

Repentance – A Resolute Change of Direction

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. For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter (2 Corinthians 7:10, 11).

Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect, but I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:12-14).

Introduction: Defining Repentance

Perhaps you have heard the story of Hernán Cortéz. He and his army landed on the shore of Mexico in 1519. He dedicated himself and his army to the conquest of Mexico by burning his ships. To survive in this New World his army now by that decisive act had only one option – conquest. It was reported that as they watched the ships burn he announced, “Now you are committed!” As we would come to a Biblical understanding of repentance, we find it too is the resolute commitment to a changed direction.

A. Two Viewpoints in Regard to the Meaning of Repentance

This must be seen against the backdrop of the casualness with which repentance is usually approached and understood. Repentance, if addressed at all in the evangelical church today, is often explained as being “sorry” for your sin and asking God to forgive on the basis of Christ’s work.¹ I can remember being taught the exercise of “spiritual breathing.” When I became aware of my sin I should “exhale,” confess it to God. Then I was to “inhale” the forgiveness purchased for me by Christ’s sacrifice. It is not that this is entirely wrong, but it has a serious deficit. It does not treat sin seriously. It does not rightly emphasize the seriousness of

¹ Thomas Brooks, *Precious Remedies Against Satan’s Devices* (Grand Rapids: Sovereign Grace Publishers, reprinted 1971), 31, 35 (hereafter *Precious Remedies*), addresses this “easy repentance” as one of Satan’s devices. “By persuading the soul that the work of repentance is an easy work, and that therefore the soul need not make such a matter of sin. Why! Suppose you do sin, saith Satan, it is no such difficult thing to return, and confess, and be sorrowful, and beg pardon, and cry, ‘Lord, have mercy upon me;’ and if you do but this, God will cut the score, and pardon your sins, and save your souls, &c.” In his first of six remedies he writes, “The first remedy is seriously to consider, *That repentance is a mighty work, a difficult work, a work that is above our power.* There is not power below that power that raised Christ from the dead, and that made the world, that can break the heart of a sinner or turn the heart of a sinner. Thou art as well able to melt adamant, as to melt thine own heart to the Lord; to raise the dead and to make a world, as to repent. Repentance is a flower that grows not in nature’s garden. ...Jer. xiii. 23. Repentance is a gift that comes down from above. Men are not born with repentance in their hearts, as they are born with tongues in their mouths: Acts v. 31.... So in 2 Tim. ii. 25.... It is not in the power of any mortal to repent at pleasure.” In his fourth remedy he writes, “*That if the work of repentance were such an easy work as Satan would make it to be then certainly so many would not lie roaring and crying out of wrath and eternal ruin under the horrors and terrors of conscience, for not repenting; yea, doubtless, so many millions would not go to hell for not repenting, if it were such an easy thing to repent.*”

repentance. In the desire to speed to the relief of forgiveness, the necessity of truly turning from our sin is missed, and this turning is the heart of repentance.

Repentance is a necessary step in “*putting to death the deeds of the flesh*” (Rom. 8:13). The Puritans referred to this removal of the power and life (vigor) of sins from our lives as the “mortification” of sin.² This mortification is accomplished through the power and work of the Spirit of which repentance is a significant part. It is this emphasis on the removal of the power of sin in our lives that is missing when repentance is represented as simply being sorry for your sin and a quick appropriation of our forgiveness in Christ. Repentance does lead us to the appropriation of Christ’s forgiveness, but repentance is also God’s process to set us resolutely upon the path of righteous living, holy living, to being holy even as He is holy. Repentance is to be transformational. True repentance is a true turning from sin not just an “I am sorry for my sin and then a returning to it.” It was an inadequate view of repentance that prompted Yahweh’s pointed response to Judah. “*Will you steal, murder, and commit adultery and swear falsely, and offer sacrifices to Baal and walk after other gods that you have not known, then come and stand before Me in this house, which is called by My name, and say, ‘We are delivered!’ – that you may do all these abominations?*” (Jer. 7:9, 10). We are not delivered to produce more abominations. Deliverance is not simply for forgiveness, but so that we may walk in good works. “*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them*” (Eph. 2:10).³ The Scriptural picture of repentance is one which not only demands a separation and turning from sin, but it is a turning which indeed separates us from our sin and sets us upon the course of good works for the glory of God! Based upon this picture of repentance, Scripture demands and admonishes us to holiness. For example, “*Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate,’ says the Lord. ‘And do not touch what is unclean; And I will welcome you. And I will be father to you, And you shall be sons and daughters to Me,’ Says the Lord Almighty. Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God*” (2 Cor. 6:17-7:1).⁴

As we will look at examples of repentance in both the OT and NT it will become evident that there is nothing “casual,” or “quick and easy” about repentant. Repentance is an issue of life and death in Scripture. It demands sorrow for our sins but much more. It demands a wholehearted turning from sin. It is a blood-earnest task. It is non-optional. Repentance is to turn all one’s self and all one’s resources away from sin and sinning and to commit all one’s self and resources to the single-minded duty of doing the will of God.

B. Two Viewpoints in Regard to the Importance of Repentance

There is a further contrast. On the one hand, we find today a growing minimization of the importance of repentance. Sometimes we can find it treated as optional and at other times even

² Cf. John Owen, *Temptation and Sin* (Grand Rapids: Sovereign Grace Publishers, reprinted 1971), wrote three treatises on sin and how to deal with it which are bound together in this book. His treatise, “Mortification of Sin,” is classic!

³ Cf. Mt. 25:31-46; 2 Cor. 5:10; 2 Tim. 2:19; Titus 1:16; 2:11-14; 3:7, 8, 14.

⁴ In the same vein, Jesus’ words fit this same grid for repentance (cf. e.g. Lu. 9:57-62; Mt. 7:21-27)

unnecessary or embarrassingly avoided. Saving faith is then spoken of as though repentance is not an essential part. Two contrasting views of the importance of repentance can be found in the use of repentance in Classical Greek and its use in the Scriptures.

The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, was an insignificant word for the Greeks. It meant to turn around or change your mind. The Greeks were given to the study of wisdom, so they felt a wise man should have enough forethought to avoid the necessity of changing his mind or turning around. Therefore, if one had to repent he was more a fool than a wise man. It would have been ridiculous to the Greek mind for someone to stand in the middle of the marketplace and cry, “you must repent!” They would have thought, “what do you think I am an idiot, a fool?” Consequently, repentance was not an important idea to the Greeks.

In contrast, to the Hebrew mind repentance was an issue of life and death. As tenaciously as Yahweh pursued them, His covenant people pursued their sin. Their sin would extract His just judgment. The only escape from Yahweh’s coming crushing judgment was for His people to repent. It was their only path of deliverance. It was the only remedy, which would deliver them from the wrath of God. Yahweh’s judgment had been slow in coming because He was slow to anger, but coming it was. Their persistent, unrelenting sin made Yahweh’s justice and judgment inevitable and inescapable. His judgment would be all consuming. Therefore, the message of the OT prophets was singular – “Repent!” But as constant as the prophets’ message was the Jewish people’s refusal to receive that message was equally constant. Typical was Isaiah 30.

*“For thus the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, has said,
‘In repentance and rest you shall be saved,
In quietness and trust is your strength.’
But you were not willing,
And you said, ‘No, for we will flee on horses,’
Therefore those who pursue you shall be swift.
One thousand shall flee at the threat of one man;
You shall flee at the threat of five,
Until you are left as a flag on a mountaintop,
And as a signal on a hill.
Therefore the Lord longs to be gracious to you,
And therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you.
For the Lord is a God of justice;
How blessed are all those who long for Him” (Is. 30:15-18).⁵*

⁵ These verses show that though Yahweh desires to be gracious and compassionate, yet without repentance His justice must justly recompense their rebellion. There is no conflict between Yahweh’s attributes of love and justice. It would seem apparent that such passages in the NT as “The Lord...is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9; cf. 1 Tim. 2:4; Ezek. 33:11; Mk. 10:21ff.) are consistent with the whole of Scripture. The doctrine of election is God’s response to save at least some without becoming unjust. God’s love and compassion answer the pervasive inability and total depravity of man to repent. In His election God compassionately and graciously saves some, while He continues to desire to save all. Unconflicted, He freely manifests His justice upon all, but by His election plucks some from their deserved end.

Yahweh's continued compassion, His continued grace, His continued goodness toward them awaited their repentance. Without their repentance they would be met not by His continued compassion but His justice. Repentance was their only hope. One of the most informative passages on repentance is Jeremiah 3 and 4. After examining this passage, we will take it as a fundamental grid which models repentance, and then we will compare it with several NT models of repentance.

I. An Old Testament Model of Repentance

A. Jeremiah's Condemnation of Judah

Jeremiah's message was a frontal attack on the sin and rebellion of Judah. He delivered condemnation after condemnation of Judah's sin. Yet, Judah's response was denial and dismay. They were incredulous that Yahweh would pour His judgment out upon them. They denied their sin, *"What have I done?"* (8:6). They were completely deceived in their justifications, *"We are wise, And the law of the Lord is with us"* (8:8). Further, they argued that Yahweh would not destroy His own temple, to which Jeremiah responded, *"Do not trust in deceptive words saying, 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord'"* (7:4; cf. v.12). They reassured themselves with the words of their false prophets and priests, *"They heal the brokenness of the daughter of My people superficially, Saying, 'Peace, peace,' But there is no peace"* (8:11). It was not a coincidence that Jeremiah announced, *"The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can understand it?"* (17:9). Judah had a tenacious ability to deny and justify their sin and then deny Yahweh's coming judgment even in the face of Jeremiah's condemnations. They demonstrated the character and nature of an unregenerate heart. They were horribly deceived and tenaciously and resolutely determined in their perverted course. Judah was an example of a truly *"perverted generation"* (cf. Acts 2:40). Their character as a society stemmed from their perverted and depraved hearts (cf. Mt. 15:19, 20). Yet, even in this totally depraved state, Yahweh, through the voice of His prophet Jeremiah, continued to call Judah to Himself. He continued to call them to repentance.

B. Still There Is Hope

Jeremiah 3 is extraordinary! The northern tribes, Israel, had already fallen under Yahweh's judgment of their idolatries and sin. Assyria had destroyed Samaria, Israel's capital, in 722 BC, nearly a 100 years before Jeremiah's prophecies. Yahweh explained His treatment of Israel's adulteries, *"And I saw that for all the adulteries of faithless Israel, I had sent her away and given her a writ of divorce..."* (v.8). Then the astonishing happens. Yahweh instructed Jeremiah in the hearing of Judah, *"Go and proclaim these words toward the north and say, 'Return⁶, faithless Israel, declares the Lord; I will not look upon you in anger, For I am gracious,' declares the Lord..."* (v.12). Note the impact of this. Judah, who had become worse than her sister, Israel, was to listen, while Yahweh called the judged and lost Israel to repentance. The implication is that if Yahweh would call judged and lost Israel a hundred years

⁶ "Return" is another rendering for repentance.

after the fact, then until the last breath is drawn it is not too late to repent. Further, underlying Yahweh's anger and justice is His abiding love, His graciousness toward His people.

C. Judah Called to Repentance

Jeremiah calls lost Israel to repentance and implicitly also calls Judah to repentance. Yet, Jeremiah is explicit as to the kind of repentance necessary for Judah's restoration. It is more than an, "I'm sorry."

