

GRACE EVANGELICAL SOCIETY

What Is Repentance?

A BIBLICAL STUDY

ROBERT N. WILKIN

What Is Repentance? A Biblical Study

Copyright © 2019 Grace Evangelical Society

Excerpt from Robert N. Wilkin, *Turn and Live: The Power of Repentance*

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided by USA copyright law.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version*, Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982, by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

Design: Shawn Lazar

Wilkin, Robert N. 1952—

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Grace Evangelical Society
P.O. Box 1308
Denton, TX 76202
www.faithalone.org
ges@faithalone.org

Printed in the United States of America

WHY STUDY REPENTANCE?

BECAUSE REPENTANCE OCCURS OFTEN IN “SALVIFIC CONTEXTS”

REPENTANCE IS FOUND IN contexts dealing with gaining *salvation*, with receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, with believing the gospel of the kingdom, with avoidance of perishing, with the kingdom of heaven being at hand, and so on.

While we must take care in each context to determine what is in view, it is easy to see why most Evangelicals think that repentance is one of the conditions of everlasting life.

In this book we will discuss the uses of *repent* (*metanoia*) and *repentance* (*metanoēō*) in the New Testament which appear to teach that repentance is required to be born again. We will evaluate whether repentance is indeed a condition.

There are ten passages which are most often cited as showing that repentance is necessary for salvation from eternal condemnation:

1. Peter implied in 2 Peter 3:9 that repentance is the way to avoid perishing.
2. The Lord said in Luke 13:3-5, “unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”
3. Peter in his Pentecost sermon said that repentance must occur before the Holy Spirit will be received (Acts 2:38).

4. John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus both proclaimed, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:2; 4:17).
5. The Lord Jesus linked repentance and believing the gospel: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15).
6. The Lord’s Great Commission in Luke linked repentance and the forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47).
7. Paul linked repentance and salvation: “For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation” (2 Cor 7:10).
8. Paul indicated what the believers in Macedonia and Achaia said about the believers in Thessalonica: “For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess 1:9).
9. Jesus told an account about a rich man and Lazarus, a poor man (Luke 16:19-31). They both die, but the rich man is in torment in Sheol, whereas Lazarus is next to Abraham in Paradise. The rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to talk with his brothers so that they might repent and avoid his torment (Luke 16:30).
10. Peter was the first to take the message of life to the Gentiles (Acts 10–11). The Holy Spirit fell on Cornelius and his household as a result of the evangelistic message which Peter gave. Several Jewish believers who had gone with Peter to observe concluded, “Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life” (Acts 11:18).

We will devote a chapter to each of those ten passages, as well as one chapter to discuss various other texts which are sometimes cited (e.g., Acts 19:4; Rom 2:4; Heb 6:4-6).

BECAUSE MOST EVANGELICALS BELIEVE REPENTANCE IS A CONDITION OF EVERLASTING LIFE

It is not a stretch to say that over 90% of Evangelicals believe that repentance is a condition of everlasting life. Calvinists? Check. Arminians? Check. Catholics? Check. Orthodox? Check. The same is true for most Fundamentalists.

In this book we will look at quotes from leading scholars and pastors. We will evaluate their suggestion that repentance is required to have everlasting life.

Here is an example of a typical view on repentance and salvation by a leading Evangelical theologian, Dr. Wayne Grudem:

The faith that justifies is never alone because it never occurs by itself, but is always accompanied by—or includes—repentance from sin and is always followed by other actions such as doing good works and continuing to believe.”¹

Grudem defines repentance as “a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and [to] walk in obedience to Christ.”² He says, “The gospel call, according to the New Testament, is ever and always a call to turn away from your sin as you turn toward the Lord to seek forgiveness from him.”³

We will see many more quotes like these by several leading theologians and pastors.

BECAUSE CONFUSION OVER SALVATION AND ASSURANCE IS BAD

If we get this subject wrong, it is bad.

If repentance is a condition of everlasting life and we do not believe and teach that it is, that is tragic. We are misleading others. And we may well have failed to do what is necessary to be born again.

If repentance is not a condition of everlasting life, and yet we believe and teach that it is, that too is a terrible error. We are misleading others, and we may not be born again ourselves. Does adding a requirement to everlasting life that is not actually a requirement mean one is not born again?

In this book we will consider these vital questions.

My challenge to you is to be like the Bereans of Acts 17:11. Be open to the Word of God. Whatever your view, be open to accepting what God has to say about repentance.

People love to put salvation prayers in books. I don't, because I do not believe that there is such a thing as a sinner's prayer that results

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Free Grace Theology: 5 Ways It Diminishes the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), p. 38.

