

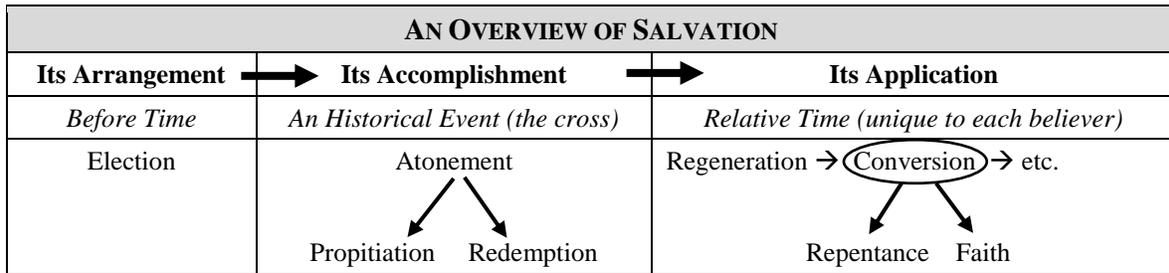
## THE MERCIES OF GOD: Repentance

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

### Introduction

The components involved in the doctrine of salvation can be placed into three categories: (1) **redemption’s arrangement** (before time, according to the decrees of God); **redemption’s accomplishment** (at a specific moment in history, achieved by Christ’s sacrifice on the cross); and (3) **redemption’s application** (how redemption is applied to the individual elect of God). The component of “repentance” belongs in category 3—the *application* of redemption. More specifically, **repentance—together with faith—is part of the experience of conversion, which itself is brought about by regeneration.** According to MacArthur and Mayhue (*Biblical Doctrine*, 590),

As God shines the light of regeneration into the sinner’s heart, he opens a man’s spiritual eyes so that he can see the bankruptcy of sin and the worthiness of Christ (Acts 26:18; 2 Cor 4:6), who is perfectly suited to forgive our sins and provide the righteousness we need for eternal life. Finally furnished with the ability to perceive reality as it is, the newborn soul necessarily and immediately turns away in revulsion from sin and eagerly turns to embrace Christ.



### A. Key Terms and Definitions

1. **“Repentance.”** Simply defined, repentance is “godly sorrow for one’s sin and a resolve to turn from it” (MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 936). A fuller definition is provided by Wayne Grudem: “Repentance is a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ. . . . Repentance is something that occurs in the heart and involves the whole person in a decision to turn from sin” (*Systematic Theology*, 713). A classic definition is found in the 1646 *Westminster Confession of Faith*:

**Key idea:**  
Godly sorrow over one’s sin, and a resolve to turn away from it.

Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached to every soul of man, as well as that of faith in Christ. By it a sinner, out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature, and righteous law of God, and upon the apprehension of His mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavoring to walk with Him in all the ways of his commandments. Although repentance is not to be rested in, as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of pardon thereof, which is the act of God’s free grace in Christ; yet it is of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it. As there is no sin so small but it deserves damnation, so there is no sin so great that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent. (15.2-4)

This understanding of repentance is based of several key terms in the Old and New Testaments. Two New Testament terms are particularly helpful:

- (a) The verb μετανοέω (*metanoēō*), **“to change one’s mind”**; and the noun μετάνοια (*metanoia*): **“a change of mind.”** This term emphasizes the *inner experience* of repentance—the change of understanding and attitude towards sin that takes place “on the inside.” For example, see **Acts 11:18**.
- (b) The verb ἐπιστρέφω (*epistrephō*), **“to change one’s course of action”**; and the noun ἐπιστροφή (*epistrophē*), **“a change of one’s course of action.”** This term emphasizes the more visible, external

experience of repentance. Repentance does not allow a person to continue in his anti-God behaviors and pursuits. It renounces them and pushes the sinner in a brand new direction. For example, see **1 Thess 1:9**.

