

# On Repentance

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This text provides a comprehensive discussion on various forms of repentance and their significance in Islamic beliefs.

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### Topic Tags:

[Repentance \(Tawbah\)](#) [6]

### Miscellaneous information:

On Repentance Allamah Tabataba'i, An extract of al-Mizan, Commentary of Surah al-Nisa', verses 17-18, vol 8, pages 61-73.

# On Repentance

Allamah Tabataba'i

An extract of al-Mizan,

Commentary of Surah al-Nisa', verses 17-18, vol 8, pages 61-73.

## [Repentance In Its Full Significance](#)

Repentance, in its full significance as laid down in the Qur'an, is among those positive teachings which are exclusive property of the Qur'an. Repentance, in the meaning of belief after disbelief and polytheism, was common in all divine religions, vis. the religions of Musa and 'Isa (peace be on both); but it was seen as 'belief' and that was that; there was nothing like analysing the reality of repentance and extending it to the belief.

Not only that. It appears from the foundations on which the Christianity was built as an independent religion, that repentance is useless and man cannot gain any benefit from it. This may easily be seen in the arguments offered for explaining the crucifixion and atonement; as narrated in the third volume [1](#) of this book where we have discussed the creation of Christ.

Nevertheless, the Church went so far in the matter of repentance that it was selling indulgence

certificates turning it into a merchandise; and the priests were [and are] pardoning sins of those who confessed before them. But as for the Qur'an, it has analysed man's condition seeing that he has been invited to Allah and provided with guidance; and looking at the perfection, honour and felicity he is entitled to in the hereafter near Allah; which is indispensable in his intended journey to his Lord – and that analysis has found the man utterly poor in his person, empty-handed in his entity. Allah says:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ أَنْتُمُ الْفُقَرَاءُ إِلَى اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ هُوَ الْغَنِيُّ الْحَمِيدُ

**“O men! you are the ones who stand in need of Allah, and Allah is He Who is the Self-sufficient, the Praised One” (35: 15).**

Also, He says:

وَلَا يَمْلِكُونَ لِنَفْسِهِمْ ضَرًّا وَلَا نَفْعًا وَلَا يَمْلِكُونَ مَوْتًا وَلَا حَيَاةً وَلَا نُشُورًا

**“... and they control not for themselves any harm or profit, and they control not death, nor life, nor raising (the dead) to life” (25:3).**

Therefore, man has fallen in the pit of unhappiness, away from divine proximity, isolated in his neediness, as the words of Allah point to it:

لَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ فِي أَحْسَنِ تَقْوِيمٍ

**“Certainly, We created man in the best make” (95:4).**

ثُمَّ رَدَدْنَاهُ أَسْفَلَ سَافِلِينَ

**“Then We rendered him the lowest of the low” (95:5).**

وَإِنْ مِنْكُمْ إِلَّا وَارِدُهَا ۖ كَانَ عَلَىٰ رَبِّكَ حَتْمًا مَقْضِيًّا

**“And there is not one of you but shall come down to it; this is a decided decree of your Lord” (19:71).**

ثُمَّ نُنَجِّي الَّذِينَ اتَّقَوْا وَنَذَرُ الظَّالِمِينَ فِيهَا جِثِيًّا

**“And We will deliver those who were pious, and We will leave the unjust therein on their knees”  
(19:72).**

فَلَا يُخْرِجَنَّكُمَا مِنَ الْجَنَّةِ فَتَشْقَىٰ

**“... therefore, let him not drive you both from the garden so that you should be put to toil”  
(20:117).**

Consequently, if he wants to achieve the position of honour and enjoy ever-lasting happiness, he must come out from that pit of unhappiness, return from the far away station, and transfer himself to the proximity of his Lord. It is what is called his returning to his Lord in the basic happiness, i.e., true faith, and in secondary happiness, i.e., all good deeds. This is what is called repentance and returning from root of happiness, i.e., polytheism, and branches of unhappiness, i.e., evil deeds other than polytheism. It is on repentance (i.e., returning to Allah and removing all the pollutions of infelicity and disobedience) that settlement in the abode of honour through true belief depends, as does enjoyment of various bounties of obedience and proximity.