² *Ibid.*, p. 42.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

in the new birth. We will discuss the condition of everlasting life throughout the book. But it is not praying a prayer.

However, I will offer a prayer for insight:

Lord, please open your Word to my eyes. I want to understand, believe, and teach only what your Word says. Please protect me from error as I read this book about repentance. If there is truth in this book, then please reveal it to me through the work of your Holy Spirit.

REPENTANCE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

INTRODUCTION

THE ENGLISH WORD *REPENT* is only found ten times in Old Testament translations and one of those ten (Num 23:19) is a statement that God does not repent. In the remaining nine places, the underlying Hebrew word is *shuv* (or the noun *teshuvah*), which is most often translated as *turning*. The noun *repentance* is not found at all in most English translations of the Old Testament.¹

So, the precise word *repent* is not found much in the Old Testament. However, the word *turn* (*shuv*) occurs over 1,000 times in the Hebrew Scriptures, often in contexts dealing with turning from sinful ways (sins, wickedness, wicked ways, etc.)

There are very few texts in the Old Testament which potentially show that repentance is a condition for everlasting life or the equivalent (being in the coming kingdom, having a new heart, being part of the resurrection of the just). Of course, a prime reason for this is that while there are many Hebrew words for salvation or deliverance in the Old Testament, they rarely if ever refer to regeneration. They

¹It is found once in the KJV (Hos 13:14), once in the NIV and NASB (Isa 30:15), three times in the NET Bible (Jer 31:9, 16; 50:4), and once in the CSB (Hos 14:2). It is not found at all in the NKJV, ESV, RSV.

always or almost always refer to temporal deliverance (from enemies, from physical death, from calamity, etc.).

TURN AND LIVE (EZEKIEL 3:19; 18:23, 32; 33:11)

Ezekiel has a number of verses which link turning from wickedness with living. These are sometimes cited as showing that the Old Testament taught that repentance is a condition for everlasting life. What do the contexts show?

You can easily see how the following verses could be used to teach that repentance is a condition for regeneration:

“Yet, if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul” (Ezekiel 3:19).

“Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?’ says the Lord GOD, ‘and not that he should turn from his ways and live?’” (Ezekiel 18:23).

“For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,’ says the Lord GOD. “Therefore turn and live!” (Ezekiel 18:32).

“As I live,’ says the Lord GOD, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?’” (Ezekiel 33:11).

The most natural understanding of all these verses is that *physical death* is in view if the nation rebels against God. Is that not what we see in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, the blessings and curses chapters? The wages of sin is death.

Charles Dyer comments:

God was not saying that a saved Israelite would lose his [eternal] salvation if he fell into sin. Both the blessing and the judgment in view here are temporal, not eternal. The

judgment was physical death (cf. vv 4, 20, 26), not eternal damnation.²

Similarly, in introducing his discussion of Ezekiel 18, Charles Feinberg notes, “The subject of justification by faith should not be pressed into this chapter; it is not under discussion.”³ Later, commenting on verse 9 (which refers to life being conditioned upon obedience to the Law of Moses) he writes, “This statement, we must caution again, does not have eternal life in view, but life on earth. Eternal life is not obtained on the grounds mentioned in this portion of Scripture.”⁴

Ezekiel 18 is not cited in the New Testament by the Lord or by any of the New Testament authors. Surely if these were key verses which show that repentance is a condition of everlasting life, then we’d see them used in evangelistic contexts by the Lord and His Apostles.

THEY TURNED FROM THEIR EVIL WAYS (JONAH 3:5-10)

Nineveh was the largest city in terms of population in the world at the time of Jonah. If Jonah 4:11 is speaking of the entire population of the city,⁵ then it was over 120,000. If it is speaking solely about small children, then the population was around 600,000.

The entire city repented. Men, women, and children. Even animals were covered with sackcloth and ashes. “The people of Nineveh believed God” (Jonah 3:5) about what Jonah had just said, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown” (Jonah 3:4).

The king said in a proclamation, “let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away His fierce anger, so that we may not perish” (Jonah 3:8b-9).

² Charles H. Dyer, “Ezekiel,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Old Testament Edition, edited by John Walvoord and Roy Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), p. 1261.

³ Charles Lee Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1969), p. 99.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁵ Obviously, adults know their left hand from their right. However, some think Jonah might have been speaking figuratively here, suggesting that most of the Ninevites were childish and ignorant.

Jonah says, “Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it” (Jonah 3:10).

While some might think that the king was trying to avoid the eternal condemnation of the Ninevites when he said, “so that we may not perish,” that is contrary to the context. The issue is the overthrow of Nineveh (Jonah 3:4). That overthrow would have meant the death of at least all the men, including the king. He was hoping that their repentance would result in God’s sparing their lives. And he was right.

