

The Process of Repentance

Aim: To show from the book of Nehemiah, some of the factors involved in repentance¹

Reading: Nehemiah 9:1-3 “...the children of Israel were assembled”²

Introduction:

Most of us are familiar with the term, “repentance”, and what it means. Basically, repentance means to “turn”, “to change”, “to go in another direction”. In the Biblical context, it means turning away from sin and self, and turning to God and His Will. It involves a re-orientation of our lives.

The word “repentance” is not mentioned in the above verses, but when you look at what was happening, and the context in which they were being done, we can see that these verses are describing the process of repentance.

To put the reading into its context, let me “back-track” a bit. The nation of Judah (the southern kingdom) had been unfaithful to God during the time of its latter kings after the time of Hezekiah – Josiah being an exception (**2 Kings 21-24**). They had fallen into idolatry, served false gods (*e.g.* **Jeremiah 7:17-20; 30-31**), and committed other evils (*e.g.* **Jeremiah 5:26-31**). Finally, after they had rejected God’s warnings and exhortations to repent (**Jeremiah 6:16**), Jerusalem was destroyed by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar, and most of the survivors were taken captive to Babylon around 587 BC (**2 Kings 25:1-21**).

After 70 years of captivity (**Jeremiah 25:11**), Babylon was over-run by the Medes and Persians (**Daniel 5:30-31**), and this new administration allowed the descendants of those survivors to return to Jerusalem (**2 Chronicles 36:22-23**). In the book of Ezra, we see the people returning to Jerusalem and rebuilding the Temple (**Ezra 3:8 – 6:15**). In Nehemiah, we see them rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem (**Nehemiah 2:11 – 6:16**).

Having taken care of the physical things, it was also time to take care of the spiritual things. In **Nehemiah 8**, we see the people getting back to the Word of God, and celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles. Now, in chapter **9**, we see the people assembling to confess their sins.

In the first 3 verses of **Nehemiah 9**, I want us to look at some of the things that are involved in repentance so that we can learn from them.

LESSON

1) Repentance starts with grief over our sins

Nehemiah 9:1 “...the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads...”

In **2 Corinthians 7:9-10**, we see that repentance requires a “godly sorrow”. This is not the type of sorrow that arises simply from being found out. That type of sorrow is described as being a worldly sorrow, and it doesn’t address the problem of sin.

¹ Acknowledgements to Bill Watkins, Crieve Hall, Nashville, TN, for the basic outline of this lesson.

² Quotes are from the New Kings James Version Bible

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The type of sorrow we need to have is the type of sorrow that arises because we have sinned against God. It is the type of sorrow that should arise on the basis that we have done the wrong thing – regardless as to whether anyone else knows about it or finds out about it.

Look at what James wrote in **James 4:8-10**. He said that they needed to “...*Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom....*”. Why did they need to do this? Why did they need to “*lament, mourn and weep*”? Because in chapter **2:1-13**, we see that they had been showing favouritism based on a person’s material wealth, and treating the poor with contempt. In chapter **4:2-3**, they had been guilty of lust, envy, covetousness. In **4:4**, they had become friends with the world, which made them enemies of God. And in **4:11**, they had been speaking evil of one another. That is why James said that they needed to “*lament, mourn and weep*”. Their sins should have caused them to grieve. They needed to turn from their sinful pride and arrogance, and “*Humble themselves in the sight of the Lord....*” (vs. **10**)

In our passage from **Nehemiah**, we see that the children of Israel wore sackcloth and put dust on their heads. Sackcloth was woven from the long dark hair of camels or goats. It was made into the shape of a bag, and normally used to store grain, *etc.* It was worn during serious and sober occasions, in times of grief and sadness³ (e.g. **Genesis 37:34**; **2 Samuel 3:31**; **Jeremiah 4:5-8**). The dust reminded them of their humanity and mortality, for in **Genesis 3:19** we read, “*For dust you are, and to dust you shall return*”. It reminded them of who they were, and of who God is.

The children of Israel were grieving over their past unfaithfulness (**Nehemiah 9:16-37**). Their personal appearance and discomfort in wearing the sackcloth were not important. The fact that they had sinned against God took precedence over anything else in their life. Repentance is not about saving face, it is about having a contrite heart (**Psalms 51:17**).