In other words, man can reach nearer to Allah in the appointed abode of honour only if he repents from polytheism and all disobedience. Allah says:

وَتُوبُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا أَيُّهَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ

**“... and turn to Allah all of you, O believers! so that you may be successful” (24:31).**

Thus repentance, in the meaning of returning to Allah, covers both types of repentance; rather it covers these two and other kinds also, as we shall describe later, Allah willing.

Man is needy in himself and does not control for himself any good or happiness except by favour of his Lord. Consequently, for this return too, he needs a favour from his Lord and a divine help in his affairs. The servant's return to his Lord with feelings of servitude and dependence needs first a return of his Lord to him with help and support; and it is a return of Allah to the servant that proceeds repentance of the servant to his Lord, as Allah has said:

ثُمَّ تَابَ عَلَيْهِمْ لِيَتُوبُوا

**“... then He turned to them (mercifully) that they might turn (to Him) ...” (9:118).**

But repentance and return to Allah is of no use unless Allah accepts it by forgiving his sins and cleansing him of the pollution of separateness; and this is the second returning of Allah that follows the servant's

repentance, as Allah has said in the verse under discussion: so, these it is to whom Allah turns (mercifully) ...

On meditating deeply, it will be realized that this plurality of divine returning occurs only when one looks at it vis-a-vis servant's repentance. Otherwise, it is actually a single return; that is, Allah turns to His servant with mercy and compassion; and it takes place when a servant repents and returns to Allah – and that mercy covers the servant from before his repentance till after it.

Moreover, that merciful divine turning sometimes takes place even without the servant's repentance, as we have earlier inferred from the divine words: nor (for) those who die while they are unbelievers. It has also been explained that granting intercession for sinner servant on the Day of Resurrection is an example of turning mercifully to him. The following verse points to that connotation:

وَاللَّهُ يُرِيدُ أَنْ يَتُوبَ عَلَيْكُمْ وَيُرِيدُ الَّذِينَ يَتَّبِعُونَ الشَّهَوَاتِ أَنْ تَمِيلُوا مَيْلًا عَظِيمًا

***“And Allah desires that He should turn to you (mercifully), and those who follow (their) lusts desire that you should deviate (with) a great deviation” (4:27).***

Nearness and remoteness are relative terms. Therefore, it is quite possible that within circle of nearness some areas would be remoter than

the others. In this way, ‘repentance’ may be used for even those good servants who are nearer to Allah, when they rise to a station that is even higher and nearer than their previous place. This phenomenon is seen in the verses where Allah mentions ‘repentance’ of the prophets even though they are sinless as other verses clearly say. For example:

فَتَلَقَىٰ آدَمُ مِنْ رَبِّهِ كَلِمَاتٍ فَتَابَ عَلَيْهِ

***“Then Adam received (some) words from his Lord, so He turned to Him mercifully” (2:37).***

وَإِذْ يَرْفَعُ إِبْرَاهِيمُ الْقَوَاعِدَ مِنَ الْبَيْتِ وَإِسْمَاعِيلُ رَبَّنَا تَقَبَّلْ مِنَّا ۖ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ

***“And when Ibrahim and Ismail raised the foundations of the House: Our Lord! accept from us; surely Thou art the Hearing, the Knowing” (2: 127).***

رَبَّنَا وَاجْعَلْنَا مُسْلِمِينَ لَكَ وَمِنْ ذُرِّيَّتِنَا أُمَّةً مُسْلِمَةً لَكَ وَأَرِنَا مَنَاسِكَنَا وَتُبْ عَلَيْنَا ۖ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ التَّوَّابُ الرَّحِيمُ

***“Our Lord! and make us both submissive to Thee and (raise) from our offspring a nation***

**submitting to Thee, and show us our ways of devotion and turn to us (mercifully), surely Thou art the Oft-returning (to mercy), the Merciful” (2: 128).**

قَالَ سُبْحَانَكَ تُبْتُ إِلَيْكَ وَأَنَا أَوَّلُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ

**“He [Musa] said: “Glory be to Thee, I turn to Thee, and I am the first of the believers” (7: 143).**

فَاصْبِرْ إِنَّ وَعْدَ اللَّهِ حَقٌّ وَاسْتَغْفِرْ لِذَنْبِكَ وَسَبِّحْ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّكَ بِالْعَشِيِّ وَالْإِبْكَارِ