In summarizing the difference between these two terms, Herman Bavinck writes, “Between *μετάνοια* and *ἐπιστροφή* there is indeed a distinction: the first word accentuates the internal change of mind that moves a person to turn away from one’s sinful past, while the second focuses more on the new relation in which, as a result of that change of mind, that person manifests him or herself outwardly” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 4.137).

Both terms work together to explain the nature of biblical repentance. David Chamberlain states, “It is the change of life design: the whole life pattern is changed; the goal of life is different; the aspirations are different” (*The Meaning of Repentance*, 47). Fundamentally, it describes a sorrow over and revulsion against one’s sin and sinfulness, and an all-encompassing desire for that which is opposite of sin—namely, Christ.

2. **“Penance.”** Penance is **one of the seven sacraments of Roman Catholic dogma** (the seven are: baptism, confirmation, participation in the Eucharist, penance, extreme unction, marriage, and ordination to the priesthood). According to Roman Catholicism, penance **includes four components**: (1) contrition; (2) confession; (3) satisfaction; and (4) absolution. Describing the need for penance, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (363) states,

Christ instituted the sacrament of Penance for all sinful members of the Church: above all those who, since Baptism, have fallen into grave sin, and have thus lost their baptismal grace and wounded ecclesial communion. It is to them that the sacrament of Penance offers a new possibility to convert and to recover the grace of justification. The Fathers of the Church present this sacrament as ‘the second plank [of salvation] after the shipwreck which is the loss of grace.

Two serious flaws are apparent in the Roman Catholic concept of penance:

- (a) **Its teaching that contrition over and confession of sin—when done correctly—achieves “satisfaction” for sin.** As Bavinck explains, “Immediately after the confession of sins, the priest pronounced forgiveness, but he still had to impose a penance proportionate to the severity of the sins confessed (prayers or other good works) in order that the confessants would thereby make themselves inwardly free from the power of sin” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 4.143). In fact, the Catholic Church does not even deny this: “The priest gives us a penance after confession **that we may make some atonement to God for our sins**, receive help to avoid them in the future, and make some satisfaction for the temporal punishment due to them” (*The New Baltimore Catechism*, 199). In response, R. C. Sproul writes,

Roman Catholics teach that for the sacrament [of penance] to be complete, it is necessary for the penitent believer to do ‘works of satisfaction,’ which satisfy the demands of God’s justice. So, a sinner is not off the hook when he confesses his sins; he still must do works of satisfaction. These works may be very small. The sinner may be required to say five ‘Hail Marys’ or three ‘Our Fathers’ . . . . But if his sins are especially severe, he may be required to make a pilgrimage. . . . As I noted earlier, Rome teaches that a work of satisfaction gives the penitent sinner congruous merit. . . . It is accrued to the person, and without that merit the penitent sinner, no matter how much faith and trust he has in the atonement of Jesus Christ, cannot be justified” (Sproul, *Are We Together? A Protestant Analyzes Roman Catholicism*, 73-75).

- (b) **Its teaching that it is the priest who pronounces “absolution” for sin.** Once again, Bavinck explains, “Of the simple invitation to a change of mind and amendment of life, Rome made a court of law in which the priest acts as judge, hears the guilty, determines the measure of their temporal punishments, and at the same time, but a declaratory statement, grants them absolution. . . . The Reformation was on firm ground when it directed its attack against this judicial system of penance and replaced it with the biblical idea of repentance or conversion” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 4.147-48).

As evidence of its departure from the sole authority of Scripture, the Roman Catholic Church has left the clear and simple teaching of the Bible and inserted human understanding and tradition into the doctrine of repentance. This is no small flaw. It results in false gospel—a mixture of truth and error. Yet even evangelical Protestants are apt at times to misunderstand the doctrine of repentance. Since the gospel is at stake, it is of extreme importance that believers understand what the Bible teaches about repentance.