2) Repentance can require time for the process to be completed

Some acts of repentance may not need much time for repentance to take place. For example, a bad thought may come into your head, and after dwelling on it for a few moments, you quickly reject it and repent.

But there are other sins that require the sinner to do some serious soul-searching. This soul-searching will take time as the sinner considers his or her actions in the light of God’s Word – considers what they have done, and what they now need to do.

In **Nehemiah 9:1** we see that the children of Israel “...*assembled with fasting...*”

Fasting involves time. Fasting is something that can be done in order to help us focus on God (**Acts 14:23**; **1 Corinthians 7:5**). Fasting can remind us of our dependence on Him. It also reminds us that there are things that are more

³ The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol 5, Q-Z, page 192,

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important than physical food. We read in **Deuteronomy 8:3** that God allowed the children of Israel to experience a bit of hunger during the wilderness wanderings so that they could learn that “...*man shall not live by bread alone, but...by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.*”.

In **Nehemiah 9:3**, we read that the children of Israel “...*stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law...for one fourth of the day...*”. The Hebrew day was nominally 12 hours. So by doing the maths, we can see that they spent 3 hours listening to the Word of God. And while the Law was being read, they would have been reminded as to who they were, who God is, and what God had done for them. As they listened to the Law being read, they would have had time to contemplate their own lives, what they had done or not done in the past, where their lives were currently heading, and what they needed to change in order to be pleasing to God.

3) Repentance involves the Word of God

I mentioned above that those assembled in **Nehemiah 9** listened as the Word of the Lord was read to them for three hours.

Psalm 119:105 describes God’s Word as being “*a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path*”

- It is the Word of God that teaches us about sin (**Romans 7:7**).
- It is the Word of God that teaches us about the need for repentance (**Luke 13:3, 5**).
- It is the Word of God that teaches us about Jesus’ sacrifice for our sins (**Acts 8:35**).
- It is the Word of God that teaches us how to live righteously (**1 Timothy 4:16**).

When we read the Word of God, we start to see the flaws in our own lives (**James 1:23-24**). As the children of Israel listened while the Book of the Law was read to them, they would have realised within themselves where they had not been obedient to God. They would have also seen that they needed to get right with God. They would have seen their need for repentance. When we lose touch with the Word of God, when we pay little attention to it, we start to lose awareness of what is right and what is wrong. We start to drift back into the world. The awareness of sin and the need for repentance will start to fade.

We need to spend time with the Word (**1 Timothy 4:13**). We need to meditate on the Word (**Psalm 1:2**) so that it transforms us (**Romans 12:2**). We need to let the Word change us so that we can be a light to the world (**Matthew 5:13-16**).

4) Repentance involves confession of our sins

Nehemiah 9:3 “...*and for another fourth (of the day) they confessed...*”

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For another three hours, they confessed their sins to God (on top of having spent 3 hours hearing the Word of God read to them). From chapter **9:16** onwards, we see them acknowledging how God had blessed them and had provided for them over the centuries, and we see them confessing their nation's history of sins against Him.

If I am going to repent of my sins, I need to first acknowledge that I have sinned. If I try to deny my sins, I won't see the need for repentance.

- **1 John 1:8** says, "*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*".
- **1 John 1:10** says, "*If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His Word is not in us*".

When we sin, we should not try to "hold it in", we should not try to hide it. When we sin, God knows about it (**Psalm 139:1-4**; **1 Corinthians 4:5**), even if no-one else does.

When David was confronted with his sin by Nathan (the prophet), straight away, David confessed – "*I have sinned against the Lord*" (**2 Samuel 12:13**) I don't know who was present when Nathan told David these things, but it seems that it didn't matter to David – he just came straight out and confessed. Not only did David confess in front of Nathan, but he also confessed to God. In **Psalm 51**, we also see David confessing his sin before God – "*For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight...*" (**Psalm 51:3-4**).

In **Psalm 32:5**, David says, "*I acknowledged my sin to You. And my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord", and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.*"⁴

Repentance involves confession.

