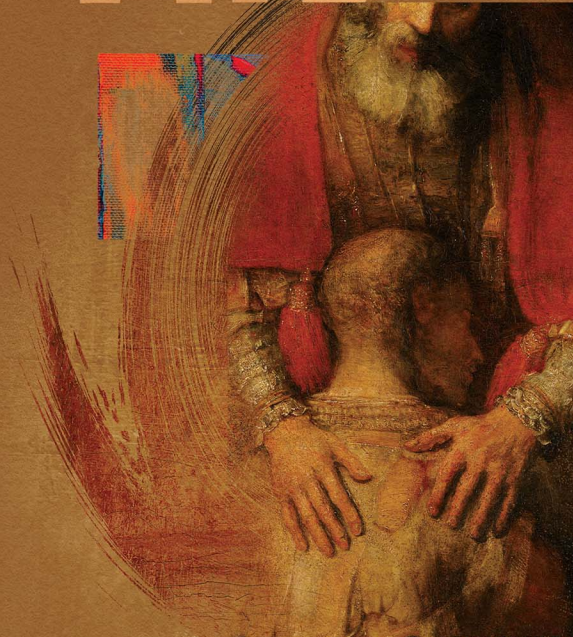


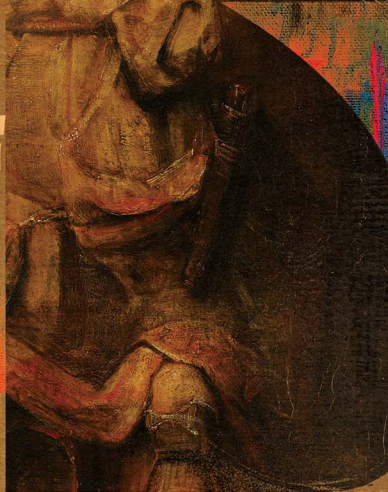
CHRIS
BRAUNS

THE



WAY

OF



REPENTANCE

EMBRACING GOD'S GIFT FOR A TRANSFORMED LIFE

“What leads to rejoicing not only for us but also for our Father in heaven? The repentance of one sinner. Grounded in the gospel, this book is filled with profound biblical wisdom on this often neglected subject. Read, mark, and inwardly digest this terrific study!”

Michael Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

“Chris Brauns’s *The Way of Repentance* makes a significant and helpful contribution to a conspicuously absent topic in modern evangelicalism. This book echoes Luther’s call for repentance, which both begins and marks the Christian life. I commend it to Christians and non-Christians alike, as the way of repentance is the way of salvation and eternal life.”

Steve DeWitt, Senior Pastor, Bethel Church, Crown Point, Indiana

“Chris Brauns, a skilled and experienced pastor-theologian, helps us understand what repentance is, how to repent, how to evaluate repentance, and how to receive the repentant.”

Andy Naselli, Professor of Systematic Theology and New Testament, Bethlehem College and Seminary; Lead Pastor, Christ the King Church, Stillwater, Minnesota

“The prospect of reading a book on repentance made me a little afraid. Would it expose my half-hearted apologies, my middle-aged complacency, my Christianly respectable ‘That’s the way I am’? But from first till last, Chris Brauns’s major note is repentance for joy. After all, he reminds us that the gospel announcement begins with repentance. And perhaps the prodigal son’s joyous welcome home is its most powerful illustration. Chris engages with vivid stories and explains things so clearly. And every time I think he has oversimplified something, he unpacks it with further hard-won simplicity. His work is Scripture-soaked and full of memorable quotes from classic authors and Christian standards, not least the prayers by which he ends each chapter. You will learn to navigate the daily necessity of repentance by reading this book.”

Sandy Grant, Dean of Sydney, St. Andrew’s Cathedral, Sydney, Australia

The Way of Repentance

The Way of Repentance

Embracing God's Gift for a Transformed Life

Chris Brauns

Foreword by Rosaria Butterfield

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The Way of Repentance: Embracing God's Gift for a Transformed Life

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To family members who have gone before and to those who will follow.

To the 1846 McElhinneys who came to Morning Sun, Iowa, with their Bibles and the Westminster Standards and planted a church on the beautiful plains of the best farm ground in the world.

