

The Repentance of God

By: Rody Chesser

The Hebrew word translated repent is the word *naw-kham*. It has a variety of meanings. Two of the most common meanings used in scripture are comfort and repent. We first see the word used in Lamech's declaration of the mission and ministry of Noah.

Genesis 5:29 *And he called his name Noah, saying, This same shall comfort us concerning our work and toil of our hands, because of the ground which the LORD hath cursed.*

The next use of the word is in God's declaration that he is going to destroy all flesh on earth with the great flood.

Genesis 6:6-7 *And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. 7 And the LORD said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them.*

These are both very different meanings for the word. This word has different meanings. An example might be a table that you sit at to eat and a table of numbers that you use to calculate something is the same word with very different meanings. In the Genesis 6 passage, we see that because of man's change in disposition toward God, God has changed his disposition toward man. Let's take a walk through the scriptures and see some other uses of this word to discover what scripture means when it says God repented.

The possibility of the Israelites changing their mind:

Exodus 13:17-18 *And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, Lest peradventure the people repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt: 18 But God led the people about, through the way of the wilderness of the Red sea: and the children of Israel went up harnessed out of the land of Egypt.*

Here the word is used to describe the people's attitude toward following God. God did not want them to face great difficulty too soon or they would change their mind and want to return to Egypt.

A plea for God to change his mind:

While Moses was on the mountain receiving the Law from the Lord, the people made a golden calf and began to worship it. God told Moses what was going on and he declared that he was going to destroy them.

Exodus 32:9-10 *And the LORD said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people: 10 Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them: and I will make of thee a great nation.*

At this point Moses begins to intercede for the people and ask God not to do what he has said.

Exodus 32:11-14 *And Moses besought the LORD his God, and said, LORD, why doth thy wrath wax hot against thy people, which thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power, and with a mighty hand? 12 Wherefore should the Egyptians speak, and say, For mischief did he bring them out, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou swarest by thine own self, and saidst unto them, I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken of will I give unto your seed, and they shall inherit it for ever. 14 And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people.*

Moses appeals to God's mighty power and his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Bible tells us that Moses specifically asked God to repent from this wrath. God did not do what he said to Moses. Notice here, God's repentance is in response to interceding pray and a request for God to show mercy.

Balaam's declaration of God:

When the wicked prophet Balaam had been hired by Balak to curse the Israelites he tried. He sacrificed to the Lord and God told him to pronounce a blessing on them. Balak was distraught so he took Balaam to another place and asked him to try again. This time Balaam announced to Balak these words:

Numbers 23:19-20 *God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good? 20 Behold, I have received commandment to bless: and he hath blessed; and I cannot reverse it.*

Balaam was not able to curse the Israelites because God had told him to bless them. Now he announces that God is not a son of man that he should repent. In other words, he is not a sinful man that would have to repent of wrongdoing. He is also telling Balak that God on this occasion is not going to change his mind.

God's repentance with King Saul:

Like the time before the flood there is an instance when a man's disposition toward God changes and so God's disposition to him changes. This is with King Saul who would not obey God. When he was instructed by Samuel, God's prophet, to completely destroy the Amalekites and all their livestock he disobeyed. He saved the best of the cattle alive and spared Agag, the Amalekite king's life.

1 Samuel 15:10-11 *Then came the word of the LORD unto Samuel, saying, 11 It repenteth me that I have set up Saul to be king: for he is turned back from following me, and hath not performed my commandments. And it grieved Samuel; and he cried unto the LORD all night.*

When Samuel confronts Saul with this disobedience, Saul says he obeyed, but the people kept back the livestock. Saul then asks for Samuel to pardon his sin and return with him to worship the Lord, but Samuel refuses:

1 Samuel 15:26-29 *And Samuel said unto Saul, I will not return with thee: for thou hast rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD hath rejected thee from being king over Israel. 27 And as Samuel turned about to go away, he laid hold upon the skirt of his mantle, and it rent. 28 And Samuel said unto him, The LORD hath rent the kingdom of Israel from thee this day, and hath given it to a neighbour of thine, that is better than thou. 29 And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent: for he is not a man, that he should repent.*

Here Samuel refers to **Numbers 23:19** in saying the God will not lie nor repent. Once again, he says that God is not a man that he should repent. God is not doing wrong here. God is not sinning. He is the Creator and he can do as he pleases. Saul's disposition toward God had changed and God's disposition toward Saul changed. He had given him the kingdom, but since he would not obey the word of the Lord God was now taking it away from him. In this matter, God would not change his mind.