## B. Essential Characteristics

**1. Biblical repentance is a necessary component of salvation.** It is a non-negotiable—a fundamental ingredient of the gospel message. As the *Westminster Confession* stated, “Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached to every soul of man, as well as that of faith in Christ” (15.2). Yet not all have affirmed this historic position of the evangelical faith. For example, Lewis Sperry Chafer—founder and first president of Dallas Theological Seminary—asserted that “The New Testament does not impose repentance upon the unsaved as a condition of salvation” (*Systematic Theology*, 3.376). The New Testament, however, clearly affirms the necessity of repentance.

- Jesus preached repentance and commanded it to be preached. See **Matthew 4:17 and Luke 24:46-47**.
- The apostles obeyed Jesus’ command and preached repentance as central to the gospel—to both Jews and Gentiles. See **Acts 2:37-38; 3:19; 5:30-31; 17:30-31; 20:20-21; 26:16-20**.

**2. Biblical repentance is a necessary consequence of regeneration.** While an unregenerate person may experience deep sorrow over sin and failures, true repentance is never the experience of the unregenerate person. Apart from regeneration, genuine repentance—the appropriate, God-honoring response to sin—is impossible. As Bavinck writes, “True repentance according to Scripture, does not arise from the ‘natural man’ but from the new life that was planted in a person by regeneration. . . . Faith and repentance both arise from regeneration” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:163, 152). Together with faith, repentance is the first conscious, spiritual experience of the regenerated person. It is that instinctive “first breath” that takes place in response to spiritual birth. Consequently, if regeneration has taken place, biblical repentance will unmistakably occur also.

**3. Biblical repentance is inseparable from biblical faith.** They are two sides of the same coin called “conversion.” Indeed, at times the Bible only speaks of the necessity of *faith*: **John 3:16; Acts 16:31; Romans 10:9; Ephesians 2:8**. But at other times the Bible mentions only *repentance*: **Luke 24:46-47; Acts 2:37-39; 5:31; 17:30-31; 2 Corinthians 7:10; 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10**. Sometimes it mentions both: **Acts 20:21**. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that when the Bible mentions one of these components, the other is assumed.

“The faith that is unto salvation is a penitent faith and the repentance that is unto life is a believing repentance . . . But if faith is directed to salvation from sin, there must be hatred of sin and the desire to be saved from it. Such hatred of sin involves repentance which essentially consists in turning from sin unto God. . . . It is impossible to disentangle faith and repentance. Saving faith is permeated with repentance and repentance is permeated with faith.” —Murray, *Redemption Accomplished & Applied*, 119

**4. Biblical repentance is a gift from God.** Even though any true believer *expresses* repentance, he does not *produce* it. Like faith, God grants the power to repent and the exercise of repentance. Barrett explains it this way: “Unlike regeneration where man is totally passive, in conversion man is active, playing a role, for *he* must repent of his sin and believe in Christ. However, in Scripture repentance and faith are not merely gifts from God but they are gifts that God works effectually within his elect” (*Forty Questions about Salvation*, 185). See especially: **Acts 5:31** (“to grant repentance”); **11:18** (“God has granted . . . repentance”); and **2 Timothy 2:24-26** (“if perhaps God may grant them repentance”).

**5. Biblical repentance is transformative in nature.** True repentance is not a mere decision. Neither is it only the pangs of sorrow or regret over sin and its consequences. It is a *paradigm shift* encompassing the whole person. It affects *cognition* (understanding), the *affections* (desires), and *volition* (choices). Michael Horton writes, “It is not only modifying a few convictions here and there, but realizing that your whole interpretation of reality—God, yourself, your relation to God and the world—is misguided” (*Pilgrim Theology*, 263). It is profound remorse that arises out of a new understanding of the odious nature of sin and its offense to God. It is personal in that it recognizes specific sins and overall guilt. It results in a transformation that commits to forsaking such sin—to the glory of God. See this “fruit” of repentance noted in **Matthew 3:8; Acts 26:30; 2 Timothy 2:25**.

