

REPENTANCE



The Joy-Filled Life

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A new translation of a
timeless classic

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2

Repentance – Creative, Life-giving, Joy-inspiring

AS THE VOICE CRYING in the wilderness, John the Baptist proclaimed, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” Isn’t this what the Gospel – the Good News – is all about? Repentance – the gateway to heaven! Repentance – the way home to the Father’s heart and to overflowing joy! For what is repentance but the tailwind driving us into the open arms of the Father? A foretaste of heaven. A gift of the Holy Spirit. In answer to prayer, the Spirit falls afresh on us, breaking our hard and self-righteous hearts – only for God our Father and Maker to take those broken pieces into His hands and form a new vessel to His glory.

Is there any gift we should covet more? Repentance is true life, life from God. Weeping and rejoicing are a sign of spiritual life. Only the dead give no reaction. Rigid, lifeless, motionless, they express no joy and shed no tears. But a contrite and repentant heart is alive with sorrow for the one thing worth grieving over: sin. What does sin bring in its wake? Death and judgment. Sin destroys lives. If there is no repentance, there are terrible consequences both here and in eternity. Repentance will quell our tears over things that aren’t worth crying about. In the light of sin and the devastation it wreaks, everything else pales into

insignificance. The troubles of this life will pass. Allowing them to throw us off balance leaves us prone to a sorrow that leads to death (2 Corinthians 7:10). But weeping in repentance over sin, the real source of misery, we shed the right kind of tears.

Responding to God's call to repentance makes us authentic. That's what it means to be a realist: being sorry now and turning from sin before it is too late. The alternative is to be sorry for all eternity.

It's the repentant who are truly alive – their hearts sing for joy. Tears for sin give way to a vibrancy unknown to others. Nothing can surpass the joy of forgiveness. Imagine the jubilation of someone released after many years behind bars. But compare that with being imprisoned forever by the evil one in his kingdom of darkness. Who could possibly save us from such a fate?

Into our hopelessness comes Jesus! He appears in human form, one of us. Of His own free will He takes our place as a prisoner, bound and sentenced to death, so that we can go free. Isn't that enough to make anyone shout and sing for joy? The key is a broken and repentant heart. As we become aware of our sinfulness and spiritual death, we are cast into the arms of our Deliverer and Lord, the Giver of life and joy.

You may call yourself a committed Christian, but if repentance is not part of your life, you are in a dangerous place. Remember Jesus' verdict on the church at Sardis: "You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead" (Revelation 3:1). To be spiritually alive is to walk in repentance. Dead are those Christians who are never sorry for their sins. Dead – in God's eyes – are those Christians who have lost the capacity for the overflowing joy of forgive-

ness. If this is missing, something is wrong with our lives, no matter how committed we seem. Being human, we are all prone to sin and stand in constant need of forgiveness. We need repentance like the air we breathe. Without it we will soon go off course spiritually and come under judgment — like those “piously strutting on his holy hill” (see Zephaniah 3:11 MSG).

Repentance is the only way. How else can we approach a holy God? The truth is, we are sinners. None of us can claim to live in perfect love. At home or at work, when someone rubs us up the wrong way, how often we fail to reach out in love. Daily we sin against God and one another. Broken before Him, we receive forgiveness. Broken before each other, we are restored to fellowship.

“Repent,” challenges the Bible. It was Jesus’ own message during His earthly ministry, and down through the centuries many took up the call. Martin Luther, for example, stressed the need for daily repentance. Opposing a lifeless and insincere Christianity, he spoke out against the presumptuousness with which we approach God. Nothing is more guaranteed to stifle the spiritual life in us. A repentant heart-attitude opens wide the door to life. Are we aware how important this is to Jesus? Why else did He pronounce such a stern verdict over the church in Laodicea? It was their self-complacency and lack of repentance that grieved Him. “Because you are lukewarm — neither hot nor cold — I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.” (Revelation 3:16-17)

Do I hear Jesus challenging me today? Or am I quick to dismiss any criticism against myself, my church or

fellowship? Do I keep making excuses? Do I insist I am not to blame if I can't get on with difficult people? "It's their fault, not mine. I've tried everything." If this is my attitude, then I am anything but repentant. I am actually shutting out my Saviour and the life and forgiveness He offers. In the Messages to the Seven Churches, who does Jesus call to repentance? Those who are so sure of their rightness. And today He calls us to repentance, urging us to turn from attitudes that are destroying our spiritual life. Only those who overcome have the assurance that they will not be blotted out of the Book of Life (Revelation 3:2-5). Only repentance saves us from spiritual death and leads us to eternal life, giving us a foretaste here and now.

