

# 1.

## REPENTANCE UNTO LIFE

*“Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life” (Acts 11:18).*

The preceding verse demonstrates a progression of activity. It indicates an action which results in the receiving of some benefit. The action here is called “repentance.” The benefit is termed “life.”

This “progression” was experienced by all the participants of the early church. The fact that this included both the Jews and the Gentiles is indicated by the word “also.” It was something basic and essential through which they had passed and which they considered fundamental to their being believers in Jesus.

It was this experience that provided the proof for the Jewish believers that they, and then later the Gentiles, had been genuinely converted. It was this repentance and the receiving of this Life, which was at the core of their understanding of what the message of Jesus was.

As it was in the days of the book of Acts, so today it is imperative that every believer both understands and experiences this progression. In order for our faith to be genuine and the benefits of our faith to be fully realized, all of us need to pass through this process.

For us to receive the fulness of all the blessings which are ours in Christ, it is essential that we comprehend precisely what is being said in the above verse. To this end we will spend a little time and investigate some of these terms.

## WHAT IS THIS LIFE?

To begin, exactly what is meant by the word "life?" Every inhabitant of the earth already has a kind of life or they would not be here. Just what variety of life is this then which requires our repentance to obtain? Obviously it is something which natural people do not yet have. It is something which they yet need to receive.

Perhaps some would think that this "life" refers to a future life in heaven. But this is not the case. Others might imagine that this is some extension of their human life so that it will not die but will go on living forever. However, this too is not what is meant.

Still others might suppose that this life is an improvement of their human existence, sort of like a gasoline additive which might give them more power and better mileage. Yet, this also is not what is meant by "life." The life spoken of here in this verse is the very life of God!

We can be certain of this fact due to the use of a special word for “life” in the original Greek texts. It is this specific word which gives us true understanding. This word “life” is translated from a unique Greek word, “ZOË.” The Greek word ZOË was chosen by the writers of the New Testament to refer to God’s own life. So we understand that the life which we are intended to receive is the life of Another – the very life of God Himself.

Although the English language only has one word for life, the Greek is much richer. It has several words which refer to unique varieties of life and distinguishes between them. All believers should be aware of this distinction because it greatly influences our understanding of what certain Bible passages mean.

For example, when we read in John 10:10 that Jesus came to give us life, what sort of life could this be? If the Greek word here were BIOS, for example, then Jesus might have come to improve our physical existence, helping us be healthy or prosperous. If this word were PSUCHË, which is also translated “soul,” then we could assume that He came to make us happy and well-adjusted.

However, the word used here is neither BIOS nor PSUCHË but ZOË which refers to the uncreated life of God the Father. Jesus came to make available to us the Father’s life and make it available abundantly! This same distinction is critical to understanding other passages of the Holy Scriptures also.

## ETERNAL LIFE

This ZOE life is described in other parts of the New Testament as being "eternal" (I Jn 1:2). This word eternal in the Greek is very special. It means "spanning the eons" or "ages." It signifies a kind of life which is without beginning and also without end. It is a variety of life which was never born and can never die. It is a special sort of life which has always existed, is now today existing, and will exist forever.

Only God possesses this kind of life. The Bible says that only He has "immortality" (I Tim 6:16), the variety of life being described here. Throughout the ages God has been the only immortal being. Not only does His life not die or grow old, it cannot be killed. It is immortal and immutable. We read: "...it was not possible that he should be held by it [death]" (Acts 2:24).

Now there is some good news. It is news so wonderful that it is almost impossible to believe, yet it is true. God has decided to share His very own life with human beings. He has made a decision to impart this never-beginning, never-ending life to mere mortals (Jn 3:16). When they receive this life, they too can become immortal (II Tim 1:10). They too can have His eternal life. This means that they also will never and can never die. They have "...passed from death into [the immortal] life" (Jn 5:24).

If we take a minute and meditate upon this idea, it seems almost unthinkable. The possibil-

ity that we, mere human beings, could receive the life of an infinitely superior being is just incredible.

What seems to be being offered to us here is the opportunity to leave the human race and become part of another race. This new race consists of people who have received an immortal, uncreated life – a life so superior to their human one it is beyond natural comprehension. Those who are part of this new race are called “the sons of God.” This is, in fact, a newly created species, a new variety of being which the Bible calls a “new creation” (II Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15).

