

REPENTANCE: THE MOST MISUNDERSTOOD WORD IN THE BIBLE Pt. 7

by G. Michael Cocoris

THE MESSAGE IN BOOK OF HEBREWS

The word “repentance” appears in the book of Hebrews three times. In one of these passages it is connected to faith, and in the other two it occurs alone.

HEBREWS SIX

Hebrews 6:1 The original recipients of the book of Hebrews were spiritually immature believers (Heb. 5:11-14). The author exhorts them to go on to maturity (Heb. 6:1). He writes: *“Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God”* (Heb. 6:1).

Repentance from dead works is a change of mind about the rituals of the Mosaic Law. The expression “dead works” occurs here and in Hebrews 9:14 where it is said to be Levitical rituals.¹ Dead works are works that have no life. They lack “any effective power for obtaining justification.”² All efforts to please God are “merely dead works” and the only hope of salvation is a complete reversal of attitude.” The sinner “must cease trusting his own righteousness (which is no righteousness at all) and must cast himself upon the mercy of God, receiving by faith the gift of salvation.”³ What is needed is faith directed toward God. Ironside puts it like this,

What then is meant by “repentance from dead works”? It is a complete change of mind,

¹ Hodges, Zane C., “Hebrews” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, edited by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, (Wheaton Illinois: Victor Books), 1983.

² Guthrie, Donald, *Hebrews*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986.

³ Kent, Homer A. *The Pastoral Epistles*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1966.

whereby the convicted sinner gives up all thought of being able to propitiate God by effort of his own and acknowledges that he is as bad as the Word has declared him to be. He turns right about face. Instead of relying on his own fancied merits he turns to the Lord for deliverance and seeks for mercy through the Savior God has provided.

“Repentance from dead works,” then implies the giving up of all confidence in the flesh, the recognition that I am not able to do one thing to retrieve my fallen estate. As a dead sinner I cannot do one thing to merit the divine favor. My prayers, my tears, my charity, my religiousness, all count for nothing, so far as earning salvation is concerned. I am lost and need a Savior. I am sick and need a Physician. I am bankrupt and need a Kinsman-Redeemer. I am dead and need Him who is the Resurrection and the Life. All I need I find in Christ, for whom I count all else but dross.⁴

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This reference again demonstrates that the nature of repentance is **not** sorrow for sin or changing one’s behavior. It is **not** saying people have to feel sorrow for their works or stop doing one kind of works and start doing another kind of works. It is saying that people need to **change their minds** about their works. If people are depending on their works, which, of course, are dead (that is, works have no life or ability to save) and they change their minds about works being able to save, they will then need to trust something or someone else. As the next phrase indicates, that someone else is Jesus Christ.

⁴ Ironside, Harry A. *Except Ye Repent*. (New York: American Tract Society, 1937), p. 83, 89-90.

Hebrews 6:1 is the third time in the New Testament where repentance and faith are mentioned together (cf. Mk. 1:15, Acts 20:21). In this case the two are linked together. People are to change their minds about trusting their works for forgiveness and trust Jesus Christ.

Repentance and faith are foundational. The author is saying that the readers need to press on beyond foundational truth to more advanced thinking, which will lead to maturity.

Hebrews 6:6 The author warns about a failure to go on to maturity.

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good Word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame (Heb. 6:4-6).

These verses constitute a single sentence. Simply put it says, "It is impossible for those who were enlightened to be renewed again to repentance." Actually, four participle phrases (literally translated: having been enlightened, having tasted, having become partakers, and having tasted) describe the people involved. The greatly debated question is who are these individuals? Are they genuinely regenerated?"

John Calvin and many others say, "No." According to that view these people were enlightened, that is, exposed to the gospel or even illuminated, but not regenerate. They tasted, but they did not drink. They were partakers of the work of the Holy Spirit, but not the person of the Holy Spirit.

A careful consideration of the content of these verses in the context of Hebrews, however, indicates that genuinely regenerate individuals are being described. The Greek word translated "enlightened" here is only used in one other place in Hebrews, namely, in Hebrews 10:32, where it definitely describes true believers. To be enlightened is to be converted (2 Cor 4:3-6). The addition of "once" to enlightened "marks the

completeness and sufficiency of the single act."⁵ It points to "something complete, rather than partial or inadequate."⁶

Likewise, the Greek word rendered "tasted" is used elsewhere in Hebrews of actual experience (cf. 2:9 see also 1 Pet. 2:3). In the illustration that follows, the land "drinks" the rain, a heavenly gift (Heb. 6:7). To taste of the heavenly gift, then, is to experience the gift of eternal life (Jn. 4:10, Rom. 6:23, Jas. 1:17-18).

