

“REPENT THEREFORE, AND TURN BACK”

Acts 3:11–26

Key Verses: 3:19–20a

“Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord...”

What do you think about repentance? To “repent” can sound heavy or burdensome. Even Christians misunderstand what it is. The dictionary defines repentance as “to feel sorry, to regret, or to be conscience-stricken.” But that’s not the Bible’s full meaning. Some believers think we only have to repent once, when we first become a Christian, and after that we’re free as a bird. But our Lord Jesus taught that repentance is essential to living and growing as a true Christian (Luke 17:3–4). To the author of Acts, repentance is crucial to gospel ministry.¹ In today’s passage Apostle Peter gives his second sermon. In it, he proclaims several things about Jesus. He explains how a lame man was healed. Most of all, he challenges his audience to repent. In this Bible study we want to think more about who Jesus is and what repentance means. And we want to learn why and how we need to repent practically. May God speak to us today.

As they healed a lame man in the name of Jesus, God continued to use Peter and John as Jesus’ witnesses (1–10). The miracle was very public, done where people were entering and leaving the Jerusalem temple, at a place called the Beautiful Gate. Look at verse 11 (ESV). Now, this healed man is clinging to Peter and John. And all the people, utterly astounded, run together to them in a temple area called Solomon’s Portico. Peter is suddenly like a rock star surrounded by an excited crowd. What does he do? Look at verse 12. He says, “Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk?” Peter indeed had received power from the Holy Spirit. But, like many godly people in history, he immediately turned the attention away from himself.²

As we go over his sermon, we first notice that it is very Jewish. Peter begins, “Men of Israel” (12a) Then he says, “The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers...” (13a) Twice he mentions “what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets” (18,21). He includes two quotations from Moses (22–23). He briefly reviews Jewish history, mentioning “all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him” (24). And he wraps up by saying, “You are the

¹ Luke uses the word for “repent” eleven times in Acts, and another 14 times in Luke’s Gospel.

² Such as Joseph in Genesis (Ge.41:16), John the Baptist (John 3:27–28), and Paul (Acts 14:11–15).

sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers...” (25). Being in Jerusalem, it’s natural for Peter to focus on these people, who are Jewish. Peter also addresses them very specifically. They’re the ones who had delivered Jesus over to Pilate (13b). They had denied Jesus and asked for a murderer, Barabbas, to be granted to them (14). Basically, they’re the people responsible for killing Jesus (15). Because this sermon is so Jewish and addresses these specific people who crucified Jesus, it might seem a bit unrelated to us.

But in his words Peter says some profound and timeless truths that help us get to know Jesus better. He begins and ends by calling Jesus God’s “servant” (13,26). He says Jesus is God’s “Christ” who “would suffer.” Jesus is the suffering servant depicted in Isaiah’s most famous servant song, whom God “glorified.”³ Peter even calls Jesus “the Holy and Righteous One” (14a) and “the Author of life” (15a), titles reserved for God alone. Though Jesus was rejected on earth, he is God himself, God the Son. He went through so much suffering and humiliation during his trial and crucifixion. But it was not the end. Peter proclaims that God raised Jesus from the dead (15b). This Jesus is now in heaven, and one day God will send him back to this world, when the time comes for restoring all things (20–21). Finally, Peter says Jesus is the promised Prophet like Moses, whom everyone should listen to carefully (22–23). To sum it up, Jesus is the Living One (Rev.1:18) whose presence is accessible to us (20a). Instead of thinking too much about ourselves, people, or the world, we need to turn our minds and hearts to Jesus until we are fully aware of who he is.

There’s another key point in what Peter is saying. He points out that this man, lame from birth, whom everyone in Jerusalem has seen and known for years, is now suddenly in perfect health. Peter explains how this incredible miracle happened. Read verse 16. This is another example of how God glorified Jesus. God glorified him by raising him from the dead. God glorified him by taking him back to heaven to be with him. God glorified him by pouring out the Holy Spirit on all the believers through him. Now God glorified Jesus by using his name to give perfect health and make strong this totally crippled, miserable man. Only the name of Jesus has the power to do that. Peter adds that it’s Jesus himself who gives us faith in his name. So even our faith glorifies Jesus.

Then Peter gets to his main point. What is it? Read verse 19. Peter puts two words together here: “repent” and “turn back.” The Greek root word for “repent” is “metaneo,” which literally means to change one’s mind. It means to realize that *I am wrong*, not others, but me, especially my attitude and way of thinking. It’s like realizing, “What am I doing *here*? I’m totally in the wrong place. I’m really *lost!*” It’s an inner

³ 13,18; cf. Isa.52:13–53:12.

realization, a change of heart, something that happens within us, without us saying even a word.

But it's also something we need to take action on. So in verse 19, Peter adds the other word, "epistrepho," which means "turn back." He's telling us: "Don't just stay in that wrong place, with that wrong attitude, feeling badly; *do something!*" Often people say they repent, but in fact, they haven't really changed their mind, or their behavior. If we're going to truly repent, God doesn't want us to just say "sorry"; he wants our mind and heart, our inner person, as well as what we do going forward, to change. To "turn back" is no mere behavior modification. It means to come back to God to ask for his mercy and forgiveness and his help to change. In many cases, it also means to seek out the people we've wronged, and beg their forgiveness.