Men and women could hardly dream up such a thing. Science fiction also falls short of what this really means. But the truth is that the God of the universe has opened the door for anyone who is able to hear, understand and respond, to become something unprecedented in the universe – something which has never been heard of before. They can receive into themselves the life of an immeasurably superior being, allow this life to completely fill them and then permit this new life to express itself through them in every facet of their living.

Even though some may not have understood this yet, it is in fact the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## ONE IMPEDIMENT

Yet, there is one problem. There is one thing which blocks men and women from receiving

this unspeakable gift. There exists an impediment to this process of experiencing this new life. There is something which bars us from receiving this life and, even if we have already received it, also inhibits us from being ever more full of this life. This problem is called sin.

You see, God is supremely holy. He is not just a little holy or partially holy. He is so intensely holy that a sinful person who somehow or another came into His presence would be consumed. They would be in terrible agony. His holiness is so pure, so concentrated, so extreme that anything which was unholy could not endure His presence. No one who is sinful could stand being anywhere near God.

God's life is holy. His life is righteous by definition. His life is as spontaneously holy as our human life is naturally sinful. God does not have to try not to sin. He is not trying to resist temptation. He naturally abhors sin since it is contrary to His nature. His holiness is simply who and what He is. It is His very essence.

Of course this explains why sinners like to keep away from Him. This is the reason that they find every excuse to deny His existence. Even the thought that God might be real already impacts the conscience of an unholy person.

To understand our God better, perhaps we could think of the analogy of the sun. The sun is actually a continual nuclear explosion. It is so intense that we cannot look at it for more than a few seconds with unprotected eyes. Imagine then, not just looking, but coming up close to

the sun. A person would be consumed by its fiery intensity.

Now our universe consists of billions of such stars. There may be in fact billions of galaxies, each filled with countless stars. And each of these stars is burning with an unimaginable intensity like the sun. Yet our God, who created all this, is much greater still! He is much more powerful and the glory of His holy presence is still more intense.

We read in Isaiah 33:14 concerning what it will be like in God's presence: "The sinners in Zion are afraid; fearfulness has seized the hypocrites: [They ask] 'Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?' "

Here the prophet is contemplating what it will be like in the very presence of God. This passage clearly indicates that God's presence is intensely powerful and burning. Confirming this we read in another place: "For our God is a consuming fire" (Heb 12:29). The presence of the Creator is a location where no sinner will be able to endure. It will cause any such person extreme agony and destruction. Just like the sun's effect on our natural body, the intensity of God's presence is too much for a sinner to bear.

A further proof of this is the way in which the coming Beast will be destroyed. He will come to his end simply by the appearing of Jesus. We read about: "...the lawless one...whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His

coming" (2 Th 2:8). It is the intense, glorious, "brightness" of His appearing which will utterly destroy the man of sin.

When we stand before God, truth – powerful, pure, undiluted truth – will permeate the atmosphere. There all our "refuge of lies" will be swept away (Is 28:17). All our excuses for our behavior; all our self-justification concerning our words, thoughts, attitudes and actions; all our blaming others for our condition; all our imagining that we are better than we truly are will be seen with the utmost clarity.

It is God's very presence which will produce this effect. Nothing will be secret or hidden. All we have said, done or thought will be evident before the entire universe. The conscience of any sinner will be in the most extreme agony with no way of escape. We read that He will: "...bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts" (I Cor 4:5). Everything secret will be exposed. It is the light of the presence of God which will do this.

Today God hides Himself (Is 45:15). He is not clearly revealing Himself to the world. No doubt He does this for our benefit. It is so that we will not be consumed. When and if God reveals Himself in all His fulness, any and all sinners will be destroyed.

This is not because God hates these people. It will be simply a natural consequence of sin coming into contact with His holiness. The nature of His person is just so extreme that anything which would be contrary to it simply

could not withstand the experience. This is something which cannot be altered. God does not change (Mal 3:6). He simply is who He is.

For another example of this truth, we can look at what will happen when Jesus appears in His glory at the end of this age. Here we find that when the heavens open and He begins to descend, the unbelievers and sinners are going to suddenly invent a new religion. They are going to begin to pray.

But instead of praying to God, they will pray to the rocks and hills. They begin to desperately plead with these mountains and rocks saying: "Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! (Rev 6:16).

At this point in time, death by having a huge rock fall on them will seem preferable to the agony and torment which the presence of Jesus will create in their minds.

I hope that this is abundantly clear for every reader. Sin and God do not combine. They cannot coexist. God's presence will destroy all sin.