Jonah 3:5-10 is alluded to by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 12:41, “The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here.” The Lord was saying that the people of Israel in His day should have turned from their wicked ways as a result of His preaching.

Was He implying that anyone who turned from his sins would have everlasting life? No. There is no hint of that. Compare John 3:14-18; 5:24; 6:28-29, 47; 11:25-27. In light of the context of Jonah 3, His point is related to the overthrow versus the sparing of Nineveh. Had the Ninevites not repented, they would have been overthrown. The nation of Israel did not repent, and so it was overthrown in AD 70. Over one million Jews died. Essentially the Lord was saying, “Forty years and the nation shall be overthrown.”⁶

LET THE WICKED FORSAKE HIS WAY (ISAIAH 55:7)

The Lord said through Isaiah, “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon” (Isa 55:7).

Because Isaiah 55:7 mentions God pardoning and having mercy on those who forsake their wicked ways, some see in this verse a suggestion that repentance is required for salvation from eternal condemnation.⁷

⁶In order for the kingdom to come for Israel, two things must happen: the nation has to repent, and it has to believe in Messiah Jesus. The nation did neither of those things in the first century. Only a small remnant believed and repented. But there is a coming day when the nation will be both repentant and believing (cf. Rom 11:26). At that time, the end of the Tribulation, the Lord will return and establish His kingdom.

⁷Under the heading “What Is the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” I found this statement at a

However, two factors call that conclusion into question. First, the idea of receiving pardon is associated with temporal blessings and curses, whether individual (Num 30:5-13; Deut 29:19-20; 2 Kings 24:4; Ps 25:11; 103:3) or corporate (Exod 34:9; Num 14:19-20; 2 Chron 7:14; Amos 7:2), in the Old Testament.⁸ Individual Jews who were away from God needed pardon and mercy whether they were eternally secure or not.⁹ King David was born again when he committed adultery and murder yet he needed God's pardon and mercy (2 Sam 12:1-15; Psalm 51). Second, this text is primarily corporate, not individual. It fits within the Old Testament motif that God curses disobedience and blesses obedience in His people, Israel. This is a call for everyone in the nation of Israel to repent and to be blessed.¹⁰ This chapter anticipates the coming kingdom when God will grant Israel *national salvation from her enemies and from temporal judgment*. Isaiah 55 ends with a glimpse of the coming millennial kingdom (vv 12-13). There is no indication that Isaiah is writing about what an individual had to do to have everlasting life.

church website, "You must repent of all that dishonors God—Isaiah 55:7; Luke 9:23. You must believe in Christ as Lord and Savior, and be willing to follow Him—Romans 10:9. What keeps you from giving your life to Jesus right now? Repent and trust in Christ today." See <http://langstaffassembly.com/the-gospel-1>. Alfred Martin also implies this concerns eternal salvation in his commentary, *Isaiah: The Salvation of Jehovah* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1956), p. 103. So also, John Martin, "Isaiah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Old Testament Edition, pp. 1110-1111; *NIV Zondervan Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), p. 1431, note on Isaiah 55:6-7.

⁸ In fact, in the Old Testament *pardon* is never linked with justification before God or salvation from eternal condemnation.

⁹ William MacDonald says concerning Isaiah 55:6-7, "The pathway of blessings lies in seeking the LORD and in forsaking sin" (*Believer's Bible Commentary*, Old Testament [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992], p. 982). J. Alec Motyer says, "*Pardon*... is a word of general meaning: to do whatever must be done to deal with sin, a word focused on the fact of forgiveness without reference to reason or means" (*Isaiah* [Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1999], p. 346).

¹⁰ While Isaiah speaks to individuals (e.g., "his way," "the unrighteous man," "let him return," and "He will have mercy on him"), he is calling upon everyone in Israel to heed this exhortation. National repentance is made up of the repentance of all the individuals of the nation (cf. Jonah 3:1-10; Matt 12:41; see also Matt 3:2; 4:17).

Isaiah 55:7 is not quoted or alluded to in the New Testament.

REPENTANCE IS A CONDITION FOR ESCAPING TEMPORAL JUDGMENT

The Old Testament makes it clear that repentance is a condition for escaping temporal judgment and premature death.

There is no reliable indication in the Old Testament that repentance is a condition for escaping eternal condemnation.

Want more?

Did you enjoy *What Is Repentance*? Then be sure to read Bob Wilkin's entire book on the meaning and role of repentance in the Christian Life, *Turn and Live: The Power of Repentance*, available in our bookstore:

www.faithalone.org/store/

And sign up for a free subscription to [*Grace in Focus*](#) magazine.

