

Repentance

We sometimes allow the circumstances we are in to determine our spiritual values. An unforgettable scene in Luke 16, which tells of the rich man and Lazarus, illustrates how this is true. The rich man had no thought of others in this life and apparently no thought of his spiritual needs. His concerns were limited to the little world of his own selfish desires and ambitions. At death, he went into eternity to face the results of what he had done. He went from luxury into torment in the spirit world called "Hades" (Luke 16:23).

After death, his priorities completely changed. All other considerations paled. He became occupied with two significant thoughts: First, he became (perhaps for the first time) concerned for his soul. He pleaded for mercy, for grace. Jesus said, "And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame'" (Luke 16:24).

Second, he voiced concern for the spiritual condition of his brothers. This may have been the first time in his life that he had verbalized any spiritual love for his brothers. A few moments of torment had given him the heart of a missionary. He pleaded,

Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father's house for I have five brothers in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment (Luke 16:27, 28).

When he was told that his brothers should read the law and the Prophets like everyone else, he pleaded, "No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent" (Luke 16:30). Was this the first time the word "repent" had ever been spoken by him? Death had changed his thinking and his interests! He knew what his brothers needed—transforming repentance!

Time and eternity will convict us all that the big issue of life is repentance! May we not wait until death for this realization to hit us with force. Jesus said, "I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3, 5). Paul pushed away all exceptions to the command of repentance with his declaration to the Athenians: "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent" (Acts 17:30). Mankind travels one of two roads before God: the way of repentance or the way of rebellion. God delays the coming of Jesus for one reason—to allow more time to bring men to repentance: "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not

wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). The final destiny of each man hangs upon whether or not he repents: "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Revelation 21:8).

The church is made up of the people who have answered the call to New Testament repentance. Christians are those who have named the name of the Lord and departed from wickedness (2 Timothy 2:19). Through conversion to Christ, they have been delivered from the domain of darkness, and have been transferred into the kingdom of God's Son (Colossians 1:13). They have committed themselves to living as obedient children of God, refusing to return to the former lusts in which they lived in ignorance and disobedience (1 Peter 1:14). Their desire is to be like the One who called them. They are striving to imitate Him in all their behavior, acknowledging in their conduct their Lord's desire: "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16).

Repentance, therefore, is a cornerstone word and a chief attitude for anyone seeking to be a Christian, a member of the Lord's church. The nature of the church is reflected in the basic meaning and implications of this word. Repentance stands as a designation for the kind of people God calls His church: the church is made up of the penitent ones. When Peter explained the baptisms of Gentiles at Cornelius' house to Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, these Jewish brethren responded by saying, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life."

(See Acts 11:18.) It was clear to them, and it should be clear to us, that the door of true life is only opened by true repentance.

What is repentance? Let us define this word more graphically so that there is no mistaking what it is and what it means. We will use the backdrop of Saul's conversion to illustrate it.

TURNING FROM SIN

First, repentance is turning from sin, making a change in direction regarding wickedness.

Repentance is more than personal improvement, more than a way to have better control of one's life. It is a deep-seated resolve, a decision to abandon all that is foreign to God. This resolve contributes to a total change that Jesus called a new birth (John 3:3).

Repentance is not just regretting that one has sinned. One can be sorry that he has sinned because of the embarrassment that sin has brought upon him or because of a penalty that he has had to pay for his sin. Judas regretted that he betrayed Jesus, but he did not repent (Matthew 27:3). Peter, who denied Christ (Matthew 26:34, 69–75), repented; Judas only regretted. One can be deeply distraught that he sinned, yet never repent.

Repentance is not just conviction of sin. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter pointed out the sins of the Jews who were listening to him. His words brought conviction to their hearts, and they cried out, "What shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). However, Peter did not regard their conviction as repentance; for in his response to their query, he said, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the

forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

Repentance is not just godly sorrow. Godly sorrow for sins precedes and produces repentance, according to Paul:

For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death (2 Corinthians 7:10).

Godly sorrow is part of the process of repentance, but it is not repentance itself.

Repentance would not even be defined as a reformation of life. Rather, it produces a reformation of life. If repentance does not effect a changed life, then it is not genuine repentance; but the reformed life is not in itself repentance. John the Baptist urged the people coming to him, "Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matthew 3:8). Actual repentance precedes the fruits of repentance, a changed life.

Repentance has to do with a resolute change of one's will regarding sin. It involves intellect, emotions, and conscience. This change of mind about sin is so comprehensive in the human personality that it enables a person to give up a way of life. At baptism, one can be immersed into his own spiritual death to sin, crucifying the old self, so that the body of sin might be destroyed (Romans 6:6).

This meaning of repentance can be seen in Saul's conversion. Saul of Tarsus was a Pharisee, a Hebrew of Hebrews (Philippians 3:5). Regarding the law of Moses, he said he was found blameless (Philippians 3:6). In other words, no legitimate accusation could

be brought against him regarding his failure to keep the Law. As a Pharisee—as a Jew of high standing in Judaism—Saul believed that Jesus was an impostor and that He intended to destroy Judaism. Saul thought that he must oppose this Jesus with the fury of a devastating persecution. Without a doubt, he considered anyone who followed Jesus his enemy. With relentless energy and intense determination, he sought to put an end to Christ's church.