This is not because God has some intolerant attitude about the weakness of mankind. It is not because He is uptight about "a few little sins." It is not because He does not understand or is not sympathetic about our faults and failures. It is simply a fact. It is a result of who God, our creator, is. The intensity of holiness which defines His nature, combined with the awesome, unlimited power of who He is, will simply destroy any sinner.

## GOD'S APPEARING

One day God is planning to reveal His presence to the universe. Sometime soon He will hide Himself no more. God is not content to simply exist in an eternally concealed fashion. His will is to be revealed in His greatness to all creation.

However God loves the human race which He made. He does not want to simply extinguish them all by revealing Himself in His fullness without them having some sort of preparation which would enable them to survive this event.

This then brings us back to our original thought. God's plan for us to endure His coming is to make an exchange of life. His idea is for us to receive His own life and by doing so become a variety of being which would welcome and enjoy His appearing.

We must become the same kind of creature that He is. We must receive and become saturated with His holy life and nature. Such a creature would suffer no negative impact when He appears. Not only would this kind of being survive in the presence of God, it would thrive there.

It is our sin which today separates us from God. It is also our sin which will cause us future agony and destruction when we are in His immediate presence. Therefore, it is necessary for us to become free from our sin. It is only by

becoming liberated from sin that we will be able to endure in God's presence when He appears.

## REPENTANCE

The first step of God's solution to our sin problem is called "repentance." This is a step which we must take. While it is true that God Himself helps us with this necessary procedure, it is a decision that only we can make.

Repentance is an essential part of the salvation process. In fact, it is so crucial to our experience of the new life, that without it we can go nowhere. Since this is so, it seems expedient for us to take some time and examine this process carefully.

When John the Baptist came, he came preaching one thing: repentance. He said: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mk 3:2).

As Jesus began His ministry on earth, He too proclaimed this same message. We read: "From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Mt 4:17). This repentance then is the first and essential step for us to be able to receive the life of God which He is offering to us.

There are many today who seem to want to skip this step. They urge many to accept Jesus, but without the initial repentance necessary to proceed very far or with much success. They seem to believe that simply "accepting" Jesus and all that He has done for us is enough for the

sinner to later “go to heaven.” They present a truly wide and easy way.

The fact is however that Jesus does not need “acceptance.” He is not craving acceptance from you or anybody else. God is not waiting nervously, anxiously hoping that someone, anyone will accept Him. And then, if they will only accept Him, He will forget all His uptightness about their sins and their sinful condition. Our desperate need is not to accept God but rather for Him to accept us! We need to be accepted by Him! And His acceptance of us requires an initial step on our part – repentance. A full, thorough, complete, deep, heartfelt repentance.

What then does repentance mean? It means that we realize the many sinful things which we have done. We also begin to see what we are. In God’s light, we become convicted of our deeds and of our natural tendency to do a great variety of evil things which are contrary to God’s nature.

Next, we confess before God what we have done and what we are and then acknowledge that we are worthy of death. True repentance involves this realization: in the eyes of God, we are worthy of death. Yes, genuine repentance means that we realize that we deserve to die for what we have thought, said, done and, in fact, are. This is an important part of the repentance process.

Reason with me for a moment. If we are not worthy of death or do not think that we are, what possible reason could there be for some-

one to die in our place? If we are not guilty enough to deserve the death penalty, what need would there be for anyone to substitute for us in this execution? If our guilt is not sufficient to warrant our death, then why would we need Jesus to die instead of us? Therefore, it must be impossible for anyone to receive a Savior which they neither want or feel as if they need.

Baptism is meant to be a symbol of this very fact. It is not simply a dunking or a bath. It is a declaration to the universe that we have understood and accepted our need to die. In true baptism, we recognize our sin and are proclaiming that we are joining ourselves with Christ in His death and looking to His resurrection for our salvation. We are stating publicly that who and what we are is worthy only of death and that we are believing in Christ to change us through the substitution of His life for ours.

Any "repentance" which has not been profound enough for the person involved to understand that they are worthy to die, is faulty. Such "repentance" will not take someone very far in their Christian walk. Without true, deep, thorough repentance, such people have no way for God to cleanse them and substitute His life for theirs. Therefore, they will make very little progress in the spiritual life.

Why, for example, would anyone want to have their life taken away and exchanged for that of Another if they still believe theirs to be pretty good? If, in their own estimation their life is serving them well, there is no logical need for

it to be replaced. No one would want to be dominated by the life of Another if they still like and approve of the one they have. They would never wish to die to themselves and have God live in their place.

