

The New Birth Experience

Importance of Repentance

The concept of repentance is deeply rooted in the experience of Old Testament Israel. When scholars examine the Old Testament understanding of repentance, they often make a distinction between two kinds of repentance. The first is cultic or ritualistic repentance and the second is prophetic repentance.

First, let's consider cultic or ritualistic repentance. In our day, the word *cultic* can be very misleading. When we use the term *cult*, we think of fringe groups of people led by false teachers. But the term *cultic*, used in the true theological sense, refers not to aberrant groups but to the behavioral patterns or the religious life of a given community. Israel's *cultus* in the Old Testament was its communal practice of religious observances. God is the One who instituted the cultus of Israel. By His law, He defined not only how the people were to behave morally, but also how they were to behave religiously. For example, there were instructions for how to pray, how to offer sacrifices, and how to carry out the ministrations of temple worship.

These were all part of the cultic practices of Israel.

Similarly, the religious structure of Old Testament life included many practices aimed at facilitating repentance. God's wrath would burn against His people for their faithless disobedience, and as a result, they would follow His instructions on how to remove His wrath from them. God would forgive their sins, and peace with Him would be restored in the community. Repentance rituals in the Old Testament often included a call for fasting during a solemn assembly. When the Israelites were in the wilderness, they were first brought before the tabernacle and then later to the temple. The prophet would announce God's judgment and call for a general fast. To turn God's wrath away, everyone would go without food for a particular period of time as a national sign of repentance.

God's people, Israel, were also instructed to wear certain types of clothing that would function as an outward symbol of an inner repentant heart. For example, we read of people wearing "sackcloth and ashes." Many would wear coarse, uncomfortable cloth as a type of a punitive measure, inflicting discomfort as a mark of repentance. Some might also take ashes and spread them on their clothes or across their foreheads. This ritualistic process was a sign of self-abasement. For example, after God spoke to Job from the whirlwind, Job said, "Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6).

Along with the change of clothes, there was a particular type of song that was sung. It was a lament, a song that expressed grief. Sometimes, the lament would be used when someone died or a catastrophe took place. In the Old Testament, the book of Jeremiah is followed by a shorter book called Lamentations, also written by Jeremiah. In this book, Jeremiah laments God's wrath having been poured out upon His impenitent people in the destruction of Jerusalem. This is a prime example of this kind of sorrow for sin. True penitence was to be expressed with the lament, a song of grief, and accompanied by loud cries and wailing.

In addition, specific prayers of repentance were part of the religious system of Israel. The book of Psalms, as a type of hymnal for God's people, contains prayers and poetry put to music and sung as part of the liturgy of the Israelite community. It is made up of different genres: psalms of lament, psalms of thanksgiving, and royal psalms, among others. There are psalms celebrating the goodness of God's law, but also psalms called penitential psalms, which were a kind of lament. Penitential psalms include an acknowledgement of sin against God, a resolution to turn away from the evil behavior, and a humble plea that God would restore the people to a state of grace. The most famous of the penitential psalms is Psalm 51. In this Psalm, David records his emotional confession of sin after being confronted by Nathan the prophet for his sins against Uriah and Bathsheba.

A final feature of this ritualistic life were specific days of repentance. These days were set apart not only for feasts, celebrations, and remembrances of the past, but also for penitence. They were set times for corporate acknowledgement and sorrow for sin, and they formed a part of the cultic life of Israel.

The cultic practices and rituals of the Old Testament allowed the people of Israel to express, verbalize, and demonstrate their sorrow for sin. But how do we do this today? How do we show a broken heart for having offended God? How do we demonstrate this in the life of the church? In the Roman Catholic Church, a whole system of penance is tied into the sacraments of the church, but Protestants seem to have lost their way in terms of having a prescribed method of showing repentance. Among the few practices that exist to facilitate repentance is the occasional prayer on Sunday morning in which the congregation confesses its sin corporately and receives assurance of pardon from the minister.

With particular forms of repentance comes the danger of mere externalism; as we will see, primary importance should be given to the heart. However, we often lack the ability to demonstrate our repentance. Here, we, like the people of the Old Testament, might find it helpful to have more structured ways to demonstrate this change of heart.

Repentance and Emotion

Repentance will affect the emotional side of man, since it includes godly sorrow and remorse. It will usually bring tears and other physical demonstrations of this emotion. However, a show of emotion cannot substitute for repentance. Some people shed tears of self pity but not godly sorrow. Some respond to God's presence but stop short of full repentance. God often lets them feel His presence as a means of drawing them to repentance, but we must not mistake this feeling for repentance itself.

When someone repents, he will feel joy because he is being restored to fellowship with God. He will also find relief because he has made his decision and he no longer has to face sin alone. However, he should not let this joy and relief hinder him from going further, for God has much more for him. God wants to deal with his past sins permanently through water baptism, and God wants to give him the Holy Spirit. Some people stop when they feel the joy of repentance, but they are to proceed to water baptism, another joyful experience. Then in praising God, they will receive the Spirit.