David's choice of chastisement and God's repentance:

During the monarchy of David, we read of a time when he took a census. He was not to do this unless instructed by God to do so and he was to exact a tax when he did. He merely wanted to know the number of his fighting men. The scripture tells us that David was grieved at his wrong doing after he had done this and God sent a prophet to him.

2 Samuel 24:10-14 *And David's heart smote him after that he had numbered the people. And David said unto the LORD, I have sinned greatly in that I have done: and now, I beseech thee, O LORD, take away the iniquity of thy servant; for I have done very foolishly. 11 For when David was up in the morning, the word of the LORD came unto the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, 12 Go and say unto David, Thus saith the LORD, I offer thee three things; choose thee one of them, that I may do it unto thee. 13 So Gad came to David, and told him, and said unto him, Shall seven years of famine come unto thee in thy land? or wilt thou flee three months before thine enemies, while they pursue thee? or that there be three days' pestilence in thy land? now advise, and see what answer I shall return to him that sent me. 14 And David said unto Gad, I am in a great strait: let us fall now into the hand of the LORD; for his mercies are great: and let me not fall into the hand of man.*

David receives the privilege of making a choice of his chastisements. His choice is very interesting because he chooses based on the fact that he would rather fall into the hands of God who is merciful than to fall into the hands of men who show little or no mercy. David knew his God and he is appealing to his mercy. This was a wise choice that David made because God repented in the midst of the carnage and showed mercy.

2 Samuel 24:15-16 *So the LORD sent a pestilence upon Israel from the morning even to the time appointed: and there died of the people from Dan even to Beersheba seventy thousand men. 16 And when the angel stretched out his hand upon Jerusalem to destroy it, the LORD repented him of the evil, and said to the angel that destroyed the people, It is enough: stay now thine hand. And the angel of the LORD was by the threshingplace of Araunah the Jebusite.*

Once again, we see that God's disposition to man is conditioned upon man's disposition to God. David knew his God to be merciful and he openly confessed his sin to God. God did bring chastisement upon the people, but he stopped short because the Bible says, God repented.

God explains his reasons for repentance through the prophet Jeremiah:

God used the prophet Jeremiah to inform the people that the Babylonian exile was coming. He has delayed it several times because of repentance on the people's part. One of those times of delay was during the reign of king Ahab. He was a wicked man who was greatly influenced by his idol worshipping wife, Jezebel. In the episode with Naboth Ahab wanted his vineyard and Jezebel had Naboth killed so Ahab could have it. Elijah was sent with a word from the Lord to tell Ahab that he would die a bloody death because of his sin.

1 Kings 21:27-29 *And it came to pass, when Ahab heard those words, that he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly. 28* *And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, 29* *Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before me? because he humbleth himself before me, I will not bring the evil in his days: but in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house.*

Even in the life of a wicked king like Ahab, God saw his humility and he changed his mind in regard to Ahab's death. But during the days of Jeremiah, God says:

Jeremiah 15:6 *Thou hast forsaken me, saith the LORD, thou art gone backward: therefore will I stretch out my hand against thee, and destroy thee; I am weary with repenting.*

God explains to Jeremiah that he will change his mind if a nation does show repentance toward him.

Jeremiah 18:7-10 *At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; 8* *If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. 9* *And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; 10* *If it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them.*

Here is the explanation we need. God can change in his disposition toward mankind if they change in their disposition to him. He will do this for good if they repent and turn to God. He will do this for ill if they turn from going the right way and turn to sin. We see this throughout scripture.

The advice of the prophet Joel:

Joel tells the people of his day to repent and turn to God in humility because he might show them mercy.

Joel 2:13-14 *And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil. 14* *Who*

knoweth if he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him; even a meat offering and a drink offering unto the LORD your God?

Joel, like David knew his God and he told the people to appeal to God's mercy and kindness. Who knows but that God might change his mind.

The King of Nineveh appealed to God's mercy:

When Jonah preached his message of judgment to Nineveh, the king took his word seriously and responded in repentance and humility. Jonah was afraid of this and was reluctant to preach there. Jonah wanted Nineveh to be judged harshly. He did not want them to repent. However, the king was wise and said:

Jonah 3:9-10 *Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not? 10 And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.*

God does not sin, he is merciful:

When you and I repent, it is because we are wrong and need to get right with God. We turn from our way of thinking to God's. However, God does not lie or make mistakes. He does however reserve the right to be merciful or to show judgment.

He will change his mind when we turn to him in humility and repentance. He does not always do this, but he has in the past. Always appeal to God's mercy!

James 4:6-10 *But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. 7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded. 9 Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. 10 Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.*

It is also interesting that the same Hebrew word can mean repent and comfort. Learn this, if you repent, you will know comfort!