At the same time, an important distinction must be maintained between the *experience* of repentance and the *results* or *fruits* of repentance. Just as “faith” cannot be confused with the “good works” it produces, repentance cannot be confused with its fruits. To blur this distinction is to fall into a kind of “penance” (see above).

- 6. Biblical repentance is inherently hopeful.** Unbiblical repentance results in death (see the example of Judas Iscariot in **Matthew 27:3-5**). On the other hand, biblical repentance is ultimately a forward look, not a backward one; it is an outward look, not an inward one; it is an upward look, not a downward one. It never leads to a descent into the abyss of depression or despair. It is never *suicidal* in nature. It always leads to “life” (**Acts 11:18**) and to “salvation” (**2 Cor 7:10**). It is always “without regret” (**2 Cor 7:10**). Whereas “legal repentance” is a repentance that recognizes guilt and the consequence of punishment, it never looks beyond to the gospel. On the other hand, “evangelical repentance” compels the contrite sinner to the real source of satisfaction and absolution: Jesus Christ. As Michael Horton states, “By itself repentance is merely the experience of damnation—until one looks by faith to Jesus Christ” (*The Christian Faith*, 578).
- 7. Biblical repentance is a way of life.** The gift of true repentance begins a new pattern of life—a life of ongoing contrition over remaining sin. See **Isaiah 66:1-2**; **Matthew 5:3**. As John Murray states, “Just as faith is not only a momentary act but an abiding attitude of trust and confidence directed to the Savior, so repentance results in constant contrition. The broken spirit and the contrite heart are abiding marks of the believing soul” (*Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 122).
- 8. Biblical repentance does not atone for sin.** Even professing evangelicals sometimes believe that their repentance accomplishes a kind of “atonement” (satisfaction) for the sins they commit. This leads to a dangerous form of “evangelical penance.” Others live in constant fear, wondering whether their repentance is enough to save them. This leads to the dangers of doubt and despair. Such thinking ignores the clear teaching of the gospel. This is wonderfully expressed in many hymns, but two in particular: “Not the labors of my hands, Can fulfill Thy law’s demands; Could my zeal no respite know, Could my tears forever flow, All for sin could not atone; Thou must save, and Thou alone” (stanza 2, “**Rock of Ages**,” by Augustus Toplady); “Nothing can for sin atone, Nothing but the blood of Jesus. Naught of good that I have done, Nothing but the blood of Jesus. Oh! precious is the flow, That makes me white as snow; no other fount I know, Nothing but the blood of Jesus” (stanza 1 and 3, chorus, “**Nothing but the Blood**” by Robert Lowry). Repentance is not atonement. God provided the only atonement that is needed in the sacrifice of Christ, who died once for all (**Rom 6:10**).

#### D. Practical Implications

Homework (see below).

#### For Further Reflection

**Scripture Memory:** 2 Corinthians 7:10

**Recommended Reading:**

- John MacArthur, *The Gospel according to Jesus*.
- Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance* (Puritan Paperback).
- Thomas Boston, *Repentance: Turning from Sin to God*.

**Homework:**

- Review the notes above. For each of the eight assertions listed in the section, “Essential Characteristics,” come up with a “practical implication.”
- Read through Psalm 51 each day for the next week. As you do, compile a list of observations about this model of repentance given to us by David.
- What are the consequences if the concept of repentance is removed from the gospel presentation?
- How would you respond to the person who argues that you can make a mere “decision” to believe in Christ without any reference to your own sin and sinfulness?
- Can you say that you have truly repented of your sin? What fruit is there of true repentance in your life?
- List things that characterize the believer who lives a life of on-going repentance. What does that look like?

**Hymns:** “Dear Refuge of My Weary Soul” (*Hymns of Grace* #52); “Rock of Ages” (*Hymns of Grace* #209)

**This Week’s Audio:** [gracechurch.org/motw](http://gracechurch.org/motw)

**Next Meeting:** January 15 – “Faith”