

THIS IS REAL REPENTANCE

What is repentance? What actually happens in a repentant person's life? What does repentance have to do with salvation? Here are the facts.

You've heard the story—and what a story it is. "As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison. . . .

"And Saul, yet breathing out thrcatcnings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord . . . came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: and he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? . . .

"And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do. And . . . they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. . . .

"And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me . . .

"And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized. . . . And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.

"But all that heard him were amazed, and said; Is not this he that

destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent . . .?" (Acts 8:3, 9:1-21).

What a story, indeed!

It is one of the best New Testament examples of real repentance what it is, how one comes to it, how to tell if it's genuine (I Tim. 1:15-16).

Total change

Change. About-face. Total reversal. Redirection. Complete transformation. These are the essentials of real, biblical repentance.

It includes feeling sorry, of course, but goes much deeper than that. A convicted, hardened criminal feels sorry when he faces the gallows. Yet this is not real repentance, merely selfish depression, inner anxiety triggered by the cowering fear of an inescapable penalty.

The Bible, in a lucid phrase, distinguishes between "the sorrow of the world" and "godly sorrow" (II Cor. 7:10). Worldly sorrow is mourning for the self. It is only another form of selfishness—inwardly directed pity, not the total transformation of the self, evidenced by real, demonstrable change, such as Paul experienced (Matt. 7:16).

Paul's life-change was completely overpowering—obvious—striking.

That's why the worst thing you can say to a true Christian is: "You haven't changed a bit!"

Paul changed—totally. The transformation was so shocking that it stunned the early Church. Early

Christians had a hard time believing it (Acts 9:26). The Bible describes "fruits worthy of repentance"—measurable, noticeable evidence of change (Luke 3:8). Paul had these fruits.

The Old Testament prophets knew that real repentance is a definite, heartfelt change. "As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" (Ezek. 33:11).

Jeremiah eloquently portrayed real repentance: "Turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou art the Lord my God. Surely after that I was turned, I repented; and after that I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh: I was ashamed, yea, even confounded, because I did bear the reproach of my youth" (Jer. 31:18-19).

Repentance is a point of no return. It is the pivotal decision in life. There is no room, in the mind of the repentant person, for turning back. God's terms are unconditional: "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19).

Sin is defined in I John 3:4 as the "transgression of the law." Romans 7:7 explains that the law that sin violates is the Ten Commandments. God's law is a spiritual principle regulating our physical actions and relationships toward others, husbands and wives (Ex. 20:14, 17), parents

(verse 12) and children (verse 10) and property (verses 15, 17).

Christ magnified the law

Jesus Christ amplified and enlarged the spiritual dynamics behind the Ten Commandments in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28).

Christ showed that sin begins in the heart (Matt. 15:19). Action follows thought (Prov. 23:7).

"I'm pretty good," some will argue. "I've never killed anyone." But have we never felt anger, spite, jealousy, resentment or the desire for revenge? Of course we have! These emotions are but preparation in the human heart for the most dire acts, if we dared try to get away with them. There are no inner reserves of goodness, no strong, selfless motives inside a human being (Jer. 17:9).

Real repentance, then—the deeply committed, emotionally jarring confrontation with and rejection of the evil saturating us deep inside— involves far more than a few superficial, cosmetic changes on the outside. The outer facade of righteousness never deceives God and Jesus Christ (Matt. 23:25-26, 28).

The rich young ruler who interviewed Jesus Christ thought he was doing all right. When Jesus challenged him with the Ten Commandments he replied, "All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?" (Matt. 19:20).

Had he, really? Christ's next statement flashed right to the heart of the matter: "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me" (Matt. 19:21).

What a bombshell! Jesus discerned covetousness in this young man. Though outwardly successful, moral and a model citizen, the rich young ruler, whom Christ liked (Mark 10:21), had not even begun to live the deep spirit and intent of God's commandments. "But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions" (Matt. 19:22).

Death of the self

There have always been curiosity seekers, those mildly titillated by after-dinner talk and coffee-break

discussions on the ultimate meaning of life. Some casually evidence an interest in the big questions at one time or another, and answers are available. Understanding is possible. The problem is that most people don't want it badly enough to pay the price (Prov. 17:16)! The price for understanding is to obey God's commandments (Ps. 111:10).

This is too high a price for the average person. It is nothing less than the death of self, the willingness to crush pride and vanity, the abasement of ego, the humility to agree that we violate the spirit and intent of God's Ten Commandments every day of our lives, the willpower mobilized by the shocking encounter with the evil within, the tenacity to fight for years in a sometimes tiresome struggle to root out wrong habits, attitudes and assumptions, even in the face of persecution and suffering.

This is the essence of the Christian life.

This is why only the few endure to the end (Matt. 7:14).

This is why the Bible teaches so emphatically: "They are all under sin; as it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one, there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God" (Rom. 3:9-11).