And to Jenna Jamie, Mary Susan, Christopher Daniel III, and future grandchildren I hope to meet. Your grandmother and I earnestly pray that you will unwrap the gift of repentance and meet us at the fifth tree on the right side of the river (Rev. 22:1–7).

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Foreword

THE RANTING AND WHINING of “faith deconstructors” and the absence of a strong and faithful church calling them to repentance have produced a climate within the church in which the faithful doctrine of repentance has fallen by the wayside. Since one cannot produce the faith that leads to salvation, one cannot deconstruct it. The problem is sin, and the solution for genuine Christians is to repent. Why? “For the sake of joy,” says Chris Brauns.

Theologians categorize repentance under the doctrine of salvation, and for good reason. There is no salvation in Jesus Christ apart from repentance and belief. Repentance and belief are two sides of the same coin. Repentance reflects a heart that believes in the promises of the gospel in a personal and life-changing way. Repentance is synergistic—it asks the believer to participate with the biblical witness of dying to self and living for Christ through the work of the Spirit.

Repentance is not a legal terror because the Christian knows that the law and the gospel have the same friends and the same enemies. Following the example of the great Puritan Thomas Watson, there are six essential ingredients to biblical repentance. True believers don’t quibble with biblical demands because we see that God’s love saturates each one. Without each ingredient, repentance isn’t complete.

First, repentance recognizes sin as sin according to the law of God, which awakens the sinner to reality and causes the sinner to come to

his senses. Seeing sin as sin and not defining it in therapeutic terms is step number one. When we see our sin as sin, we feel the moral law's sting with a heart filled with gratitude for Christ, who bore its curse.

Second, repentance leads to sorrow for sin. The modern world works overtime to ensure that no one feels bad, but to repent of sin we must have sorrow for our sin—grief, sadness, and heartbreak. Sorrow sheds tears over the cost of sin for our Savior (Ps. 51:17). The Lord returns our needed season of sorrow with the balm of godly comfort (Matt. 5:4; 2 Cor. 7:9), a comfort that deepens our union with Christ.

Third, repentance requires the confession of sin, which is self-accusing, voluntary, and sincere. We resist any attempt at self-justification and blame shifting. Confession of sin includes our resolve to purge sin forever, which marks a clear path for the Lord's pardon (1 John 1:9).

Fourth, true repentance requires something that modern man often finds irritating and offensive: shame. Shame uncovers and lays bare our evil, guilt, and foolishness, which is the essence of sin. Embracing shame means agreeing with God and not with our idolatrous hearts. And when we feel godly shame for our corrupting sin, we cling to the covering of the gospel (Ps. 91:1), which reminds us that although we feel the effects of sin, Jesus has taken its curse for us (Gal. 3:13).

Fifth, repentance means learning to hate sin. We need to cultivate a universal hatred toward all sin without hating ourselves. Like Paul, we need to see ourselves as the chief of all sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). The Bible helps us see that sin is the essence of Satan's reign on earth and that we cannot domesticate or rationalize it.

Sixth, repentance results in breaking sin's bondage on our affections. True repentance leads us to do more than abstain from sin. It requires our turning from it and our running in the opposite direction away from it toward Christ. The thief, Paul says, should "no longer steal" but must now "labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need" (Eph. 4:28).

His sin once ran his hand to steal; his repentance should now lead his hand to labor and to give.

The Way of Repentance reintroduces the life-saving doctrine of repentance to our sleepy and self-indulgent age. Repentance is the threshold to a holy God (Hos. 14:1–2). Repentance is a doctrine of God and the first word of the gospel (Mark 1:15). Repentance brings joy, peace, and purpose to our lives, our families, our churches, and the world (Ps. 32). Repentance cleans the slate of a burdened soul (Ps. 103:12).

Read this book for the good of your soul and for your witness to the prodigal whom you love.

Rosaria Butterfield

Introduction

FOR JOY.

The question is *Why read a book about repentance?* And the answer is *For joy*. For deep and abiding gladness.

Or from my point of view, the question is *Why write a book on repentance?* And the answer is the same: *For joy*. I want to be used to share joy and to experience more of it myself.

We should meditate on and work out our repentance to know and experience the joy of those who have turned from crushing burdens to find rest in Christ, who deserves all glory.

Scripture is clear that repentance is an occasion of joy. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus teaches that repentance leads to the sort of celebration that takes place when a lost son comes home and his father rushes out to receive him and then throws his son a party (Luke 15:11–32). Levi the tax collector repented and hosted a great feast (5:27–32). So did Zacchaeus (19:1–10).