But concerning God's judgment on those who sin we read: "Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses" (Heb 10:28). It was God who gave this law. His penalty for sin is death. This death was applied for many different offenses, even ones which we consider insignificant. For example, the Old Testament gives us the example of a man stoned to death, following the direction of God Himself, for collecting firewood on the Sabbath (Num 15:32-36).

This same judgment was also mandated for those who committed adultery, used drugs, practiced homosexuality, consulted spirits, committed incest, had sex with animals, blasphemed, murdered, were rebellious sons and many other such things. In short, just as Adam and Eve's sin resulted in death, so any and all who sin reveal that they are worthy of death. "The soul who sins shall die" (Ezek 18:4).

The physical death which was mandated by the Old Testament law is simply a prefiguring or a shadow of the future. As we have seen, death or destruction of the sinful soul will be an unavoidable result of the direct presence of God. It is when He appears that the sinful life and nature will be burned up.

God's sentence upon sin is death. Sin and

God cannot coexist. “The wages of sin [any and all sin] is death” (Rm 6:23). We have clearly understood from the beginning of this chapter that the very presence of God will judge who and what we are. So we easily understand that someone full of sin or even with a natural tendency toward sin, will have His judgment executed upon them. These individuals, merely appearing before a holy God, will suffer judgment by His presence.

Therefore, our repentance – the acknowledgment of our deeds and our condition and the recognition of our worthiness to die – is essential for us to escape His wrath by receiving His new life. Our repentance opens the way for us to become dead to ourselves and full of His life.

Thus, we prepare ourselves for the coming day when Jesus will appear in His intense, blazing glory. It is when we truly repent that we open our hearts for God to do His glorious substitution work in us, changing us into His own image.

If we do not really see our sin, it is because we lack light. The only way we can truly repent is if God in His mercy shines His light into us. When He draws near to us, the light of His presence exposes who and what we are. When we lack this light and the accompanying conviction of sin, it is a proof that we are not truly intimate with our Creator. But when, through God’s favor, we are able to see Him with more clarity, we also see our sin. This then enables us to repent.

## SORROW

Repentance is something we do when we finally see our sin. When we realize, in the light of God, the evil of our ways we begin to be sorry. When we understand how we have offended others; when we see how we have grieved God; when we know how our words and actions have caused pain and suffering to those around us, then we are in a condition of being ready to repent.

True repentance involves sorrow. We read about Paul saying to the Corinthians: "Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance... For godly sorrow produces repentance to salvation, not to be regretted..." (2 Co 7:9,10).

Repentance means that we have a great sense of remorse concerning the sins which we have committed and even our very condition of being sinful. We become truly convicted of the gravity of our sins and their consequences.

Genuine repentance involves the realization of the ugliness of our condition. When we truly see ourselves we will see something very abhorrent. The experience of Job is an example of this truth. He was, in his own estimation, a righteous man. In fact, from a superficial standpoint he was doing pretty well. He helped the poor. He succored the homeless. He did not speak evil of others. He did not lie, cheat, steal, take advantage or make commitments to others and then

break them. In many, many ways he was much more righteous than many who call themselves Christians today.

But at the end of his trial, God revealed Himself to Job. God's genuine righteousness was seen, and in this brilliant, intense light Job saw that his own efforts were merely human and defective. He says: "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear. But now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5,6).

Please note Job's reaction. When he saw true holiness he abhorred himself. He realized that what he was, even though in human terms it was esteemed, was really rotten. It was worthy of repudiation. He abhorred what he saw in himself. He hated the flesh, the fallen nature and even the self-righteousness which he had seen in himself. The result was repentance – sincere, heart-rending repentance. This is the only reaction which is acceptable to God.

When Peter was preaching on the day of Pentecost, his hearers had a similar reaction. They were "cut to the heart." Peter had accused them of participating in the murder of Christ. In verse 23 of chapter 2 of the book of Acts, speaking about the death of Jesus, he proclaims: "...you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified."

No doubt these were not the very men who held and pounded the nails. Yet they were convicted by the Holy Spirit of being just the sort of person who would do such a thing. They had

consented to His death. Through the preaching of Peter, they sensed a deep inward guilt, cutting straight to the heart. The direct result of such conviction of sin was repentance (vs 38).