*"Go, and proclaim these words toward the north and say,
'Return, faithless Israel,' declares the Lord;
'I will not look upon you in anger.
For I am gracious,' declares the Lord;
'I will not be angry forever.
'Only acknowledge your iniquity,
That you have transgressed against the Lord your God
And have scattered your favors to the strangers under every green tree,
And you have not obeyed My voice,' declares the Lord.
'Return, O faithless sons,' declares the Lord;
'For I am a master to you,
And I will take you one from a city and two from a family,
And I will bring you to Zion'" (Jer. 3:12-14).*

1. Return from Your Faithlessness

It is described as a "return" (v. 12). They must come back from where they are, i.e. their idolatries and injustices. Sorrow may precede repentance, but sorrow is not the essence of repentance. Repentance is a turning and a coming from where the sinner is to where he or she ought to be. Repentance is movement. It is not static. It is not feeling better. Whatever it takes there is to be movement and change. Do not wait. Do not procrastinate. Do not hesitate. Turn! Come! Move! As we will see this turning is a specific turning. It is a turning away from our sin and a turning to God in obedience to His will. Sin by its very nature is a turning away from God, His will, and His law. Repentance corrects what has been perverted. Repentance calls for the returning to God and obedience and conformity to His will and law. Thus, repentance is active and deliberant.⁷

⁷ Thomas Brooks, *Precious Remedies*, 32, 33, explains the true nature of repentance and elaborates. He first points out the three parts of repentance: 1) "the formal act of repentance is changing and converting;" 2) "the subject changed and converted, is the whole man;" and 3) "the terms of this change and conversion, from which and to which both heart and life must be changed; from sin to God." He then comments that this turning is from all sin and to all good. "Herod turned from many, but turned not from his Herodias, which was his ruin. Judas turned from all visible wickedness, yet he would not cast out the golden devil covetousness, and therefore was cast into the hottest place in hell. He that turns not from every sin, turns not aright from any one sin. Every sin strikes at the honour of God, the being of God, the glory of God, the heart of Christ, the joy of the Spirit, and peace of a man's conscience; and therefore a soul truly penitent strikes at all, hates all, conflicts with all, and will labour to draw strength from a crucified Christ to crucify all. A true penitent knows neither father nor mother, neither right eye nor right hand, but will pluck out the one and cut off the other. Saul spared but one Agag, and that cost him his soul and his kingdom, 1 Sam. xv. 9. Besides, repentance is not only a turning from all sin, but also a turning to all good; to a love of all good, to a prizing of all good, and to a following after all good: Ezek. xviii. 21.... It is not enough that the tree bears not ill fruit; but it must bring forth good fruit, else it must be 'cut down and cast into the fire,' Luke xiii. 7. So it is not enough that you are not thus and thus wicked, but you must be thus and thus gracious and good, else divine justice will put the axe of divine vengeance to the root of your souls, and cut you off for ever. 'Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewed down and cast into the fire,' Mat. iii. 10."

2. Hope in Yahweh's Grace

The motivation and assurance for this movement, this turning and returning of repentance is the promise of Yahweh's grace, i.e. His goodness and help for those who do not deserve it (cf. 9:24). "*I will not look upon you in anger. For I am gracious,' declares the Lord; 'I will not be angry forever'"* (v. 12). God's promise of grace is meant to encourage us to face our sin. He urges. He invites. He woos. He calls. But face our sin we must, yet it is not His justice with which He encourages us but His grace. He calls us to hope in Him and His goodness toward us when we are entirely undeserving.⁸ With regard to turning to God John Calvin wrote, "...what faith finds in the Divine word, upon which to rest its dependence and confidence. When our conscience beholds nothing but indignation and vengeance, how shall it not tremble with fear? And if God be the object of its terror, how should it not fly from him? But faith ought to seek God, not to fly from him. It appears, then, that we have not yet a complete definition of faith; since a knowledge of the Divine will indefinitely, ought not to be accounted faith. But suppose, instead of will, – the declaration of which is often productive of fear and sorrow, – we substitute benevolence or mercy. This will certainly bring us nearer to the nature of faith. For we are allured to seek God, after we have learned that salvation is laid up for us with him; which is confirmed to us by his declaring it to be the object of his care and affection. Therefore we need a promise of grace, to assure us that he is our propitious Father; since we cannot approach him without it, and it is upon that alone that the human heart can securely depend."⁹

3. Acknowledge Your Specific Sins

Continuing on in verse 13 we read, "*Only **acknowledge** your iniquity, That you have transgressed against the Lord your God....*" The rest of the verse and the next (cf. vv. 22-25) specifies the iniquity which must be acknowledged or confessed (cf. Mt. 3:6; 1 Jn. 1:9): "*And have scattered your favors to the strangers under every green tree, And you have not obeyed My voice,' declares the Lord. 'Return, O faithless sons,' declares the Lord; 'For I am a master to you.'*" Judah's sins have taken them to a specific place, and they must name that place. They have chased after false gods "*under every green tree.*" They have "*not obeyed My voice.*" They have been "*faithless sons.*" They have thrown off the yoke of their "*master.*" They have committed certain and specific crimes, and they must be admitted. Repentance is a shedding of denials, deceptions, justifications, and ignorance, and it is a conscious walking out of the darkness into the light of truth and reality. It names the darkness as darkness, and it does so

⁸ Cf. Ps. 51:1, 2; Is. 55:1-7; 63:7-64:12, esp. 63:7-9; Mt. 11:28-30; Rom. 2:4; 5:6-11.

⁹ *Institutes*, Vol. 1, Bk. III, Chap. II, 603. Calvin goes on to ask why then do we not believe? "But we have already seen, that Christ is the only pledge of his love, without whom the tokens of his hatred and wrath are manifest both above and below. Now, since the knowledge of the Divine goodness will not be attended with much advantage, unless it lead us to rely upon it, we must exclude that apprehension of it which is mixed with doubts, which is not uniform and steady, but wavering and undecided. Now, the human mind, blinded and darkened as it is, is very far from being able to penetrate and attain to a knowledge of the Divine will; and the heart also, fluctuating in perpetual hesitation, is far from continuing unshaken in that persuasion. Therefore our mind must be illuminated, and our heart established by some exterior power, that the word of God may obtain full credit with us. Now, we shall have a complete definition of faith, if we say, that it is a steady and certain knowledge of the Divine benevolence towards us, which being founded on the truth of the gratuitous promise in Christ, is both revealed to our minds, and confirmed to our hearts, by the Holy Spirit" (604). Thus, true faith sees the grace of God extended in the person and work of Christ, and then sees that this grace has been extended "to me."

specifically. Repentance is to leave no doubt as to what has necessitated it. At the close of chapter three, Jeremiah prophetically hears a future confession,

*“Behold, we come to Thee;
For Thou art the Lord our God.
‘Surely, the hills are a deception,
A tumult [on] the mountains.
Surely, in the Lord our God
Is the salvation of Israel.
‘But the shameful thing has consumed the labor of our fathers since our youth,
their flocks and their herds, their sons and their daughters. “Let us lie down in our
shame, and let our humiliation cover us; for we have sinned against the Lord our
God, we and our fathers, since our youth even to this day. And we have not obeyed
the voice of the Lord our God””” (3:22b-25).*

Here we find a model of the acknowledgment of sin – specific and heart-deep.¹⁰

4. Persevere in Serving Yahweh

In chapter 4 we find another element of repentance, namely, perseverance. *“...And if you will put away your detested things from My presence, And will not waver, and you will swear, ‘As the Lord lives,’ In truth, in justice and in righteousness...”* (vv. 1, 2). The point is clearly made that, having turned from idolatry, repentance allows no returning to the sin from which one has departed. There can be *“no wavering.”* One must persevere having departed from your sin and returned to serving the Lord. This returning demanded a renewed allegiance to Yahweh, thus one must swear by Him, *“you will swear, ‘As the Lord lives.’”* In other words, in their idolatries they had sworn by other gods, but in repentance they would acknowledge Yahweh and Him only. Now they would swear by no other god, Yahweh alone. Implied, in this, was the demand of a renewed understanding and knowledge of Yahweh, *“In truth, in justice and in righteousness.”* Trust, obedience, and a personal knowing of Yahweh can only be based upon the truth, i.e. a right knowledge of Him (cf. Jn. 4:32).¹¹ This perseverance is determined and faithful, but it is based upon both an accurate and personal knowledge of God. In fact, it is this knowledge and knowing of God that makes perseverance possible – *“Return, O faithless sons, I will heal your faithlessness”* (3:22a).

¹⁰ Cf. Lev. 5:5; 16:21; 26:40; Num. 5:7; Prov. 28:13; Pss. 32:1-7; 38:18; Mt. 3:6; 1 Jn. 1:9. J. A. Thompson and Elmer A. Martens, “bwc,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, Willem A. VanGemeren, General Editor (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), IV:57: “The word *šwb* is a central word for the concept of repent. The imagery is one of a person doing a turnabout. Critical in this turnabout, if it is to be repentance, is the direction toward which one turns, namely, to Yahweh. The moves in this turning process are delineated clearly in Jer 3:22-4:2, and veritable liturgy of repentance: acknowledging God’s lordship (3:22); admitting wrongdoing (3:23), including the verbal confession, ‘We [I] have sinned’ (3:25); addressing the shame (3:25); and affirming and adhering to new conduct (4:1-2). For a comparable prescription of the components of repentance cf. Hosea 14:1-3 [-4].”

¹¹ Change of behavior is not optional to repentance. It is inherent. The NT uses the expression “fruit in keeping with repentance” (Mt. 3:8; Lu. 3:8, 10-14; Acts 26:20). The obvious point is that true repentance was never a naked act, but one clothed with its fruit. Repentance by its very nature persevered in righteousness. Luke 3:8-14 provides very vivid examples (cf. 2 Cor. 7:9-11). The Reformers were emphatic that one was justified by faith alone, but, they then hastened to add, the nature of faith dictated that justification is not by a faith that is alone (cf. Mark R. Talbot, *The Signs of True Conversion* [Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000], 30, 31).