**“Therefore be patient [O Prophet!]; surely the promise of Allah is true; and seek pardon for your fault and sing the praise of your Lord in the evening and the morning” (40:55).**

لَقَدْ تَابَ اللَّهُ عَلَى النَّبِيِّ وَالْمُهَاجِرِينَ وَالْأَنْصَارِ الَّذِينَ اتَّبَعُوهُ فِي سَاعَةِ الْعُسْرَةِ

**“Certainly Allah has turned (mercifully) to the Prophet and those who fled (their homes) and the helpers who followed him in the hour of straitness...” (9: 117).**

This is the general ‘return’ of Allah which is referred to by many Qur’anic verses, as for example:

غَافِرِ الذَّنْبِ وَقَابِلِ التَّوْبِ

**“The Forgiver of the faults and the Acceptor of repentance...” (40:3).**

وَهُوَ الَّذِي يَقْبَلُ التَّوْبَةَ عَنْ عِبَادِهِ

**“And He it is Who accepts repentance from His servants...” (42:25).**

## Summary

The above discourse may be summarized as follows:

**First:** Bestowal of Allah’s mercy on a servant by forgiving his sins and removing the darkness of disobedience from his heart – whether polytheism or other evils – is Allah’s merciful returning to His servant; and return of a servant to His Lord seeking pardon of his sins and removal of his disobedience – whether polytheism or lesser evils – is the servant’s repentance, and his return to his Lord.

It shows that a true Divine Call should be as much concerned with the subject of sins as it should be with

polytheism and disbelief; it should invite men to a comprehensive repentance covering polytheism as well as other sins.

**Second:** Return of Allah to His servant both the first and the second one – is a grace of Allah like other bounties which He bestows on His creatures without any coercion or constraint from anyone else. When it is said that by reason it is obligatory for Allah to accept repentance, its

connotation is not different from what is mentioned in many Qur’anic verses. See, for instance, the following verses:

وَقَابِلِ التَّوْبِ

*“... and the Acceptor of repentance...” (40:3).*

وَتُوبُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا أَيُّهُ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ

*“... and turn to Allah all of you, O believers...” (24:31).*

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ التَّوَّابِينَ

*“... surely Allah loves those who turn much (to Him) ...” (2:222).*

فَأُولَٰئِكَ يَتُوبُ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ

*“... so these it is to whom Allah turns (mercifully)...” (4: 17).*

These and other such verses praise Allah for His acceptance of repentance, call people to repent, exhort them to seek forgiveness and turn to their Lord; as such they contain promise of acceptance of repentance, either explicitly or implicitly; and Allah does not break His promise.

Obviously, Allah is not under any compulsion to accept repentance; His is the Kingdom and authority without any exception; He does what He pleases to do and decides what He wishes. It is for Him to accept a repentance according to His promise; or to reject that which He rejects, as is clear from the divine words:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بَعْدَ إِيمَانِهِمْ ثُمَّ أَزْدَادُوا كُفْرًا لَنْ نَقْبَلَ تَوْبَهُمْ

***“Surely, those who disbelieve after their believing, then increase in unbelief, their repentance shall never be accepted ...” (3:90).***

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا ثُمَّ كَفَرُوا ثُمَّ آمَنُوا ثُمَّ كَفَرُوا ثُمَّ أَزْدَادُوا كُفْرًا لَمْ يَكُنِ اللَّهُ لِيُغْفِرَ لَهُمْ وَلَا لِيَهْدِيَهُمْ سَبِيلًا

***“Possibly the same is the connotation of the following verse: Surely (as for) those who believe then disbelieve, again believe and again disbelieve, then increase in disbelief, Allah will not forgive them nor guide them in the (right) path” (4: 137).***

A very strange interpretation has been advanced by a writer concerning the Qur’anic verses narrating the story of Pharaoh’s drowning and repentance:

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا أَدْرَكَهُ الْغَرَقُ قَالَ آمَنْتُ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا الَّذِي آمَنْتُ بِهِ بَنُو إِسْرَائِيلَ وَأَنَا مِنَ الْمُسْلِمِينَ

