

Does genuine repentance always lead to salvation?
A Series on Genuine Repentance: Part 2

When the Bible speaks of repentance in the context of non-Believers, it is often in regards to initial salvation (also known as “justification salvation”). This can be seen in the apostle Paul’s preaching where he closely associates repentance and faith: “repentance to God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21).

From Paul’s perspective, penitence and conversion reflects genuine biblical repentance as it represents a “change of mind” about sin, God, Jesus or the sinner and a decision is made to change the direction of one’s thoughts and life.

But does genuine repentance always lead to initial salvation?

Can a non-Believer express genuine repentance that does not lead to justification salvation?

King Ahab of the Old Testament presents a wrinkle to this understanding of genuine repentance. As the seventh king of Israel’s Northern Kingdom, Ahab married Jezebel who was a Phoenician princess and devotee of Baal. Ahab apparently worshipped God as implied in the naming of his children: Jehoram (Yahweh is exalted), Ahaziah (Yahweh sustains), and daughter Athaliah (Yahweh is righteous); however, he also openly worshipped, served and built temples for idols (1 Kings 16:32-33; 2 Kings 3:2).

The Bible records, on several occasions, the evil and idolatrous rule of Ahab was worse than all other kings before him (1 Kings 16:30, 32-33; 21:25-26; Micah 6:16).

As another example, Ahab does not stop Jezebel’s massacre of the prophets of the LORD (1 Kings 18:4, 13, 18).

Despite Elijah’s Mount Carmel victory over the 450 priests of Baal (1 Kings 18:17-40) and two divinely provided military victories over the Syrians (1 Kings 20:13-14, 22, 28), Ahab allows his wife Jezebel to violate the Mosaic Law (Lev 19:11; 25:23-28; Num 36:7-12) and organize the murder of Naboth and his sons (2 Kings 9:26) and the theft of his vineyard. It is here that Elijah confronts Ahab with his sin and conveys God’s judgment (1 Kings 21:17-24).

Ahab responds with the tearing of his clothes, wearing sackcloth, fasting and mourning which all indicated grief and contrition; it was an expression of sincere repentance (1 Kings 21:27).

In observing Ahab’s repentance, God reveals that Ahab was genuine in his self humbling (1 Kings 21:28-29).

Out of mercy, God defers His judgment after Ahab has died (1 Kings 21:29; 2 Kings 9:24-26; 30-37).

It would seem that Ahab was truly repentant of his actions towards Naboth and mourned the divine consequences it wrought. Ahab’s genuine repentance resulted in a temporal delay from judgment which was deferred to the next generation. Did Ahab’s repentance lead to faith in God and eternal salvation? The biblical text is silent whether Ahab turned towards God and developed a genuine faith; the Bible does not mention Ahab renouncing idolatrous worship or restoring Naboth’s vineyard.

What was the genuine character of Ahab’s repentance? What is it about the practice of wearing sackcloth and fasting that conveys genuine repentance?

Sackcloth is a coarse cloth made of goat hair and fashioned in a bag like garment. Scratchy and uncomfortable to wear, it was worn as a symbol of grief whether in mourning of a death (Gen 37:34) or a calamity (Esth 4:1-4) and a practice largely confined to the Old Testament.

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The nation of Israel learned that, through their covenant relationship with God (Mosaic Covenant) and subsequent reminders from His prophets, all blessings and curses in life were from God. Jews understood that blessings and curses were conditioned on one's faith life and ethical behavior whether as an individual (Ezek 14:6-8) or nation (Jer 18:7-11).

Thus misfortune was seen as a consequence of personal sin and God's displeasure. Wearing sackcloth was symbolic of one's unworthiness and a means to humble oneself before God (Esth 4:1-3; Job 16:15). The act of rending one's clothing and wearing sackcloth and ashes represented self censure. From this perspective, genuine repentance includes a sense of humiliation, sorrow and submission (1 Chron 21:16; Ps 35:13).

Prophets, who mourn the sins of the nation, often wore sackcloth to show their own brokenness as they made pronouncements of God's judgment (2 Kings 1:8; Is 20:2; Zech 13:4; Rev 11:3).

However, the Bible records some of wearing sackcloth for reasons other than repentance. For example, motivated by his desire to survive a military rout, the pagan king Ben-hadad wore sackcloth to seek mercy from king Ahab (1 Kings 20:31-32). In this example, humbling oneself was not done with repentance in mind; instead it was in quest of mercy.

In another example, the nation of Israel complains of fasting and its failure of achieving a favorable response from God (Is 58:3-4). Isaiah confronts this manipulative attitude; the fast that God sought was not merely refraining from food; the Jews should loosen the bonds of wickedness by undoing heavy financial burdens, feed the hungry, shelter the poor and clothe the naked (Is 58:5-7). Isaiah points out that one's behavior reflects the condition of the heart and the true attitude of humbleness.

Widely recognized public acts of tearing clothes, wearing sackcloth, fasting and mourning may not reflect the genuine condition of the heart; God saw repentance as genuine when done with a humble heart (1 Kings 21:28-29). Yet despite his genuine repentance, it is doubtful that Ahab had a genuine faith in Yahweh. The author of 1 Kings inserts his evaluation of king Ahab:

"Surely there was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do evil in the sight of the LORD, because Jezebel his wife incited him. He acted very abominably in following idols, according to all that the Amorites had done, whom the LORD cast out before the sons of Israel." (1 Kings 21:25-26)

Jonah and the city of Nineveh present another interesting case of genuine repentance that led to a temporal salvation from God's judgment, but less certain is whether this included justification salvation.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and cry out against it, because their wickedness has come up before Me." (Jonah 1:1-2)

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you." So Jonah got up and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk. Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, "Forty more days, and Nineveh will be overthrown." (Jonah 3:1-4)

After hearing Jonah's message, the people of Nineveh believed in God, fasted and wore sackcloth. The king himself wore sackcloth, sat on ashes and issued a decree ordering all to fast (including livestock), wear sackcloth, call on God and turn from wicked ways. Because of their repentance and turning from wicked ways, God did not deliver the calamity He had planned for Nineveh (Jonah 3:1-10).

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Scholars have long noted the subtle differences in the use of God's divine names. Throughout Jonah 1, 2 and 4, "LORD" ("Yahweh"), the name of the covenant making God of Israel is consistently used. In Jonah 3, the people of Nineveh noticeably refer only to "God" ("Elohim").

From a Hebrew's perspective, "Elohim" is the name of God as the Creator and Judge of the universe (Gen 1:1-2).

While the Assyrians did not mention "Yahweh," the covenant making God of Israel, they believed in polytheism. Scholars believe that the Assyrians understood "Elohim" within the context of their polytheism as the one god who could enforce his will upon the others.

The Assyrians recognized Jonah's proclamations as the voice of the supreme god and responded accordingly.

Because they did not mention "Yahweh", it is believed that the Assyrians did not have a genuine faith in the God of Abraham. There isn't any historical evidence of a period of faith in the God of Israel while Nineveh existed.

However Jesus thought well enough of the men of Nineveh who repented at the preaching of Jonah in contrast to the Jews who refused to respond to His preaching (Matt 12:38-41; Luke 11:29-30); Jesus implied a contrast between belief and unbelief.

It appears that repentance, involving the genuine humbling of oneself, can result in at least the temporal salvation from God's judgment. It may or may not lead to justification salvation; faith in God alone provides the means for eternal salvation.

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