

## ***Repentance: What's the big deal?***

On the 8<sup>th</sup> July 1741 Jonathan Edwards preached at a church not far from where he was Pastor of the Congregational Church in Northampton, New England.

The title of his sermon is now famous: "sinners in the hands of an angry God". Up to that point the people of Enfield had been untouched by the revival that had hit Northampton and the surrounding area.

The effect of the preaching that night was remarkable to say the least. By the end of the sermon, most if not all the congregation were "*bowed down with an awful conviction of their sin and danger*". Indeed even before the sermon was over there was a lot of moaning and crying among those in the congregation who felt their sin. Some were crying out "*what must I do to be saved?*"

One of the headings of that sermon simply states this: "*God is not obliged to keep any unconverted person out of hell one more moment*".

That one comment reminds me of the precarious position that man is in until he knows the saving grace of God through His Son Jesus.

Sin has to be addressed and has to be dealt with. The seventeenth century preacher and writer Thomas Watson stated that "*Either sin must drown or the soul burn*".

That is why repentance is part of the Biblical view of the gospel.

To define repentance in one succinct statement and at the same time to do it justice is almost impossible.

However we do need to begin with such a working definition; even if we enlarge on it later.

*"Repentance is a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ"* (Grudem).

*"Repentance is a grace of God's Spirit whereby a sinner is inwardly humbled and visibly reformed"* (Thomas Watson).

### **Is repentance important in Scripture?**

The writer to the Hebrews, in what at first seems a somewhat throwaway comment, sees repentance as a foundational part of salvation **Heb 6:1**.

It is not that the writer diminishes the importance of those doctrines he list, but that he wants to build on them.

That being the case they are crucial.

Anything that is not built on a firm foundation is liable to fall.

So we have the context in which repentance comes.

In seeking to determine how important repentance is to the gospel we can look at its place in the ministry of Christ when here on earth.

When Matthew records the beginning of the Jesus ministry in **Matt 4:17** notice Jesus' first word?

Go to the other end of those three years and note Jesus' words to the disciples after his resurrection in **Luke 24:45-47**.

Repentance was again foundational in the reason Jesus came, for He came to deal with the issue of sin.

Let us consider what happened when the apostles were first sent out by Jesus in **Mark 6:12-13**.

It is easy to focus on the miracles they were able to perform, but their primary calling as they saw it was to preach repentance. John the Baptist had already set the scene prior to Christ's ministry as we see earlier in **Mark 1:2-4**.

You know, what struck me forcibly as I was studying this subject again was that repentance is a gospel grace.

What do I mean by that? Surely grace is God's underserved favour toward sinful man.

Indeed it is just that, and yet that is what makes it consistent with that which we are considering this evening.

Repentance came in with the gospel. It is through the blood of Jesus that repentance is possible in the first place and therefore repenting sinners are saved.

Under the law there was a requirement for perfect and continual obedience. The consequences of failure were dire as we see in **Gal 3:10-11**.

It strikes me in that verse 11 that Paul is being very matter of fact: "*Clearly no one is justified before God by the law...*"

Paul does not suggest that there is any room for repentance here; just a curse!

Our conclusion therefore must inevitably be that repentance is a doctrine that has been brought to light only because of the gospel. Now that should thrill us and spur us on to consider a theme that is so often these days avoided because it is unpalatable.

Some have argued that to include repentance as well as faith in the gospel message is tantamount to preaching salvation by works. In other words we can do something ourselves that will aid our conversion.

The implications of such an argument to exclude the need to repent appear to me to leave saving faith only requiring intellectual assent to the facts of the gospel.

It doesn't change that remaining fact that we need to be pardoned from our sin; which is the whole issue surrounding the work of the cross.

Therefore repentance must remain; it is as we mentioned earlier foundational in the gospel of salvation.

## What leads us to repentance?

First of all if we go to the events of Pentecost in Acts 2 we see that the preached word of God ignites the seeds of repentance (**Acts 2:37-38a**). This shows the important of the word of God.

Look at the Lord's own description of His word in **Jer 23:29**. It melts the heart but also breaks us.

But doesn't this put the onus of either the reader, the preacher or the listener?

What is it about the word of God that leads to repentance? It can be read continually and preached most fervently without it seemingly having any affect.

It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit that takes the word and makes it effectual; such was the experience at Pentecost; however good Peter's preaching was **John 16:8, 13-14**.

## So what is repentance?

Repentance is more than...