***“... until when drowning overtook him, he said: “I believe that there is no god but He in Whom the children of Israel believe and I am of those who submit.” (10:90).***

الآنَ وَقَدْ عَصَيْتَ قَبْلُ وَكُنْتَ مِنَ الْمُفْسِدِينَ

***“What! now! and indeed you disobeyed before and you were of the mischief-makers” (10:91).***

His interpretation, in short, is as follows: The verse does not indicate that Pharaoh’s repentance was rejected, nor is there anything in the Qur’an to show his ever-lasting perdition. It is difficult, for someone who ponders on the spaciousness of God’s mercy and its precedence over His wrath, to believe that Allah would drive away who was seeking shelter at the door of His mercy and grace, abasing and humiliating himself with abject desperation.

Even a human being, after acquiring natural good characteristics of generosity and benevolence, does show mercy to such persons when they are really sorry for the evil deeds they had done before. Then how much mercy will be shown by Him Who is the Most Merciful of all, the Most Generous of all and Who is the Refuge of the refuge-seekers?

Reply: This hypothesis is rebutted by the divine words:

وَلَيْسَتِ التَّوْبَةُ لِلَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ السَّيِّئَاتِ حَتَّىٰ إِذَا حَضَرَ أَحَدَهُمُ الْمَوْتُ قَالَ إِنِّي تُبْتُ الْآنَ وَلَا الَّذِينَ يَمُوتُونَ وَهُمْ كُفَرًا

***“And repentance is not for those who go on doing evil deeds, until when death comes to one of them, he says: “Surely, now I repent,” nor (for) those who die while they are unbelievers” (4: 18).***

We have already explained that repentance and regret at that late hour is a falsity; man shows that remorse only because he now clearly sees the consequences of his sins, and looks at the misfortunes of the next life rushing towards him.

Not every remorse is repentance, nor every repentance acceptable. See how Allah describes the condition of the guilty on the Day of Resurrection:

وَأَسْرُوا النَّدَامَةَ لَمَّا رَأَوْا الْعَذَابَ

***“And they shall conceal regret when they shall see the punishment” (34:33).***

There are many other verses describing their regret for what they had done and their plea to be sent back to this world in order that they could do good deeds, and its rebuttal that even if they were returned, they would do what they were forbidden to and that they were liars.

You should not imagine even for a moment that the earlier explained Qur’anic analysis of repentance is merely a mental exercise having no relation with realities. If you contemplate on human felicity and infelicity, goodness and wickedness, you will not get any result other than repentance. Look at a normal man in society, keeping in view the effect of education and bringing up on him. You will find that he by himself is devoid of sociological good and evil; his psyche is capable of accepting both imprints – without any preference to either.

Now, let us suppose that he wants to adorn himself with merit and virtue, to acquire piety and righteousness. It will not be possible unless all necessary factors join together to rescue him from the evil conditions he is surrounded with. In spiritual context, it is like the first returning of Allah to His servant. Then comes the stage of taking himself out of, and away from, the shabby condition and the fetters of tardiness. It is a repentance like that of the servant returning to his Lord.

Thereafter comes the final step of removing the rust of mischief and depravity from his heart, so that virtuous characteristics and light of goodness may take its place; because the heart cannot accommodate goodness and vileness together. This is equivalent to the acceptance of repentance and forgiveness – in the context of the subject under discussion.

The same process takes place in the matters of collective good of society in which man lives according to natural dictate. All the rules and effects which the religion considers important in matters of repentance are applied in individual and social context too, according to the natural trait which Allah has created in man.

**Third:** As may be inferred from all the verses of repentance, including the ones quoted in this discussion, repentance is a reality having real effect on human psyche. It reforms and prepares it for human good which contains felicity of this world and the next. In other words, repentance proves

effective – when it does – in removing spiritual evils which pull man to all kinds of infelicity in this life and the hereafter and prevent him from settling on the throne of felicity. But so far as the rules of Shari‘ah and laws of religion are concerned they stay in their place. No repentance can waive them as no disobedience can remove them.

