

Is Repentance an Act that Saves?

Bernie Gillespie

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Email Question: Is repentance an act that saves? I believe it is.

My Response: The reason that I do not understand repentance as an act that saves or obtains salvation is because of the nature of salvation. The Bible teaches that our condition in sin is so total that God is the only one who can do anything to save us. When we understand how serious our condition is and how holy God is, we would understand that we cannot even respond to God unless His Spirit enables us.

I would be interested in how you would answer a couple of questions. The first is, “Saved from what?” That would tell a lot about what you mean by repentance and where you base your faith. The Bible says that we are saved from God’s wrath. (Romans 1:18; 2:5, 8; 3:5; 4:15; 5:9; 9:22; Eph. 2:3; 5:6; I Thess. 1:10; 2:16; 5:9; Rev. 6:16, 17). The depth of our sin against God is so profound that it is impossible for any human to calculate it. When Adam & Eve sinned, they did so not only defying the authority of God, but more seriously questioning the goodness of God. Rather than live in unbounded love and enjoyment of God and living for His glory, they turned their love inward toward themselves, enjoying things other than God and seeking their own glory (Rom. 2). This dishonoring of God shook humanity to its core and corrupted human nature until now (Gen. 11:1; Eph. 4:22; 2 Pet. 1:4). This sin against God’s goodness, glory and sovereignty was so great that it evoked nothing less than righteous anger from God (Rom. 1:18; 5:9; Eph. 2:3; 5:6). Not petty human or emotional anger, but wrath in the sense of God’s justice working to reconcile or restore what the unrighteousness of sin defiled and destroyed (Acts 17:31).

The second question is: “Saved by what?” The Bible does not teach that repentance is salvation itself. It teaches that repentance is “unto” salvation (2 Cor. 7:10; 2 Tim. 2:25), which is accomplished by God. A perfect sacrifice was required under Moses (Ex. 12:5; 1 Pet. 1:19). But Romans and Hebrews tell us that none of the Old Covenant sacrifices were able to forgive sin (Rom. 3: 25; Heb. 10:4). Only the one sacrifice of Jesus upon the Cross quenched the wrath of the Father and remitted our sins (Heb. 7:27; 9:12; 10:10). Therefore, repentance in itself does not save; it turns us to Jesus, and Jesus saves!

Let me ask this another way. If you are dead in sin (Eph. 2:1) then how can you repent? What can a dead person do? If you are utterly lost in sin, then how can you do anything to help your own cause? So if God calls you to repent, he must make your soul alive by regeneration and give you the desire and the power to repent. I believe that is exactly what he does. Paul says, “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-- it is by grace you have been saved.” (Ephesians 2:4-5) We cannot take credit for that which God gave us the desire and power to do. And the repentance we do, as inspired and empowered by God’s Spirit, is not what saves us. It is our regenerated soul acknowledging and accepting what God has already done for us in Jesus.

Repentance in its OT meaning is a turning. It implies both a turning from sin and a turning to God. In the NT the Greek word behind repent means "to change one's mind or purpose." I believe the NT use of repentance includes both ideas of "turning" and the "changing of the mind." You have not stated your definition of repentance, but any view of repentance as saying one is sorry, asking forgiveness, turning one's life over to God, being determined to live for God, or promising to not do wrong, but to do right, is an unbiblical view of repentance. Certainly these motives are implied as behind repentance, but they are not true repentance itself. Repentance is turning from anyone or anything other than God to be God or one's savior (1 John 5:20-21). It not only means to turn away from one's sinful attempts to be God and to glorify oneself, it also means turning from any attempts to be right with God by one's own personal righteousness (Phil. 3:9)

We not only repent of our sins, but we must repent of our righteousness. Isaiah says even our righteousness is an unclean thing (Isa 64:6). We repent or turn to God because only He is able to save us. And He can save us through Jesus Christ. Jesus saves us because he was perfect in righteousness (Heb. 1:9; 4:15; 9:28). He merited the Father's acceptance and love by his only personal holiness (Rom. 5:19; Heb. 5:8,9). He could have gone straight to Heaven without dying. He did not need a sacrifice for his own sins (Matt. 3:17; Heb. 7:26,27). But, to be the Savior of us sinners, Jesus chose to accept the Father's will by taking our unrighteousness (1 Pet. 2:24). On the Cross the unrighteousness of all the world was punished in Jesus (John 1:29; Rom. 4:25; Col. 1:20; Heb. 2:9, 14). By his resurrection, Jesus was vindicated as the perfect Son of God (1 Tim. 3:16). Therefore, he is able to share with us his own personal righteousness (Rom. 10:4; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21). Thus, when we trust in the crucified, risen Lord, God counts his righteousness to us by faith:

Romans 4:4 Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. 5 However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. 6 David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: 7 "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. 8 Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him." (NIV)

True repentance is to turn both from one's own filthy unrighteousness AND one's righteousness, to trust God for the righteousness that comes from Jesus.

Romans 3:21 But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22 This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Thus repentance is joined to faith because it means turning to God to trust Him for salvation through Jesus. This turning must be based on faith in Jesus alone to save (John

14:6; Rom 3:22). It is not by our own efforts, sacrifices, obedience, worship, resolutions, decisions, experiences, sincerity, sorrow over sin, or righteousness that we are saved. None of these is sufficient reason for God to save us from judgment. It is a righteousness that comes by faith alone (Rom 3:22; 9:30; 10:4). To even think that such flawed things as we can do, produced from a fallen, corrupt human heart, could pay or make right the horrible offense of our sin against God's holiness, love and glory, does not take God's holiness seriously. Only the death of the precious Lamb, our Lord and Savior Jesus, can atone for our sins against a just, merciful, infinite and sovereign God.

If people in the OT or today could be saved by turning from sin (the way to do this is never described beyond casting oneself upon God for mercy) and to God out of their own effort, then why did God require animal sacrifices under Moses and ultimately the sacrifice of His Son? If we can save ourselves by an act and an attitude of "repenting" then why did Jesus need to die a horrific death on the Cross? But Jesus did die on the Cross. And God calls us to turn to this Cross to believe in this Cross (repent) because that Cross is the only way of salvation that God has provided for us (Acts 4:12). This kind of repentance means to turn from any of our personal attempt to save ourselves, and to turn to the only Savior Jesus. We embrace his sacrifice and saving work for us by faith alone. It is by faith alone, because it is about nothing in us, but is all about God, Who has done His saving work outside of us in Jesus. It is in true faith that we turn our heart away from ourselves to Christ alone (Heb. 12:2). When we accept the Gospel by faith, we are saying that nothing in us or in this universe can save us. We are saying that we look to Christ alone as our Savior (Isa 43:11; 49:26; Hos 13:4; John 4:42; 1 Tim 4:10).