

# Forgiveness and Repentance



## Sabbath Afternoon

**MEMORY TEXT:** “Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?” (Romans 2:4).

**T**HE BUMPER STICKER had only one word written across it: “Repent!” That is all it took, one word, not even exclusively a Christian word (it is used in other contexts and even in other faiths), and the faith of the owner was clearly identified. That is because the concept of repentance is tied so intricately to Christianity. In fact, not only did the word reveal the faith of the owner, but that word, as expressed, was also a form of witnessing.

Thus, with one word, the owner of the car revealed his faith; he was able to witness for it, as well.

This week we will look at that word, not so much in the verb form (“repent”) but as a noun, “repentance,” even if, at its core, repentance is nothing if not a verb; that is, something a Christian does.

**THE WEEK AT A GLANCE:** How important is the concept of repentance in Christian theology? How does repentance help us understand what it means to be forgiven? How does our understanding of the Cross help us come to repentance? What is true repentance? Why must repentance involve more than just sorrow for the consequences of sin? What danger is there of making repentance an attempt at salvation by works?

\*Please study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 19.

## TO COME TO REPENTANCE.

“The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to usward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).

**R**ead the chapter in which this verse appears, focusing particularly on the texts leading up to verse 9. The context is that of the last days, before the Second Coming, when this world as we know it ends. Peter is talking also about scoffers, about those who deride the notion of Christ’s return—a time that will ultimately lead to the “destruction of ungodly men” (2 Pet. 3:7, NASB). It is in the midst of these thoughts that Peter expresses the wonderful truths, in verse 9, that God’s promises are not delayed and that He will fulfill His purposes among us.

Though the immediate context of the chapter is one of “gloom and doom,” of mockers, of delay, and of destruction, what does Peter say in verse 9 that should give followers of Christ hope and security? What does the text itself also imply about God’s love, even for those who, even now, might be mocking the notion of His return?

Though God does not want anyone to perish, some clearly will (Dan. 12:2; Matt. 25:41; Rev. 20:14, 15); it is obvious, then, that whatever God’s desire might be for all human beings, He respects our freedom of choice and free will—even if those choices can lead to the death of beings for whom Christ died (something He does not want to happen). This text, among other things, presents a powerful testimony to the sanctity of free will and free choice.

Notice the crucial word in verse 9 that, in a sense, separates the “dead” from the “living”: *repentance*. God does not want any to perish; that is why He wants all to “come to repentance.” The clear implication being, of course, that those who repent will not perish, while those who don’t repent will. Whatever, then, repentance means, it obviously has consequences of eternal importance.

Write down somewhere your understanding of what it means to “come to repentance.” When this week’s lesson ends, write down your thoughts on the same topic, comparing what you learned with what you wrote for today’s study. Share the differences with your class on Sabbath.

**Monday**

**April 14**

**“TO BE FORGIVEN.”**

**“But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Matt. 9:13).**

The first task of Christians, for the most part, is not to learn to forgive but *to be forgiven*. “To be forgiven” is, in many ways, the foundational principle of Christianity. Without it, our actions become mere outward religious forms, and our profession of faith becomes nothing but cold dogmas, things containing no more value before God than the idols Israel made and worshiped while still professing faith in the same God we profess to worship, as well.

How, then, do we learn “to be forgiven”?

We learn when we acknowledge our inability to do anything of ourselves to earn or to merit God’s grace. We learn when we realize just how bad our moral situation is and why we must fall before God with nothing to plead but our own great need of His mercy. We learn when we experience true sorrow for our sins themselves and not merely for the immediate consequences of those sins. We learn “to be forgiven” when we, indeed, learn to repent.

**Look at the text for today in the context of the whole chapter (see also Mark 2:17; Luke 5:32). What did Jesus mean when He said the righteous do not need repentance but only sinners? Are we not all sinners? (Rom. 3:23).**

Jesus called sinners to repentance because the righteous *had already repented*. They had to, because that is the only way they could be deemed “righteous.” The “righteous” are those who have acknowledged their sin, who have accepted God’s forgiveness for their sin and thus have Christ’s righteousness credited to them as their own. They have, under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, confessed their sins, put away their sins, and surrendered themselves to God, grasping by faith alone the promise of forgiveness and righteousness made available through Christ’s sacrifice. The righteous have already come to repentance; they have, in short, learned “to be forgiven.”

**Dwell more on this idea of learning “to be forgiven.” Why is this idea so basic and crucial to the Christian life? Ask yourself this crucial question: Have I learned to be forgiven? If so, how could you explain what that means to someone who is struggling with this question but who hasn’t learned it? How does repentance teach us what it means “to be forgiven”?**

**Tuesday**

**April 15**

**THE GOODNESS OF GOD.**

**“Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?” (Rom. 2:4).**

The human condition boils down to one simple point: Because of Adam’s sin, we, as a race, have been alienated from the Creator, a situation that, if left unremedied, would lead to our eternal demise (Rom. 5:12). The good news is that Jesus, at the Cross, resolved that situation (5:8-10). How? Because there, in human flesh, Jesus died for the sins of the world (Gal. 3:13).