What's wrong with these people listening to Peter? They've done such evil to Jesus. But they have no idea how bad it was. It's why Peter has to use such strong words to help them. God himself had glorified his servant Jesus. But these people denied Jesus. Even Pilate had decided to release him. But they wanted Jesus gone. They denied the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer. Ultimately, they had the Author of life killed. It's the greatest crime ever committed. They thought they could just put it behind them and forget about it. But God did not forget. In the same way, some day each of us is going to have to give an account of himself to God (Rom.14:12). God our righteous judge can't just ignore or forget our sins. But in his righteousness he's provided a way to deal with our sins and forgive them, through the death of his Son and his shed blood (Rom.3:24–26). If we repent of our sins and believe in Jesus, then God forgives and forgets (2:38).

These people show us the danger of spiritual blindness. If we let sin creep into our minds and hearts, we, too, become blind spiritually. We make foolish choices. We develop ignorant attitudes. We ignore God our Father. We ignore our Lord Jesus and his amazing grace. We ignore the presence of the Holy Spirit. We choose our own stubborn desires and ways. We fail to see those around us from God's point of view. We ignore, dismiss or despise people, and can get emotionally cruel and abusive. Confessing faith in Jesus and getting active in church doesn't make our spiritual blindness, ignorance and abusive sins go away. It's why we constantly need God's help to repent.

The worst sin that Peter calls out here is the sin of denying Jesus. He repeats the word "deny" twice (13–14). He knows it's such a sin because it's what he himself did. What does it mean to "deny Jesus"? Of course it means to deny believing in Jesus, turning away from the faith. But it also means failing to identify my faith when I'm with

people who don't believe. It means living in ways that contradict Jesus' teachings, choosing worldly and sinful values and lifestyles. Denying Jesus involves compromising key parts of our Christian faith just to conform to cultural pressures. As Christians, when we're dishonest, or ignore justice, or lack compassion, we're denying Jesus. When we lack love and forgiveness, we deny Jesus. When we neglect prayer, worship and fellowship with believers, we deny Jesus. Even inaction and indifference are ways we deny Jesus. One of the most prevalent ways we deny Jesus is through our own self-righteousness. We think we know better and are better than everyone, even Jesus. Our habitual attitude toward the living God, his holy words and his precious people, deny Jesus. We need to become more aware, more sensitive to the ways we may be denying Jesus in our own lives. May God help us turn back to Jesus our Lord in sincere personal repentance, and earnestly pray for others.

To help these people, Peter mentions the blessings they'll experience if they repent and turn back. First, he says their sins will be "blotted out" (19b). It means erased, obliterated, forgotten. Really? In this world, that's unheard of. People say, "I can forgive but I won't forget." But when we repent and put our full trust only in Jesus, God himself promises to remember our sins no more (Jer.31:34b). Second, we experience "times of refreshing...from the presence of the Lord..." (20a). Our minds, our hearts, our spirits get refreshed through repentance. It's better than a great workout or even a vacation. Repentance helps us newly experience the living presence of our Lord Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit. It's his presence, personally with us, that refreshes and renews us. It's why we need to come to him daily to repent of all our known and even our unknown sins. David wrote in one of his Psalms: "Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me!" (Ps.19:12–13a) Such thorough and earnest repentance brings real refreshment. 1 John 1:9 tells us: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." This is meant to describe our daily walk in the light of Jesus. We all need spiritual cleansing daily, even more than personal hygiene. When's the last time we've really been refreshed in his presence?

In verses 20b–21 Peter suggests that the more we repent, the sooner Jesus will come back and restore all things. Of course, God determines that day. But the more we repent, the more we actually *want* him to come back, the more we long for the new heaven and new earth that only he can bring.

Look at verses 22–23. Centuries earlier, Moses warned the people that one day God would raise up for us a prophet like himself, and that everyone should listen to that

prophet or be cut off from God's people. That prophet is Jesus. In light of this, we need to repent seriously of not really listening to Jesus. Who are we listening to?

Peter concludes by reminding us of God's vision. Read verse 25. The Bible says that even though we are not Jewish, if we belong to Christ, we are all sons and daughters of our father Abraham through faith (Gal.3:7–9,29). Through our faith in Jesus we inherit God's promise to Abraham. So, even in our offspring, all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Repentance helps us see God's greater vision for our lives instead of getting engrossed in petty concerns.

And what does it mean to be a blessing? Read verse 26. Being a blessing to people doesn't mean always striving to give them "the warm and fuzzies." It means first to turn from our own "wickedness." As sinners, we all have them. We can't be a blessing if we're hiding our wickedness, living a double life. We can't be a blessing if we're living in self-righteous hypocrisy. After our own repentance, being a blessing also means helping others practically to repent of their own wickedness. God wants us all to repent of our wickedness, of having a wrong mind and heart, to turn back to him and truly believe in Jesus, his servant, the Holy and Righteous One, the Author of life.

Read verses 19–20a again. In light of this passage, let's reflect seriously on the ways we may be denying Jesus. This summer, may God help us all to repent and turn back to him through faith in Jesus, so that we can experience his forgiveness and spiritual refreshing in his presence.