5. Heart-Deep Sincerity

To these demands of external, persevering allegiance was added the necessity of internal or spiritual agreement. In other words, repentance is not simply an external conformity to the laws of God. Repentance demands an internal cohesion, so that both actions and heart agree. The external actions must be the out working of a heart that loves and humbly obeys Yahweh. Therefore, Jeremiah exhorted Judah, *“Break up your fallow ground, And do not sow among thorns. Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, And remove the foreskins of your heart.... Wash your heart from evil, O Jerusalem, That you may be saved”* (4:3, 4, 14). Threaded through this mix of metaphors was the demand to conform the heart to the external actions of repentance. To *“break up fallow ground”* was to prepare a field for planting, so repentance was to be a plowing of the heart. Such prepares the heart for the seeds of obedience to the words and the laws of Yahweh. To avoid planting *“among thorns”* was a demand to clear the field of thorns. A fallow field was one that had not been planted the previous season, so the natural yield would be weeds and thorns. They had to be cleared. One is reminded of Jesus’ parable of the sower, and the soil filled with choking thorns, *“the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word and it becomes unfruitful”* (Mt. 13:22). Such, unless cleared, can have devastating results. The point of these agricultural pictures meshed well with the next metaphor in verse 14, *“wash your heart of evil,”* namely, to purify your soul of all nonconformity to the laws of Yahweh. To *“circumcise...your heart”* referenced to a heart in a state of humility, compliance, and willing obedience to Yahweh. Most of all it represented a heart that loves and delights in Yahweh.¹² The point is made repetitively that repentance is a matter of the heart!¹³

6. God’s Sovereign Enablement

Woven into repentance is the theme of God’s sovereignty, and it is critical that it not be overlooked. At the conclusion of verse 14 we find this statement, *“For I am a Master to you, And I will take you one from a city and two from a family, And I will bring you to Zion.”* In the preceding verses the act of repentance is demanded of Judah and Israel, *Return, O faithless sons*. If that were all that was said, we would have to conclude that repentance was solely the activity of man. But the certainty of Judah’s repentance is based upon the work of Yahweh not Judah, *“For I am a Master to you, And I will take you one from a city and two from a family, And I will bring you to Zion.”* As a result of Yahweh’s activity repentance and blessing will happen, but only on a limited basis, one here, and two there. Clearly the reason for this assurance is the activity of Yahweh! *“I will take.... I will bring....”* We meet this sovereign language again in verse 22, *“Return, O faithless sons, I will heal your faithlessness....”*¹⁴ Then in chapter 4 we find this statement, *“If you will return, O Israel, declares the Lord, ‘Then you should return to Me’”* (v. 1; cf. Rev. 2:11; Mt. 13:11-16).¹⁵ There is a suggestion here that as

¹² Cf. Lev. 26:41; Dt. 10:12-11:1, esp. v. 16; 30:6; Jer. 6:10; 7:23-28; Rom. 2:25-29.

¹³ Cf. Eph. 5:19, there is the call to worship externally, but then the added admonition that worship like repentance must be done in the heart.

¹⁴ The irony of this verse should not be missed. How do faithless sons return? The nature of faithless sons is that they are faithless, but Yahweh announces that He will heal them of that which keeps them from repenting.

¹⁵ The above citation is the NASV. The NIV reads, “If you will return, O Israel, return to me....” The NKJV is the same as NIV. The NRSV reads, “If you return, O Israel, if you return to me, if you remove your abominations from my presence, and do not waver....” Each translation except NRSV translates the verse with an emphasis on “will” return. Though one should not make too much of this emphasis on “will,” but there is the evident emphasis by the majority of translations that “will” is not used as a prediction of the future

the “*willing*” to repent precedes the act of repentance, so this “willing” is the gift and work of Yahweh. In other words, when one finds himself *willing* he has already experienced the grace of God. This work of God is consequently necessary for the exercise of true repentance.¹⁶ Further, when one is thus enabled to repent, i.e. made willing to repent, then he or she is to repent! In other words, when one desires or wants or wills to come to Yahweh, let nothing stop you! “Come!”¹⁷ Thus, repentance is depicted not as the independent activity of man, but rather it is an activity initiated and enabled by God. By God’s sovereign act man becomes willing to repent.¹⁸

The six parts of repentance found in Jeremiah 3 and 4 are listed below:

1. **Return** from faithlessness (3:12)
2. **Hope** in Yahweh’s Grace (3:12)
3. **Acknowledgement** of specific sins (3:13)
4. **Perseverance** in serving the Lord (4:1)
5. **Heart-deep Sincerity** (4:3-4, 14)
6. **God’s Sovereign** enablement (3:14, 22; 4:1)

This model of repentance is very typical of the call to repentance in the OT and especially in the prophets.¹⁹ As we turn to the NT we will find a similar pattern there but with an additional, significant difference.

II. A New Testament Model of Repentance

The Greeks might have held repentance in ridicule, but as we have seen the OT clothed repentance with urgency, with necessity. When we move to the NT repentance does not lose this significance. As in the OT, the NT also framed repentance with this same sense of necessity and urgency. Consequently, the Gospel was introduced with John the Baptist’s stinging message, “Repent!” On his shirt tails came the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. But it was like the sun moving from behind a cloud with a blinding immersing radiance, so the *Coming One’s* ministry emerged from behind John the Baptist’s closing ministry. John had preached, “*Repent,*

but as an exercise of volition. Therefore, it is fair to say that this emphasis is present and apparent. Cf. Peter C. Craigie, Page Kelley, and Joel Drinkard, Jr., *Jeremiah 1-25*, Word Biblical Commentary, 26 (Dallas: Word Books, Pub., 1991), 62, 64. Technically, the issue rests on the “hypothetical particle,” *ma!* (“if”). *bWvT** (“you return”), the verb is a Qal imperfect. The combination of the two, the particle and the Qal imperfect, can present a “purely imaginary case,” i.e. a hypothetical case (F. Brown, S. Driver, C. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1907 ed., 1968 rep.], 49, hereafter *BDB*).

Literally there is no “will” in the Hebrew text. The “will” is supplied not so much as a representation of time, i.e. future or present, but rather it poses the hypothetical possibility that if Israel is *willing* to repent, then they should in fact repent; they should return to no one but Yahweh. This is the possibility that is placed before them in 4:1.

¹⁶ Cf. Jer. 31:3; Hos. 11:4; Phil. 2:13; 2 Tim. 2:25; Jn. 6:37, 44, 65.

¹⁷ Cf. Mt. 13:44-46; 11:28-30; Jn. 6:37.

¹⁸ An additional point is that the heart ultimately is impossible for a man to change. Jeremiah asked in this regard, “*If you say in your heart, ‘Why have these things happened to me?’ Because of the magnitude of your iniquity Your skirts have been removed and your heels have been exposed. Can the Ethiopian change his skin Or the leopard his spots? Then you also can do good Who are accustomed to doing evil*” (13:22-23; cf. 17:9; Is. 44:9-20). The testimony of Scripture in both the OT and NT enforce this fact (cf. e.g. Dt. 30:6; Pss. 51:10; 139:23, 24; Jer. 17:9, 10; Lu. 24:32, 45; Acts 16:14; Rom. 2:25-29; 2 Tim. 2:25, 26; 1 Jn. 5:20). Thus, the very work of changing the heart is declared to be impossible without the sovereign work of God preceding and enabling the willing of the recipient.

¹⁹ Cf. Is. 63-65; Hosea 14; Joel 2:12-17; Amos 4-6

for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Mt. 3:2). With John’s imprisonment by Herod, “From that time Jesus began to preach and say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’” (Mt. 4:17). Where John left off Jesus began. But there was a change.

A. The Unique Difference in Jesus’ Proclamation of Repentance: *Discipleship*

The significant change in Jesus’ message from John the Baptist’s was that the Kingdom of God was not simply coming, indefinitely, but Jesus preached that the Kingdom was already present. He announced that He was the fulfillment of the Kingdom. Early in His ministry Jesus had visited Nazareth. He rose in the synagogue and read from a messianic passage, Isaiah 61:1 and 2.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord (Lu. 4:18-19).

He sat down, and with every eye upon Him He announced, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in you hearing” (v. 21). The crowd received His announcement as nothing less than an audacious presumption. They were so offended and enraged they drove Him from the city attempting to execute Him. Mid-ministry Jesus had asked His disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Mt. 16:13). After their report, He asked, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’” (vv. 15, 16). Further, His actions were those of God and His King. He forgave sins by His own authority (Mk. 2:5ff). He cast out demons (Mt. 12:22ff). He bound the power of Satan upon earth (v. 29). He healed diseases by His Kingly power (e.g. Mk. 1:34). He commanded nature (Mt. 8:26, 27; cf. 11:25-30). By the close of Jesus’ ministry it was evident Jesus was announcing that the King of the Kingdom had come. At His trial before Pilate, He was accused that He taught He was the Christ (Lu. 23:2). Pilate asked, “Are You the King of the Jews?” Jesus replied, “It is as you say” (v. 3). Everything Jesus did and said in His ministry was to announce He was the *Coming One*, He was the King, the Christ of the Kingdom of God.

It is against this background that we must see Jesus’ call to *repentance*. The sign of *repentance* for Jesus was not baptism as it had been with John. Rather the act of *repentance* for Jesus was discipleship.²⁰ Discipleship meant to follow Him. He called men not for learning or healing or for a little while. Discipleship to Jesus was a radical reorientation of one’s life putting their faith absolutely in Jesus. Such faith demanded that all else be forsaken in light of this absolute allegiance to Him. No other relationship was to supercede the disciple’s to His Lord. In other words, Jesus was to be loved with all one’s heart, soul, and might.²¹

Jesus’ call to *repentance* was rooted in the Old Testament prophets. Repentance for the prophets and for Jesus meant a life changing transformation. It was still a turning away from

²⁰ We see the interchangeableness of the terms demonstrated by Matthew’s version of the Great Commission featuring *making disciples* (Mt. 28:19) and Luke’s Great Commission featuring *repentance* (Lu. 24:47).

²¹ So that we are not misunderstood, Jesus clearly called people to God, but His revolutionary call focused on Himself as well. To reject Him was to reject God, and to embrace Jesus was to embrace God. There was no separating the two.

evil and a turning to God. It was still man’s task, while at the same time it was also God’s gift. Yet, though Jesus’ idea of *repentance* was clearly rooted in the prophetic idea, under Jesus repentance blossoms to be more than it was with the prophets, and what was only suggested by the prophets becomes fully manifest in Jesus. Thus, Jesus preached repentance as the one and only imperative to prepare for and enter the Kingdom of God,²² but this imperative had several parts. **First**, the sinfulness of man was exposed with the vivid reality of God’s wrathful judgement on sin (e.g. Lu. 13:3, 5). **Second**, there was the promise of hope. Salvation and deliverance could be found in Jesus alone (e.g. Mt. 4:19, 20; 16:24-27). **Third**, there was the demand for a radical turning away from sin and to Jesus. Obedience to this demand resulted in a reorientation, which could only be viewed as a revolutionary change of mind (e.g. Mt. 5:27-30). **Fourth**, this reorientation was so comprehensive, so transformational, so life changing that no part of an individual’s life could be isolated or exempted from it. It was consuming (e.g. Lu. 9:57-62). Discipleship was what Jesus meant by *repentance*. Simply put here are the four parts of Jesus’ call of repentance:

1. Confrontation of Sin
2. Promise of Salvation
3. Turning from Sin and to Jesus
4. Persevering Discipleship

We need also to recognize that, though Jesus began His ministry with the clear, explicit announcement to *repent*, He used the word *repent* sparingly throughout His ministry.²³ Yet, Jesus was constantly teaching and calling people to *repentance* without using the word. Once we realize the elements of His call, as stated above, we do not need Jesus to name His teaching or His call as teachings and calls to *repentance*. Behm comments, “The whole proclamation of Jesus, with its categorical demands for the sake of God’s kingdom (the Sermon on the Mount, the sayings about discipleship), is a proclamation of *metavnoia* [repentance] even when the term is not used.”²⁴

B. Repentance and Discipleship Opposed to the “Self-Life”²⁵

²² J. Behm, “*μετάνοια, μετανοέω*: A. Greek Usage,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (hereafter *TDNT*), Gerhard Kittel, ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967), IV:1002f.

²³ Jesus uses the verb, *metanoeo*, approximately 15 times in the Gospels and the noun, *metanoia*, only 5 times. “The full meaning of Jesus’ use of the concept cannot be exhausted by means of a word study. Actually, the words are found on the lips of Jesus in a limited number of Gospel texts.... The words are completely absent from the Fourth Gospel, although the concept is present” J. Lunde, “Repentance,” *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, J. Green and S. McKnight eds. (hereafter *DJG*) (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 670.

