

Who Needs to Repent? (Part 2)

If repentance is not required for those who are eternally condemned to have eternal life, how is the concept used in the New Testament? There are three main answers to that question, the first of which is, by far, the most predominant and will be addressed in this article.

First Century National Israel Needed Repentance

Of the fifty-nine verses that use the words *repent* (Gr., *metanoeo* and Gr., *metamelomai*) *repentance* (Gr., *metanoia*) twenty-nine (nearly half!) are directed toward national Israel in the first century. As will be demonstrated, these usages have nothing to do with salvation from eternal condemnation, though they are quite commonly “gospelized.” God was calling His covenant people to repent of their disobedience, and to turn their hearts back to Him, or else they would face temporal destruction. Of course, in hindsight we know the nation did not repent and therefore faced the prophesied judgment of God in AD70, when the Romans invaded Jerusalem and destroyed the nation.

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) focus on the specific message preached by John the Baptist and Jesus – and later the apostles (Mark 6:12) and the seventy (Luke 10:1-10)– who offered the kingdom of heaven to the nation of Israel, and only to Israel (called “the lost sheep of the house of Israel, Luke 10:6). The offer was predicated on obedience, which required repentance on the part of the nation, for the national heart was far from God. To be sure, Jesus and the apostles were also concerned with salvation of any individual Jews who were eternally lost. Thus the Holy Spirit included the Gospel of John in the canon of Scripture, and the purpose of that particular Gospel is evangelistic, as clearly stated in John 20:31. It seems the focus of the other Gospels is not evangelistic, per se, but a call for the nation to repent and thereby turn from sin and return to the Lord. In essence, Jesus and John the Baptist were emphasizing the importance of 2 Chronicles 7:14.

In other words, the Synoptics hone in on the Gospel of the Kingdom, which is distinct from the Gospel of Grace. The former is for those who are positionally saved, but in need of repentance, whereas the latter is directed at those who are positionally lost and in need of depending on Christ alone for eternal life. There is a big difference. Some might think that because the word “Gospel” has been traditionally used for the first four books of the New Testament that they all are referring to the same Gospel of Grace. But there are actually two Gospels in the New Testament, and thus the word “Gospel” could refer to either one.

The Purpose for National Repentance: Revival

An assumption is typically made by evangelicals that the Jews, at the time of Christ’s earthly ministry, were mostly lost and in need of eternal salvation, but that appears to be upside-down. I believe it is unwise and inaccurate to

press the overarching message of the Synoptics into the mold of the Gospel of Grace. That happens because of long-standing assumptions about passages such as the following:

Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel. Mark 1:14-15

Like John, Jesus also preached the Gospel of the Kingdom. But somehow expositors frequently see only the last phrase of this passage – *repent ye, and believe the gospel* – and use that as the basis for proclaiming that salvation is by repentance and faith. However, they totally miss the context. When taken together with the entire verse, as well as the previous, the phrase *believe the gospel* clearly applies to the Gospel of the Kingdom, not the Gospel of Grace. The Israelites were to believe that God had sent Jesus to usher in the Messianic kingdom. In response, they were to turn back to Jehovah in righteousness.

A related assumption made by some expositors is in regards to the phrase, *many believed on Him*, or other similar phrases. They stumble over the word *believed*, assuming it must refer to faith for eternal salvation. However, do not saved people need to believe for sanctification? Does not a sinning Christian need to believe that God will forgive and cleanse when he confess his sins (1 John 1:9)? I would submit that this “believing” was not unto eternal salvation in these contexts. It was the culmination of the revival! Multitudes of these already-saved Jews were repenting of sins and getting right with God, experiencing revival in their lives, and the natural result was that they embraced Jesus as the Messiah they had been waiting for. They believed on Him, not as their Savior from eternal condemnation in this case, but as the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies. More consistent with the context of Matthew’s Gospel is the premise that the Jews were predominantly saved when Jesus began His public ministry.

It is important to consider how the Jews were eternally saved in Old Testament times. In any era, salvation is by faith alone. *Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness (Rom. 4:1)*. What, then, was the state of the Jews at Christ’s first coming? As God’s covenant people, they were believing God about a coming Messiah. That is evidenced by the overwhelming revival that began under the ministry of John the Baptist. Furthermore, the nation was not participating in idolatry, but rather was worshipping Jehovah God and offering blood sacrifices at the Temple. Not to mention, they were observing the feasts and the Sabbaths. Granted, religious observances do not make one eternally saved. However, would these facts not be overwhelming evidence that the nation was predominantly believing in Jehovah rather than unbelieving? And would not their spiritual condition be consistent with Christ’s quotation of Isaiah 6:9-10?