Repentance leads to the sort of joy that bursts forth when someone is freed from an addiction, when a marriage is restored, or when the sun finally breaks through the dark clouds of anxiety and depression caused by some spiritual defeat.

Who would not want such joy? Not everyone, it turns out.

I mentioned to a friend, an elderly lady, that I was writing a book, and she asked, “What is it about?”

“Repentance,” I said. “My book is about repentance.”

She winced and quickly responded without apology, “I’ve just never really liked that word.” With raised eyebrows, I asked her to explain. “I just feel like the word *repentance* implies I have done something wrong,” she said.

That thought, “I feel like *repentance* implies that I have done something wrong,” just sat there while various responses flashed through my mind. I considered saying tactfully, “You mentioned that the word *repent* implies that you have done something wrong. Well, as it turns out Scripture says . . .” Many Bible verses could have finished my sentence: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23); “All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6 KJV); or “None is righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10)—to name just three.

But starting with a sin emphasis seemed a little abrupt, so I thought about pointing out that Jesus began his good news ministry in the Gospel of Mark with a call for people to repent (Mark 1:14–15). Or I considered asking, “Has there ever been someone you wounded deeply and needed to tell that person you were sorry?” or “How does a victim go about responding safely to the person who hurt her?” These are repentance questions, and they prompt us to think more deeply about the subject.

But instead of any of those options, I decided instead to focus on joy. I asked my friend, “Do you know the parable of the prodigal son—the story of a young man who wastes his inheritance in a ‘far country’ but returns home to his father, who then receives him with a joyful celebration?”

“To repent is to go home for joy,” I wanted to say, but she cut me off before I could mention the older son, who wasn’t happy about the party for his penitent brother. She interrupted dismissively and without apology: “I never really liked that story.”

I smiled, a little chagrined, realizing it was not going to be a long conversation.

Seeing my smile, she went on a friendly offensive strategy of her own. “Really,” she asked, “why would anyone like that story? The older son stayed home and did all the work. His brother blew his inheritance and yet came home to a party.”

That was the end of the conversation. My friend wasn’t upset with me, but she was grumpy at the thought of having something to personally confess and at the idea of a repentant sinner getting a party. She wasn’t looking for the rest that God grants as a gift to the broken who come home from a far country.

I have much more to say about the parable in the pages to follow. Here I am only pointing out that not everyone is motivated by the joy that Jesus offers. But how about you? For joy, will you consider thinking deeply about what the Bible calls “repentance unto life” (Acts 11:18 KJV)? Over and over, Scripture promises that repentance is a tear-soaked yet joyous turn to Jesus, and this is why we should be motivated to meditate on it. Repentance is the way into the Christian life. And it is also the way of the Christian life, as we work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

As I write this afternoon, repentance has framed and reframed my thinking about a dozen situations. It’s Monday, and even before breakfast, I received texts regarding two different marriages in our community that appear to be near the end. I was already thinking pastorally about a young couple in our church who has two small children and is near adopting a third. And I was waiting for my wife, Jamie, so we could begin the day by reading Scripture. She is battling stage 4 cancer, which means, among many other things, a hard physical beginning to each day as she endures the effects of losing much of her pancreas, stomach, and liver.

So while I waited to begin the day, I was thinking about those situations while reminding myself not to be too introspective in second-guessing my preaching from the previous day nor to be too anxious about stresses and strains with our extended family, grown children,

and grandchildren. I also told myself that it would be a good idea to quit being lazy and get my taxes done because I had already filed for an extension five months ago when Jamie was still a patient at the Mayo Clinic.

As I was thinking about all these people and my own life, I knew that the first word that we all needed to think about as we moved forward was the word *repent*. I also knew that *repentance* is not a word that hits us in a positive way. Repentance is so blunt and confrontational. Why would I encourage people to repent when they fear that their marriage is circling the drain because of their spouse's decisions? Or for heaven's sake, why would I remind my wife, who is battling the effects of cancer surgery, that we should begin our day with repentance? It's bad enough that I have to pay taxes. Why should I be motivated to repent about not finishing them too?

Again, here's the answer. *For joy*. We repent for joy.

So for deep and abiding gladness and for the glory of Christ, read on.

