gift given by the Holy Spirit whereby they are able to powerfully or appropriately explain and proclaim the message of the Gospel. When the message of the Gospel given under the power of the Holy Spirit is received by one whom that same Holy Spirit has made sensitive to the Gospel by the twin conviction of sin and the mercy of God, one sees the grace and mercy of God at work. As Paul rightfully points out in Romans 10:14, "How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" It is to fulfil this need that the preacher is sent. And it is through their preaching that the way to salvation is proclaimed. As Paul said a few verses later (vs 17), "Consequently faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the preached word of Christ." (NET)

The Holy Spirit also works in the life of the non-Christian, showing and emphasising what their consciences already know: the reality of sin, pointing to the need for a Saviour. Without the Holy Spirit convicting us of sin, most of us would happily ignore it. The true righteousness of God requires justice and punishment of sin, and so it is by God's Grace that the Holy Spirit brings this to mind in the life of the sinner. If God did not care, He would not bother to point this out to us, and we would still be rightfully condemned. Yet the Holy Spirit does guide every sinner to the truth of their own condition before God at some point in their life, and therefore He will also make known the Gospel to each person. The choice of whether to listen and act upon it is theirs.

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Scripture is full of the imagery of a parent feeling compassion for a wayward child. The Prodigal Son is perhaps the best known, but He also speaks of Jerusalem:

Luke 13:34 ESV

34) O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

It is notable that while Jerusalem was not willing to return to their Lord (and was later destroyed by Rome in 70AD, just as it had been by the Babylonians 700 years before) the Prodigal Son acknowledged his sin (Luke 15:18), returned in contrition to ask his father for forgiveness, and was welcomed back with open arms. This is the template that God has set for us too. He wants us to know that He is merciful and wants us back, but it must be on His terms. This is why he commands us to repent: So that He can show us His mercy in the same way that a merciful yet just judge wishes that the accused would plead guilty and throw themselves on the mercy of the court so that mercy could be shown.

## Sanctification

As stated several times above, real repentance involves a commitment to stop the sin, and live a life worthy of the forgiveness received. But this is not done by pure will-power alone. When one understands the enormity of the debt owed and the price of the atonement, gratitude and love for one's saviour should compel the Christian to avoid the offence caused by the former practises and way of life. For many, the reality is that this understanding comes slowly after the fact, as they begin to mature in their Christian Faith. There is no shame in this. It is merely a fact of life. Nevertheless, a growing maturity in the Faith should lead to a deeper understanding of God and His ways, which leads to a greater love for Him and a desire to know Him more. Amongst others, this somewhat circular process has one effect on the new Christian: It highlights the things which displease and cause offence to God. It is a mark of true repentance that one begins to recognise them in our own lives, and so to avoid them not only to honour our Saviour, but for fear of causing offence, as one would in any relationship. Although that deepening relationship will also highlight the depth of God's forgiveness, there is more to it than this: it is a commitment to cease doing the things that necessitated Jesus' death on the cross in the first place. It stands saying again: Repentance comes from an understanding of the effect of sin. As Erickson points out, without repentance, we cannot have any real awareness of being saved from the power of sin (Erickson p951).

This growing maturity is more than just avoiding certain things that God does not like. If that were so, then it would be little different from the Old Testament Law. It is also learning to do the things that please Him. His is the beginning of a relationship with Him. Anyone who has ever been in a relationship knows that there is more to being in a relationship than simply claiming to be in one. One must take action to build that relationship. We need to begin to live as Jesus did. This is exactly what the Apostle John wrote in his letter, making it one of the proofs, or evidences of our Christian walk:

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1 John 2:3-6 NIV

3) We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands.