Spiritually alive, we spark life in others. Spiritually dead, we have neither words nor works of love to bless anyone. Only life begets life. It all boils down to this one question: Am I living a life of daily repentance? If not, I am spiritually dead and incapable of rousing anyone to life. There is a vitality about those who are repentant that kindles life in others. Words are hardly necessary – it's not about preaching: it's about confessing, broken-hearted, to God and others, "I have sinned. I have done wrong." That sort of honesty breaks down defences and brings restoration and new life. The words of the prodigal son as he knelt weeping caused the father's heart to overflow with love (Luke 15:11-32).

Admitting our sins to others and asking forgiveness will open people's hearts. Tears of repentance can soften even hearts hardened in bitterness. It may take time, but contrition and repentance will transform both us and the other person, giving birth to life and love. What creative, life-giving power lies in repentance!

REPENTANCE – CREATIVE, LIFE-GIVING, JOY-INSPIRING

Repentance is central to Jesus' Messages to the Seven Churches and to Peter's sermon at Pentecost. Repentance brings us the Holy Spirit and ushers in the kingdom of heaven. It is the way to life.

3

Repentance – A Breath of Heaven

REPENT, FOR THE KINGDOM of heaven is near. Don't we all long to see something of heaven among us? The kingdom of heaven – joy and peace! The kingdom of heaven – where love reigns! And where love reigns, there is rejoicing, for Jesus is truly present.

But where do you find a church or ministry reflecting the kingdom of heaven? Where do you find believers cooperating in selfless love? Where do you find mutual acceptance and respect, worship coming from the heart, faces alight with joy? That's the sort of place people would be drawn to – including those who want nothing to do with the Church. In this sad world even those furthest from God hunger for love, joy and peace. It would be a breath of heaven. Doesn't that strike a chord? As Adam's offspring, exiled from paradise, we long for what we have lost.

Seeing kingdom values being lived out, even the most critical would think again. Disillusionment would melt away and many would come to faith in Jesus, the Lord of heaven, who epitomizes its love, joy and peace – everything we hunger for.

How tragic that our churches, communities and ministries are such a poor reflection of the kingdom of heaven Jesus heralded. How tragic that so few are convinced by

our talk of His love and glory because our lives don't measure up. In vain people look for a little bit of heaven, a place where they can taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

At the start of His public ministry Jesus announced the coming of His kingdom. Still He waits for it to materialize among us. Jesus died a cruel death on the Cross so that we can go to heaven someday, but also so that we can experience something of heaven on earth. His salvation begins here and now: He saved us so that we can reflect Him. When believers come together, something of the kingdom of heaven should be seen. The redeemed of the Lord are a people who embody His kingdom by living a life of love, peace, joy, reconciliation, goodness and gentleness.

God is waiting, the world is crying out, for something of His kingdom of heaven to be manifested among us. If God declares, "The kingdom of heaven is near," surely it must be visible somewhere. It came in the person of Jesus, who offered it to us and wants it to materialize in our midst. Wherever the Lord of heaven appeared, something of heaven could be seen on earth. Those who witnessed Jesus' earthly ministry tasted God's goodness and kindness as He cared for their needs. They found healing for emotional wounds in the Father's love. They experienced the joy of pardoned sinners welcomed by the Saviour, assured of His love and acceptance. Jubilation broke out among those who saw Him, heard His gracious words and felt His touch of love.

Ascending to heaven, Jesus entrusted His disciples with the task of furthering His kingdom. He is the Head and we, the Church, are His Body on earth. As people come into contact with members of His Body, they are to experience the kingdom of heaven. They are to be made well in body

and soul, be healed of wounds, refreshed, comforted and filled with joy. They are to be loved back to wholeness with a warm, compassionate, forgiving, patient love. Such love is a foretaste of heaven.

“The kingdom of heaven is near,” announced Jesus as He walked this earth. This is His promise for the Church today. Still, we ask, “A little bit of heaven? Where?” Can we say, “Go to this house or that church, and you will find it. There you will be healed of your inner wounds. Surrounded by love, you will feel like a new person. Heaven will seem near. You will taste its lasting joy.” Is this true of our churches?

For those who don’t know Jesus, our services must often seem unattractive. Given a choice, most people would probably prefer a trip to the countryside rather than church on Sundays. Is it any wonder? There in the beauty of creation they find something of the joy we all crave. Joy is not what they usually find in church as they look at the faces around them. Out in nature they feel closer to God. Where do they find a church with uplifting worship, singing that comes from the heart and music that brings a sense of Jesus’ presence?