PART 1

REPENTANCE UNTO LIFE

Repentance unto life is a saving grace . . .

WESTMINSTER SHORTER CATECHISM, Q. 87

What Is Repentance unto Life?

And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

ACTS 11:18

What is repentance unto life?

WESTMINSTER SHORTER CATECHISM, Q. 87

THE GOAL OF THIS BOOK is to help readers understand and live what the Bible teaches about repentance. Let’s get started with a quiz. This will raise relevant questions and outline the discussion. There are ten true-or-false questions. You’re invited to disagree with me. In fact, for a reason that will become clear, there is a good chance that you will.

To prepare to take the quiz, do three things. First, as I said in the introduction, be motivated by joy and gladness to know more about repentance. Many come to the topic of repentance from a place of brokenness and a sense of dread. That brokenness may be a good thing; we need to be contrite. But dread should not be part of deciding to leave a pigsty for a party. Decide that you are going to learn all you can about repentance. Nothing is more foundational to joy.

You might object that it seems a little over the top to say that *nothing* is more foundational to joy than repentance. This brings us to the second way to prepare for the quiz. Reflect for a moment on the fact that Mark’s and Matthew’s Gospels introduce the ministries of both John the Baptist and Jesus with their calling people to repent:¹

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Mark 1:4)

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matt. 4:17)²

This alone, that Jesus *began* his preaching of the good news of the kingdom with a call for repentance, should motivate us to meditate on repentance. And yet, despite the central importance of the doctrine of repentance, it has often been neglected in evangelical churches. Over fifty years ago D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899–1981) said with concern, “Surely, the thing that accounts more than anything else for the state of the Church, as well as the state of the world today, is our failure to realize the full content of what is meant by repentance.”³

More recently, Michael Ovey (1958–2017) wrote, “Our time in the early twenty-first century in the cultural West is widely described as a time of repentanceless Christianity.”⁴ Kevin DeYoung challenged, “There’s a word missing from the presentation of our modern gospel. It’s

1 For a summary of the New Testament emphasis on repentance, see appendix 1.

2 See also Mark 1:15.

3 Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God the Holy Spirit*, in *Great Doctrines of the Bible: Three Volumes in One* (Crossway, 2003), 131.

4 Michael J. Ovey, *The Feasts of Repentance: From Luke–Acts to Systematic and Pastoral Theology*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (InterVarsity Press, 2019), 1.

the word *repent*,”⁵ and Samuel James observed, “The ambient culture is practically begging for someone to articulate a theology of repentance.”⁶

We cannot allow this neglect of the doctrine of repentance to continue. There is no understanding of biblical Christianity without understanding what Jesus means when he calls for repentance. As we will see, though, understanding repentance is not as easy as we might think. I know that I underestimated the difficulty.

Third, understand what repentance is. It will help us engage with the questions if we begin with a very basic definition. *Repentance means turning from unbelief to belief in Jesus*. Repentance references a spiritual “about face.”⁷ For example, when Paul appeared before King Agrippa, he summarized his own ministry by saying that he challenged people to “*repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance*” (Acts 26:20).

This, then, is biblical repentance: an about-face of mind, heart, and will from sin to Jesus that results in bearing fruit. But this simple definition of repentance raises other questions: What should *motivate* one to turn and believe in Jesus? What *initiates* or causes repentance? *How* do we repent? When is repentance authentic, and when is it counterfeit? These questions and more need to be biblically explored.

So here is the quiz:

1. True or false: Repentance can happen in an instant. _____
2. True or false: Joy should motivate one to repent. _____
3. True or false: In contrast with faith or believing in Jesus for salvation, repentance is a work we perform rather than a gift we receive. _____

5 Kevin DeYoung, “The Missing Word in Our Modern Gospel,” The Gospel Coalition, February 20, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/>.