As he branched out in his persecution of the church, Saul asked for the backing of the high priest (Acts 9:1, 2). When he received the authority he desired, he left for Damascus to carry out his plan. As he journeyed to Damascus, the Lord Jesus appeared to him in a brilliance that exceeded the sun at high noon. Blinded by the light of the Lord's presence, Saul crumpled to the ground. When Saul realized with earthshaking conviction the truth that the One speaking to him was Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, he asked in deep penitence and contrition, "What shall I do, Lord?" (Acts 22:10). He was instructed to go to Damascus, where he would be told what to do (Acts 9:6). When he arrived, he waited for three days in fasting and prayer until the answer was brought to him by Ananias.

Saul repented. He made a resolute change of will regarding his way of life. His life had been dedicated to Judaism and the persecution of Christ's church; when he repented on that Damascus road, his life took an entirely new direction. He turned from his old life with a revolutionary change of will which affected his entire personality—intellect, emotions, and conscience. Later, he said, "Whatever things

were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ" (Philippians 3:7).

Christians are people who, like Saul, have turned from sin in repentance. The lifestyle of God's people is that of abstaining from every form of evil (1 Thessalonians 5:22), refusing to be conformed to this world (Romans 12:2), overcoming evil with good (Romans 12:21), and putting to silence any false charge against them by excellent behavior (1 Peter 2:12).

TURNING FROM SIN TO CHRIST

Second, repentance is turning to Christ. It is not just a negative reaction to evil; it is also a positive response to Christ.

Paul commended the Thessalonians because in their repentance they had "turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God" (1 Thessalonians 1:9). If one turned from sin but did not turn to God, he would not have repented in the complete sense of this term in the New Testament.

New Testament preaching in its main thrust exalted Christ. Luke's description of Philip's preaching in Samaria is an example of the type of preaching all inspired men did: "Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them" (Acts 8:5). As people responded to this type of preaching, they renounced sin and received Christ by yielding to the gospel message. After the preaching of Paul at Ephesus, both sides of repentance were evident. Luke said,

And fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified. Many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing

their practices. And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of everyone (Acts 19:17b–19a).

The repentant Ephesians acknowledged Christ and abandoned their sinful practices.

Saul's repentance was both a turning from sin and a turning to Christ. He was on his way to persecute Christians as he journeyed to Damascus. Living under the Law of Moses, he had been free from moral and ceremonial crimes. He had not been a wicked prodigal in any sense. His repentance, therefore, did not affect his core desire to please God; he had been driven by this desire from his youth and had manifested such in his faithful keeping of the Law of Moses. His persecution of Christians, however, was a terrible sin. Consequently, his repentance before God resulted in the rejection of his former belief that serving God required persecuting Christians and denouncing Christ. It also required a turning to Christ, an acknowledgment of Him as Lord, and a humble bowing in submission to His will.

Paul himself described his repentance in Philip-
pians 3:8–11:

... I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of

His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Therefore, Saul turned from sin to Christ. Repentance to him was both negative and positive, a turning from his former way of life and a turning to a new and better way of life in Christ.

The church, Christ's body of penitent people, lives in submission to Christ. The members of it have become one with Christ. Through repentance, the Christian has entered a life of holiness and righteousness. He has been crucified with Christ, and in his new life which has resulted from his repentance, he lives by faith in the Son of God (Galatians 2:20). As God's penitent people, Christians wear Christ's name, live in union with Christ, exalt Christ in worship, and are constrained to be righteous by their anticipation of going to be more fully with Him at His coming or at death.

TURNING FROM SIN TO CHRIST FOR LIFE

Third, repentance is a turning from sin to Christ for life. Jesus did not invite anyone to take a religious vacation, a brief respite from wickedness. He asked for total commitment, which He referred to as a birth of water and the Spirit, a birth from above (John 3:5). So radical and lasting is this transformation that Paul compared it to a spiritual circumcision, a complete removal of the body of flesh through the working of God:

And in Him you were also circumcised with a cir-

cumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ (Colossians 2:11).

Paul said that conversion means discarding the old self and putting on the new self, as one would remove shabby, dirty, worn-out clothes and lay them aside with the intent of never returning to them (Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10). God lifts us up from sin and death and gives us life in Christ when we are redeemed by the blood of Christ (Colossians 2:13).

Repentance involves an ongoing commitment. In our response to God, we are to put to death the deeds of the body. Henceforth, one task we have as Christians is to keep these deeds from resurfacing. Paul said, "Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry" (Colossians 3:5). He also said,

But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices (Colossians 3:8, 9).

Paul wrote of a putting away at one point in time, a point of death, and of a continual putting aside, an ongoing repentance.

Where could we turn for a more vivid illustration of this meaning of repentance than to the conversion of Saul? Someone has said, "We have not yet seen what God can do with one man who is totally con-

verted to Him." If we have not, we come very close to it in the life of Saul. The impact in the world as a result of the conversion of Saul has been felt for two thousand years. His decision to follow Christ was final and irrevocable. He laid his life at the foot of the cross for the service and good that Christ could do with it.

