

## Rethinking repentance

by Norman Walford (1142 words)



I'm halfway through listening to an audiobook—*The Jewish War* by Flavius Josephus.

The book was written in AD 75 and recounts the history of the Jews starting with the Maccabees and proceeding to the Jewish War and the final destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70 by the Roman general Titus.

I started a bit reluctantly expecting it to be dry and boring, but in fact it's been quite the opposite. It's a fast moving story, racy, full of blood, gore, torture, individual valour, family intrigue, betrayal etc. etc. It makes great reading, and it's the best possible way to get a detailed insight into the political environment of Palestine before, during, and after the life of Jesus, written by an articulate writer who was there and witnessed it all.



Strongly recommended!

But that's not what I want to talk about. Rather, I want to pick up on one word, in one sentence, from Josephus' preface.

Now Josephus was a wily operator. Consider this, that he started the war as a commander on the losing side (the Jews), and ended the war as an honoured Roman citizen on a full state pension provided by the Roman Emperor Vespasian, working as a trusted advisor to the Roman military. That takes a bit of doing. So when we read Josephus singing the praise of Titus (Vespasian's son, future emperor, and the general who supervised the siege and capture of Jerusalem), and telling us what a kind, generous and warm-hearted man Titus was, we can perhaps take it with a large pinch of salt. But no matter. I'm concerned with something else.

*"Titus Caesar who destroyed (the Temple) is himself a witness who during the entire war pitied the people who were kept under by the seditious (Jewish leaders) and did often voluntarily delay the taking of the city and allowed time to the siege in order to let the authors have opportunity for **repentance**."* (Josephus, Preface to *The Jewish War*)

There it is, that word! In effect Joseph is saying, *Titus had no desire for all this killing and destruction; and if the Jews holding out in the city would but **repent** and stop fighting, then Titus would have been more than happy to accept an honourable surrender on generous and humane terms.*

It's that one word, REPENT. We hear it so often in church, but here it's being used by this entirely secular first century writer, a contemporary of Paul and the Apostles, in a totally non-religious context. That's what really hit me.

And what does Josephus mean by it? He means just what the word should mean, which is *THINK AGAIN!* Josephus is using Greek, and the Greek word for *repent* is *metanoia*, from *noiein* (to think) and *meta* (after, further). So it's 'think again, change your mind'.

That's all Titus is saying to the defenders of Jerusalem – *Think again Jews! Stop fighting and surrender! Lay down your arms and accept a fair and generous settlement!*

We need to remember that these 'technical' theological terms that get thrown around in church usually have ordinary, everyday meanings, and often if we stick to the everyday meaning we may get closer to the truth than we would otherwise. With *repent*, I think that we can be too heavily conditioned by the mediaeval Catholic church and its rather narrow concepts of sin, so that as soon as the word comes up, immediately in our mind's eyes we are looking at flashing billboards of the Ten Commandments—*Murder! Theft! Adultery!* And so on. And I grant that all that can indeed be a part of it, but is that really getting to the heart of it?

I think not.

In our Men's Group this week we were discussing Acts chapter 2. Here Luke summarizes the gospel message in a few simple words:

<sup>37</sup>When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

<sup>38</sup>Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <sup>39</sup>The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." (Acts 2.37-38)

And the natural question then is, **Repent of what?** Of course we can all find things—*OK Lord, I admit it, I jumped a red light on my way home yesterday. I won't do it again—until next time!* But is that really what it's about? I don't think so.

I've been fascinated for years by a little and much overlooked verse in Hebrews. It gathers weight from its context—it's in a list of what the writer regards as a list of basic Christian doctrines which the reader is supposed to know already. So it's presented as central. And it says . . .

**Not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works . . .** (Hebrews 6.1)

So its foundational. One of the building blocks on which the whole Christian edifice is constructed. Just a minute! I've heard of repentance of *sin*, but what's this about *dead works*? Just that. The greatest sin known to man. The one sin of which above all we are called to repent is **dead works**.

So what are dead works? Just that. *Works* are things that you do. Rules that you follow. For the Jews it was their Law. And why dead? They're dead because they can't save you. Paul describes the Law as *the ministry of death*. (2 Corinthians 3.7) Works can't impress God, can't put God in our debt. Nothing puts God in our debt. Nothing we do can impress God—he's unimpress-able. Works are just that. Dead, dead, works

At the Men's Group we got into trouble as we usually do, as one or two have not really understood the full ramifications of the free gift. *But repent what? I don't really think I've done anything too bad! You seriously think I can get to heaven by confessing to a red traffic light?* No. Please let none of us get into that mentality. If we repent, let's repent first and foremost of *dead works*. Lay them aside and accept the free gift of God.

In a way we're not unlike Jewish defenders on the walls of Jerusalem, surrounded by the massively superior forces of Titus. Like them we need to repent. Have a change of thinking. Surrender to the greater power and (if Josephus is to be believed) receive mercy at his hands. I'm not sure if I would trust Josephus entirely on that one, his track record is a bit mixed. But our God, we know we can trust.