Another biblical reaction to the revelation of God's person is self-loathing. In Ezekiel chapter 20 verse 43 we read about something which will occur in the coming millennial kingdom of Christ when He will restore all those from the nation of Israel to their land. There He will reveal Himself to them. And what will be their reaction? They will realize their sin and loath themselves. We read: "And there you shall remember your ways and all your doings with which you were defiled; and you shall *loath yourselves in your own sight* because of all the evils that you have committed." True repentance also involves self-loathing.

There are many today in the church who are preaching positive thinking. They imagine that you should "love yourself." Dear brothers and sisters, let me tell you as plainly as I can: This is a serious mistake. This will take you nowhere spiritually.

While it might give you some false sense of "self-worth" in the psychological realm (which is merely the human soul) it will not promote one iota of spiritual growth. It might adjust your mind humanly speaking and perhaps give you some emotional consolation but it will not transform you into the image of Christ.

In fact, according to the gospel of John, self-love will result in the loss of your life or "soul."

We read: "He who loves his life [self or soul] will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for [have it exchanged for] [God's] eternal life (Jn 12:25).

Now why would this be? It is because when we approve of and love what we are, we will not repent. We will not loathe and detest ourselves. We will not sense the need for Someone superior to live within us taking the place of our natural life. Therefore when Jesus appears, we will not be very transformed. Then and there the intense holiness of who He is will consume what is natural, human and sinful. It is not possible for the sinful life to endure in His presence.

Here we find a reliable promise of God. This is a fact upon which we can depend. If we love who and what we are; if we approve of ourselves, if we imagine that we are pretty good, if we do not loathe and detest ourselves, then we will lose our natural (PSUCHÊ) self-life the hard way.

It will be lost at His coming. It will be consumed by the intensity of His holiness. But if we hate our life because we have seen what it really is in the light of Jesus' countenance, then He will work in us to exchange it for His own eternal life.

True repentance – something which occurs when we see ourselves in the light of God – generates sorrow, self-aborrence and self-loathing accompanied by a willingness to be rid of what we see. It means that we now understand our need to die and have our life replaced by God's

divine one. We agree with God's judgment on our flesh and open ourselves to receive His great salvation.

## THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

As we have been seeing, true repentance depends upon the revelation of God. Jesus is "the light of the world" (Jn 8:12). When we draw near to Him or He comes near to us, His light shines in us. As this light dawns, we begin to see ourselves with much more clarity.

A person in a completely dark room sees nothing. This is like our condition before we know Christ. But as a small light begins to shine, then the person in the room begins to see their surroundings. The brighter the light, the more clearly everything is seen.

In the same way, the closer we come to Jesus, the brighter His light shines and the more clearly we see our sin. In fact, this is an excellent test for us to know if we are genuinely becoming more intimate with Jesus: if we are increasingly seeing our sin.

As a young believer I imagined that after more than 36 years of walking with the Lord I would almost be walking without touching the ground, really feeling holy. But my experience has been that, with the passing of time, I see more and more of my sin. This has given me an ever deepening opportunity to repent more completely and have God's new life grow within me.

Repentance is not merely a one time thing. It is not something which we do once at the beginning of our Christian walk and then it's over. Instead, genuine Christianity involves an ever deepening sense of our need for a Savior. It means that we see more and more clearly what we are as natural humans and how much we need our life exchanged for His.

The more thoroughly we repent, the more completely we can be transformed. The more we understand how much our old life is worthy of death, the more we can be changed into His image. An ever increasing repentance makes way for the life of God to fill us and replace what we are.

Now why is this so? It is because unless and until we see the need for our old life to die, God will not – in fact cannot – do His work in us. He is certainly not going to force us to experience this transformation. He will not apply the death of Jesus to us in the areas of our life where we are unwilling to die.

Jesus will never force transformation upon us. Our lack of willingness to be crucified will always stop His work. Therefore, we must first see ourselves in His light and then agree with God's sentence upon us. Then He will operate in our interior to apply both the death and resurrection of Jesus to our soul life (PSUCHÊ).

As long as we approve of what we are, we will want to hold on to it. While we think we are O.K. then there is no need whatsoever for any change. Certainly we would not feel a need for

a death sentence to be executed upon us. Therefore, we remain as we are: untransformed, natural men and women.

True progress in the spiritual life – genuine, eternal transformation into the image of God – can only come to the degree to which we see ourselves in the light of God. Then, and only then, are we willing to “deny ourselves and take up our cross.” This means that we are willing for our own life to be put to death.