6 Samuel James, *Digital Liturgies: Rediscovering Christian Wisdom in an Online Age* (Crossway, 2023), 124.

7 F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans, 1988), 69.

4. True or false: Fear should motivate one to repent. _____
5. True or false: Those who repent and believe are forgiven of their sin once and for all and need not repent of their sins on a regular basis. _____
6. True or false: Repentance takes place in the context of grief. _____
7. True or false: We must work out our repentance. _____
8. True or false: Genuine repentance is easily distinguished from counterfeit repentance. _____
9. True or false: Given that our sin is fundamentally against God, we need not express repentance and ask forgiveness of someone we have offended. _____
10. True or false: Where grave offenses are concerned, Christians should immediately and unconditionally receive the person who expresses repentance. _____

The interactive nature of the quiz is meant to set the tone for how you should read this book. I encourage you to continue weighing each of my assertions. Ideally, you would write *true* or *false* next to what you read but only if you think that what I am teaching represents the clear sense of Scripture. Be like the Bereans, who, Luke tells us, “received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11).

It is time to grade your quiz. Here are my answers and a brief explanation. The ten chapters that follow expand on each of these answers in turn.

1. *True or false: Repentance can happen in an instant.* True. If you are at a crossroads—and in some sense we all are every day—be encouraged. Repentance can happen in an instant. As surely as the prodigal son came to his senses and decided to return from a far country, so also people can pivot. Chapter 2 focuses on the biblical character Judah and how he turned from the darkest of places to become the father of

the tribe of the line of the Lord Jesus. The call to repent rests on the beautiful truth that the God who spoke all things into existence turns lives around.

2. *True or false: Joy should motivate one to repent.* True. If you long for a place of joy, gladness, and rejoicing, then repentance is for you. The essential reason that repentance is a turn to joy is considered in chapter 3. But for now, notice that Psalm 32, one of the penitential psalms (or psalms of repentance), concludes,

Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart! (32:11)

Likewise, in Psalm 51 David prays a prayer of repentance with the goal of being restored to joy, gladness, and rejoicing (Ps. 51:8, 12).

Speaking of the penitential psalms, I pray that this book encourages you to soak in these psalms that are our greatest resource for prayers of repentance. Memorize them. Sing them. And like Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and countless others have, may you see that they give joy to the heart and bring light to the eyes. Appendix 3 introduces the penitential psalms and recommends resources for meditating on them further.

3. *True or false: In contrast with faith or believing in Jesus for salvation, repentance is a work we perform rather than a gift we receive.* False. Just as we are saved by amazing grace through faith, repentance is also a gift. Indeed, repentance and faith are inseparable—two sides of the same coin. Repentance is turning from sin. Faith is turning to Christ.⁸

⁸ “Where we might sketch out a difference between faith and repentance would be over the question of focus. Repentance, we have seen, involves an acknowledgment by a person of his standing in the context of his relation with God. It acknowledges sin and estrangement and relies on Christ to provide forgiveness. The focus, though, we might say, is readily on who the sinner is. A person’s faith most naturally involves an acknowledgment of who Christ is, and God’s promise of salvation to those who trust in him, and to the individual who has faith in particular. Here the focus most easily is seen as Christ and who he is.” Ovey, *Feasts of Repentance*, 115.

It is not possible to have repentance without faith or faith without repentance. John Murray (1898–1975) wrote, “The faith that is unto salvation is a penitent faith and the repentance that is unto life is a believing repentance. . . . Saving faith is permeated with repentance and repentance is permeated with faith.”⁹

Repentance must not be viewed as a work or something Christians must do to be Christians. To be sure, biblical repentance bears the fruit of a changed life (Matt. 7:15–27; Acts 26:18–20; James 2:14–26). But repentance and the fruit it bears are distinct from one another.¹⁰

Not understanding that repentance is a gift is one of the ways that people get confused about the nature of repentance. They view it as something they must produce either in themselves or others rather than as a gift to be unwrapped. This is an exhausting way to live. Chapter 4 shows from Scripture that repentance is fundamentally a gift that God gives.

4. True or false: Fear should motivate one to repent. True. I noted above that joy should motivate one to repentance, but I would also add fear. Philip Ross, in his foreword to Thomas Boston’s (1676–1732) classic book on repentance, tells readers that they should read about repentance because unless they repent, they will perish.¹¹

Think of it this way: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10), and wisdom’s first act is to understand that God is a just judge who is righteously angry with sin. Anyone who prayerfully reads the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1–17) or Jesus’s words in Matthew 5 should see that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23) and will face a just judge. Yet many are reluctant to teach what Scripture clearly says about judgment. This is a great

9 John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Eerdmans, 1955), 113.

10 “Repentance is wholly an inward act, and should not be confounded with the change of life that proceeds from it.” Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Eerdmans, 1976), 487.

