

## Why Repent?

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Repentance is more than a single decision; it is a way of life. But how can repentance be sustained through a lifetime of turmoil and temptation?

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*“For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death” (2 Cor. 7:10).*

*“Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?” (Rom. 2:4).*



God “commands all men everywhere to repent” (Ac. 17:30). If we’re serious about our relationship with God, repentance is a big deal. But what is repentance? More importantly, what drives it?

Repentance is a change of heart with a view to changing one’s life. We usually think of repentance as a single life-altering decision (for example, the Prodigal Son’s “I will arise and go” declaration, Lk. 15:18, 20). That’s a valid concept that has useful application in our lives. However, repentance can also be viewed as an *ongoing* commitment to improvement, a constant awareness of one’s weaknesses, and of the struggle to overcome them. In Colossians 3, Paul urges his readers to “set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth” (v. 2). This new mindset requires that we “put to death” worldly passions that seek to dominate our lives (v. 5), which will lead us to “put off” bad habits and attitudes, and

“put on” more noble behaviors and patterns of thinking (v. 8-14). That’s a lifetime project, one that requires continual evaluation and recalibration of our minds and conduct.

Historically, God has used two types of incentives to encourage this kind of transformation in people. Each approach is effective in its own way, but for different reasons.

The first motivation involves *punishment*. Either directly or indirectly, God can bring suffering into our lives to get our attention. Sometimes the pain will be the direct result of poor decisions we have made. On other occasions affliction may hit us indiscriminately, seemingly from out of nowhere. Or it may come in the form of a stern *threat* of calamity if we fail to alter our path. Whatever form it takes, this “godly sorrow” can shake us out of our lethargy and cause us to re-examine the path we are on. The Bible is full of stories of people—such as Job, David, Paul, etc.—who matured through the painful experiences life dealt them. When this “chastening of the Lord” comes into our life, we should not despise it, but learn from it (Heb. 12:5-11).

However, there is a potential downside to this kind of repentance. Changes driven by calamity can be shallow and selfish. As soon as the adversity (or threat thereof) is removed, the motivation to change can fade away. Think of the Pharaoh of the Exodus, or the Jewish people throughout their history. Again and again God used hardship to compel these people to bend to His will, but their “repentance” was often superficial and short lived. In the long run, repentance based solely on pain is inadequate.

There is another incentive to repentance that is deeper and longer lasting. Paul says that “the *goodness* of God leads you to repentance.” When we finally grasp the magnitude of God’s love for us, and the awful sacrifice that He was willing to make to save us from our own foolishness, we have a far more compelling reason to clean up our act. Repentance rooted in gratitude penetrates the soul more deeply than repentance enforced by pain.

When Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of the Wittenberg church, his first thesis stated that “our Lord and Master Jesus Christ . . . willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” That life of repentance is best sustained in a heart that is consumed by the goodness of God.

— David King