But do we really know what it means? What it means is that, at the Cross, your sins—whatever they were, and no matter how much damage they might have caused—have already been punished (Isaiah 53). It means that the legal penalty—before God—for every foul thing you have ever done or could ever do has been paid, in full, now and forever (Rom. 3:25). It means if you stole, the divine penalty for that sin has been taken care of; it means if you murdered, God’s justice regarding that horrible act has already been satisfied; it means if you lied, if you cheated, or if you seduced your best friend’s spouse (or daughter)—God’s just anger at those sins has been met through Jesus’ death (1 Pet. 2:24). It means that although you still have to deal with the immediate legal, moral, social, and relational *consequences* of those sins (which can be devastating), if you have surrendered in faith and obedience to the Lord, you will still never have to face God’s wrath for those sins.

This means that your lies, your deceit, your foul thoughts have already been condemned at the Cross (John 12:31); your lusts, your greed, your perversions have already been condemned at the Cross; your hatred, your envy, your violence have already been punished at the Cross. If they were not, you would have to face that judgment, that condemnation, and that punishment yourself; and if you did, you would be judged *guilty*, you would be condemned, and you would be punished severely (Rev. 21:8). Fortunately, this judgment, condemnation, and punishment have already happened—at the Cross.

This is the provision that God, through His love (John 3:16), has provided as the only means to forgive us for our sins (2 Cor. 5:19).

**Does what you have learned today cause you to want to continue in sin? Or does it cause you to hate your sin, to want to be forgiven, and to want to be purged and cleansed of your sin so thoroughly that you never do it again? If it’s the latter, you are beginning to understand what the Bible means when it says that “the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance.”**

Wednesday

April 16

**“GODLY SORROW.”**

Please read 2 Corinthians 7:9, 10.

The context of these words quickly can be summarized: Paul receives some terrible reports about the situation at the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 5:1; 6:1-8; 11:20-30), a church he himself had founded (Acts 18:1-11). He writes them a stern rebuke that, apparently, is accepted in the right spirit. Second Corinthians 7 contains his words of rejoicing over their positive response.

**Paul, in 2 Corinthians 7:9, 10, contrasts two kinds of sorrow: godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. One leads to salvation, the other to death. Obviously, there is a big difference between the two. Keeping 2 Peter 3:9 in mind (Sunday’s section), what do you think that difference is?**

Perhaps the best way to understand “godly sorrow,” the kind that “worketh repentance to salvation,” is first to understand the real problem with sin, which can be understood only in the light of the Cross. Christ’s death on the cross wasn’t to save us from the immediate consequences of sin (obviously not, because we still suffer those consequences). Instead, Christ’s death struck at the heart of sin, at the principle of sin as sin. Ultimately, He came to destroy sin itself.

Thus, “godly sorrow,” the kind that leads to repentance, is sorrow for sin itself, for the principle behind it, as opposed to the immediate consequences. Almost anyone can sorrow over wrong deeds that lead to punishment or to embarrassment or to some unfortunate consequences. But that’s not the real problem with sin, which is a rupture in the moral fabric of God’s universe. Christ didn’t die in order to spare the child of an adulterer the trauma of divorce; He didn’t die to spare a thief time in jail, because the issue of sin goes so much deeper than the immediate and earthly, physical consequences of sin.

“Godly sorrow,” though it can include the consequences of sin, must go deeper, to the principle of sin itself and to what sin means to God and to His creation. Only then, when we understand just how bad sin is (apart from immediate consequences), will we be sorry enough (“godly sorrow”) to want it eradicated from our lives.

**If we are sorry only for the consequences of sin, as opposed to the sin itself, then, if we could avoid the consequences, we would be less inclined to avoid the sin. How does this concept help us understand the true nature of repentance?**

Thursday

April 17

**WHAT REPENTANCE DOES NOT DO (see Acts 5:31; 2 Tim. 2:25, 26).**

In the course of this week’s study on repentance and forgiveness, it should be clear how crucial repentance is to forgiveness. In fact, it would seem that without repentance, there can be no personal forgiveness of sin. The provision the Lord made for the human race (see Romans 5) becomes individually efficacious only as the individual accepts what was done; repentance is the process of this acceptance.

**Look at Acts 5:31 and 2 Timothy 2:25, 26. Where do they say repentance comes from?**

The point that Christians need to remember is that repentance, no matter how crucial to the process of forgiveness, is *not* the means of forgiveness. It is not some work that we do that earns us pardon. There’s no merit in repentance in the sense that the act itself is something that can make us acceptable in God’s sight or that it helps atone for our sins. Forgiveness comes only through what Christ did for us on the cross, an act that is external to us (Heb. 9:12). Repentance, like faith (see Eph. 2:8, 9), is a divinely endowed gift that allows us to appropriate in our own lives the promise of forgiveness.

