

Highlights from **The Doctrine of Repentance** by Thomas Watson

Let it not be said that repentance is difficult, things that are excellent deserve labor. Will not a man dig for gold in the ore though it makes him sweat?

Repentance is a pure gospel grace. The covenant of works admitted no repentance; there it was: sin and die. Repentance came in by the gospel. Christ has purchased in his blood that repenting sinners shall be saved. The law required personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience. It cursed all who could not come up to this: ‘Cursed is everyone that continues not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them’ (Galatians 3:10). It does not say, he that obeys not all things, let him repent, but, let him be cursed. Thus repentance is a doctrine that has been brought to light only by the gospel.

It is one thing to be a terrified sinner and another to be a repenting sinner. Sense of guilt is enough to breed terror. Infusion of grace breeds repentance. If pain and trouble were sufficient to repentance, then the damned in hell should be most penitent, for they are most in anguish. Repentance depends upon a change of heart. There may be terror, yet with no change of heart.

This sorrow for sin is not superficial: it is a holy agony, is called in scripture a breaking of the heart: ‘The sacrifices of God are a broken and a contrite heart’ (Ps. 51:17)’, and a rending of the heart: ‘Rend your heart (Joel 2.13). The expressions of smiting on the thigh (Jer. 31.19), beating on the breast (Luke 18.13), putting on of sackcloth (Isa. 22.12), plucking off the hair (Ezra 9.3), all these are but outward signs of inward sorrow. This sorrow is:

- To make Christ precious. O how desirable is a Savior to a troubled soul! Now Christ is Christ indeed, and mercy is mercy indeed. Until the heart is full of compunction it is not fit for Christ. How welcome is a surgeon to a man who is bleeding from his wounds!
- To drive out sin. Sin breeds sorrow, and sorrow kills sin. Holy sorrow is the rhubarb to purge out the ill humors of the soul. It is said that the tears of vine-branches are good to cure the leprosy. Certainly the tears that drop from the penitent are good to cure the leprosy of sin. The salt water of tears kills the worm of conscience.
- To make way for solid comfort: ‘They that sow in tears shall reap in joy’ {Ps. 126.5). The penitent has a wet seed-time but a delicious harvest. Repentance breaks the abscess of sin, and then the soul is at ease. Hannah, after weeping, went away and was no more sad (I Sam. 1.18). God’s troubling of the soul for sin is like the angel’s troubling of the pool (John 5:4), which made way for healing.

It is sorrow for the offence rather than for the punishment. God’s law has been infringed, his love abused. This melts the soul in tears. A man may be sorry, yet not repent, as a thief is sorry when he is taken, not because he stole, but because he has to pay the penalty. Hypocrites grieve only for the bitter consequence of sin.

Confession is self-accusing: 'Lo, I have sinned' (2 Sam 24:17). Indeed, among men it is otherwise: no man is bound to accuse himself but desires to see his accuser. When we come before God, however, we must accuse ourselves... The humble sinner does more than accuse himself; he, as it were, sits in judgment and passes sentence upon himself. He confesses that he has deserved to be bound over to the wrath of God.

Look upon sin in its nature, and it will appear very hateful. See how scripture has penciled it out: it is a dishonoring of God (Rom. 2.25); a despising of God (I Sam. 2.30); a fretting of God (Ezek. 16.43); a wearying of God (Isa. 7.13); a breaking the heart of God, as a loving husband is with the unchaste conduct of his wife: 'I am broken with their whorish heart' (Ezek. 6.9). Sin, when acted to the height, is a crucifying Christ afresh and putting him to open shame (Heb. 6.6), that is, impudent sinners pierce Christ in his saints, and were he now upon earth they would crucify him again in his person.

Affliction can take away life; sin takes away the soul (Luke 12:20).

That sin is worse than affliction is evident because the greatest judgment God lays upon a man is this life is to let him sin without control.

The very day a Christian turns from sin he must enjoin himself a perpetual fast. The eye must fast from impure glances. The ear must fast from hearing slanders. The tongue must fast from oaths. The hands must fast from bribes. The feet must fast from the path of the harlot. And the soul must fast from the love of wickedness. This turning from sin implies a notable change.

A man may restrain the acts of sin, yet not turn from sin a right manner. Acts of sin may be restrained out of fear or design, but a true penitent turns from sin out of a religious principle, namely, love to God. Even if sin did not bear such bitter fruit, if death did not grow on this tree, a gracious soul would forsake it out of love to God. This is the most kindly turning from sin. When things are frozen and congealed, the best way to separate them is by fire. When men and their sins are congealed together, the best way to separate them is by the fire of love. Three men, asking one another what made them leave sin: one says, I think of the joys of heaven; another, I think of the torments of hell; but the third, I think of the love of God, and that makes me forsake it. How shall I offend the God of love?

As God has two places he dwells in, heaven and a humble heart, so the devil has two places he dwells in, hell and a hard heart. It is not falling into water that drowns, but lying in it. It is not falling into sin that damns, but lying in it without repentance: 'having their conscience seared with a hot iron' (I Tim. 4.2). Hardness of heart results at last in the conscience being seared. Men have silenced their consciences, and God has seared them. And now he lets them sin and does not punish – 'Why should ye be stricken anymore?' (Isa. 1:5) – as a father gives over correcting a child who tends to disinherit.

Till sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet.

If prayer does not make a man leave sin, sin will make him leave prayer.

Repentance is a continuous act. This issue of godly sorrow must not be quite stopped till death.

As the plough, when it breaks up the ground, fits it for the seed, so when the heart is broken up by repentance, it is fitted for remission, but it does not merit it. God will not save us without repentance, nor yet for it. Repentance is a qualification, not a cause. I grant repenting tears are precious. They are, as Gregory said, the fat of the sacrifice; as Basil said, the medicine of the soul; and as Bernard, the wine of angels. But yet, tears are not satisfactory for sin. We drop sin with our tears, therefore they cannot satisfy. Augustine said well: I have read of Peter's tears, but no man ever read of Peter's satisfaction. Christ's blood only can merit pardon. We please God by repentance but we do not satisfy him by it. To trust to our repentance is to make it a savior. Though repentance helps to purge out the filth of sin, yet it is Christ's blood that washes away the guilt of sin. Therefore do not idolize repentance. Do not rest upon this, that your heart has been wounded for sin, but rather that your Savior is been wounded for sin. When you have wept, say with him: Lord Jesus, wash my tears in thy blood.