Nevertheless, there are some rules which have some links with repentance, and are waived if one repents. This is ordained, keeping in view the interest of the creation; but in no way it means that repentance, per se, waives any of the divine laws. Allah says:

وَالَّذَانِ يَأْتِيَانِيَا مِنْكُمْ فَأَذُوهُمَا فَإِنْ تَابَا وَأَصْلَحَا فَأَعْرِضُوا عَنْهُمَا إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ تَوَّابًا رَحِيمًا

***“And as for the two who are guilty of it [i.e., indecency] from among you, afflict them both; then if they repent and amend, turn aside from them; surely Allah is Oft- returning [to mercy], the Merciful” (4: 16).***

إِنَّمَا جَزَاءُ الَّذِينَ يُحَارِبُونَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ وَيَسْعَوْنَ فِي الْأَرْضِ فَسَادًا أَنْ يُقَتَّلُوا أَوْ يُصَلَّبُوا أَوْ تُقَطَّعَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَأَرْجُلُهُمْ مِنْ خِلَافٍ أَوْ يُنْفَوْا مِنَ الْأَرْضِ ذَلِكَ لَهُمْ خِزْيٌ فِي الدُّنْيَا وَلَهُمْ فِي الْآخِرَةِ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ

***“The punishment of those who wage war against Allah and His Messenger and strive to make mischief in the land is only this, that they should be killed or crucified or their hands and their feet should be cut off on opposite sides or they should be imprisoned; this shall be as a disgrace for them in this world, and in the hereafter, they shall have a grievous chastisement” (5:33).***

إِلَّا الَّذِينَ تَابُوا مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ تَقْدِرُوا عَلَيْهِمْ فَاعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ

***“Except those who repent before you have them in your power so know that Allah is Forgiving, Merciful” (5:34).***

There are a few other verses of this import.

**Fourth:** The basic purpose for which the institution of repentance has been established, (as is clear from the above discourse) is to get deliverance from perdition of sin and disaster of disobedience, because repentance is a means of success and is instrumental in achieving felicity, as is implied in the verse:

وَتُوبُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا أَيُّهَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ

***“... and turn to Allah all of you, O believers! so that you may be successful” (24:31).***

One of its benefits, apart from the above, is this: It preserves the spirit of hope, lest it be overwhelmed by desperation. Man cannot proceed straight on the path of life unless there is a perfect balance between hope and fear. It is this equilibrium that attracts him to what is beneficial to him and repulses him from what is harmful; otherwise, he would have perished. Allah says:

قُلْ يَا عِبَادِيَ الَّذِينَ أَسْرَفُوا عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِهِمْ لَا تَقْنَطُوا مِن رَّحْمَةِ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَغْفِرُ الذُّنُوبَ جَمِيعًا ﴿٤٠﴾ إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْغَفُورُ الرَّحِيمُ

**“Say: ‘O my servants who have acted extravagantly against their own souls, do not despair of the mercy of Allah; surely, He is the Forgiving, the Merciful’” (39:53).**

وَأَنِيبُوا إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُمْ وَأَسْلُمُوا لَهُ مِن قَبْلِ أَن يَأْتِيَكُمُ الْعَذَابُ ثُمَّ لَا تُنصَرُونَ

**“And return to your Lord time after time and submit to Him before there comes to you the punishment, then you shall not be helped” (39:54).**

Any scholar of human psychology will tell you that man perseveres in his efforts with zeal and ardour as long as his labour seems to bear fruits. But if he finds his efforts going to waste, he feels dejected and depressed, hope gives way to despair and his actions lose vigour and vitality. Often, he stops whatever he was doing, as he feels that he can in no way achieve success; he loses heart and is overwhelmed by pessimism.

Repentance is the only cure for this disease; it revives his heart even when he has reached the brink of disaster and perdition.

Some people have misunderstood repentance and said that establishment of the institution of repentance and calling people to avail themselves of its benefits was tantamount to inciting them to commit sins and encouraging them to disobey Allah. When man is sure that if he committed a sin Allah would accept his repentance, it will surely embolden him to violate the sanctity of divine law, to dive headlong in the abyss of sins and crimes. He will go on committing sin after sin intending to repent after each transgression.