Examples of Repentance

The parable of the prodigal son illustrates all the elements of repentance (Luke 15:11-32). In the story, the errant son realized of his sin and his desperate condition: "He came to himself" (Luke 15:17). Then he made a decision to return home and seek forgiveness: "I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants" (Luke 15:18-19). Finally, he left the place where he was, returned to his father's house, and confessed his sin with contrition (Luke 15:20-21).

Another parable shows the proper attitude in repenting (Luke 18:9-14). A Pharisee stood and prayed in the Temple, thanking God that he did not commit sins and boasting to God of his good works. A tax collector also came to pray. He approached God with humility, beating his breast in an emotional, heart-felt expression of contrition. He prayed, "God be merciful to me a sinner." Jesus condemned the self-righteous Pharisee but commended the honest, repentant tax collector.

David's prayer after his adultery with Bathsheba is a beautiful example for a child of God who has sinned and the spirit of his prayer is characteristic of all true repentance. "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight ... Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow ... Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit" (Psalm 51:1-4, 7, 9-12).

The Source of Repentance

Repentance is part of salvation, so the opportunity and ability to repent come from God's grace. The goodness of God leads men to repentance (Romans 2:4). Repentance unto life is a gift God provides (Acts 11:18; II Timothy 2:25). God alone can give the sorrow that brings repentance (II Corinthians 7:10). When someone repents, he simply responds to God's universal call and voluntarily accepts God's saving work.

Repentance does not earn salvation, but it qualifies one for, and begins the work of, salvation.

Repentance, then, comes by God's grace through man's faith. Men come to repentance in situations that emphasize God's presence, His Word, and faith in Him.

The Spirit of God is necessary to lead men to repentance. Jesus said, "When he [the Holy Spirit] is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (John 16:8). Psychological tricks and gimmicks will not produce true repentance; it takes the convicting power of God's Spirit.

Rather than emphasizing oratory, persuasive techniques, or scare tactics, we should concentrate on preparing a spiritual atmosphere. Verbal persuasion and warning have their place, but our foremost concern should be to let the Spirit have perfect liberty, for only God can draw men to Him (John 6:44).

The Word of God has power to bring men to repentance as the Spirit applies it to hearts. The preached Word brings men to a realization of their sins and their need for God. Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost brought conviction and a desire to repent: "**Now** when they heard this they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). Jonah's preaching brought the entire city of Nineveh to repentance. Again, our emphasis should not be on man-made ideas or techniques but upon the pure Word of God.

your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin. Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye" (Ezekiel 18:30-32). "As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" (Ezekiel 33:11). These passages portray the compassion of God, the necessity of repentance, and the definition of repentance as a turn from sin to God. John the Baptist preached repentance strongly (Matthew 3:1,11; Mark 1:4-5; Luke 3:3-9), and so did Jesus. Jesus proclaimed, "Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). "Repent ye and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15). "I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3, 5). While Christ was on earth He sent His disciples to preach repentance (Mark 6:12), and just before His ascension He again commissioned them to preach repentance (Luke 24:47). Peter preached repentance (Acts 2:38; 3:19), and so did Paul (Acts 26:20).

Paul told the Athenians, "And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commanded all men everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). In Old Testament times, God did not hold the Gentiles accountable to every command in the Mosaic law because they were ignorant of it. However, God did judge them by the standard of conscience and natural law and found them guilty even on that basis (Romans 2:12-16). In New Testament times, Ministers must preach against sin and define it so that the sinner will realize his sin. Nathan

explicitly named David's sin, and John the Baptist named Herod's sin. John told the tax collectors, "Exact no more than that which is appointed you" and told the soldiers, "Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages" (Luke 3:12-14).

In our day there is too much generality in proclaiming the Word of God. Where the Word reveals sin, we must be specific. If we will preach the Word, God will apply it to individual hearts. The hearing of God's Word brings faith (Romans 10:17), and faith will cause man to obey the command to repent.

Repentance comes as a response to the drawing, convicting power of God's Spirit, to the hearing of God's Word, and to the impulse of an awakening faith in God. From God's point of view it is a gift to enable man to be saved; from man's point of view it is his first voluntary act of faith in God.

The Command to Repent

Repentance is absolutely necessary for salvation; the Bible commands everyone to repent. When Adam sinned, God questioned him and expected a confession (Genesis 3:9-13). In Noah's day, God destroyed all but eight souls because mankind would not repent. He spared the wicked city of Nineveh only because its inhabitants repented in response to Jonah's preaching. In Ezekiel, God entreated Israel to repent: "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, saith the Lord Goo. Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin. Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord Goo: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye" (Ezekiel 18:30-32). "As I live, saith the Lord Goo, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" (Ezekiel 33:11). These passages portray the compassion of God, the necessity of repentance, and the definition of repentance as a turn from sin to God.

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