For this people’s heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of

hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. (Isaiah 6:9-10, as quoted by Jesus in Matt. 13:15)

It seems the people were saved, but hard-hearted. The word choices used by Jesus are instructive. *Lest they ... be **converted***. This is the Greek word *epistrepho* and, in this context, means “to revert” or “to turn again.” Jesus is saying the nation had willfully grown calloused in heart, dull in hearing, and blind in spiritual vision. By the time of Christ’s arrival, the nation was in desperate need of revival. They needed to “turn again” to Jehovah. One who is unsaved doesn’t need to “turn again” to the Lord. This is for saved people who have grown apathetic and indifferent to spiritual truth and godly living. Those in such a condition are in need of healing (cf, “heal their land,” 2 Chron. 7:14).

To demonstrate the spiritual healing needed in Israel, Jesus and the apostles did many miracles.

And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people. Matthew 4:23 (see also Matt. 9:35)

And heal the sick that are therein, and say unto them, The kingdom of God is come nigh unto you. Luke 10:9

Certainly, these signs and wonders were for the purpose of corroborating Christ’s ministry as the Son of Man sent by God. But they were not only for that end. They were also pictures of what the coming Messianic Kingdom would be like – a world in which the curse of sin will be largely lifted.

The Penalty for National Rejection: Temporal Destruction

In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand ... Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins. Matt. 3:1-2, 5-6

Are we to conclude this is eternal salvation? Notice in the passage that *all* Judaea, and *all* the region round about Jordan responded positively to his preaching, submitting to his baptism of repentance, confessing their sins. That is certainly not the way to be eternally saved, as we have seen in a previous chapter. Salvation is by faith alone, not by confessing sins. We should be quick to label this a sweeping revival! That is, until the religious leaders of Israel stepped in and poured cold water on what God was doing.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. Matthew 3:1-12

While many of the individual religious leaders were undoubtedly lost (particularly, the Sadducees, who denied the supernatural, and undoubtedly some of the Pharisees, who were not believing God but depending on keeping the law as their salvation), they all knew better! There was no excuse for any individual Israelite to be lost, especially the religious leaders. Jesus said to Nicodemus, *Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? (John 3:10)*. So John the Baptist went right on with his message of repentance for the nation. Perhaps national repentance would help to open the eyes of any unsaved, individual Israelites, so they could see their personal need for salvation by faith alone. Would not a nation-wide revival of saints in America, for example, be a tremendous catalyst for the spread of the gospel, making the overall spiritual climate more conducive to unsaved individuals being more open to salvation in Jesus Christ?

Notice how John condemns the national religious leaders. It is not a pronouncement of *eternal* condemnation, for he is addressing the national need. It is a pronouncement of *temporal* destruction. They are urged to lead the nation in bringing forth fruits meet for (*worthy of*, Luke 3:8) repentance, turning from sins. John condemns their thinking that national identity (*We have Abraham to our father*) equates to right fellowship with God. No, they must repent nationally! If not, a metaphoric "axe" would chop down the national tree, and those refusing to repent would be cast into a metaphoric "fire," symbolizing the fires of God's judgment. Again, this prophecy was fulfilled in AD70, when Rome burned Jerusalem and cast the bodies of thousands of Jews into the burning fires of the Valley of Hinnom (Gehenna), an unquenchable fire. John does not refer to it as an "eternal" fire but an "unquenchable" one. The fires in the Valley of Hinnom were said to burn perpetually.

Woe Unto Thee!

This warning of temporal judgment was quite serious. After being rejected in some of the Galilean cities where He had done the greatest miracles, Jesus rebuked them.

Then began he to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not. Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you. (Matt. 11:20-22)

Because Chorazin and Bethsaida never repented, despite their repeated exposure to the Galilean ministry of Christ, their judgment (in AD70) would be more oppressive than that of Tyre and Sidon, which were repeatedly destroyed by enemies (Babylonian, Persian, Greek) but later rebounded. Indeed, the Romans were much more ruthless to the Israelites when Titus invaded and conquered the land. The long, grueling invasion was torturous for the Israelite nation, which could have repented and avoided it all.

A Parallel for New Testament Saints

I would suggest the spiritual condition of Israel in the first century is much like the spiritual condition of the church of Jesus Christ in the twenty-first century – spiritually anemic. First century Israel was spiritually oppressed and not in possession of the national Messianic promises because of disobedience. Like their forefathers who had been delivered from Egypt in the Passover, they were saved people, but wandering in a wilderness of their own, never obtaining the promised land inheritance. What a tragedy! Yet the church in the twenty-first century is similarly oppressed by worldliness, fleshliness and lack of faith, characterized by defeat rather than victory. Do Christians realize their present spiritual condition will affect their future millennial existence?

While the Gospel of the Kingdom was originally intended for early first century national Israel, it has enormous spiritual application to the present day church of Jesus Christ. As Israel needed to repent, lest it face fiery judgment at the hand of the Romans, so Christians must repent lest they face the fires of God's judgment at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire. 1 Cor. 3:13-15

Peter said, *Judgment must begin at the house of God (1 Pet. 4:17)*. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us, *Our God is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29)*.

Oh Christian, *Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matt. 4:17)!*