But, in view of what we have explained above, there is no room for this misunderstanding. Apart from the fact that acquirement of virtues depends on remission of sins, repentance is meant to keep the hope alive; and this revival of optimism has its own good effects. There is no question here of a man committing a sin thinking that he would repent afterwards. This objection has missed the point altogether; because such a repentance is totally devoid of the reality of repentance. Repentance is renouncement of sins, and there is no renouncement in the situation mentioned by the objector.

Why? Because he had planned to repent before the sin, and with the sin, and after the sin; and how can one feel remorse (i.e., repentance) before the action? The fact is that, in such cases, the whole activity –

the sin and the so-called repentance – taken together is one action with one intention; and that is trickery and deception, with which he tries to deceive the Lord of the worlds. But evil plan does not beset any except its authors.

**Fifth:** Sin is an evil stand of man and has bad effect on his life. Consequently, he cannot repent, cannot turn away from it, unless first he realizes, and is sure of, its evil. This knowledge and certainty cannot fail to produce regret and remorse for it. Remorse is a particular psychological response to committing an evil deed. When that remorse takes hold, then man may change his direction to do some good deeds, opposite to that evil one. This second step will be a proof that he has really repented and returned to his Lord.

This forms the basis of all the formalities and manners of repentance laid down by the Shari‘ah, e.g., expressing regret, asking for forgiveness, acquiring habit of doing good deeds, discarding evil deeds, and other related things described in the traditions and the books of ethics.

**Sixth:** Repentance means returning, by one’s free will and choice, from evil and sin to obedience and servitude. As such, it can take place only where man has free choice, i.e., in the life of this world. But where there is no freedom to choose between good and bad, between felicity and infelicity, there is no room for repentance. The preceding discourse throws light on this aspect.

A field where repentance is ineffective and inadmissible, is violation of other people’s rights; because repentance is beneficial concerning Allah’s rights only. If a sin has violated other people’s rights, more repentance will do no good at all; the victims’ pleasure must be obtained if the sinner wants to erase that sin. Allah has given some rights to people in their properties, honour and lives. According to the divine law, it is an injustice and transgression to violate these rights. He cannot grant remission if someone transgresses any of these rights. Otherwise, it would be tantamount to depriving the victims of their due rights without any mistake on their part. Far be it from Him to do injustice when He has forbidden us to do it; He has said:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَظْلِمُ النَّاسَ شَيْئًا

**“Surely Allah does not do any injustice to people” (10:44).**

Nevertheless, Islam – being repentance from polytheism – erases every preceding evil, every past sin, which concerns the branches of religion. The Prophet (S) has said: “The Islam cuts away all (that had happened) before it”. This is the connotation of those verses which declare that all sins will be forgiven. For example, Allah says:

قُلْ يَا عِبَادِيَ الَّذِينَ أَسْرَفُوا عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِهِمْ لَا تَقْنَطُوا مِن رَّحْمَةِ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَغْفِرُ الذُّنُوبَ جَمِيعًا ﴿٤٠﴾ إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْغَفُورُ الرَّحِيمُ

**“Say: ‘O my servants who have acted extravagantly against their own souls, do not despair of the mercy of Allah; surely, He is the Forgiving, the Merciful’” (39:53).**

وَأَنِيبُوا إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُمْ وَأَسْلُمُوا لَهُ

**“And return to your Lord time after time and submit to Him...” (39:54).**

Another example is the repentance of a person who originates an evil custom or leads people astray. According to numerous traditions, his chastisement will be equal to that of all those who followed him in that evil custom or went astray. Obviously, reality of ‘return’ cannot take place in such cases, because he had established something whose effect would persist as long as that thing continues. Unlike those sins which are confined between the servant and his Lord, it is almost impossible for an originator of an evil custom to undo what he has done.