Where are the humble, trusting, childlike souls of Matthew 18:3? Theirs, Jesus says, is the kingdom of heaven. Where are the outgoing believers whose infectious joy puts newcomers at their ease? God is saddened when intellectualism dominates the Church, producing rigid, uptight, negative Christians. God’s heart grieves to see Christians so lacking in joy, simplicity and warmth that we reflect less of the kingdom of heaven than nature does. We end up making Christianity unappealing to those who don’t know Him.

Have we any idea of the pain we are causing God? Do we realize how much we disappoint Him as Christians? He saved us with His Son's blood to be His witnesses. Yet so often we fail to mirror Him in our lives and to draw others to Him. Again God grieves. The very stones, all of nature, bear witness to the Lord, while the Church is silent. The tragedy is: we are saved but don't look it; the joy of redemption is missing. And so our lives are not a testimony to God.

The burning question is: Why do we see so little of the kingdom of heaven among us? A breath of heaven would renew the world, draw people to God, heal the sick in body and soul, and comfort the sad. What has gone wrong?

A single word ushers in the kingdom of heaven. Repent! A call sounding forth like a peal of thunder – too loud and clear to be ignored. Not just any call but a call straight from the Bible and addressed to us sinful human beings. Miss this call, and you miss out on the kingdom of heaven, its gifts and blessings, including the grace of forgiveness.

In the Bible we see a spiritual law at work: only to sinners who humbly repent will God draw near with His grace; only at the Cross do we gain access to the kingdom of heaven. By any other route the way is barred. God's kingdom is a kingdom of grace. To all who kneel at Jesus' feet in repentance, grace is given.

That's why repentance, a contrite heart, opens the floodgates for joy. Overflowing joy is the essence of the kingdom of heaven. Repentance opens the way for the Gospel, God's good news, to reach us. Repentance opens the way to a joy-filled life with Christ. It is the prerequisite for attaining forgiveness; and wherever forgiveness is received, there is freedom and rejoicing. Through the open

floodgates pours the joy of sin cancelled; pardon in the place of condemnation now and in eternity; acceptance as God's child as He speaks the words we most need to hear, "Your sins are forgiven".

Yes, repentance brings us the bliss of heaven. Think of the long-lost son returning home. See the father welcoming him with open arms. He clothes him with the robe of righteousness. He gives him a ring as a token of his love. For us too, the heavenly Father has prepared the most beautiful jewels to adorn us in heaven. Truly sorry for our sins, we are made rich. In our poverty, we are showered with gifts, tokens of forgiveness. It is all grace, for we have forfeited the right to claim anything. Having squandered our inheritance, we stand helpless and guilty in the sight of God and man. Undeserved favour is all we can hope for — a loving glance, a word of pardon freely given.

Pardon for the condemned — what unimagined joy! Reprieved. Released. The very thought makes you sing and dance for sheer delight and relief. Isn't that heaven? Again, where does the kingdom of heaven dawn? In a heart that has received forgiveness.

What else does the kingdom of heaven stand for? Love. But we love only because He first loved us. Draw near to Him with a broken and repentant heart, and you will know His love for yourself. Jesus did not come for the righteous: those who've got it all together. He came for sinners. Repentant, we are loved back to wholeness and embraced by a mercy that tasted death for us and pronounced forgiveness on the Cross. Broken-hearted before Him, we have but one desire: to love Him who loved us so much. Never can we thank Him enough, our strong Deliverer and Bondage-Breaker. He loosed our

chains and freed us from captivity. Overwhelmed with joy at His forgiveness, we love generously, pouring out our lives for Him who gave His life for us. We live to bring joy to Him by giving Him our all: talents and abilities, strength and whole-hearted devotion. Focussing on Him is heaven on earth, for heaven is about Jesus and loving Him above all else.

Through repentance we can actually experience the kingdom of heaven and its blessings, for repentance brings us the gift of all gifts: to pour out our love for Him, holding nothing back. Isn't that the deepest desire of a Christian? To love as He would have us love Him – generously, unreservedly – in response to His love. To know the fullness, the richness, the significance of a life devoted to loving Him. Wouldn't that be joy beyond words?

The wonderful news is that this overflowing love for Jesus can be ours – through repentance. We see this in the story of the great sinner in Luke 7. Guilty in the sight of God and shamed by those around her, she was conscious of her utter poverty – a life wrecked by sin and a reputation in tatters. But suddenly she was rich – rich in love for Jesus – through repentance and the experience of His forgiveness. And so she became an example for us all. Repentance is the gateway to heaven's kingdom of love. There is no other way to enter the kingdom of heaven or have it come to us. No other way to taste heaven on earth.