²⁴ Behm, *TDNT*, IV:1002.

²⁵ A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, no date, “Special Edition”), 23, 45, uses the term “Self-life.” Commenting on Mt. 16:24, 25 Tozer wrote, “...it would seem that there is within each of us an enemy which we tolerate at our peril. Jesus called it ‘life’ and ‘self,’ or as we would say, the *self-life*. Its chief characteristic is its possessiveness: the words ‘gains’ and ‘profit’ suggest this. To allow this enemy to live is in the end to lose everything. To repudiate it and give up all for Christ’s sake is to lose nothing at last, but to preserve everything unto life eternal. And possibly also a hint is given here as to the only effective way to destroy this foe: it is by the Cross. ‘Let him take up his cross and follow me.’” ... “It is woven of the fine threads of the self-life, the hyphenated sins of the human spirit. They are not something we do, they are something we *are*, and therein lies both their subtlety and their power.

“To be specific, the self-sins are these: self-righteousness, self-pity, self-confidence, self-sufficiency, self-admiration, self-love and a host of others like them. They dwell too deep within us and are too much a part of our natures to come to our attention till the light of God is focused upon them. The grosser manifestations of these sins, egotism, exhibitionism, self-promotion....”

It was because of His idea of *repentance* that Jesus made such radical and demanding claims upon His disciples. Jesus pitted discipleship against not simply man's sinfulness but especially His self-centeredness. Discipleship is contrasted to the "self-life." Thus, those that would follow Him must deny self (Mt. 16:24), but even more each must shoulder his cross (i.e. the instrument of execution, death, and the personal cost of following Jesus) and follow Jesus. The self-life is subtle and everyday. Because devotion to self-life is so common place, so prevalent so normal it must be stripped of its normalcy and be seen for what it is the self-efforts of man's attempts to "*save his life*" (v. 25). Such self-efforts will only result in a man losing his life (v. 25). Only in giving up this self-life in discipleship can real life, eternal life, be found (v. 25). Forsaking self-life was never incidental. It was of the utmost importance and the critical issue of life. "*For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?*" (v. 26).

Peter seemed to have prompted this teaching. In one breath he confessed that Jesus was the Christ (v. 15). Jesus then blessed him for his confession. Jesus further stated that such knowledge was the gift of the Father (v. 17), and it will be the foundation of His Church (vv. 18f.). Then occurs an incident which was abruptly startling. What was startling was not Peter's rather natural and protective reaction, but it was Jesus' response to Peter which seemed to be such an over reaction. But, it would seem an over reaction only to those who would casually think and operate unconsciously from the base of the self-life. After Jesus had revealed that He would have to suffer, die, and be resurrected, Peter immediately and protectively responded, "*God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You*" (v. 22). To Jesus, this betrayed the controlling self-life in Peter, and even more insidious, it represented an attack and temptation of Satan through Peter's failure to deny his self-life. Jesus explained "*...for you are not setting your mind on God's interests but man's*" (v. 23). Man's interests are always self-interests. Jesus' call to discipleship and *repentance* was a ruthless attack on the self-life. No matter how innocent self-life's appearance may be, it always stands diametrically opposed and totally incompatible with the life of repentance, life in the Kingdom, life under the rule of the King.

On another occasion Jesus explained the nature of discipleship (Mt. 1:24-42). Among other things, He told His disciples not to fear those who kill the body, "*but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell*" (v. 28). In many ways to cast discipleship in the light of martyrdom would be expected and obvious, but Jesus then moved to the not so obvious. "*Do not think that I came to bring peace... I did not come to bring peace, but a sword*" (v. 34). This sword would cut away self-life everywhere it was found.

For I came to set man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household. He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life shall lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake shall find it (vv. 35-39).

Such a cleavage between the disciple and his family would be a shocking and traumatic application. Certainly one would ask, “is not love of family and the honoring of parents commanded by the Law?” Why would Jesus make such an extraordinary demand of discipleship? The reason is that here we are confronted with a not so obvious clinging to the self-life. A disciple must understand the radical nature of *repentance* and its resulting turning to Jesus. This turning had no qualifications. There were no “buts” in its regard. One, and only One, stood supremely before the disciple. This One alone was to be given total allegiance without qualification. No others may tempt the disciples’ loyalty to Jesus. This illustration of family attachments was to show that anything in comparison to Jesus, which the self-life will cling to, must be severed. Such surgery was to be without inhibition or restriction. Anything, which would stand between the disciple and Jesus, was to be submitted to this sword. In this context Jesus unhesitatingly said,

And if your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to go into hell (Mt. 5:29, 30).

Jesus sketched discipleship in the most radical²⁶ of terms. It was framed in the most ultimate of terms – heaven and hell. One’s uncompromising discipleship to Jesus was the ultimate issue. When one turned to Jesus in discipleship (*repentance*) a net of allegiance was cast over every area of the disciples’ life, so that he followed Jesus with his whole person, his whole being, with his whole life. Nothing could be held back.

C. Three NT Models of Repentance

1. Three “Would-Be-Disciples” (Lu. 9:57-62)

For Jesus *repentance* was to enter into the King’s presence and submit whole-heartedly to His authority, turning from self and turning to Him in total allegiance. No attachments to this life, to self, will be excused or accepted. Jesus came with a sword. He without partiality severs the disciple from all attachments but to Him. It is an absolute turning from one way of life to a radically different and new way of life. Consequently, we can clearly see why Jesus was intolerant of any of the following seemingly justifiable excuses for following Him.

And as they were going along the road, someone said to Him, ‘I will follow You wherever You go.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.’ And He said to another, ‘Follow Me.’ But he said, ‘Permit me first to go and bury my father.’ But He said to him, ‘Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God.’ And another also said, ‘I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.’ (Lu. 9:57-62; cf. Mt. 8:18-22)

²⁶ “Radical” would seem to be over used, but it is hard to find a more fitting description of Jesus’ call.

We should note that each of Jesus' responses to these would-be-disciples severed them from their most basic of expectations. Each severing stroke of Jesus' sword makes sense only against the background of Jesus' absolute call to allegiance, which promised no comfort for self.

a. A Disciple has no home on earth.

The first would-be-disciple volunteered to follow Jesus, but he was met with Jesus' rebuff to expect no place to lay your head, no place to call home (vv. 57, 58). He must learn to sing the words of the old Gospel chorus, "this world is not my home." Jesus will later explain that He will go to prepare a place for His disciples, so that they will have a place in His Father's house (Jn. 14:3). But for now, to follow Jesus meant to forsake the hope of comfort or security for self. The world seeks after these things (Mt. 6:31, 32). These things are the focus of the world's existence – "the good life." They are not to be the focus of the disciple's life, for the one who would *repent*.

b. A Disciple's only obligation is following Jesus.

The next would-be-disciple was not a volunteer, rather Jesus said to him, "*Follow Me*" (v. 59). In essence the man's response was "yes, but" (v.59). He had family obligations. He had a dead father. He had an estate to settle. How can such a "but" not be justifiable? It was unjustifiable only when we understand that Jesus' call gave no quarter. Jesus' call was a severing from the old life. Self and all its attachments had to be severed. Jesus sliced them away without hesitation, explanation, or sensitivity. *Repentance* is radical. It is decisive. It is intolerant of any compromise, any excuse, rationalization, or partiality. Self must be denied. Self must die, and total allegiance to Jesus Christ is its resurrected life, its new life.

c. A Disciple can have no distractions from Jesus.

The final man volunteered, yet he volunteered with qualification. He too answered "yes, but." His seems to be the least of any hesitation. It is a minimal request, "*first permit me to say good-bye to those at home*" (v. 61). How can such a responsible person be denied? How can a consideration for the worry of others be prohibited? This surely would be reasonable. Such would be our rational and understandable response to this man's "but." Jesus did not share our sentiment. Those who would look back are not "*fit for the kingdom of God*" (v. 62). Why would He be so insensitive, so heartless? Jesus raised His sword and once again defined discipleship and *repentance* as absolute allegiance to Himself. Nothing less makes one fit for the Kingdom. The only hope of entering the Kingdom, of saving one's soul, of inheriting eternal life is radical *repentance*, this ruthless turning from self to absolute allegiance and attachment to Jesus Christ. We now will turn to meet two men who were called to discipleship. We will see two different responses to Jesus' call to repentance.

2. The Rich Young Ruler (Mt. 19:16-26; Mk. 10:17-30; Lu. 18:18-30)

Mark referred to him simply as "*a man*." Luke named him, "*a certain ruler*" (18:18). It was Matthew who noted his age. First he was simply "*someone*" (19:16), but then Matthew described him twice as "*the young man*" (vv. 20, 22). The compilation is that he was "*a rich young ruler*." There are other qualities about him, which are noteworthy. None more important

than Mark's note, "*And looking at him Jesus felt a love for him*" (10:21). Also, each of the Gospels specifically recorded the man's respectful address to Jesus, "*Good Teacher,*" but Mark added that the young man "*ran*" to Jesus and then "*knelt*" before Him (v. 17). He seemed earnest. We can assume that there was no duplicity in his question, unlike the questions of the Pharisees and the religious leaders (e.g. Mk. 11:18, 27ff; 12:13ff, 18ff, 28ff). Heartfelt, he truly wanted to be secure in eternal life, "*what shall I do to inherit eternal life*" (v. 17)? The fact that Jesus loved him suggests that the young man had made a good impression. Jesus' answered him in three parts.

a. Part One: Jesus Disarmed the Young Man

First, Jesus responded by disarming any pretense of flattery and giving the man a basic lesson in theology. "*Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God*"²⁷ (Mk. 10:18). Second, being a Jew the young man would already know that the most obvious way to eternal life was through obedience to the Law. Jesus' response would have been the most obvious of answers. Matthew put it "*...if you wish to enter life, keep the commandments*" (15:17). Both Luke and Mark emphasize the obviousness of the answer, "*You know the commandments..*" (Lu. 18:20; Mk. 10:19). All three Gospels recorded the emphasis of the young man's response, namely, "*I have kept all these things from my youth up*" (Mk. 10:20). The "*all*" is a statement of blamelessness before the Law. Mark added "*from my youth up*" for the added emphasis of the duration of this blamelessness. Matthew recorded the man's follow-up question, "*what am I still lacking?*" (19:20). At this point Mark inserted, "*And looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him*" (10:21). The sincerity and devotion of this young man must have been clear and unfeigned. Yet, Jesus' affection does not cloud His perception of the young man's heart. Though sincere the young man's understanding was misinformed. No, it must be stated more strongly. The young man was wrong. It was the perpetuation of a wrong understanding of the Law and righteousness.

b. Part Two: Jesus Pinpointed the Young Man's Mistakes

This is evident from two suggestions from the text. First, the man's desire was for "*eternal life*" not the "*God*" who is the supreme good. Second, he justified himself with a typical Jewish pride – "*as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless*" (Phil. 3:6). Righteousness was not the "face to face" intimacy with his forgiving, gracious heavenly Father, rather it was the completion of a list of "dos and don'ts." With this frame of mind the young man confidently asked, "*...what am I still lacking?*" (Mt. 19:20).²⁸ His implication was

²⁷ Why did Jesus refuse the title "*good*"? Jesus' identification with man (Heb. 2:14ff) and His self-emptying incarnation (Phil. 2:7) enabled Him to be entirely unreflective of Himself – "*although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped*" (Phil. 2:6). Jesus would not "*grasp*" at equality by even such an implied equality to God as "*good.*" Further, Mark implies the man's eagerness. He ran, knelt, and "*began asking Him*" (v. 17). Perhaps Jesus' rebuff was to caution him that in his eagerness his words still must be measured. His words might have come spilling out, and he was just getting started, so Jesus' rebuff would have cautioned him and slowed him down. Ultimately, Jesus was refusing to be included in the young man's inadequate view of God's goodness.

