

Understanding New Testament “Repentance” in Light of Old Testament Covenants ¹

Introduction

In the New Testament, there are several verses that mention repentance in the context of salvation, but there are also many that discuss salvation without any mention of repentance. In many of the gospel verses, the call to repent is tied to the nation of Israel’s need to return to the Mosaic Covenant with God in order to receive the promised blessings of the new covenant which God had promised them. Understanding this clarifies that salvation is always by faith in the promise.

Moses’ Prophetic Call to Return to Yahweh

Near the end of his ministry, Moses prophesied about the nation of Israel’s covenant relationship with God.

Deuteronomy 30.1-6 NIV: ¹ *When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come on you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations,*

- † Notice that Moses was prophesying that the nation would fail to uphold its part of the covenant, and so God would turn from blessing them to cursing them, to bring them back to himself. Here Moses said “when” this happens, not “if.” Notice also that Moses predicted the exile, the dispersion among the Gentile nations.

² *and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today,*

- † When the exiles would take to heart what God had done to them [v.1] and choose to learn from it, they would return to Yahweh and literally “hear his voice,” which means obey, and they would do so wholeheartedly. This would be Israel’s repentance: instead of continuing to stray away from God, they would return to the covenant relationship they had with him, which included obedience to the provisions of that covenant, as described in Moses’ writings.

³ *then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. ⁴ Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back. ⁵ He will bring you to the land that belonged to your ancestors, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors.*

- † If they would return to the covenant relationship with God, God would restore the covenant blessings upon them, including returning them to the land he had given them, and returning them to prosperity and fertility.

⁶ *The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.*

- † Part of the Mosaic covenant was the command to the Israelites to “*Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer*” [Deuteronomy 10.16 NIV]. The NET Bible notes say this is a reference to the Abrahamic covenant [which God made with Abraham to create the nation (or people) of Israel], which had a sign of physical circumcision [Genesis 17.9–14]. As physical circumcision was a symbol for total identification with God [dependence and devotion] under the Abrahamic covenant, spiritual circumcision could be thought of as a metaphor for identification with God which would include submission to the terms of the Mosaic covenant. The Israelites were not to be stubborn in their rebellion away from God and his ways, but rather to consecrate themselves to God with full devotion, dependence, and submission.

- † As part of restoring Israel to its glory, Moses said that God would change the covenant. No longer would they be responsible for circumcising their own hearts, as had been commanded in their present time, but rather in the future, when they returned from the exile, God would initiate a new covenant in which he would circumcise their hearts for them, so they would be purified and consecrated enough to truly love God. This is an important historical shift: instead of people trying to consecrate and sanctify themselves, God would do it for them.

¹ The motivation for this study was a paper by one of my DTS professors: Charles Baylis, “Repentance in Acts in Light of Deuteronomy 30:1-6,” in *Michigan Theological Journal* [Vol.1, #1, Spring 1990], 19-35. The analysis is mine, but I owe a lot to Baylis’ paper and his comments in class.

- † The prophets repeatedly looked forward to Israel’s repentance and the initiation of the new covenant [e.g., Jeremiah 31.33-34; Ezekiel 11.14-19; Nehemiah 1.6-9]. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God said, “*I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. ²⁶ I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws*” [Ezekiel 36.25-27; NIV]. This is a clear reference to what we see happening in the New Testament after Jesus’ ascension, with the beginning of the new ministry of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

The state of affairs at the close of the Old Testament Era

Much of the Old Testament is about Israel’s failure to represent God to the rest of the nations, and thus mankind’s failure to represent God in ruling the earth. It is important to realize that Old Testament Israel never fully returned to God as Moses called them to do. Nehemiah 13, Ezra 10, Haggai 1, and Zechariah 1 show the failure of the returning exiles to keep the covenant any better than their fathers.² The book of Malachi, the last in the Old Testament chronology, is an indictment against those whom God had brought back from exile because they had not returned to God in their hearts.

