

Faith and Repentance

In this series so far, we have surveyed the message that God has given to us in the Bible. Across its pages we have seen consistently that He plans to set up a kingdom which will last for ever, that He will make this earth a place of peace and joy, with no sin, disease or unhappiness; and finally, not even death. Now we look at how God wants us to respond.

A Choice to be Made

We read that nothing is too hard for the Lord (Genesis 18:14), so God could have made us like robots, keeping His laws by animal instinct. But He had a higher plan. After He had made the animals God said:

“Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them (Genesis 1:26).



God made men and women with the intention that we should become like Him. He described His own character to Moses in these wonderful words:

The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty (Exodus 34:6-7).

Men and women have the potential to behave like that, but He also gave us free will, and so how we live is our own responsibility. We have a duty to live in the way that pleases God, but He wants us to do so by our own choice. From the beginning, men and women showed a strong preference for pleasing themselves rather than God. Left to ourselves, we mostly do not live to please God, and that is why humankind as a whole is astray from Him, suffering and dying.

Without Hope?

Paul tells some new Christians in Ephesus to remember that before accepting the Gospel and becoming part of God's family, they were in a very different state:

At that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world (Ephesians 2:12).

This is the natural position of all men and women unless we accept God's way.

If we desire to be amongst His people, we have to 'opt in'. By ourselves we cannot solve the problem. Even if we could live perfect lives starting today, we could not *earn* the eternal life that God wants us to have. In New Testament times there were scholars who thought that if they kept all of God's laws from the Old Testament they could be sure of eternal life. But Jesus told them that although they were obeying details they were failing to exercise the big things like justice, mercy and faith (Matthew 23:23). The Apostle Paul shows from the Old Testament itself:

By the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20).

If you look at the earlier verses (Romans 3:10–19) you will see that Paul quotes from Psalms 14, 53, 5, 140, 10, 59 and 36 in that order. These show that humans, left to themselves and without guidance from God's Word, do not please Him.

The Importance of Faith

The Lord God is merciful and gracious:

As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust (Psalm 103:13–14).

Therefore, God does not demand perfection from us, which would be impossible. What He does demand is faith – He expects men and women to believe what He says, and then to try hard to please Him.

This is what we learn from Abraham. God promised a child to him although he and his wife were very old:

He believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness (Genesis 15:6).

Abraham was not perfect, but God was pleased with him because he showed faith. In Romans 4:23–5 (ESV), the New Testament explains how important this is:

The words 'it was counted to him' were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification (in other words, 'to put us right with God').

Another key scripture says "*the just shall live by his faith*" (Habakkuk 2:4) and this is quoted three times in the New Testament (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38).

When we have been put right with God by faith in this way, God will resume His work of making us like Himself – 'in His image' as our English translation puts it. Paul wrote to the members of another church:

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator (Colossians 3:9–10, ESV).

When we really try to do that, we start to realize how far from God's ways our lives have been. This is the beginning of what the Bible calls 'repentance'.

God Desires to Forgive

Six weeks after Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem, the Apostle Peter stood up boldly in the city and accused the crowd of murdering the Son of God. There could not be a worse sin. Peter said:

“Let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:36–38).

Even a sin as bad as that can be forgiven, if we can truly repent and do as these people did. The word ‘repent’ means ‘change your mind, think differently’. It means being truly sorry for the wrong we have done and the good we have failed to do, and then making up our minds to start again, living a new kind of life.

Although we cannot possibly earn eternal life and we depend completely on God’s grace (meaning His favour and forgiveness), God expects us to show our appreciation by doing our best to live in His way.

Facing Up to our Faults

Before Jesus began to teach, John the Baptist was sent to show people the way back to God, to be reconciled to Him.

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written

in the prophets: “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you. The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; Make his paths straight.’” John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins (Mark 1:1–5).

They had to be honest with John the Baptist, and with themselves, in confessing their sins. Indeed, when people came to John with the wrong attitude, he turned them away:

When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them: “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Matthew 3:7–8).

It must be the same with us, when we desire to be associated with Jesus by baptism into his name, to share the hope of eternal life. We must look at ourselves honestly, facing up to the faults we have.



Saul the Pharisee learned the same thing. He converted to Christ, and

became the person we know as the Apostle Paul. He spent the rest of his life preaching and teaching people *“that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance”* (Acts 26:20).

In the Old Testament

In earlier studies from this series, we were thinking about the sacrifices and other rituals of Old Testament times. One important fact we learned was that these practices had no value in themselves. Their purpose was to teach men and women about how far they had gone from God’s standards and to make them aware of their need for forgiveness. In other words, they were to bring people to this state of mind that the Bible calls ‘repentance’. The prophet Joel explained it in this way:

“Now, therefore,” says the LORD, “Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.” So rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm. Who knows if He will turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him? (Joel 2:12–14).

The Invitation of Jesus

John chapter 4 records a wonderful conversation about the state of mind that God wants us to have. A woman wanted to know whether it was best to worship God on a mountain in her country (Mount Gerizim, see Joshua 8:33), or in Jerusalem. Jesus carefully explained to her that where believers worship is not the important thing. What matters now is the way in which

they worship, and that they do so sincerely:

Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:21–24).

God calls us to have faith in His promises and to believe that He wants us to be part of His kingdom. When we develop this faith, we realise our shortcomings and so repent, changing our mind and outlook to follow the example of the Lord Jesus Christ.

John Woodall