²⁸ Matthew is the only Gospel which records the young man's question to Jesus: "*...what am I still lacking?*" (Mt. 19:20). The Greek word for "lacking" here is *hytereō*. Matthew has Jesus responding, "*If you wish to be complete....*" The Greek word for "complete" is *teleios*, while Mark uses *hytereō* which is translated "lack;" and Luke uses *leipo* being translated also, "lack." *Leipo* means simply to leave. Here, it means to be left behind so as to be lacking or fall short. *Hytereō* means "to be behind or to come behind" in one of three ways: space, time, or inferiority (cf. C. Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers,

that he had completed the list, and he now awaited his praise. This was *repentance* twisted by focusing on the Law rather than on the God of the Law. The man's view of God fell far short of the reality, and, with such a deficient view of God and His goodness (cf. Is. 6:1ff; Ex. 33:18-23), the man's consequential view of eternal life was misinformed and perverted. Jesus will teach in His "High Priestly Prayer" (Jn. 17) that "*this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent*" (Jn. 17:3). **Knowing** God is eternal life not "blamelessness" before the Law, which is only a means for knowing God, but, in this period of Judaism, the Jewish perspective on the Law had degenerated to the view represented by this young man. The Law had been lost to this young man as a means for loving God. The Law had swelled to dwarf the intimacy of loving and enjoying God. The end had become attainment not the fullness of relationship.

c. Part Three: Jesus Exposed the Young Man's Self-Life

We now come to the third part of Jesus' response to the young man, and in it we need to see Jesus' sword. He will call the young man to *repentance* with His surgical response. Matthew recorded Jesus' statement stating positively the young man's lack, "*If you wish to be complete...*" (19:21), while both Mark and Luke stated Jesus' response in the negative, "*One thing you lack...*" (Mk. 10:21). Luke being still more emphatic recorded, "*One thing you still lack...*" (18:22). What can this "*one thing*" be? The "*one thing*" has two parts. First, it is the removal of the man's allegiance to his "self-living." Each of the Gospels' records state the man's extreme wealth. Matthew and Mark emphasized, he owned "*much property*" (Mt. 19:22; Mk. 10:22). Luke flatly put it, "*he was extremely rich*" (18:23). Jesus brought His sword down upon this that held the young man's supreme allegiance. "*Go and sell all you possess, and give to the poor and you shall have treasure in heaven*" (Mk. 10:21). Jesus will no less slice between wealth and a man as between family and a man. Anything to which the self will cling above Jesus must be cut away. The unregenerate self believes that self must save self. Self must not be denied, rather self must be nurtured, cared for, and comforted. Jesus tells of the rich fool who said,

...I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be

1994), III:427, 429). Here, it has been taken that the young man's question represented his self-sufficiency, i.e. he expected Jesus' praise for such an exemplary testimony. What the young man meant by "lacking" was a "posed, polite humility" which invited Jesus' praise. G. Campbell Morgan, *Studies in the Four Gospels* (Westwood, N. J.: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1931), Mt.:239, noted, "Then the Master, instead of flashing upon him external light, sent light right through the darkened cells of his inner life, and revealed the fact that he was a self-centered man, never having found his true King, never having kissed the sceptre, or bent to control." Jesus made it clear by His use of *teleios* that what He called the young man to was not a lacking in the Law which was the young man's focus but his lacking before God Himself. By Matthew's use of *teleios*, we can deduce Mark's meaning of *hytereos*, namely, that it refers to inferiority. *Teleios* means "having attained the end of purpose, complete, perfect." With regards to a person it can refer to a maturational growth which ends with *teleios*, i.e. growing from a child into a mature adult, e.g. Eph. 4:13, or it can refer to a moral or spiritual maturation so as to become one who has reached his end or *teleios*, i.e. to be fully developed or perfect. F. D. Bruner, *Matthew: Volume 2, The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990), 706, 707, comments on *teleios*, "The word's primary reference in Jesus' teaching is toward God, as we see from its one other use in the Gospels, Matt 5:48: 'So you must be *teleioi* [pl.] as your heavenly Father is *teleios*.' Thus 'Matthew does not use *teleios* in the Greek sense of the perfect ethical personality, but in the OT sense of the wholeness of consecration to God' (G. Barth, 101; similarly, Delling, *TDNT* 8:74)." Thus, we may conclude that for Jesus *teleios* was a God-likeness, a God-perfectness, the measure of God's goodness, which was to be emulated in His people. In other words, Jesus' comment, "*There is only One who is good,*" was also His point of reference for what He meant by *teleios* – God, Himself.

merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?’ So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God (Lu. 12:18-21).

Here is self, which tenaciously seeks to save his life and refuses to lose his life for the sake of Christ (cf. Mt. 10:39; 16:25). The unregenerate self is terrified at the thought of losing self, but the truth hidden from him is that when self succeeds in saving self it is utterly lost (Mt. 16:25, 26). Jesus’ response to the rich young ruler strikes at the heart of this issue. The first part of the “*one thing*” lacking was to forsake self – “*sell all you possess.*”

The second part of the “*one thing*” lacking was discipleship – “*come, follow Me*” (Mt. 19:21). Here we see the second part of *repentance*. The first is to turn from self, and the second is to turn to Christ. Here, we see Christ’s call for a radical change from one life to another, from being devoted to self, to the forsaking of self and following Christ. To follow Christ necessitates the forsaking of self and all its allegiances. Discipleship and *repentance* call for total allegiance to Jesus and Him only. This is Christ’s call to the rich young ruler.

This call to *repentance*, to discipleship, came to ears which could not hear, to a heart which could not know. Mark recorded, “*But at these words his face fell, and he went away grieved, for he was one who owned much property*” (10:22). The meaning of his departure was translated by Jesus’ earlier words, “*And he who does not take his cross [i.e. the cost of following Jesus] and follow after Me is not worthy of Me*” (Mt. 10:38). Such is the state of an unrepentant heart before God. The soul of such a heart is forfeit and lost (Mt. 16:26).

d. Jesus’ Explanation to His Disciples

After the young man’s departure Jesus turned to His disciples. He explained the reason for the young man’s rejection, “*...it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven*” (Mt. 19:23). To which His disciples say, “*Then who can be saved?*” Jesus’ answer is in line with that of the Old Testament prophets, “*With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God*” (Mk. 10:27). Such an impossible change of life – forsaking self and following Christ – is only made possible by the work of God, whereby He creates a new heart. He causes a man to be born again, to be raised up so that what was dead receives new life. By this statement Jesus was clearly teaching us that His demand for absolute repentance is an impossibility for the human heart, “*with men it is impossible*” (cf. Mt 6:21-24). It is here that we are confronted with the reality that the ability to respond to Jesus’ demand will take a work of God, “*it is impossible, but not with God.*” We find that Jesus with the OT prophets understood that ultimately repentance, though justly demanded of man, was beyond the fallen capabilities of his depraved heart. This was the resulting condition of the human heart following the Fall of man in Adam (cf. Rom. 1:28; 8:5-8; Mt. 15:18-20; Jn. 2:24, 25). Saving repentance as the work of God is the gift of God.²⁹

²⁹ Behm, *TDNT*, IV:1003, “But this unconditional requirement is not met by man’s own achievement. In Mt. 18:3 Jesus shows from the example of the child what ‘to convert,’ ‘to become another man,’ means for Him: [“*unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven*”]. To be a child...is to be little, to need help, to be receptive to it. He who is converted becomes little before God (cf. v. 4...), ready to let God work in him. The children of the heavenly Father whom Jesus proclaims...are those who simply receive from Him. He gives them what they cannot give themselves (cf. Mk. 10:27 par.). This is true

Peter impassioned with the personal implications of what he had witnessed stated the difference between the apostles and the rich young ruler,

'Behold, we have left everything and followed You.' Jesus said, *'Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first, will be last; and the last, first'* (Mk. 10:28-31).

The one who follows Jesus does not lose anything but gains everything (cf. Mk. 19:28-30; Lu. 18:29, 30). Here, we see the contrast between the rich young ruler and the twelve apostles. These twelve had forsaken all to follow Jesus, but they could see only their loss. They willingly had counted that cost to be able to follow Jesus. Now, fear swept over them that their *repentance*, their sacrifice of one way of life for the life of following Jesus, would not gain them entrance into the Kingdom. By contrast, the rich young ruler saw that the cost and its subsequent loss was too great a price to pay and rejected Jesus' call. In response to His disciples' anxiety Jesus reassuringly promised that, by their repentance and faith, they were guaranteed entrance into eternal life but more also. He promised that they will not suffer loss, but in their total allegiance to Him He will return all that has been lost a hundred fold not only in this life but also with the treasures of heaven in eternal life. We now turn to a second man who encountered Jesus.

3. "A Wee Little Man" in a Sycamore Tree (Lu. 19:1-10)

This man too was extremely wealthy, but his wealth was by graft. Luke recorded "...*he was a chief tax-gatherer, and he was rich*" (19:2). He was a Jew who worked for the Romans gathering their taxes. The rights to gathering taxes were purchased. This guaranteed the Romans a certain amount, and the amount gathered legitimately or illegitimately above this amount belonged to the tax-collector. Taxes could be arbitrarily fixed, and the cost of gathering the taxes was added on to the taxes. Tax collecting was not a Roman job; it was a Jewish business. The people had little course of appeal. Zaccheus was a *chief tax-gatherer* which meant he dealt directly with the Romans, and others gathered taxes for him.³⁰ He was a man with an organization and wealth accumulated through extortion sanctioned by the Roman government. By virtue of his occupation and his ruthlessness against his own people for a foreign government he was deeply hated.

of *metavnoia*. It is God's gift, and yet it does not cease to be a binding requirement. It is both these at one and the same time; it is this so unconditionally as to rule out any calculated playing off of the one aspect against the other.... Behind the call for conversion which Jesus issues with His announcement of the rule of God there stands the promise of the transformation which He effects as the One who brings in this rule (cf. Mt. 11:28ff.)." Richardson, "Repent," *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (hereafter *TWBB*), A. Richardson ed. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962), 191: "The encounter with Christ produced both these things [repentance and faith] in men's hearts (cf. Zacchaeus, Luke 19.1-10), and both of them are God's gifts, not men's achievements (cf. Acts 5.31, 11.18. Rom. 2.4, II Tim. 2.25)."