Through the prophets, God revealed more about the new covenant that was coming if the people would return to him, a new way in which God would interact with mankind. Based on the Old Testament prophecies, a Jew in Jesus’ day who understood the prophecies would have been anticipating the following:³

- † Israel would be the nation receiving the new covenant. Though it was clear that God intended to bless the nations through Israel, his offer of the new covenant was to Israel, and there was no indication that Gentiles would share equally in it. In the New Testament, Paul spoke of the “mystery” or “secret” that God was now revealing, that the Messiah would extend salvation and new covenant blessings directly to the Gentiles [Ephesians 3.1-7].
- † Israel as a nation would repent by returning to its covenant relationship with God.
- † God would provide the returning, repentant people with cleansing from sin and forgiveness which would be real and permanent, instead of symbolic and temporary.
- † The Holy Spirit would indwell all believers, not merely coming upon specially anointed people who were serving a special purpose for God.
- † The kingdom would be restored permanently, with a descendent of David on the throne.

The Gospels⁴

John the Baptist called on Israel to “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*” [Matthew 3.2; NIV]. Jesus echoed this call for the nation to repent and return to God [Matthew 4.17], and elaborated that they should believe in his gospel or good news [Mark 1.15]. It would be good news because of the fulfillment of the expectations listed in the previous section. The call by John the Baptist and Jesus for Israel to repent clearly relates to the same call as made by previous prophets in fulfillment of Moses’ words in Deuteronomy 30. Israel was to return to its covenant relationship with God and so be blessed. The time was now urgent, because of Jesus’ presence as the promised Messiah, the deliverer from God the Father. John the Baptist described his own baptism as being for repentance [Matthew 3.11; see also Mark 1.4; Luke 3.3] – the return to God on the part of Israel – and prophesied that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit, a clear reference to the coming new covenant. Jesus also sent out his disciples to call for this repentance that would usher in the new covenant blessings [Mark 6.12].

John the Baptist told the religious leaders that they should not assume they were right with God just because they were descendents of Abraham, for God wanted people who were wholeheartedly returning to him, and such a return [or repentance] would lead to fruitfulness for God [Matthew 3.8-10; Luke 3.8-9]. Jesus repeatedly chastised the religious leaders for not belonging to God. In response to their questions about his association with known sinners, Jesus told them, “*I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance*” [Luke 5.32; NASB]. He was pointing to their self-righteous attitudes as the cause for their distance from God and thus eventual exclusion from the kingdom, because self-

² Baylis, 24.

³ See Baylis, 25.

⁴ The two references to repentance in Luke 17.3-4 are the only ones in the gospels not discussed here, which is because they are not involved in a salvation context: they refer to one person repenting of hurting another and restoring the relationship between them.

righteousness prevented them from seeing the need for repentance, for heeding the call of the prophets, including John the Baptist and himself [see also Matthew 9.13; 21.28-44; 23.1-35; Mark 2.17; Luke 18.9-14]. Provocatively, Jesus told parables about repentant sinners being valued more than those who thought they needed no repentance [Luke 15.7, 10].

Jesus taught that there presently was a transition from the time of proclaiming the Law under the Mosaic covenant to the new time of proclaiming the kingdom under the new covenant, and that the Law pointed to Jesus and the kingdom and would not fail [Luke 16.16-17]. The implication was that the lovers of the Law, like the Pharisaic religious leaders, needed to respond to Jesus, to truly repent and return to God and thus recognize God's Messiah. Jesus followed this teaching with a parable that had a related implication: the religious leaders were not heeding Moses and the prophets to which they supposedly were devoted, which was evident because they were not recognizing the Messiah to which the Old Testament pointed and they were not truly repentant and devoted to God as the Old Testament preached [Luke 16.30-31].