**Seventh:** No doubt, repentance. erases the sins where it is effective and admissible, as Allah says:

فَمَنْ جَاءَهُ مَوْعِظَةٌ مِنْ رَبِّهِ فَانْتَهَىٰ فَلَهُ مَا سَلَفَ وَأَمْرُهُ إِلَىٰ اللَّهِ

**“To whomsoever then the admonition has come from his Lord, then he desists, for him shall be what has already passed, and his affair rests with Allah” (2:275).**

As has already been explained in the second volume<sup>2</sup>. Also look at the following verse:

إِلَّا مَنْ تَابَ وَآمَنَ وَعَمِلَ عَمَلًا صَالِحًا فَأُولَٰئِكَ يُبَدِّلُ اللَّهُ سَيِّئَاتِهِمْ حَسَنَاتٍ ۗ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا

**“Except him who repents and believes and does a good deed; so these are they of whom Allah changes the evil deeds to good ones; and Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.” (25:70).**

وَمَنْ تَابَ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَإِنَّهُ يَتُوبُ إِلَىٰ اللَّهِ مَتَابًا

**“And whoever repents and does good, he surely turns to Allah a (goodly) turning” (25:71).**

Its apparent meaning, especially in view of the second verse, shows that repentance, by itself or in conjunction with belief and good deeds, causes evil deeds to change to good ones.

All this is true. But the fact remains that keeping away from evil deeds is far better than committing a sin and then erasing it through repentance. Allah has made it clear in His book that sins, of whatever type they may be, ultimately have some links with Satanic insinuation and temptation. On the other hand, He

has portrayed His pure-hearted servants, those who are free from sins and evils, in a way that cannot be equalled by all praises revealed for the others:

قَالَ رَبِّ بِمَا أَغْوَيْتَنِي لَأُزِينََنَّ لَهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَاغْوِيَنَّهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ

**“He said: My Lord! because Thou hast made life evil to me, I will certainly make (evil) fair-seeming to them on earth, and I will certainly cause them all to deviate” (15:39).**

إِلَّا عِبَادَكَ مِنْهُمُ الْمُخْلِصِينَ

**“Except Thy servants from among them, the devoted ones” (15:40).**

قَالَ هَذَا صِرَاطٌ عَلَيَّ مُسْتَقِيمٌ

**“He said: This is a right way with Me” (15:41).**

إِنَّ عِبَادِي لَيْسَ لَكَ عَلَيْهِمْ سُلْطَانٌ إِلَّا مَنْ اتَّبَعَكَ مِنَ الْغَاوِينَ

**“Surely. as regards My servants, you have no authority over them except those who follow you of the deviators” (15:42).**

Also, Allah says quoting Iblis in the same story:

وَلَا تَجِدُ أَكْثَرَهُمْ شَاكِرِينَ

**“... and Thou shalt not find most of them thankful” (7:17).**

So, these sinless people have a especial prestigious position in the circle of servitude that is not shared by other good repenting servants.

## Traditions

The Messenger of Allah (S) said, inter alia, in his last sermon: “Whoever repents one year before his death, Allah will turn (mercifully) to him.” Then he said: “Surely, a year is too long; whoever repents one month before his death, Allah will turn (mercifully) to him.” Then he said: “Surely a month is too long; whoever repents one day before his death, Allah will turn (mercifully) to him.” Then he said: “Surely a day is too long; whoever repents one hour before his death, Allah will turn (mercifully) to him.” Then he

said: “Surely an hour is too long; whoever repents while his soul has reached here” – and he pointed with his hand to his throat – “Allah will turn (mercifully) to him.”<sup>3</sup>

Imam As-Sadiq (‘a) said when he was asked about the word of Allah, And repentance is not for those who go on doing evil deeds, until when death comes to one of them, he says: “Surely now I repent”: “That is, when he looks at the affairs of the next world.”

**The author says:** al-Kulayni has narrated the first tradition in al-Kafi through his chain from as-Sadiq (‘a); it is also narrated through the Sunni chains, and there are other traditions too of the same import.

The second tradition gives the explanation of the verse; also, it explains those traditions which say that repentance in presence of death is not accepted. Accordingly, “in presence of death” means ‘when man knows that the process of death has begun, and sees the signs of the hereafter’; it is at that point that the door of repentance is closed against him. But if a man is unaware of his impending death, then there is no snag in acceptance of his repentance. Some of the following traditions have similar meaning.

Zurarah has narrated from Abu Ja‘far (‘a) that he said: “When the soul reaches here”, pointing to his larynx, “then there is no repentance for the knower; but there is repentance for the ignorant.”<sup>4</sup>

It is reported in Ad-Durr Al-Manthur that Ahmad, al-Bukhari (in his at-Tafsir), al-Hakim and Ibn Marduwayh have narrated from Abu Dharr, that he said: “Surely the Messenger of Allah (S) said: ‘Surely Allah accepts repentance of His servant, or forgives His servant, until the curtain comes down.’ It was asked: ‘And what is the coming down of curtain?’ He said: ‘The soul goes out while a polytheist.’