4) The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what He commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

5) But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in Him:

6) Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

The process of growing maturity bringing about change is known by the technical term, *Sanctification*. The word 'sanctify' means to *make Holy*, or to put something aside for God's use, just as Jesus prayed that God would sanctify his Disciples after His death. (John 17). There is no doubt that those God has saved are saved completely, without any "degrees of Holiness," but the process of turning away from our old way of life and unlearning old habits may take as long to unlearn as they did to learn, and for many that is a lifetime. "Old habits die hard," says the old saying, but recognising them is the first step. In Psalm 66, David wrote, "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened." Some translations refer to sin being given "safe harbour" in one's heart. As Martin Luther wisely said, "Temptations cannot be avoided, but because we cannot prevent birds from flying over our heads, there is no need that we should let them nest in our hair."

Perhaps it could be said that the one who continues in their old ungodly way of life after becoming a Christian does not truly understand what it means to repent. If the understanding does come later, then real repentance is still a possibility. Scripture is clear that if one has understood the depth of the love and sacrifice made by Jesus, yet still abandons the forgiveness found through repentance, then one is making a mockery of His sacrifice, holding Him in contempt. John the Baptist called upon the Pharisees and Sadducees to show their repentance by the fruit of their lives. Not seeing any, he called them a brood of vipers. "The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire," he told them. (Matthew 3)

Paul speaks of people who abandon their faith as though they have had their consciences seared with a hot iron (1Tim 4:1-2). The analogy points to those who have lost sensitivity due to scar tissue caused from repeated or prolonged exposure to something that burns- something they would normally be repelled from. It is as if the prompting of the Holy Spirit has faded into the background after being ignored for so long. Partially for this reason, if you worry that your sin is too great, or that you may have committed the Unforgivable Sin, you may rest assured that the Holy Spirit is still working in you to bring you back to repentance. As C.S. Lewis once said, "A Christian isn't someone who never does wrong, but a man who is enabled to repent."



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## Forgiveness: The Result of Repentance

Luke 7:48-50 ESV

And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

We have already looked at the differences between repentance and forgiveness, and how they relate to each other. Now we need to look at forgiveness itself. The Hebrew definitions we looked at earlier show three ideas, two of them related: that of enduring or putting up with something, and covering something over. The third can also be seen as related, if we understand it as making a choice not to be offended by it any more- to turn away from something. This is the idea held by the Greek word, which means literally, "to send away." Essentially, forgiveness speaks of a choice to endure the offence, and no longer hold it against the other person. It involves not constantly bringing it up again, or dwelling upon it – figuratively covering something over. As said before, repentance involved accepting liability, and being sorry for the offence caused; forgiveness involves removing the liability from that person.

On the annual Day of Atonement, the blood of the sacrificial lamb was sprinkled over the lid of the Ark of the Covenant by the High Priest, symbolically hiding the tablets of The Law from the Shekinah Glory of God's presence. The lid is also known as the Mercy Seat, or *Atonement Cover* (Exodus 25:17). The Hebrew word used, *Kapporeth* comes from the word *Kippur*, meaning, *to cover*. Anyone who has read the Epistle to the Hebrews knows that this prefigures the blood of Jesus, the Once-and-for-all sacrificial Lamb of God. We recognise here that God has covered over our sin with His blood, and does not hold it against us, instead figuratively sending it away<sup>[4]</sup>. Coincidentally, this is another reason why attempting to atone for one's own sin is a misunderstanding of Christ's sacrifice: The sacrifice of Christ's blood for the remission of sins has already achieved this in full. The author of Hebrews considers the idea of repentance from pointless ("Dead") works foundational, and urges his readers to move on to other mature ideas ("doctrines") by building upon it and other "elementary" doctrines. (Hebrews 5:11- 6:3). We need to consider that if our sin has been deliberately covered over by the One we have offended, then figuratively sent away, then we are truly forgiven.

With repentance and forgiveness come other aspects. As mentioned before, as ambassadors of Christ, we preach the message of reconciliation with God. 2 Corinthians 5:17-19 tells us that in Christ, God no longer holds our sins against us: we are reconciled to God. With our sin atoned for, we can stand guilt-free in His presence. This is not a right the unrepentant can claim. Romans 5:9-10 makes it clear that before we were justified by Christ's blood, we are worthy of God's wrath, being still seen as God's enemies. Now we are reconciled to Him, we do not face that certain punishment.