11 Philip S. Ross, foreword to *Repentance: Turning from Sin to God*, by Thomas Boston, rev. ed. (Christian Heritage, 2012), 15.

tragedy because understanding that we will stand before God one day is one of the means that God uses to bring people to repentance and faith. Chapter 5 considers how Jesus calls people to repentance in the context of warning about wrath.

5. True or false: Those who repent and believe are forgiven of their sin once and for all and need not repent of their sins on a regular basis. False. Those who repent and believe in Jesus are justified and forgiven of their sins—past, present, and future—based on his atoning work (John 1:12; Rom. 8:1; 2 Cor. 5:21). Sanctification (becoming more Christ-like), however, is a process that will not be completed in this life, and working out our salvation with fear and trembling requires ongoing repentance (2 Cor. 3:16–18). In chapter 6, we see that repentance is not only the way into the Christian life but also the way of the Christian life (1 John 1:7–10). One of the reasons why so many Christians are drained, depressed, and depleted is because they are not regularly repenting (Ps. 32:3–4).

6. True or false: Repentance takes place in the context of grief. True. Repentance is turning away from sin. This includes grieving sins that we've committed and feeling sorrow for remaining sin. In 2 Corinthians 7:5–13, an important passage that contrasts godly grief with worldly sorrow, Paul encourages the Corinthians that they were “grieved into repenting” (2 Cor. 7:9). Likewise, Psalm 6, another penitential psalm, vividly describes the grief of repentance:

Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing;
 heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled.
 My soul also is greatly troubled. . . .

I am weary with my moaning;
 every night I flood my bed with tears;
 I drench my couch with my weeping.
 My eye wastes away because of grief. (Ps. 6:2–3; 6–7)

These verses might cause you concern. You might say, “The reality is that I am a Christian, but I don’t feel that bad about my sin.” Chapter 6 shows how we should approach repentance when sin does not concern us as much as it should, and how as we grow in the faith, we will be more grieved by our sin.

If it seems strange to say that repentance is an occasion for grief and sorrow, think of it this way: Repentance involves understanding something about us—namely, that we are sinners who have rebelled against God. And this is a source of grief. But true repentance also involves seeing the beauty of Christ. And this is a source of great joy.¹²

7. True or false: We must work out our repentance. True. While repentance is not a work that merits salvation, we must still work at repentance. If that sounds like a contradiction, consider Paul’s encouragement to the Philippians: “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12–13). So we must work out our salvation, but even our work is a gift from God. Of course, this raises many questions about how we work out repentance and why doing so is so difficult. This is the focus of chapter 7.

8. True or false: Genuine repentance is easily distinguished from counterfeit repentance. False. The Bible teaches that there is a large category of people who think they have repented and believed but they have false assurance. Indeed, Jesus warns that on the last day, there will be many who thought they professed faith but did not (Matt. 7:22–23; Luke 13:22–30). James likewise warns that there is a kind of faith that is dead (James 2:26). Paul says we should examine ourselves to see whether we are in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5). Peter says we should be eager to make our calling and election sure (2 Pet. 1:9–10). Chapters 7 and 8 focus on how to distinguish between the sorrow of Judas, who

¹² “True repentance not only sorrows for sin but sees a Saviour.” Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Banner of Truth, 2014), 195.

was so grieved that he took his own life, and that of Peter, who denied Christ yet truly repented.

9. True or false: Given that our sin is fundamentally against God, we need not express repentance and ask forgiveness of someone we have offended. False. Jesus says,

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. (Matt. 5:23–26)

I suspect that nearly everyone who takes this quiz will agree that it is the responsibility of the offender to repent and ask for forgiveness. Yet any number of factors might complicate communicating repentance. Think about these questions:

- What if a person has committed a grave offense like infidelity, and the spouse is unaware? Should repentance be communicated when it means the offended party will experience great pain?
- What words should be used to communicate repentance? How can a person avoid saying things that might only make matters worse?
- What if the other party is unwilling to believe that the offender is truly repentant?

Chapter 10 explores these questions and how to communicate repentance in the right way.