The Greek word for "partakers" is also used elsewhere in Hebrews of regenerate people. In Hebrews 3:1 it is used of partaking of the heavenly calling and in Hebrews 3:14 of being partakers of Christ! To partake of the Holy Spirit is to participate with the person of the Holy Spirit.

Thus, there is no question but that the individuals referred to in Hebrews 6:4-5 are genuinely regenerate.

In the Greek text as well as the English, the word "tasted" is used twice. They not only experienced the gift of eternal life (Heb. 6:4); they also experienced the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the age to come (Heb. 6:5). The word translated "powers" is the normal New Testament word for miracles. They had witnessed miracles, the power of God in the present that will also be manifest in the age to come (cf. Heb. 2:4).

Thus, there is no question but that the individuals referred to in Hebrews 6:4-5 are genuinely regenerate. The context (Heb. 5:11-6:3) and the content of these verses support such a conclusion. In the words of Kent, "the normal understanding of these descriptive terms, in light of the author's own use elsewhere in the epistle, is to those who are regenerate."

The next question concerns the falling away. In the English text verse six reads "If they fall away," but in the Greek text "fall away" is a participle like the four descriptive phrases of Hebrews 6:4-5. A more accurate translation would be "It is impossible for those who having been once enlightened and having tasted the heavenly gift and having become partakers of the Holy Spirit and having tasted the

⁵ Westcott, B. F., *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965).

⁶ Kent, Homer A. *The Pastoral Epistles*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966).

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good Word of God and the powers of the age to come and having fallen away to be renewed again to repentance." The Greek verb "*fall away*" occurs only here in the New Testament, though the noun occurs much more (cf. for example, Gal. 6:1). The idea is of falling aside from the right path and here refers to deliberate apostasy (Heb. 3:12), that is, defection from the faith or withdrawal from a Christian profession.

Is it possible for a genuine regenerate person to deny the faith? Apparently. Consider the fact that John warns believers (1 Jn. 2:12-14) that false teachers were trying to deceive them (1 Jn. 2:26) concerning the doctrine of Christ (1 Jn. 2:21-25). Paul said something similar (2 Cor. 11:1-4, 13-15. See also 2 Tim 2:17-18).

In other words, this passage is saying that it is impossible is for a regenerate person to apostatize and be renewed again to repentance. The Greek word rendered "*renew*" only occurs here in the New Testament and means "to restore." In the Greek text it is in the active voice, and Westcott argues that "the use of the active voice limits the strict application of the words to human agency" and that the fact that it is also in the present tense "suggests continual effort." It is impossible for continuous effort on the part of people to restore an apostate back, not to conversion but to commitment.

What then is the meaning of the word "*repentance*" in Hebrews 6:6? Some interpret Hebrews 6 as hypothetical. If that is the case, then the word "*repentance*" is identical to Hebrews 6:1 and means that it is impossible for genuine believers to repent again (change their minds about good works), which is another way of saying be saved again. The point would be to go on to maturity because you cannot be saved again.

Others say that this is not hypothetical. It is really impossible for genuine believers who return to a works system of salvation (such as Judaism) to have their minds changed either by God or by man.

Either way (hypothetical or actual) the meaning of the word "*repentance*" in verse six is "change your mind."

In Hebrews 12, the author warns believers not to fall short of the grace of God, lest a root of bitterness spring up (Heb. 12:15) or lest there be a fornicator or profane person—that is, one who is "worldly irreligious" (Heb. 12:16). Esau is given as an illustration of a profane person.

Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup (Gen 25:29-34). The birthright was the right of the oldest son to be the head of the family. Under the Mosaic Law the eldest son received a double inheritance (Deut 21:17). Esau valued things earthly and present more than he did things heavenly and future. For a temporary gratification he forfeited his inheritance. He put the sensual above the spiritual. He was a worldly, irreligious person.

That does not mean Esau was not a believer. He was a son who was entitled to an inheritance (Lang). He lost his inheritance, not his sonship. Nor does it mean he had no spiritual interest at all. In fact, the author says, "*For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears*" (Heb. 12:17). In other words, Esau later wanted to inherit the blessing; he changed his mind and even was moved to tears over his foolishness, but it was too late (Gen 27:34-35). He could not reverse what he had done; he could not reverse the consequences of his former decision.⁷

Summary: "Repentance" in the book of Hebrews is a change of mind. It is used of a change of mind about dead works (Heb. 6:1, 6) and a change of mind about a previous decision (Heb. 12:17).

"Repentance" in Hebrews is changing one's mind from believing in dead works to believing in Christ or changing one's mind from believing soup was more important than inheritance to believing that inheritance is more important than soup. ■

G. Michael Cocoris pastors The Lindley Church in Tarzana, CA. His e-mail address is cocoris@cocoris.com.

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⁷ "New Testament Repentance: Repentance in the Epistles and Revelation" by Robert N. Wilkin in *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Autumn, 1990, p. 29).