³⁰ Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Day of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 55-57; also see Madeleine S. and J. Lane Miller, *Harper's Encyclopedia of Bible Life*, revised edition (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1978), 268, 269, 349.

a. Jesus “Called” Zaccheus

Luke began his account of Zaccheus with an exclamatory interjection, “*And behold*” (v. 2). Its significance was to call special attention to this man, Zaccheus. He was a man called by Jesus. Zaccheus’ calling stood out as much as the calling of the twelve. It was after the fashion of Nathanael’s calling (Jn. 1:45-51). Philip brought Nathanael to Jesus. When Jesus saw Nathanael, He declared him to be an Israelite without guile. Nathanael responded, “*How do You know me?*” (v. 47). “*Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree I saw you*” (v. 48). When Jesus stopped under the sycamore tree, Luke recorded, “*He looked up and said to him, ‘Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house.’ And he hurried and came down, and received Him gladly*” (literally, rejoicing) (vv. 5, 6). Jesus knew Zaccheus before He addressed him even as He had preciously seen Nathanael. His plans for Zaccheus were not impulsive but predetermined – “*for today I must³¹ stay at your house.*”

b. Zaccheus’ Commitment to a Changed Life

Zaccheus was a man beside himself with joy. He had simply hoped to be able to see Jesus (v. 3), but now Jesus had graced him by singling him out and coming to his house. Zaccheus knew what this meant. The King of the Kingdom was coming to his house. He had been invited into the Kingdom. This was clear from Zaccheus’ abrupt stop on the way and his response to Jesus. “*And Zaccheus stopped and said to the Lord, ‘Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much*” (v. 8). Entrance into the Kingdom, Zaccheus knew, was by *repentance*. Zaccheus saw the pearl of great price, and all that he had he would willingly sacrifice for it. Here was a man who when seeing the Kingdom in Jesus he ran to enter. He shed every encumbrance.³² That, for which he had prostituted himself for, was immediately shed. The kingdom was of ultimate value to him. Jesus affirmed that this was the case. “*Today salvation has come to this house because he, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost*” (vv. 9, 10).

c. Zaccheus’ Eager Repentance

Jesus did not have to instruct Zaccheus. For here was a man who already knew what *repentance* was. It was the rejection of his old way of living and the whole hearted embracing of a new way of life. Here was a man who had been dead and had been resurrected by the call of Jesus. Jesus did not require more of him. He knew Zaccheus had given all to Him. Zaccheus by his *repentance* had become a disciple of Jesus. As the twelve had confessed that they had left everything (Mk. 10:28: Lu. 18:28), so Zaccheus too had left everything. In the words of Luke, “*And behold, there was a man called by the name of Zaccheus.*” He was a special man. Take note of him. He was a man who *repented*.

³¹ In the Greek text “*I must*” is translated from *dei*. It is an impersonal verb meaning “it is necessary, one must or has to.”

³² Zaccheus did not surrender literally all that he had, but his initiative, his restitution, and his generosity to the poor were sacrificial and evident demonstration of his total about face. These were accepted by Jesus as his total repentance.

III. The Practical Issues of Repentance

A. The Anxiety of Repentance

There is a natural trepidation that accompanies repentance. Perhaps, there are many potential reasons, but there is a single one that is commonly at the center of the anxiety and fear which accompanies repentance. It is the very real knowledge of our own “weakness”³³ in the face of sin and suffering. We know we are “weak.” We lack perseverance. In our hearts we agree with Paul, “*For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. ...I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good*” (Rom. 7:18, 21). We agree with the writer of Hebrews that we are faced with many encumbrances “*and the sin which so easily entangles us...*” (Heb. 12:1). James freely acknowledges, “*For we all stumble in many ways*” (3:2). The apostle John flatly states, “*If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us*” (1 Jn. 1:8). Paul describes this “*weakness of your flesh*” as our vulnerability to our “*lusts*” (Rom. 6:19, 12). The war between the Spirit and flesh rages within us, so that we easily identify with Paul’s cry, “*Wretched man that I am!*” (7:24). There is a “*law of sin*” at work in us (7:21, 23, 25), and at its core is an “*enmity against God*” (8:7), a hatred of God.³⁴ This enmity creates a soulful aversion and opposition to all the things of God, so that we weary of, are dull toward, loathe, and avoid the things of God. This is coupled with the schemes of Satan which are launched upon us (Eph. 6:10-12; 1 Pet. 5:8) and along with the conforming and lust stimulating pressures of the world’s system. We can easily lose heart toward repentance. All this is added to our own history of succumbing far too often to sins of all sorts. Then against this background and experience we are called to declare in our repentance that we will return to God and obey Him completely. Still repentance is not done. It demands more. We must not waver. We must continue to persevere. Called to face these overwhelming tasks anxiety floods over us. Fear wraps itself around us – “I can say it, but I know it will be only a matter of time till I fail again! I feel that to declare my repentance and my complete obedience will only set me up to fail. Rather than hypocrisy, I simply avoid repentance. I don’t want to face it. It seems simply utterly impossible for me. At the thought of it fear and anxiety engulf me, and I just want to hide. Repentance is beyond me. I have no confidence that I can fulfill what I declare.” At this point we must be reminded of two truths, which must renew our minds.

³³ Both bodily and spiritually: cf. Mt. 26:41; Rom. 5:6; 6:19; 8:3, 26; 14:1, 2; 15:1; 1 Cor. 1:25; 2:3; 8:7, 9, 10; 15:43; 2 Cor. 11:29, 30; 12:5, 9, 10; 13:4; Heb. 11:34.

³⁴ John Owen, *Temptation and Sin*, “The Nature and Power of Indwelling Sin” (Grand Rapids: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1971), 182: “That which we have declared concerning its nature is, that it [i.e. the nature of the law of sin] consists in enmity. Now, there are two general heads of the working or operation of enmity—first, *Aversation*; secondly, *Opposition*.

“First, *Aversation*. Our Saviour, describing the enmity that was between himself and the teachers of the Jews, by the effects of it, saith in the prophet, ‘My soul loathed them, and their soul also abhorred me,’ Zech. xi. 8. Where there is mutual enmity, there is mutual aversation, loathing, and abomination. So it was between the Jews and the Samaritans,—they were enemies, and abhorred one another; as John iv. 9.

“Secondly, *Opposition*, or contending against one another, is the next product of enmity. Isa. lxiii. 10, ‘He was turned to be their enemy, and he fought against them;’ speaking of God towards the people. Where there is enmity, there will be fighting; it is the proper and natural product of it.”

B. Two Truths for Renewing Your Mind

1. Repentance calls us to 100% obedience.

First, we must understand why we are called to complete obedience though in our own strength we are incapable of it. There is always and only one standard to which God and our Lord Jesus can call us to, that is, complete and perfect obedience, 100% devotion. He can ask nothing less without compromising Himself. Thus, He can only call us to shoot at the center of the bulls-eye. He demands that we wash away all evil. He calls us not to 90% obedience or 99.9% obedience but 100%. He cannot say, love Me half-heartedly. He must command us to love Him whole-heartedly, with all my heart, all my soul, and all my might. Repentance focuses us on this consuming goal. Repentance teaches us that we cannot allow complacency or compromise in our service to our King. We belong to our Lord totally. There is nothing left for us to command or protect. We are all His. In repentance we must name it. *“For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s”* (Rom. 14:7, 8). *“...you are not your own.... For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body”* (1 Cor. 6:19, 20). Jesus demands, *“If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me”* (Mt. 16:24). *“No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God”* (Lu. 9:62). *“For Your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered”* (Rom. 8:36). True repentance must clear our minds of all but one obligation. True repentance must uncompromisingly declare that obligation.

2. Repentance calls me to 100% obedience. (Repentance is personal.)

Second, repentance must unreservedly declare “my personal” commitment to follow and obey. No, “maybes.” No, “kind ofs.” No, “mostlys.” With Isaiah we must say, *“Here am I, send me!”* (Is. 6:8). With Joshua we must say, *“As for me and my house we will serve the Lord”* (Josh. 24:15). With the Lord Jesus, *“Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come...to do Your will, O God”* (Heb. 10:6, 7), therefore *“...not what I will, but what You will”* (Mk. 14:36). . Repentance in this vein is a renewal of our covenant in Christ. It is a reaffirmation that we declare ourselves as the Lord’s, and to declare that “I am the Lord’s without qualification, without reservation.”³⁵

These two points redirect our lives. It is a necessary reorientation, and it does so by laying our lives not at our own disposal but at the disposal of our Lord and Master. Repentance redirects us 180°. No matter how frightening it is, or how inadequate we feel, this must be

³⁵ “Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative, there is one elementary truth – the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves, too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision raising in one’s favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamed would have come his way. Whatever you can do, or dream you can begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now”— Goethe. This quote only affirms that even in the physical and fleshly world commitment changes things and enables one to see and discern that which without commitment would not have been seen and the opportunity not ceased. In the spiritual realm commitment is the approach of faith to the promises of God and the work of the Spirit.

done. There can be no “buts”! With this redirection realized we must then fill our repentance with faith.

C. Three Promises to Fill Your Faith

1. Impossible for us, Possible for God (Lu. 18:26, 27; Phil. 2:12, 13)

We fill our repentance with faith by continuing to renew our minds with the promises of God’s Word. There are three, which are critical. First, we fill our faith with the promise that what is impossible for us is possible for God. This is what Jesus taught the twelve. Overwhelmed by Jesus’ demand to sacrifice all to follow Him, His disciples lamented, “*Then who can be saved?*” Jesus’ response is one, which we must wrap our arms around. “*The things that are impossible with people are possible with God*” (Lu. 18:26, 27). In our anxiety over the demands of repentance, we become fixated upon our own weakness. Repentance must reorient, redirect, our focus to God.

The promise to which we must cling is Philippians 2:13. The latter part of verse 12 catches our anxious and fearful state over our repentance, “...*work out your salvation with fear and trembling.*”³⁶ Note, we are called to be fully engaged and actively working out our salvation: all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.³⁷ We are to assume responsibility. This is “my salvation.” So great and impossible is this task that it can only be engaged with “fear and trembling,” with trepidation. So what one feels in the face of the demand of repentance is appropriate. But then in verse 13 Paul ushers us to the foundational truth upon which our work rests. “*For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.*” The “*for*” states the cause of why we work out our salvation. In other words, because God is at work we can confidently work. It is not because we work that God works. The point is not that God helps those who help themselves. It is because God is at work that we work at salvation *at all*. Therefore, the very fact that we want to repent, that we “will” to repent, is the work of God *in you!* He is both *willing* and *working* His good pleasure in you. We “will” because He “wills” in us. We work because He works in us. Therefore, we must fill our faith with the promise. Though I am fully engaged and must be fully at work, my engagement is the very evidence that I am not alone in this but that God has preceded my work by His willing and enables my work by His working. We are faced by an impossible task which causes us to rightly “*fear and tremble,*” but take heart, the very fact that you want to repent and yet tremble at the prospect is the evidence that God is at work in you to do this very thing. We should remind ourselves at this point of Jesus’ statement, “*apart from Me you can do nothing*” (Jn. 15:5), and then fit it together with Paul’s testimony, “*I can do all things through Him who strengthens me*” (Phil. 4:13). Repentance was never meant to be a task which we could easily put our arms around. It was meant to be an impossible task for us. This insight leads us to a second promise with which we can fill our faith.

³⁶ Note that Phil. 2:12 and 13 deal specifically with “salvation” in its entirety and all its parts of which repentance is a part. Therefore, it is a promise, which directly addresses repentance.

³⁷ Cf. Mt. 22:37; Dt. 6:5.