10. True or false: Where grave offenses are concerned, Christians should immediately and unconditionally receive the person who expresses repentance. False. To be clear, the Bible teaches that Christians should always stand ready to forgive and that we must forgive the repentant (Luke 17:3–4). But it is not always clear how to respond to someone who expresses repentance. Consider these sorts of situations:

- If an abuser makes a superficial display of being sorry, should the abused unconditionally continue that relationship?
- Is it “Christian” to establish boundaries with a repentant person?
- What if it is unclear whether the offending party is truly repentant?

Chapter 11 focuses on principles for relating to those who have committed grave offenses and may or may not be repentant.

I qualified earlier that the repentance quiz is likely to cause discussions, if not arguments. It is an imperfect tool. One of the reasons, no doubt, is because it is written by me, an imperfect person. But a biblical understanding of repentance should spark discussions because there are many internal tensions. For example, repentance is a time of grief, but it’s also a time of joy. Repentance means losing your life, but repentance also means finding it. Repentance is the way into the Christian life, but it is also the way of the Christian life.

These tensions within the doctrine of repentance show the need for a more careful definition, like that given in question 87 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which was approved by the Westminster Assembly in 1648. This catechism provides some historical perspective, considering that the Westminster Standards were adopted about one hundred years after the death of Martin Luther and 131 years after

Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses on the door at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517.

The first of Luther's theses focuses on repentance: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said 'Repent,' he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance."¹³ This means that from the beginning of the Reformation, a biblical understanding of repentance was a central consideration and that the Westminster Assembly drew on over a century of Reformed thinking in its definition. This is why the Westminster Standards are sometimes called the full flowering of the Reformation.

Here is how the Westminster Shorter Catechism defines repentance: "Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, does, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience."

I encourage you to read this aloud and consider it word by word, phrase by phrase. This catechism answer is not inspired. It is beautiful only to the extent that it accurately summarizes the clear teaching of Scripture. And I believe it does. Much of this book engages with this definition, as well as with article 15 of the Westminster Confession of Faith, "Repentance unto Life." For your reference, both are included in appendix 2.

As we conclude this chapter, reflect on the question presented in this catechism: "What is repentance unto life?" The phrase "unto life" rests on a beautiful premise—namely, that it is possible, in whatever mess that you find yourself in, to turn from a place of weariness and death to one of rest and joy. You can turn regardless of bad decisions you have made in the past. If you know of a situation that seems too ugly or beyond hope, consider the amazing story of Judah, which is the focus of the next chapter.

¹³ Quoted in David Mathis, "Luther's First Thesis and Last Words," October 31, 2008, <https://www.desiringgod.org/>.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

In this book, an overarching goal of the questions for reflection and discussion is to encourage readers to immerse themselves in four of the seven penitential psalms: 32, 38, 51, and 130. Psalms are poetry. At a minimum, I pray that readers will make it a priority to read the suggested psalm carefully and aloud. But the best way to be blessed by the Psalms is to memorize and prayerfully meditate on them for extended periods of time—or, better still, to sing them. For a brief introduction to the penitential psalms see, appendix 3. For a suggested method for memorizing Scripture, see appendix 4.

1. In your experience, how does the call to repent strike most people?
2. What should motivate people to want to know more about repentance?
3. Identify two questions from the quiz that were of particular interest to you and explain why.
4. There is a well-known saying that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing repeatedly while expecting different results. In what ways does the biblical teaching on repentance agree with this definition?
5. In Acts 26:18–20, the apostle Paul summarizes the charge Jesus gave him and his obedience to that charge. Based on these verses, how would you define *repentance*?
6. Does Paul indicate in Acts 26:18–20 that “deeds” constitute repentance or are “deeds” the result of repentance? Why is this an important question?
7. Read Psalm 32 aloud at least three times. Identify three to five ways that this psalm motivates us to repent.

A Prayer

The following prayer was written by Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), an English writer most famously known for *A Dictionary of the English Language*:

O merciful God, full of compassion, long-suffering and of great pity, make me earnestly repent, and heartily to be sorry for all my misdoings; make the remembrance of them so burdensome and painful that I may flee to you with a troubled spirit and a contrite heart; and, O merciful Lord, visit, comfort, and relieve me; excite in me true repentance; give me in this world knowledge of your truth and confidence in your mercy, and in the world to come, life everlasting. Amen.¹⁴

¹⁴ Quoted in Jonathan Gibson, *O Sacred Head, Now Wounded: A Liturgy for Daily Worship from Pascha to Pentecost* (Crossway, 2024), 343. Used with permission.

