

What Is Repentance?

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R. C. SPROUL

What Is Repentance?

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Chapter One

What Is Repentance?

Have you ever been asked what you would do differently if you had your life to live over again? It amazes me when people respond that they wouldn't do anything differently. I simply can't imagine someone not having anything they'd want to change. Don't we all have regrets? Certainly, as Christians who understand our sin, we would relish the chance to relive some of our past. Perhaps we have words we'd love to take back or painful scenes we'd like to rewrite. These desires hint at our need for repentance.

What Is Repentance?

It is vitally important that we understand the biblical concept of repentance. It is central, not only to the New Testament, but to all of Scripture. The gospel of Mark begins with the appearance of John the Baptist, who comes out of the wilderness announcing the approach of the kingdom of God. His message to the people of Israel was very simple: he called them to repentance. Just a short time after this, Jesus began His public ministry, preaching the exact same message: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel’” (Mark 1:14–15).

This theme recurs throughout the New Testament. When people listened to Christ or to the preaching of the Apostles, they would often respond by asking, “What should we do?” The answers assumed a similar form—“Believe in Christ,” “Believe and be baptized,” or “Repent and be baptized.” Since this concept of repentance is so central to the Apostolic preaching, it’s extremely important that we fully understand it.

The word *repentance* comes from a Greek word *metanoia*. The prefix *meta* can mean “with,” “beside,” or “after.” An English derivative is *metaphysics*. The study of physics is

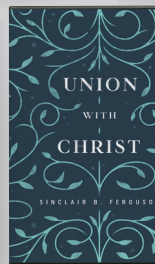
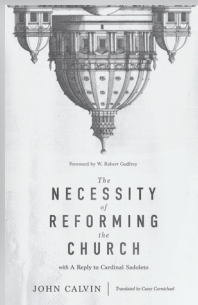
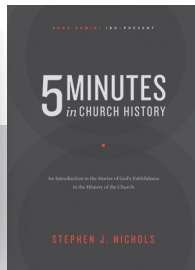
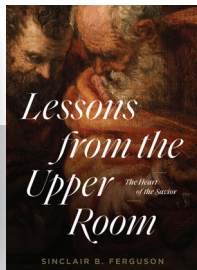
What Is Repentance?

the study of those elements of nature that are visible, perceivable, and physical. Metaphysics is an attempt to reach beyond the realm of the physical world to the transcendent realm. The root *noia* is the verb form of the noun that we find frequently in the Bible as *nous*. This is simply the Greek word for “mind.” In its simplest form, the term *metanoia* has to do with “the mind afterward,” or, as we might say, “an afterthought.” In the Greek language, it came to mean “a significant changing of one’s mind.”

So, in the most rudimentary sense, the concept of repentance in the Bible means “to change one’s mind.” However, we will soon see that this is not just a matter of intellectual judgment, such as changing our approach after trying to solve a problem. Generally speaking, *metanoia* has to do with the changing of one’s mind with respect to one’s behavior. It contains the idea of *ruing*. To rue something means to regret a particular action. It carries with it not only an intellectual assessment but also an emotional or visceral response. The feeling most often associated with repentance in Scripture is that of remorse, regret, and a sense of sorrow for having acted in a particular way. Thus, repentance involves sorrow for a previous form of behavior.

The concept of repentance is deeply rooted in the

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