2. God's power is perfected in my weakness (2 Cor. 4:6, 7)

We are to fill our faith with the promise that God's power is perfected in our weakness. In 2 Corinthians 4:6-7 the amazing work of God in us is announced by a comparison to His work of creation. *"For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."* As God spoke light into existence by simply saying, *"Let there be light,"* so God has spoken again. *"Let the light of Christ shine in your heart"* and at His word the knowledge of Christ came effectually into your heart. Yet, it is further explained, *"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels...."* The treasure is the saving knowledge of Christ in us, but it has been placed in *"earthen vessels."* We are not "heavenly," but we are "earthly." Earthly reflects that which is finite, limited in duration. It means that such vessels break and break easily. It implies being tainted and corrupted by sin and the resulting multiplicity of imperfections which accompanies the "earthly". Further, we are but vessels. We were created to hold something. Never forget that is what vessels are for – to hold something. We were created to hold the treasure of Christ, and we were created in weakness and frailty for a reason. *"...So that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves."* Repentance is an impossible task for us. It demonstrates our weakness, our "earthiness," and our weakness is the stage upon which "the main event" takes place – the display of *"the surpassing greatness of the power"* of God. Our salvation is to display the greatness of God. It is about God, and it is only secondarily about us. My repentance is for the display of God's power in me. The result is evoking from us a boasting confidence in God, in our Lord Jesus Christ. *"But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus...so that, just as it is written, 'Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord'"* (1 Cor. 1:30, 31). This is the lesson Paul was taught on the occasion of his "earthly" thorn in the flesh. *"Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ...for when I am weak, then I am strong"* (2 Cor. 12:8-10). Our faith must be filled with this simple but so fundamental and profound point and promise. We do not have to be fearful of our weakness for it is God's stage to display His power. So rejoice in your weakness and boast in our God. His treasure has been placed in you to display, not your power, but His! Take heart!

3. No condemnation for those in Christ (Rom. 8:1).

The third promise with which to fill your faith is that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Such a sweeping promise leaves a battle-weary child of God breathless. *"Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"* (Rom. 8:1). When the gravity of such a promise sinks in, we want to ask, how can this be?

The reason is that God has accomplished all of our salvation. *"For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified"* (Rom. 8:29, 30). That we not miss the impact of this fact the Apostle continues, *"If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will*

He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us" (Rom. 8:31-34). The victory of Jesus Christ in the plan of God, the Father, is so comprehensive and so decisive that the elect can only be described as "super conquerors" through Him (v. 37). Nothing will separate them "from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 39). We need to be deeply assured by this promise – no condemnation will come from the lips of God for those who are in Christ. We wear the righteousness earned by His Son, and the blood of the Lamb has paid our debt and the penalty for our sin. Our union has made us ready for judgment with Christ, and we have already been given the verdict before the trial – justified! Therefore, this promise of no condemnation is to make us bold about repentance.

It does not eliminate the need for repentance, but knowing that both the power and the forgiveness is assured, every hesitancy should be removed. We are assured that the Father waits as longingly for us as He waited for the prodigal. This is the promise of Isaiah, *"Therefore the Lord longs to be gracious to you, And therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the Lord is a God of justice; how blessed are all those who long for Him" (30:18)*. It is the promise of Hebrews, *"For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (4:15, 16)*. This promise is repeated again, and again, and again in various ways, so that we will be assured that as we come in repentance, we will find grace and rest for our souls. God has assured us of His reception of our repentance. These promises are to fill our faith more and more. This confident faith meets our fears and anxiety head on so that they are quenched with the fire extinguishing grace of the cross.

Summary

With these three promises our faith should be bursting at the seams. First, in my desire and wanting to repent we are assured this is already the evidence of God at work in us doing the impossible. Second, in my fear and trembling, my weakness, is God's chosen stage to display His power in me, so I will always boast in Him. Third, the fact that there is no condemnation for those in Christ assures me of my reception at God's throne. We *will* be met with grace and power, so do not hesitate. Come! To set the stage for these promises, two truths about repentance were underlined. First, repentance of necessity demands complete and total obedience. Anything less will not redirect and reorient our lives, and anything less will not start on the path of the mortification of our sin. Second, this reorientation of our lives is incomplete without a personal commitment of ourselves to it. Therefore, of necessity, repentance demands the personal expression of dedication to its course. There are two last expectations, which we must address. First, what should I expect to experience in repentance? Second, if I commit myself to the course of repentance, that is, total and complete obedience, but then I fall into sin again, how do I respond?

B. Two Expectations to Anticipate

1. What should I expect to experience when truly repenting?

The sense of anxiety which repentance can stir within has been discussed. Though such anxiety is normal to our anticipation of repentance and its demands, yet this anxiety must be met by the renewal of our minds, our thinking, so that we perceive repentance from the perspective of Scripture and not our own subjective experience. But what Biblical expectations should we have toward the experience of repentance? What should we expect to experience spiritually, emotionally, and mentally when repentance is Biblically experienced? Three parts characterize this first expectation.

a. Relief

First, there is the release and the relief from the lifting of our previous anxiety. The Holy Spirit accomplishes this. The means by which He works are the renewal of the mind, i.e. the reframing of our thinking with Biblical ideas and the development of a Biblical worldview. This renewal is supplemented with the filling of our faith with the promises of God.³⁸

b. Fellowship

Second, repentance issues in the blessedness and joy of unrestrained fellowship. Sin has the predictable and inevitable result of driving a wedge between God and us. The knowledge of sin produces guilt, and unresolved guilt pushes the guilty party to distance himself from the offended party. Like Adam after his sin, he was ashamed of himself and attempted to cover and hide himself. Pride, shame, fear of giving up the pleasure of sin, our aversion to submitting to the law of God, and many other motivations come into play that drive us into deeper hiding and greater distance from God. Unresolved sin creates a slow spiritual dying, a spiritual suffocation. When finally by the grace of God we are granted repentance,³⁹ and our lives are realigned and redirected in accordance with the will and laws of God. There will be a great relief from the running and the hiding, from the shame, from arrogance and pride, from the hardness of heart, and we are home again. There is once again peace between the Holy Spirit and your soul. This relief gives way to become joy as we breathe in the forgiveness that is ours in Christ. We rejoice in the wondrous grace of God poured out upon us so freely in Christ when we were so undeserving. We realize afresh that this grace is a fountain, which never runs dry. Thankfulness now accompanies our joy. How good God is. How amazing that He delights in being so good to me. He is my Helper, my Deliverer, my Rock, my Shelter and Hiding Place. Praise joins

³⁸ Promises give us specific warrant to expect the work of God. Whereas, the truth of Scripture apart from specific promises provide the material by which we can understand the workings of God, how we should perceive the world, and what our duty to God is.

³⁹ The great variety of ways God brings this about is truly amazing. Sometimes, there can be a moment of clarity when you see the way of escape and you want to take it. Sometimes, circumstances press you to a point of crisis or suffering, and the crisis necessitates repentance. Other times, the conviction of your sin by the Spirit brings such sorrow that it crushes you, or it so depresses and constrains you that you must repent. At times, you see your sin, and before it progresses to an extreme, you have immediately repented fearing its progress even to a small degree. At other times, the truth of Scripture washes over you and ushers you to the path of repentance. The recognition of God's goodness to us will sometimes be the impetus for repentance. The ministry of another person to us will trigger our repentance. This ministry from others may take many forms: comfort, exhortation, warning, admonishing, correcting, teaching, helping, etc. The experiences of the preaching of God's word, worship, receiving the Lord's Supper, prayer, fasting, ministry to others, or other means of grace will be used by the Spirit to trigger repentance. These and many others are the variations of experiencing the granting of repentance (cf. 2 Tim. 2:25, 26; Acts 5:31; 11:18).

thanksgiving.⁴⁰ This restored state is one of blessedness, “*Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, And whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account*” (Rom. 4:7, 8; Ps. 32:1, 2).

c. Zeal

Third, repentance issues into greater spiritual understanding, growth, and zeal for the Lord. Paul wrote the Corinthian church a very stern and sin-convicting letter. It stung, grieved, and burdened the Corinthians terribly. “*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. For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter*” (2 Cor. 7:10-11). Here then is the fruitful outcome of true repentance. The process of repentance is depicted as painful and challenging, but it led to “salvation.” In contrast, a vain faith, which refuses to repent and persevere in righteousness, leads to death.⁴¹ The Corinthians by their repentance proved that their faith was truly a saving faith leading to salvation. Such insight is spiritual understanding. Their spiritual growth and zeal for the Lord and His righteousness further blessed them. “*What earnestness this...has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong.*” From their complacency and passiveness about sin in their midst, they rose up like lions to do war. They received the correction of Paul’s letter, repented, redirecting their lives, aligning themselves with God’s righteousness and holiness, and the fruit of their repentance was a zeal and earnestness consistent with the Lord’s righteousness. True repentance always produces spiritual growth. It brings relief from the estrangement of sin; it brings the joy of restoration and a heart aligned and at peace with the Lord; and true repentance is the path to growth and greater zeal.

2. What should I expect if I fall into sin again?

The possibility of failure fosters a certain degree of anxiety. The greater the certainty of failure increases the degree of fear, but with the certainty of failure there will either be a still greater escalation and intensification of the anxiety and fear experienced or a plunge into despair. It is certain that we will sin again. It is guaranteed by our limited knowledge, our limited control, the way we think, given the ferocity and effectiveness of our enemies, and the inherent propensity of our natures to sin, i.e. our “weakness” in all its manifestations. Therefore, if in repentance I declare myself purposed and committed not to sin, then what do I do *if*, or rather *when*, I sin? How do I respond? How do I respond to God? How do I respond to myself? How am I to understand and think Biblically about my failure and then even anticipating more future failures? How does one continue on with such repentance with any integrity between word and practice? Are not hypocrisy and despair the only anticipated outcome of such a

⁴⁰ Cf. Ezra 9:1-10:44; Pss. 32; 38; 39; 51; 130; Ezek. 36:31; Jonah 2:1-9; 3:5-10; Lu. 3:7-14; 15:20-24; 18:9-14; 22:61,62; Jn. 15:10, 11; Rom. 2:4-6; 8:5-17; 2 Cor. 7:6-16; Gal. 5:22; Phil. 4:4-6; Titus 2:11-3:8; Heb. 12:14-17, 28; Jas. 4:7-10; Rev. 3:14-22.

⁴¹ Judas is the classic example of sorrow, which produces death. He despaired of his sin, and he went and hung himself. Hope and faith are the fruit of true repentance which issue in restoration and growth in the Lord.

scenario? What do we do with all of Scripture's absolute statements promising and demanding victorious and righteous living?⁴² Are they attainable? Are they absolutely attainable or only approximately? These questions just begin to scratch the surface. It seems that hazards, contradictions, and inconsistencies surround us. Yet, we need not panic. Scripture does provide answers.

a. Some Qualifications

As we look for these answers there are some points of qualification for our forthcoming explanations, which should be first made. **First**, there are some tensions which, after all is said and done, will still remain when we are done. This should not surprise us, because in the area of spiritual matters we are dealing with issues which are beyond our knowing and capability of knowing. We are dealing with mysteries beyond our ability to comprehend. This is what Scripture clearly teaches. *"We see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known"* (1 Cor. 13:12). *"You have enclosed me behind and before.... Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is too high, I cannot attain to it"* (Ps. 139:5, 6). Therefore, we should not expect to know all the answers or reach a resolution without remaining tensions. **Second**, and more importantly, we need to focus on understanding what we have been given, and we must accept that on occasions we simply are not given explanations. We are given commands! Yet, even in the commands, there is a reasonableness that we will find implicit to them. **Third**, it is hoped that as we progress toward a resolution for the above questions, that, in some measure, we will be able to string together all the points, which have been made so far, to form a harmonious whole.

b. We are living in two ages.