This is why Paul, a real repentant, proclaimed so exultantly: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

A tumultuous upheaval

What is real repentance? It is a tumultuous upheaval in a person's life, a spiritual and emotional crisis triggered by a painful and intense conviction from grasping the true inner motives and intentions—the evil inside us (Matt. 19:17).

Real repentance is an experience that hammers home to us that we haven't just done wrong but that we *are* wrong (Ps. 51:5). The truly repentant are pricked in the heart (Acts 2:37). They are shocked by the deceit and vanity that permeate their words and deeds—they realize that even their good deeds are many times only selfish attempts to appease God's wrath or to make themselves

feel better than others (Isa. 64:6).

Real repentance includes the heart-broken desire to give ourselves over to God—the willingness to allow God to refashion us as He sees fit. This includes submitting to the human representatives of God once we prove who they are (John 20:21).

Real repentance is the stabbing awareness that our personal sins, the wrong habits that we relish and enjoy, required the brutal and excruciating death of Jesus Christ (Isa. 53:11).

Real repentance is toward God and no one else. The truly repentant worry about their personal standing with God, not their standing with anyone else.

Real repentance means to tremble at God's Word, not at the opinions, customs and traditions of mere men (Isa. 66:2). When God speaks, we listen. We are submissive, teachable. We're willing to observe any festival, pay any tithe, shun any worldly association to measure up to God's standards (Phil. 3:8).

Real repentance is the sober desire to replace selfish, fleshly reactions with the promptings of God's Spirit inside us (Eph. 4:24). It is the axial change in life, the most important experience we can ever pass through.

How repentance comes

How can we come to this conviction overnight? The answer is that we can't!

Who can deeply grasp true repentance inside a circus tent, listening to a sweating preacher whip up a frenzy about "hell fire"?

Real repentance does have an emotional content, but is much more than sheer emotion. It is conviction. Purpose. Determination. A quiet resolve to change.

Now, how do we get that?

Can it be "worked up" in a moment of hysteria?

No. "The goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance," Romans 2:4 tells us. Even the desire to repent comes from God. No human being decides of his own volition to surrender before God unless God is at work first in that individual's mind. God must help us pass from darkness to light, from death to life, from blindness to understanding. He must grant repentance:

"When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18).

"Him [Jesus Christ] hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:31).

"In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth" (II Tim. 2:25).

Repentance is the gift of God! How else could we ever see ourselves through God's eyes?

God the Father Himself carefully selects those to whom He wants to reveal His truth at this time (John 6:44). God then gives a small portion of His Holy Spirit to work alongside our minds (John 14:17). We begin to see our way of life for what it is—for the first time, we understand our true motives and intentions.

God watches for the reaction this produces. If our conscience is tender, if we are yielded and teachable, we begin to put some things right in our lives. Then, in direct proportion to how much we yield to and obey God, God gives us more understanding. He works with us more strongly through His Spirit (Acts 5:29).

This begins the process of Christian growth. A responsive heart and a pliable spirit are essential. Finally we amass enough evidence, through study, prayer and meditation, to see ourselves for the first time—as a sinner, with a chemical, temporary life expectancy of only 70 years, in need of forgiveness and power from Almighty God.

But this new attitude of obedience cannot atone for past sins. Thus the truly repentant believer comes to hold an undying respect for the enormous sacrifice Christ made for him almost 2,000 years ago. Only Christ's death can purge our past sins, wipe the slate clean (I John 1:7).

Gratitude, willingness to learn, an exquisite consciousness of God's mercy—these are the attitudes that pre-dominate during real repentance. No hardheartedness, belligerence or placing blame on others. None of the "But here's the way I look at it" syndrome.

The repentant person surrenders to God. He throws himself upon God's mercy and pardon. Job's cry is now his: "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6).

An ongoing process

But repentance is not merely a one-time event in a person's life. It is an active, ongoing, dynamic process. Even after we have deeply, sincerely repented of our past sins and been convicted to follow God's way in everything, we will stumble and fall. We do not become perfect all at once. We still are ruled, for the most part, by our human nature. We are still under the influence of Satan and the world around us.

We will, in moments of weakness or carelessness, sin again. And then we must again repent and ask God to allow Christ's precious shed blood to cover the sin (I John 1:8-10).

As we obey God and submit to His government in our lives, He will give us more of the power of His Holy Spirit to overcome. The process of Christian growth—the process of developing God's perfect character within ourselves—is gradual, a life-long profession (II Pet. 3:18). The true Christian consistently keeps himself in an attitude of repentance and submission to God's will.

In II Corinthians 7:9-11, Paul describes seven mental reactions triggered by real godly repentance. This Paul calls "godly sorrow," the profound realization that our personal sins caused the death of the perfect, spotless Son of God.

It is a mature, heartfelt mourning over the wasted energies, the squandered opportunities, the misplaced time and attention, the deep hurt to ourselves and others that sin produces. Yet the truly repentant believer comes roaring out of this emotional turmoil raring to do something about it all.