In other words, we must not make the doctrine of repentance into a subtle form of salvation by works, which is easy to do (for our natural tendency is to try to work our way to heaven). Sorrow for sin and a desire to turn away from it, though key elements of repentance, are simply not sufficient to solve the problem of sin and forgiveness.

**The Greek word for true repentance, *metanoia*, means literally “a change of mind.” How does that concept help us understand what repentance involves?**

**Though repentance is a gift from God, as any gift it has to be accepted. And yet not everyone will accept the gift. Many times people will resist the Spirit’s attempts to bring the soul to repentance. Why is that? Keeping in mind the idea that repentance involves sorrow for our sin, the need to turn away from our sin, the recognition of our sin, and our utter helplessness to do anything ourselves about our sin, what are some of the reasons why people might be resistant to accepting the gift of repentance? Look at your own life: Can you see, in yourself, any resistance? If so, how can Romans 2:4 help?**

**FURTHER STUDY:** Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, “A Knowledge of God,” pp. 85–91.

**A**s you see the enormity of sin, as you see yourself as you really are, openly do not give up to despair. It was sinners that Christ came to save. We have not to reconcile God to us, but—O wondrous love!—God in Christ is ‘reconciling the world unto Himself.’ 2 Corinthians 5:19. He is wooing by His tender love the hearts of His erring children. No earthly parent could be as patient with the faults and mistakes of his children, as is God with those He seeks to save.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 35.

“Paul had ever exalted the divine law. He had shown that in the law there is no power to save men from the penalty of disobedience. Wrongdoers must repent of their sins and humble themselves before God, whose just wrath they have incurred by breaking His law, and they must also exercise faith in the blood of Christ as their only means of pardon. The Son of God had died as their sacrifice and had ascended to heaven to stand before the Father as their advocate. By repentance and faith they might be freed from the condemnation of sin and through the grace of Christ be enabled henceforth to render obedience to the law of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 393.

“There are many who fail to understand the true nature of repentance. Multitudes sorrow that they have sinned, and even make an outward reformation, because they fear that their wrongdoing will bring suffering upon themselves. But this is not repentance in the Bible sense. They lament the suffering, rather than the sin. Such was the grief of Esau when he saw that the birthright was lost to him forever.”—Ellen G. White, *Conflict and Courage*, p. 63.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Paul rejoiced that the Corinthians sorrowed to repentance. Why can there never be repentance without sorrow? At the same time, in what ways can Satan tempt us to take our sorrow too far, and why would he even try to do that?
2. There’s a fine line between guilt, the kind that Christians should no longer bear, and repentance, which in a very real sense involves a kind of “guilt.” How can we draw the distinction between the two?
3. In light of this week’s lesson, what do you think the phrase “works meet for repentance” means? (Acts 26:20; see also Matt. 3:8).



## Cuban Revolution, Part 1

Charlotte Ishkanian

Hector Soque drove a truck for a cement company in eastern Cuba. One day he was to take a load of cement to a church building site. He had to park the truck some distance away from the building site and wondered how he would get the cement to where it was needed. Suddenly, men, women, and children hurried to the truck carrying buckets, cooking pots, anything that would hold cement. They began filling the vessels with the heavy cement and carrying it to the building site.

Hector watched amazed as these people carried cement all afternoon without complaining. “What kind of church is this?” he asked one of the workers. When he learned that it was an Adventist church, he wanted to know more about Adventists.

A church member gave him a Bible, and he began to read it. When someone told him that Adventists are a sect, Hector studied the Bible even more deeply. Soon he was spending all his free time reading the Bible. He shared with his family what he was learning about the hope we have in Christ. The family began to attend the Adventist church, and eventually all were baptized.

When Hector lost his job because of the Sabbath, he claimed God’s promise to provide his needs.

An Adventist man invited Hector to visit his home some distance from the church and in an area where no other Adventists live. While there, Hector felt God calling him to start a church in that area. The man offered his home and promised to invite his friends if Hector would come and teach them.

Hector spent every Sunday visiting people and holding Bible class at his friend’s house. Within a year, some twenty people were attending the Sunday-night meetings. They needed a larger house of worship, but there was no money for a church, and the members were very poor. The man who had opened his home to the church sold his car to provide money to build a chapel that holds about fifty people. During evangelistic meetings, 100 people crowded into the chapel.

Hector loves teaching others about Christ, so when the conference asked him to move to another city and start a church there, Hector agreed. He and his wife said Goodbye to their family and friends, left their teenage daughter with her grandmother so she could continue her studies, and moved. It is a sacrifice, but the couple agrees, “Jesus is coming soon, and we want to do what we can to help people be ready to meet Him.”

(continued next week)

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