Jesus chastised several cities which had observed his miracles but not been moved in their hearts to return to God in repentance [Matthew 11.20-21; Luke 10.13]. There is an obedience aspect to this: obedience to the Mosaic Covenant which would signify a return to covenant relationship with God. Jesus chastised the whole nation or generation, because they had not repented as Nineveh did with Jonah [Matthew 12.41; Luke 11.32], and warned them that if they did not respond to him then they would perish [Luke 13.3, 5]. In Jonah, the text says the Ninevites believed in God as a result of Jonah's proclamation that change was coming [which they might have understood as their overthrow] and so they turned from their wicked ways. Jesus was disappointed that Israel did not believe enough to see the need to return to God and his covenant for the blessings they desired.

In all these gospel verses, discussion of repentance relates to Israel's return to God and Israel's consequent physical deliverance by God. Such repentance would have been an act of faith, and it would have included believing in God's promises of deliverance into the new covenant blessings through his Messiah; since this would have included forgiveness of sins and spiritual cleansing, we can see that this includes salvation as we think of it today. It is significant that the book of John does not include the words "repent" or "repentance" at all, and yet nobody claims that John's gospel is insufficient to lead somebody to salvation. John's purpose was to bring people to faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, so they thus could be saved [John 20.31]. John wrote, sometimes quoting Jesus, that whoever believed in Jesus would have eternal life [John 1.12; 3.14-18, 36; 5.24; 6.40, 47; 11.25-26; and more; see also Luke 7.50; 23.40-43] and the promised new covenant blessing of the indwelling Holy Spirit [John 7.38-39].

A more difficult verse is Luke 24.46-47, in which Jesus explained, "*Thus it stands written that the Christ would suffer and would rise from the dead on the third day,*⁴⁷ *and repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem*" [NET]. Let's leave this unexplained; it might become clear in the next section.

Peter in Acts⁵

When the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples of Jesus, Peter spoke to the gathered Jewish crowds from all over the Roman Empire, telling them, "*Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*³⁹ *For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself*" [Acts 2.38-39; NASB]. Once again, we clearly see here the connection with the Old Testament prophets and their call to return to God and receive the new covenant blessings, as Moses first prophesied in Deuteronomy 30. Peter was speaking to Jews about the promises God had made to them, calling them to repent as Jesus and John the Baptist had, promising them the new covenant blessings. These Jews had a clear need to repent, for – as Peter pointed out – they had just conspired to crucify their Messiah! They must now repent of that mistake and return to God wholeheartedly by embracing that Messiah and being baptized in his name.

Peter again spoke publicly, in the Temple complex, after healing a crippled man [Acts 3]. Again, Peter identified Jesus as the promised Messiah from God, about whom all the prophets had spoken. Again, Peter brought people to conviction for having conspired to reject and kill this Messiah. Peter made a direct connection both to the Abrahamic covenant [Acts 3.25] and to Moses' prophecy in Deuteronomy 30 [Acts 3.22], and said to them, "*Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord;*²⁰ *and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you,*²¹ *whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time*" [Acts 3.19-21; NASB].

⁵ In Acts 8.22, Peter spoke of repenting of a specific sin by a specific person, but not in the context of salvation.

When Peter and the other apostles were arrested and commanded by the religious leaders to stop preaching the gospel, they said, “*We must obey God rather than men.*”³⁰ *The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross.*³¹ *He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.*³² *And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him”* [Acts 5.29-32; NASB]. Again, we see identification of Jesus as the Messiah, the need for the people to repent of not believing in him, and the call to the nation to repent and return to God and his covenant, and thus be granted the blessings of the new covenant, which included forgiveness of sins and the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Interestingly, when Peter went to speak to the Gentiles, he did not call them to repent. Instead, he shared the truth about Jesus and then said, “*And He [Jesus] ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead.*”⁴³ *Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins”* [Acts 10.42-43; NASB]. So here again is identification of Jesus as the Messiah who brings the new covenant and forgiveness of sins, but now the criterion for receiving this blessing is faith or belief, as we saw was the case in the gospel of John. The Gentiles had not enjoyed a relationship with God under the Mosaic covenant, so they were not called to return to it or repent for straying from it. Because the Messiah was promised to Israel and rejected by Israel, the Gentiles were not called to repent for rejecting him. But if they would believe in this Messiah as savior, then they could enjoy some of the new covenant blessings along with believing Jews.