There is an inherent tension between our earthly lives in Christ and all the promises which accompany being in Christ because we are living in two ages. We have not been "glorified" yet, but we have the first fruits of our glorification.⁴³ Our glorification, i.e. our total heavenly transformation (e.g. Phil. 3:20, 21; 1 Cor. 15:51-54), awaits the second coming of Christ, but that transformation has already begun (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18). Yet the restraints, the corruptions, the weaknesses of this age still confound us (Rom. 8:18-27). Our enemies still abound. The war between the kingdoms still rages. We groan within ourselves. The first fruits of the Kingdom have "already" come, but we are "not yet" glorified. We live in the overlap of the ages, so that we have "already" tasted of the good things to come, but we are "not yet" satisfied and completed. We live in the tension of the "already" but "not yet." Therefore, complete resolution has not yet arrived. By the very Biblical definition there are inherent tensions to our present state. We are not in heaven yet.

⁴² Cf. e.g. Mt. 5:48; 7:17-20; 25:31-40; 28:20; Jn. 8:34; 14:15; Rom. 2:5-8; 6:6, 7, 11, 12, 14, 19, 22; 8:4-17; 13:14; Gal.5:19-21, 24; 1 Pet. 1:13-16; 2 Pet. 1: 5-9, esp. 9; 1 Jn. 3:6, 9; 5:18.

⁴³ E.g. The Holy Spirit is the earnest payment, down payment, of all that is ours in Christ (Eph. 1:13, 14; 2 Cor. 1:22; Rom. 8:23). His fruit (e.g. Gal. 5:22) as they are manifested in our lives are future blessings experienced now. Christ's resurrection is a first fruit of the "age to come" now (1 Cor. 15:20, 23; Acts. 26:23; Rev. 1:5; Col. 1:18). All of Christ's miracles were the evidence that the Kingdom of God had arrived in "this age" and thereby ushering in the "age to come."

c. We are in a real battle.

With the recognition that we are living in the “already” and the “not yet,” we realize that though our salvation has started it is not yet completed. We are living in a “battle zone.” It is a battle with “real” if not literal bullets. It is a battle with real blood, real wounds, real suffering, and real enemies who concertedly seek our real destruction. Yet, this too is God’s plan. As Christ’s earthly Body we take up His battle. We take up His ministry (Acts 1:1). We are to complete His sufferings (Col. 1:24). We are to arm ourselves with His armor (Eph. 6:13-17), with His purpose (1 Pet. 4:1, 2), and with His Spirit (Rom. 8:9-17). We are to follow His example (1 Pet. 2:21-25), and we are fix our eyes upon Him, the author and perfecter of faith (Heb. 12:2).

d. A Parable

These facts can be translated into a parable. Picture a small boy stepping into his father’s shoes and beginning a long march. He will stumble. The shoes are great weights for his small feet, weak legs, and undeveloped coordination. His father has called him to follow in his path as small and as weak as he is, and with an inspired love and a determination not to disappoint his father, he follows. His first surge of idealism and enthusiasm will wane, so he will have to learn fortitude and perseverance. This was the father’s plan. Though the boy now knows he will fall again, he stands and trudges on. But this is not without effect. His legs are growing stronger from his struggling and trudging, and his feet are growing bigger. Slowing his coordination is also developing from the exercise. This too was his father’s plan. This parable points to the simple but very real fact that the journey is cannot be minimized. So it is with repentance.

1) Lesson One: The Father’s plan is not always straightforward.

Part of the parable was that the father’s plan for his son was not always straightforward. The father could have made the journey easier, but that was not his purpose. The struggles were as much a part of the plan as the arrival. Discouragement served as a teacher as well as for progress. So it is with God’s plan. He is not afraid of letting His children hurt or suffer or face hardship or to die (cf. Rom. 14:7, 8; 8:35, 36; Heb. 12:4-14). It was by these very things that Jesus was perfected (Heb. 2:10; 5:7-9). Defeat and weakness had its lessons as well as victory and strength. God’s purposes differ for us at different times and seasons: here victory, there defeat, now patience, then perseverance, and so God’s good purpose differs and is not always straightforward or obvious.

2) Lesson Two: Repentance is the Christian life.

A second part of the parable is that repentance is not simply what we do when we sin. Repentance is hearing the call of Christ and following Him. Repentance is discipleship. It is following after Christ no matter what we face or however inadequate we are for the task. Repentance is the Christian’s life. It is his or hers marching orders. Repentance hears the call of Christ and follows in the face of sin and enemies. Repentance is not perfection; it is following Christ. Thus, the apostle Paul’s testimony to the Philippians is a testimony of repentance.

“...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,...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. Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (3:8-14).

This is repentance. It is the living out of our vow of discipleship. It is the path by which we come to know Christ by following in His steps by knowing the real help of His Spirit, and by knowing that in my trudging I am being enabled by my Father in heaven. I know that in every step I take it will be by the strength of Christ at work in me. My course teaches me, “*Not that I have already obtained it or have not already become perfect, but I press on...but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on....*” Above all things I desire the prize for which Christ calls me to heaven – to know Him face to face.

e. Summary: What do I do when I fail again?

Therefore, when confronted with my sin I freely acknowledge it. I name it. It is my enemy, the offender of my Lord. It is not who I am. As attractive and appealing as it seems, it is not me. I belong to Christ. I am His, and He is mine. Therefore, I purpose never to sin again. I want no more shame upon my Lord’s name, and I press on. But if in my weakness I fall to my enemy again, I have a Lord who has already paid the price of that sin, so it cannot claim or demand payment. It has been paid for already by my gracious and precious Lord. He calls me, so I turn and follow His voice. I grow as I go. Slowly, painstakingly, always moving forward by His grace and mercy, which I do not hesitate to ask for boldly. All has been paid for, so I acknowledge it and forget it and press on. Ever righting myself, ever reorienting myself to His voice and His call. He is working, so I can work. That I am at work is the evidence that He is at work. By this course He will grow me; His Spirit will transform me; the deeds of the flesh will be mortified; I will be led to the shores of heaven; and I will see and know Him face to face! This is repentance.

D. The Joy of Repentance

Repentance of this kind spills over on earth and into heaven with joy. In Luke 15 Jesus told three parables: the lost sheep (vv. 4-7), the lost coin (vv. 8-10), and the lost son (vv. 10-32). We are told that they are about repentance (vv. 7, 10, 24, 32). There are three important emphases, which we do not want to miss. First, they teach us of the radical nature of repentance, namely, repentance is the sinner’s return from being lost (i.e. being found vv. 6, 9, 24, 32), and lostness is equivalent to death (vv. 24, 32). Second, repentance brings with it an elating and explosive experience of joy for God (“*heaven*”, v. 7), for the company of heaven (“*the angels of God*,” v. 10), and for the one who repented (implicitly, vv. 20-24; cf. 10:20). Third, as we observe heaven’s joy we must see the enormous weight and value that God places on repentance. From this vantage point of God’s joy we see that the duty and work of repentance serves God’s delight. This radical

transformation of peoples' lives is not only miraculous but it is also delightful, even deliriously wonderful. It fills the heart of God with gladness; He is enraptured and exultant; He revels over repentance. True repentance delivers bliss and blessed to heaven in special portions. The application is obvious that this is the way we should also see the event of repentance. We must behold repentance as a resurrection of the dead (vv. 24, 32). We must envision it as against all odds the lost was found (vv. 6, 9, 24, 32). Repentance is never mundane or dismal, rather it is always to be seen as a miracle. One can never watch the birth of a baby without gasping over the miracle and wonder of life. In a like manner repentance should never be taken for granted or seen as less than the reality is. It is the joy for which Jesus came to deliver to heaven and share on earth! "...*They were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren*" (Acts 15:3). Such should ever be the joy of the Church as it is the joy of heaven.

This emphasis on the joy of repentance leads us back to the fundamental idea of joy in the NT. Joy is found in Jesus Christ. It is in Him because of what He does, and it is in Him because of who He is. Thus, Matthew records that the wise men rejoiced with great joy at the star of the coming King (Mt. 2:10). We see especially in Luke's Gospel, the Gospel of joy, that Jesus is the reason for the joy of those in the Gospel narrative. Zacharias, John the Baptist's father, rejoiced over John's birth because John would be the forerunner to the Messiah. When Elizabeth was pregnant with John, her baby jumped for joy when she saw Mary, the mother of Jesus (Lu. 1:41, 44). The angels' announcement of Jesus' birth to the shepherds was an announcement accompanied with great joy (Lu. 2:10). These illustrations point to the fact that Biblical joy is directly reflected from who Jesus is and what He will do.

In John's Gospel Jesus' own joy is the result of His obedience to the Father and that He abides in the love of the Father, i.e. His fellowship with the Father is perfect and is full of joy (15:10, 11). Jesus gives this joy, "*His joy,*" to His disciples to make their joy complete (15:11). The implication is that as His disciples abide in Him, i.e. abide in His love for them (v. 9) and obey His words and commandments (vv. 7, 8, 12), their joy in Jesus will be completely realized just as Jesus' joy is complete. The disciples' joy is distinguished from the world's joy. In fact, they are diametrically opposed to one another. The world will rejoice in Jesus' suffering and death (16:20), while the disciples will lament, but then at the resurrection their sorrow will be turned into joy (vv. 20-22). Jesus promised them that "*no one will take your joy away from you*" (v. 22). Further, their joy would also be experienced in answered prayer which Jesus in His ascension will grant them (v. 24). Finally, Jesus additionally explained that the fullness of His disciples' joy would be realized in the distinctiveness His words would create in them (v. 13), in Jesus' continued intercession and shepherding of disciples (v. 12), in their oneness (vv. 21-23), in the future glories He would share with them (vv. 24), and in that they would be loved with the love with which the Father loves Him (v. 26). On the evening of Easter Jesus appeared to His disciples. John tells us that Jesus showed them His hands and His side, the proof that He

was not a ghost but had truly been resurrected. The disciples' response would have been predictable. "*The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord*" (20:20).⁴⁴

Jesus' joy was the result of His perfect fellowship with the Father, and it was this joy He gave to His disciples through His work, His words, and His Spirit. Thus, Biblical joy is dependent upon both who Jesus is and what He has done. Repentance is the most comprehensive expression of the means by which one can avail himself or herself of this joy. This is not simply an earthly joy, but it is the Father's joy rejoicing in His children's return to Him. The Father is the Father who runs from His porch and sweeps up his estranged son into his arms. He cries with overwhelming joy that His son who had been lost has been found, that His son who was dead has come back to life. The joy of repentance echoes both from earth and from heaven. It is a joy that sees in Jesus the means of perfect fellowship with the Father and is also the fulfilled longing of our heavenly Father and all the company of heaven.

⁴⁴ J. Painter, "Joy," *DJG*, J. Green and S. McKnight eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 395f.