Yet hasn't every believer known what it is to kneel at the foot of the Cross? There we received forgiveness as penitent sinners. That was the moment we entered the kingdom of heaven. Why, then, is there so little evidence of the kingdom of heaven in our churches and fellowships?

By being born again as Christians, we are accepted into the kingdom, through baptism. But does this automatically and permanently secure us a place in heaven, regardless of how we spend the rest of our lives? Scripture makes it clear that it is possible to obtain grace and then forfeit it, even the next moment. This spiritual law is borne out in Jesus' own words, as for example in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18).

Am I any different? Aren't I harsh and unforgiving too? Do I sometimes bear grudges? We all lapse into resentment at some time or another, so how do we come under grace again? How do we regain access to the kingdom of heaven? The key is repentance. We need to repent of our sins before God — and, where necessary, before others. Keeping short accounts is the only way.

Jesus never fails to draw near wherever people turn away from sin and back to Him. And where He is, there is heaven. Think of the penitent criminal on the cross. He admitted he deserved his punishment and humbly asked, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). Jesus' reply was, "Today you will be with me in paradise." This promise holds good for all who come to Jesus in repentance. And here and now we can experience something of the glory of heaven, for where sinners repent, the kingdom of heaven is near.

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Repent! The Call for the End Times

REPENT! WAS THE CRY of John the Baptist. “Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him ... The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth” (Luke 3:4-5). Repentance was the only way to receive Jesus. The King couldn’t come until the way had been paved, the rough places cleared of stones by a people turning from sin. So it was at Jesus’ first coming, and so it will be at His second coming. Preparing the way is a recurrent theme in the Bible. Malachi 4:5 refers to Elijah once more appearing before the Day of the Lord, preaching repentance. In Revelation we have the same theme taken up, for example, by the two witnesses (Revelation 11:3-6).

Repentance, like judgment, begins with the household of believers. When the Messiah comes, a mighty wave of repentance will sweep across Israel, and her people will mourn as they recognize the One whom they pierced (Zechariah 12:10). But how can they repent if Christians do not lead the way? When Jesus comes for His Bride, who will be gathered up to Him? Surely those who live in repentance. Jesus drew His first disciples from the ranks of John the Baptist’s followers (John 1:35-42). They were part of a movement of repentance. At His second coming Jesus will look for those with the same spirit.

That's why we bear a double responsibility as believers, both individually and corporately as members of the Body of Christ. The end times are upon us. This is the nuclear age. Before our eyes, ancient biblical prophecies for Israel are coming true: leaves are appearing on the fig tree, the Jews are returning to the land of their fathers. In these unique times all heaven and earth waits for us to repent. When the way is prepared, the Lord will bring home His Bride. Creation's long wait will be over. At last the redeemed of the Lord will have returned to Zion, complete in number and maturity.

In a world whose very existence is endangered by weapons of mass destruction, nothing could be more imperative than the call "Repent!" What does the nuclear age signal? Horrendous disasters threaten, bringing to mind the trumpet judgments of Revelation 8 and 9: widespread devastation of nature and a war resulting in the death of a third of humanity.

In past centuries, readers of Revelation found it hard to imagine such an apocalyptic scenario. Not so today. Even a child knows the dangers. The damage done through nuclear tests and warfare is an indication of what the future may hold.

Judgments are impending such as the world has never seen. God is waiting for our response of repentance. What lies ahead defies imagination. Now is the last chance to prepare for the Lord's return: the call to repentance is too powerful to be ignored. In Revelation we see God's longing for people to repent. After each judgment, whether the Seven Trumpets or the Bowls of Wrath, His one question is how people will respond. "Still they did not repent" is the sad refrain (see Revelation 2:21; 9:20-21; 16:9-11).

May that never be said of us. When the judgments of God reach their climax, so should the response of the believers, culminating in one great worldwide movement of repentance. Jesus wants those who belong to Him to be spared the full horror of the antichrist's evil regime. "Be always on the watch," He says, "and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man." (Luke 21:36)

This means allowing the Lord to judge us, individually and as churches, and giving Him free rein to deal with every area of our lives. It means loving and trusting Him as our Judge. Then we will be ready to receive Him when He comes again as the Bridegroom. This stands in stark contrast to the fate of those who resist Jesus as their Judge. At the sight of the Lamb in His wrath they will cry out for the mountains and rocks to fall upon them and hide them (Revelation 6:16).