5) Repentance involves worship of God

Nehemiah 9:3 "*...and for another fourth (of the day) they.....worshipped the Lord their God*"

While they were confessing their sins, they were also worshipping God. Worship has a meaning of bowing down before someone who is superior to us. (**Matthew 2:11**; **28:9**; **Philippians 2:10**). Our worship to God is not *about* us, it is not *for* us, it is *for God*. In the end, we should be blessed by it (**1 Corinthians 14:26b**), but first and foremost, it is *about God*. It is about acknowledging His greatness, while at the same time acknowledging our unworthiness.

When the prodigal son repented of his foolishness, he said, "*I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son....."*" (**Luke 15:18-19**). This is the type of attitude that repentance requires.

⁴ This verse may not be related to the sin referred to in Psalm 51, but it contains the same principle regarding the need for confession.

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Repentance involves seeing someone to whom we must give account (**2 Corinthians 5:10**), seeing someone who is higher than we are (**Philippians 2:9**), seeing someone who is holier than we are (**Revelation 15:4**), and bowing down and worshipping Him.

6) Repentance requires a change in our actions

At the end of **Nehemiah 9**, and as you go into chapter **10**, we see the people are now determined to change direction. They are no longer going to walk in the ways of their fathers. Rather, they are determined to walk according to the Word of the Lord (**Nehemiah 10:28-31 f.f.**⁵)

Repentance is not just a mental exercise. True repentance results in a change of attitudes and actions. Things are not the same any more. Have a look at a couple of examples from the New Testament.

- **Acts 16:16-34** Paul and Silas had been unjustly beaten and thrown into jail (vs.23). After the earthquake, the jailor was taught the gospel (vs.32), and he and his family obeyed (vs.33b). But notice what the jailor does;

“...he took them.....and washed their stripes.....brought them into his house.....set food before them.....” (vs.33-34).

There is nothing in the scriptures to indicate that he had any such concerns for his prisoners before being taught the gospel. He possibly saw Paul and Silas as being just another couple of troublesome Jews. But now, he cares for them, he treats their wounds, and he feeds them.

- **Luke 19:1-9** Zacchaeus was a tax collector, a rich tax collector. Jesus came to his house one day, and no doubt, some teaching took place. But notice what Zacchaeus says in verse **8b** *“...if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold.”* **Leviticus 6:2-5** says that if a someone has extorted from his neighbour (vs. 2b), then he shall restore the full value, plus 1/5th more (vs.4-5). Zacchaeus was going to restore four-fold what he had taken falsely, and that was after he had already given to the poor half of what he owned.

Note that Zacchaeus didn't just say that he would not defraud people in the future. He was also prepared to try and “right the wrongs” that he had done in the past.

When we repent of our sinful ways, people should see changes in our lives. The types of changes we should see include things mentioned in passages such as **Ephesians 4:21-32** and **Colossians 3:5-16**. These passages talk about things that we need to put out of our lives, and things that we need to “put on”. We are not to let sin reign in our body (**Romans 6:12**).

True repentance will be visible by a change in our attitudes and actions.

⁵ With regards to the marriages between the children of Israel and those of other peoples mentioned in these verses, see also **Deuteronomy 7:1-4** and **Ezra 10:1-44**.

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Conclusion:

Repentance is not about trying to win the sympathy of others. Repentance is not about trying to gain advantage by appearing humble and pious. Repentance is not about thinking, “*How can I get through this with the minimum damage to my reputation*”. Repentance is about getting right with God. Repentance is about turning away from sin and from self, and turning back to God and His Word.

Repentance is not simply saying “sorry” when you are made aware of your sins.

- Repentance involves a heart-felt response (**Psalm 51:10, 17**).
- Repentance involves having a godly sorrow (**2 Corinthians 7:10**).
- Repentance involves spending some time in self-examination in the light of God’s Word (**2 Corinthians 13:5**) – considering what we have done, and what we need to do in order to get back right with God.
- Repentance involves acknowledging that that we have sinned against the Lord God Almighty (**Psalm 51:4**).
- Repentance involves acknowledging that God is holy (**Isaiah 6:1-3**), and that we are sinful (**Isaiah 6:5**).
- Repentance involves getting our lives back in sync with God’s Word (**Acts 20:32**).

When we truly repent and seek God’s forgiveness, there is rejoicing in Heaven (**Luke 15:10**), our sins are forgiven (**1 John 1:9**), and “*times of refreshing come from the presence of the Lord*” (**Acts 3:19**)