1. Responding to fear of judgement. We cannot frighten people into the kingdom for repentance is not about self-preservation. The fear of hell can be a factor in people coming to repentance but that is not enough.
2. Resolving not to sin. The people of Israel made such a resolution in **Jer 2:20** but did not follow it through. There was no change of heart. People make resolutions for different reasons: perhaps because of some present problem they have or because they are afraid of dying. God can use these situations in our lives to awaken us but repentance involves something far deeper.
3. Leaving behind certain sins. People can see sin as being the big things like stealing or adultery etc whereas repentance is about the very condition of the heart. It is about sin as well as about sins!

## What are the key elements of repentance?

- 1) A recognition of sin

In our Home Fellowship Groups at the moment we are looking at the subject of regeneration as it is seen in the story of Nicodemus in John 3. There Jesus uses the term 'born again'.

This Sunday morning we will consider the opening verses of Ephesians 2 which show that before we are saved we are spiritually dead; oblivious to our spiritual need; oblivious to sin and its affects; therefore incapable of repentance. Paul reminds the Ephesians that this is where they were before God called them by His grace (**Eph 2:3**).

Peter Jeffrey writes that *"True repentance is about seeing sin for what is really is; not just a character defect, but a permanent attitude of rebellion against the love and care and righteous authority of God."*

This is why the Bible talks about coming from darkness into light. We were unaware of our need of repentance and therefore could not live the life God requires.

That is where our theme verse for the year comes in (**Eph 5:8**).

But recognising our sin is not enough. There is also the need of a...

## 2) Sorrow for sin

I cannot feel any remorse for something I have done until I recognise that it is wrong. But once I know, the next stage is to see it as it really is. In Psalm 38:18 David states *"I am troubled by my sin"*. And so once our eyes have been opened by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit suddenly we can see. Look at what is prophesied in **Zech 12:10**. Now turn again to the record of Pentecost in **Acts 2:36-37**.

Sorrow for sin is not superficial; it breaks our heart as David recognised himself in his psalm of repentance in **Psalm 51:17**.

True sorrow for sin is not about how it affects me but what my sin does to God.

It is, as one writer put it: *"a sorrow for the offence rather than for the punishment"* (Watson).

We can be sorry, not because we have done wrong but because we have been found out and we have to pay the penalty.

In repentance we do not grieve only for the terrible consequences of sin. We grieve that we have offended Almighty God and now that matters to us whereas before it we wouldn't have given it another thought.

We have abused His love.

If there was never any consequence for our sin; no judgement; no hell, it would still grieve us that we have offended God **2 Cor 7:10**.

There is another element to sorrow for sin. It is not temporary; a few tears as a result of a challenging sermon or testimony. It stays and eats away until it is dealt with.

But thank God, that by His grace, it can be dealt with! Remember, repentance is a grace!

## 3) Confession of Sin

Who wants to be burdened with the guilt of their sin? Not only is there no excuse but where is the benefit?

In Nehemiah 9:2 we read that the people *"stood in their places and confessed their sins..."*

There can be no forgiveness until there is confession. We confess that we have sinned against God; that we have rejected his sovereignty.

But confession must not be simply a way of purging oneself of feelings of guilt. The story of the Prodigal Son is a good example of this. He was sincere in his confession to the Father and it was a true desire to put things right as we see in the way he did not have any expectations of being given an advantageous position in the household **Luke 15:18-19**.

Here we see his shame for sin and he receives forgiveness.

That is what happens to the repentant sinner as we see in those wonderful verses in **Isa 55:6-7**.

## 4) Turning from Sin

We can all remember as children saying sorry and saying we won't do it again. But of course we can also remember what happened next!

When we repent we resolve to live in obedience to Christ and not to do those things again.

Now we know that we are not perfect and we do sin. That brings us back to repentance again as John states in **1 John 1:8-9**.

But this does not mean that we deliberately sin again.

All this goes back again to our theme verse in Eph 5:8: *"Live as children of light"*.

In 2 Cor 5:17 Paul tells us that in Christ we are new creations; the old has gone, the new has come.

There is a definite movement there as is reflected in **Ezek 14:6**.

In repentance we turn away and head off in a new direction.

Again we go back to matters noted earlier. We no longer want to offend God or abuse His love.

Our desire now is obedience; to please Him.

What mattered to us and brought us pleasure before has changed.

That is why repentance continues to be a matter for the Christian. We are still sinners although we have been saved by grace.

Sadly we still break God's laws and as Paul confesses in Romans 7 the Christians life is a continual battle with the old nature **Rom 7:21-25a**.

That is the key! There is still forgiveness for there is still grace!

How easy it is to see repentance as a negative thing to avoid talking about.

I trust that this evening we have briefly seen what a great subject it is which magnifies the grace of God and reminds us of what a great gospel we have!

**Repentance! That's the big deal!**