As Alexander the Great brought his army ashore for a great battle, it is said that he commanded that the ships be set afire once they were vacated. Alexander would not consider the possibility of a retreat. There would be no turning back for him or for his men. Any future they had was straight ahead, not behind. So it was with Saul. He left no room in his heart for any kind of reservation or any possibility of retreat.

God's people, the church, have made a commitment—one so strong that it may be labeled a transformation, a passing from death to life (1 John 3:14). They have put on the new man in Christ for life. This happened at one point in time, as their conversion to Christ took place, but heart cleansing is a continual obligation for them (Romans 6:2b). The old man has been put to death, but he will try to come back to life if any opportunity is given for his resurrection (Romans 6:12, 13). The Christian must be careful to walk in wisdom, not in foolishness (Ephesians 5:17). He does not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but rather exposes them (Ephesians 5:11). He has died, and his life is hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3). The Christian has presented himself to God as one who is alive from the dead and as one whose body is dedicated to righteousness (Romans 6:13).

CONCLUSION

Everyone accountable before God has the obligation to repent and to live the life that repentance requires. Repentance is a profound changing of the will, a turning from sin to Christ for life. It is brought about by conviction of sin, godly sorrow, and the goodness of God. It results in a transformation which brings to life a new person who is hidden with Christ in God.

The church is a community of new persons. They are not perfect, but they are in pursuit of purity, godliness, and righteousness. Their lifetime commitment is to be vessels of honor in the Lord's service.

Three incentives for repentance can easily be identified in the Scriptures. First, Paul said that the goodness of God leads to repentance: "Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?" (Romans 2:4). Second, Peter mentioned the promise of reward: "Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19). Third, John referred to the fear of punishment:

Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. . . . The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matthew 3:1-10).

Repentance in and of itself is not enough to please God, but repentance does create within us the spirit

of submission. Such a spirit compels us to obey all of God's commands which He has made requisite to coming into Christ. It opens up one's life to God's will.

It has been said that the last word of our Savior was not the Great Commission but His call for five of the seven churches of Asia to repent (Revelation 1—3). If you have not repented and come into the body of Christ to live as God's penitent people, you have no greater need. If you are a Christian, living as a new person in Christ, your supreme obligation is to live the commitment you have made.

STUDY QUESTIONS

(answers on page 271)

1. How did death change the thinking of the rich man?
2. Why is "repentance" a cornerstone word and a chief attitude for anyone seeking to be a Christian?
3. Why is repentance more than regret that one has sinned?
4. Explain why repentance is not just godly sorrow.
5. How can repentance be seen in Saul's conversion?
6. Why did Paul commend the Thessalonians?
7. How is repentance more than confession of sins?
8. What are the three scriptural incentives for repentance?

A GUIDE FOR FURTHER BIBLE STUDY

Who should repent?—2 Peter 3:9; Acts 17:30, 31; Luke 13:3.

New Testament examples of repentance—The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–24); Zaccheus (Luke 19:2–8).

The cost of repentance—Matthew 10:34–39; Luke 12:51–53.

Examples of conversions—Acts 2:36–47; 8:5, 6, 12, 18–22, 26–39; 9:1–18; 10:1–48; 16:13–15, 25–34; 18:8; 19:1–5.

Christian influence—Matthew 5:13–16; 1 Corinthians 15:33.

Jesus shed His blood for all people—Salvation is provided for the obedient (Hebrews 9:11–14); the blood of bulls and goats is insufficient to take away sins (Hebrews 10:4); His blood has redeemed us (1 Peter 1:18, 19); Jesus tasted death for everyone (Hebrews 2:9).

When we look at the cross we learn—that we need a Savior (Romans 3:23; 5:12); how much God loves us (John 3:16); that Christ loves people even though they are sinners (Romans 5:8, 9); that salvation is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8–10).

Jesus' death on the cross saves us when we contact His blood through baptism—We are buried with Him in baptism (Romans 6:3, 4); baptism saves (1 Peter 3:21).

How can you live as a Christian after obeying the gospel?

1. *Have a great commitment to spiritual growth.* Make every effort to grow (2 Peter 1:1–10). Plan to grow (Philippians 3:7–15).
2. *Study the Bible.* Accurately handle the Word (2 Timothy 2:15). Grow in knowledge (2 Peter 3:18). Study the Scriptures daily (Acts 17:11). Receive the Word with humility, and obey it (James 1:21–25).
3. *Add the Christian graces to your life.* Add faith, moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love (2 Peter 1:5–7).
4. *Pray regularly.* Pray for wisdom (James 1:5, 6). Pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17).
5. *Worship regularly (with other Christians, if possible).* Do not forsake the assembly (Hebrews 10:25). If there is no church in your area, you can start one in your home (see page 275). Worship in spirit and truth (John 4:24).
6. *Tell others about Jesus.* Teach everyone you can (Matthew 28:18–20; Mark 16:15, 16). Share this book with friends, and help them to become Christians.
7. *Do good works.* Those saved by Jesus are created to do good works (Ephesians 2:10).