When Peter explained to the other Jewish leaders of the early church what happened with the Gentiles, that they had accepted the gospel in faith and received the sign of the Holy Spirit indwelling them, the other Jewish leaders concluded, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life” [Acts 11.18; NASB]. This is an important declaration. First, they accepted that God was extending the new covenant blessings to the Gentiles just as he had to the Jews, a new revelation to them. Second, they called this faith of the Gentiles “the repentance that leads to life.” They equated simple faith in Jesus as the savior with repentance. It is as though the important thing were to repent of lack of faith, which is the same thing as having faith. This might explain what Jesus meant in Luke 24.47, discussed above: people everywhere needed to repent of their lack of faith, of their lack of trust in God’s promised Messiah who would deliver them from sin and death.

Paul in Acts

When Paul landed on the mainland of what is now Turkey, at Perga, he spoke in the synagogue and gave an exhortation that included the following: (1) identifying John’s baptism as a call of repentance for Israel before the Messiah came; (2) identifying Jesus as the Messiah, the savior who offered salvation and forgiveness of sins [new covenant blessings], which fulfilled the promises of God in Old Testament prophecy; and (3) identifying the nation of Israel as guilty of not believing this Messiah [Acts 13.16-31]. Paul said that through Jesus, “*everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses”* [Acts 13.39]. So here Paul was talking to Jews outside of Israel and to their Gentile friends, and he called on them to believe in Jesus to receive salvation and new covenant blessings.

Paul and Barnabas told the people of Lystra that God had allowed the nations to go their wayward ways, but now was calling them to turn from vain idol worship and worship the living God [Acts 14.15-16]. Similarly, in Athens, Paul said that God had overlooked their ignorance of him and their idols of other gods, but now was calling on the nations everywhere to repent and believe in God and his Messiah [Acts 17.30-31].

When Paul came to some disciples of John the Baptist in Ephesus who did not know about Jesus, he described John’s baptism as one of repentance which called people to believe in the Messiah [Acts 19.4], similar to how John had described it himself. When these disciples heard the truth about the gospel, they received the Holy Spirit and other new covenant promises [Acts 19.5-6]. Later, Paul addressed the elders of Ephesus and reminded them that he had been “*testifying to both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus”* [Acts 20.21 NET]. The construction of the Greek sentence suggests a strong relationship between repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus, perhaps that repentance toward God is shown by faith in our Lord Jesus [that they are equal; this could relate to the evidence earlier in Acts when the Jews were called to repent and return to their covenant relationship with God and the Gentiles (or Greeks) were called to believe in Christ] or that one is the subset of the other, that putting your faith in Jesus includes turning toward God or that turning toward God includes belief in his Messiah. When on trial before Agrippa, Paul said, “*I declared to those in Damascus first, and then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds consistent with repentance”* [Acts 26.20; NET].

Epistles⁶

Because the epistles were written to the church many years after Jesus' ascension, not directed to Jews in Israel in Jesus' day, the concept of repenting and thus returning to a covenant relationship with God is not prevalent. However, there are uses of the concept of repentance that bear consideration. When describing the foundational teachings about Christ, the author of Hebrews mentioned repentance from "dead works" and faith in God [Hebrews 6.1]. It is tempting to see repentance from dead works and faith in God as parallel to each other since they seemed to be grouped here, meaning one would repent of self-righteousness – the works that one thinks make one righteous, but really lead to death – and put one's faith in God instead. However, the other use of "dead works" in Hebrews indicates these are sinful acts [Hebrews 9.14-15]. Still, this is a letter to believers about the foundation of the Christian faith, so this does not clearly tell us whether repentance from sins is part of what one believed to become a Christian or what one must learn as a young Christian [other items mentioned – baptism and laying on of hands – would not necessarily be included in a gospel message either].