Let's notice these qualities:

"For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you" (II Cor. 7:11).

Carefulness encompasses the diligent, circumspect, intense habits the genuinely repentant believer prac-

tices. He is wary. He wants to avoid the same sins springing up again (II Pet. 2:20). The really repentant aren't involved in the same sins again, at least as a life pattern or habitual walk. A motorist pardoned from the penalty of a speeding ticket is careful. He doesn't gleefully charge off to speed again. The lesson sinks home.

"Yea, what clearing of yourselves."

How true! The deeply sorry, sincerely broken-up individual now eagerly seeks God's approval. He wants to be totally absolved of guilt. He is disgusted with himself for allowing sin to "lord it over him," and he energetically applies himself to the advice and counsel that will help him not miss the mark again (Ps. 63:1).

"Yea, what indignation!"

It is maddening to see how Satan subtly cons us into collapsing before temptation. Satan's ploy is to deceive us into thinking that the satisfaction we derive from sensual enjoyment is more worthwhile in the short run than the thrill we can feel from resisting temptation and making real progress in our personal lives.

Don't fall for this "cunning craftiness," this devilish sleight of hand (Eph. 4:14). Abhor and despise the temporary "pleasures of sin" (Heb. 11:25). The real, repentant Christian is infuriated at Satan's victories against his own attempts to overcome.

"Yea, what fear."

Fear is a vital component in real repentance. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7). Once we understand that God considers Sabbath breaking as wrong as murder, adultery and stealing, we should fear to disobey (Heb. 12:28). We will want to flee the folly and distraction involved in worldly, pagan holidays like Christmas, Easter and Halloween once we deeply grasp the cunning deception involved.

We should recoil instantly from sin (I Cor. 6:18). Otherwise our conscience slowly hardens and we end up half enjoying the sins we should hate. This is serious! Unless we dramatically wrench ourselves from some sins we can slowly become amoral creatures, conscienceless reprobates whom even God cannot shake up (Matt. 5:29-30). Godly fear helps

yank us out of this attitude (Matt. 10:28).

"Yea, what vehement desire."

The spirit of our drifting, caloused, noncommittal generation affects us all. Vehement desire changes this. The casual "I suppose I should do something about this sometime" melts before the burning, pressing desire of the truly repentant to shake up his life, get back on track and stay there.

"Yea, what zeal."

The genuine Christian isn't a spiritual cliffhanger, edging as close to the spiritual abyss as possible. The repentant believer deeply feels the need to put as much distance between himself and his sins as possible. The invincible power of God's Spirit gives one a conquering, formidable zeal.

King David of ancient Israel, even in the inky blackness of despair over his capital sins of adultery and murder, found relief only in real repentance. Psalm 51 is his emotion-etched expression of that crucial event in his life.

David came storming out of that experience bursting with zeal, over-

flowing with godly projects as an expression of his thanks to God (verses 13-19). David's enthusiasm, triggered by his gratitude to God for showing him mercy, helped seal his repentance. He threw himself into God's Work even more.

"Yea, what revenge."

Exactly. David bounced back from his sins. The apostle Peter's cowardly rejection of his Lord and Savior shook him to the depths of his being (Luke 22:61-62). It was a different Peter on the day of Pentecost in A.D. 31 helping move 3,000 people to real repentance (Acts 2:36). Peter's conviction and intensity flowed in part from his determination to overcome his own nature (II Cor. 10:6).

Are you holding back?

How about you?

If you have read this far you must surely realize that it is no shame at all to kneel before your Creator, your Savior, your Lord and Ruler, and to really mean it when you say, "God be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18:13).

Real repentance. It is that catalytic key step on the road to real life—the

road to eternity (Luke 15:21-24).

So how about it? Do you still only agree halfway with God? Do you resent the concerned direction and authority you receive from this Work? .

Do you still say, "Well, here's the way I look at it."

Do you hold back? Do you still retain sovereignty over part of your inner nature? Those of you who really understand should know by now that this is God's Work, not that of men (Acts 5:38-39). Those of you who feel pricked in the heart by the promptings of God's Spirit as you study our publications should begin to respond.

Why? Because the Holy Spirit can be inside you, illuminating your understanding, giving you a richer contact with the God Family, setting you on the road to your eternal destiny—a life of accomplishment, service and usefulness in the coming Kingdom of God.

It all begins with that first step: the willingness to admit, the honesty to confess, the strength and wisdom to agree, that we just didn't *do* wrong, but that we *are* wrong. This is real repentance. □

The Truth About Water Baptism

Millions are being deceived into thinking they are saved, when they are not! People have been taught that Christ completed the plan of salvation on the cross, when actually it only began there. Jesus said repentance and belief are the first two steps toward becoming a true Christian. Water baptism is next. But how should you be baptized, and by whom? What does baptism picture? Is baptism required for salvation? Our free booklet *All About Water Baptism* explains. For your copy, just write us. You can find our addresses on the back page.