The end-time judgments are already upon us. Now is our last chance to repent and to allow God to judge us personally, so that we can escape what is to come. That will be the grace of the rapture – delivered from a world in the throes of judgment and caught up to the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18). But not all who call themselves believers will be taken (Matthew 7:21). When Jesus comes again, He will be revealed in His majesty and divine glory. No one can enter His immediate presence or take their place beside Him unless they have been sanctified and remade in His likeness (Hebrews 12:14). As we allow the Lord to judge us, chastening will do its transforming work in us.

"Repent!" Like a trumpet blast from heaven the call sounds forth with tremendous urgency. Time is running

out. Who will hear the call and pass it on? The Church needs to take up the challenge, so that nations are impacted and a movement of repentance gains momentum all over the earth. Where there is repentance, the hand of the Lord is stayed and judgment deferred or tempered with mercy.

It is not just for our own sakes that God wants us to repent. More is at stake. In a world headed for destruction we as believers bear responsibility for our nations and for the human race at large. Soon the time of grace will be over. Soon God's patience will run out, and His wrath will descend. Have we any idea of the full extent and horror of these judgments?

Here in Germany our hands are stained with the blood of six million Jews. The day of reckoning will come. Our repentance, our weeping and mourning, needs to correspond to the enormity of our deeds.

Tragically, it is the Church that is storing up God's wrath. We have missed so many chances to repent. Are we going to continue along this road? At the first coming of Jesus it was the religious who resisted the call. Sure of their own rightness, they objected when John the Baptist tried to shake them out of their complacency. "Why this constant emphasis on repentance? It's so one-sided." Today anyone who consistently preaches repentance can count on similar reactions. "Fanatical. Unbalanced. A gloomy brand of Christianity. This is not the Good News." But the call to repentance is at the heart of the Gospel. Contrition and repentance lead us straight into the joy of forgiveness.

If we want Jesus to draw near, if we want to be delivered from judgment, there is only one way – repent! This is the call of the hour. Grace lies in store for those whose

lives are marked by repentance. In a world headed for the fullness of judgment, theirs will be the fullness of grace. When Jesus comes in the clouds of heaven, He will gather them to Himself. They will be changed in an instant. Once humiliated, now they are exalted. Once they came weeping, wearing the garment of repentance. Now they wear the dazzling white wedding garment and, shining like the sun in the kingdom of their Father, they go in to celebrate the Wedding Feast (Matthew 13:43).

The greater the threat of judgment, the greater our repentance needs to be. And the greater our repentance, the greater the pardon and glory. Repent! That is God's message to us in these end times. Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it (Luke 11:28; cf. Revelation 1:3; 22:7). Blessed are those who respond to God's offer of love. Here and now they will have a foretaste of heaven. More wonderful still, they will be prepared for their Lord, to celebrate with Him the Marriage Feast of the Lamb. "He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus." (Revelation 22:20)

Dear Lord Jesus,

I am asking You for the greatest gift I could ever have: the gift of a broken and contrite heart, the grace of tears.

Send me the Spirit of Truth and help me to see the depths of my sin in Your all-revealing light. Convict me by Your Word. Let it be the standard for my thoughts and words, for what I do and refrain from doing, for my work and Christian service. Keep me from applying my own cheap standards. I am committed to the standard of the Sermon on the Mount. I want to see myself as You see me and to judge myself as You would judge me one day if I had not repented of my sin.

Through Your Holy Spirit help me to discern Your loving admonition in everything that happens to me, especially in Your discipline. And give me the grace to respond willingly.

Hear my prayer and grant me a broken and contrite heart – not satisfied with self, nor sure of my own rightness. Give me tears for my sins and joy for Your forgiveness.

Thank You, Lord, for I know You will hear my prayer. Nothing brings You more joy than seeing a sinner repent. Thank You that our tears of repentance are precious to You. I'm not going to focus on my hard and unrepentant heart but look to You, Lord Jesus. You came to destroy all self-righteousness and hardness of heart. By Your redemption You won for me a new heart that is soft and humble.

REPENTANCE – THE JOY-FILLED LIFE

Help me to persevere in prayer and faith until my stony heart is melted and I am able to weep over what I have done to You and to others. Give me the grace of tears for my sinful attitudes: my lack of mercy, my harshness and unkindness, my gossiping, my envy and jealousy, my untruthfulness, my over-attachment to people and possessions. Turn my life around completely.

Thank You, Lord. You create new things out of nothing. And so I ask You to create in me the repentance I lack. Let the grace of repentance well up in newness of life and love for You, transforming me from the inside out. I long to honour You with a life reflecting the joy of forgiveness, as a sinner saved by grace. Make me ready when You come again in glory. Make me ready for the Marriage Feast of the Lamb.

Amen.

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