Paul's use of "repentance" in 2 Corinthians 7.9-10 is difficult to assess. He mentioned a repentance of sins leading to a "salvation," but some commentators suggest Paul has a temporal deliverance in mind here ["salvation" and "deliverance" are both possible translations in English for the Greek word σωτηρία], not eternal salvation.⁷ If we look at Paul's other extant letter to the Corinthians, we see that he made clear that salvation came through belief in the gospel message [1 Corinthians 1.21; 15.1-2].

In Romans, Paul talked about repentance from sin, and that those who chose to pursue the path of sin instead of the path of God would end up condemned [Romans 2.4]. In the same passage, however, he said, "*circumcision is of the heart by the Spirit and not by the written code*" [Romans 2.29; NET], and in the next section of his letter he said we are declared righteous by God as a gift of grace when we believe [Romans 3.21-24]. So was Paul saying we need to repent of sin and obey to be saved or not? When reading the whole letter, it becomes clear what Paul was saying. He said if you believe in the gospel message, you will be saved [Romans 1.16], you can have access to God's mercy through faith [Romans 3.25], you can have access to God's grace and have peace with God through faith [Romans 5.1-2], you can have righteousness in God's sight if you believe [Romans 10.4], you can have salvation if you acknowledge Jesus is God the Son and believe God the Father raised him from the dead [Romans 10.9], and the way to salvation has always – even in Old Testament times – been through faith [Romans 4]. So salvation is by grace through faith in Christ; but Paul would agree with James, that a faith that does not lead to a changed life is not true faith [Romans 6.1; James 2.14].

Conclusions

The only biblical criterion God has placed on man for salvation is faith in the gospel message about Jesus Christ. And even that faith is inspired by God [Ephesians 2.8, where the whole process is a gift]. There is no doubt that believers must repent of sin: this is part of being in a right relationship with God, of following Christ, of becoming more like Christ [more sanctified], and of being cleansed [2 Corinthians 12.21; Hebrews 6.6; James 5.16; 1 John 1.9]. There also is no doubt that true faith increasingly over time will lead to obedience and submission to Christ, and thus a changed life [Romans 6.1; 8.29; 12.2; 2 Corinthians 3.18; 2 Timothy 2.19; James 2.14]. But if there is repentance in the gospel or salvation process, it is repentance of not believing, of lack of faith in Christ. God calls all people to return to him and repent of the broken relationship with him: for the Jews of the nation Israel, this included a return to covenant obedience as well as covenant faith in the promise of deliverance; for Gentiles this is a demand for faith in God and his Messianic savior. Rather than confessing sin, unbelievers are called on to confess faith in Christ [Romans 10.9-10; 1 John 2.23]. Coming to faith in Christ – for a Jew or a Gentile – will include recognition of falling short and the need for a savior, but the full commitment to follow Christ and change one's life comes as one is changed inside by the Holy Spirit in the sanctification process. Salvation has always been by faith in God's revealed promise of deliverance; since the Jews had more revelation, they were called to respond in more detail.

⁶ In 2 Corinthians 12.21 and 2 Timothy 2.25, Paul discussed people repenting of specific sins, but not in the context of salvation. Hebrews 6.6 discusses repenting of falling away from Christian life, while Hebrews 12.17 discusses a specific person's repentance from a specific sin, neither of which is in a context of salvation. In Revelation 2.5, 16, 21-22; 3.3, 19, John wrote that various churches must repent of specific sins or face temporal discipline by God, but these are not in a context of salvation. Revelation 9.20-21; 16.9-11 prophesy about people not repenting during the tribulation; while these people are unsaved, the talk of repentance is not specifically about the context of salvation. I am not sure how to interpret repentance in 2 Peter 3.9; perhaps it relates to the discussion above regarding Acts 11.18.

⁷ See, for example, Thomas L. Constable, *Dr Constable's Notes on 2 Corinthians*, 2010 ed., 67; accessed online 11.16.11, at <http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/2corinthians.pdf>.