# Repentance and forgiveness

For those who know the reality of the forgiveness of sins, there are certain rights and privileges. First among those is the right to be called "Children of God" with the rights and privileges those bring, such as having full unhindered access to the throne of God at any time. Paul speaks about believers being conformed into the image of God's Son, so that Jesus would hold the honour and title of Firstborn amongst many brothers (Rom 8:29). Through Jesus, we too have the right to approach the throne of God with confidence, confident of mercy and grace (Hebrews 4:14-16). Not only do we have the right to approach the Throne, we have the right to call Him *Father*, with the right to live in His house with him.

There will always be those, perhaps even a majority, who claim to repent, fearing only the punishment that awaits. Perhaps this is a beginning. As David said, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding." (Psalm 111:10) Believing God - taking Him at His word - is honouring Him. And while there will be those who have only remorse for the consequences of their sin, some in time will understand God's Mercy and Grace, and the emphasis will shift from avoiding their punishment to avoiding the offence out of respect and thanks. We must not allow ourselves to forget that Salvation is a Gift, given solely at our Sovereign's will and discretion. (Who among us can claim we are more deserving of our salvation than our punishment?) Both Peter and Paul quote the prophet Joel: "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Acts 2:21 Romans 10:13 cf Joel 2:32)

As ever, however, there is a caveat. Claiming to repent with the sole intention of claiming only the benefits makes a mockery of the real meaning of repentance. This person cares not so much about making amends for the wrongs committed as they do for getting something out of the One they have wronged. This is a double insult to the Almighty, all-knowing God. They have forgotten, or perhaps never knew that the reason for their forgiveness and salvation is to be reconciled to God, and to form a relationship with Christ. Regrettably, there is a great emphasis today on "coming to Him" for the promises of "health, wealth and prosperity." Our Saviour's death is sometimes seen merely as a means to fix broken marriages or relationships, get out of poverty or debt, or bring about healing. Grabbing the Gift with both hands, they ignore the Giver. There is no contrition in this attitude. There is no acknowledgement or confession of personal sin; no acknowledgement of God's Righteousness. Contrast this with David's attitude when confronted about his adultery with Bathsheba (And his murder of her husband, Uriah).

Psa 51:2-4 NET

- 2) Wash away my wrongdoing! Cleanse me of my sin!
- 3) For I am aware of my rebellious acts; I am forever conscious of my sin.
- 4) Against you – you above all – I have sinned; I have done what is evil in your sight. So you are just when you confront me; you are right when you condemn me.
- 8) Grant me the ultimate joy of being forgiven! May the bones you crushed rejoice!
- 9) Hide your face from my sins! Wipe away all my guilt!
- 10) Create for me a pure heart, O God! Renew a resolute spirit within me!
- 11) Do not reject me! Do not take your Holy Spirit away from me!
- 16) Certainly you do not want a sacrifice, or else I would offer it; you do not desire a burnt sacrifice.
- 17) The sacrifices God desires are a humble spirit – O God, a humble and repentant heart you will not reject.

Perhaps this psalm should be the template for our lives.

# Repentance and forgiveness

## Footnotes

1. See 1 Corinthians 10:11, and 1John 5:13 [↑](#)
2. It is implied, (but not stated) that God relented and promised that He Himself would go with Moses in Exodus 33:1-5, 13-17. [↑](#)
3. The well-known Psalm 103:12 needs to be read in context of verse 8. [↑](#)
4. This is the meaning of Psalm 103:12. The "Sending Away" is also prefigured by the Scapegoat in the days of the Tabernacle. [↑](#)

## Abbreviations

ESV English Standard Version 2001. Crossway Bibles: Good news Publishers

NET New English Translation 2017. Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C.

NIV New International Version 1984. International Bible Society

## Dictionaries

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