Ibn Jarir has narrated from al-Hasan that he said: “[A report] has come to me that the Messenger of Allah (S) said: ‘Verily Iblis said when he found that Adam had cavity [in his body]: “By Thy honour! I will not leave his cavity as long as there was soul inside him.” Then Allah, the Blessed, the High, said: “By My honour! I will not come between him and repentance as long as there was soul inside him.”’<sup>5</sup>

‘Ali al-Ahmasi has narrated from Abu Ja‘far (‘a) that he said: “By Allah! None gets deliverance from sins except he who confesses them.” Also he has narrated from the same Imam (‘a): “Enough is remorse for repentance.”<sup>6</sup>

It is narrated in al-Kafi through two chains from Ibn Wahb that he said: “I heard Abu ‘Abdillah (‘a) saying: ‘When the servant repents, a sincere repenting, Allah loves him and covers him.’ I said: ‘And how does He cover him?’ He said: ‘He makes his two angels forget what they had written against him; then He inspires his limbs and the areas of the earth to conceal his sins. Thus, he meets Allah – when he meets Him – and there is nothing to give evidence against him concerning his sins.’ “

Muhammad ibn Muslim has narrated from Abu Ja‘far (‘a) that he said: “O Muhammad ibn Muslim! sins of the believer are forgiven to him when he repents from them. Therefore, the believer should perform his deeds afresh after repentance and forgiveness. But, by Allah! it is not but for the people of faith.” “I

said: ‘But what if he relapses into sins after repentance and forgiveness, and then repents again?’ He said: ‘O Muhammad ibn Muslim! do you think that a believer servant feels remorse for his sin and asks forgiveness from Allah for it and repents and then Allah will not accept his repentance?’ I said: ‘Then if he does so repeatedly; commits sin and repents and asks forgiveness?’

Then he said: ‘Whenever the believer returns asking for forgiveness and repenting, Allah the High, returns to him with forgiveness; and surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful; He accepts repentance and pardons the evils. Therefore, be careful, lest you make the believers lose hope of Allah’s mercy.’”<sup>7</sup>

Abu ‘Amr az-Zubayri narrates from Abu ‘Abdillah (‘a) about the words of Allah:

وَإِنِّي لَغَفَّارٌ لِّمَن تَابَ وَآمَنَ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا ثُمَّ اهْتَدَىٰ

**“And most surely I am most forgiving to him who repents and believes and does good, then continues to follow the right direction” (20:82).**

That he (‘a) said: “This verse has an explanation, which explanation is proved [by the fact] that Allah does not accept any deed from any servant except from him who meets Him with fulfilment of that explanation, and with that condition which Allah has imposed on the believers.”

And he said: “Repentance with Allah is only for those who do evil in ignorance; Allah means that every sin which the servant does – although he may be aware of it – he is ignorant when he thinks in his heart to disobey his Lord; and Allah has spoken about it quoting the talk of Yusuf to his brothers:

أَفَلَا يَرَوْنَ أَنَّهُمْ إِذْ يُرْجَعُ إِلَيْهِمْ قَوْلًا وَلَا يَمْلِكُ لَهُمْ ضَرًّا وَلَا نَفْعًا

**“Do you know how you treated Yusuf and his brother when you were ignorant?” (12:89).**

So, he charged them with ignorance because they planned in their hearts to commit sin against Allah.”<sup>8</sup>

**The author says:** The text of the narration is not free from confusion and disarray. Apparently, the earlier portion is meant to show that good deed is accepted when the servant fulfils its condition and does not destroy it. After all, repentance is acceptable only when it restrains and prevents the repenter from sin – even for a limited time.

And probably the text:

إِنَّمَا التَّوْبَةُ عَلَى اللَّهِ لِلَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ السُّوءَ بِجَهَالَةٍ ثُمَّ يَتُوبُونَ مِنْ قَرِيبٍ فَأُولَٰئِكَ يَتُوبُ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ ۗ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمًا

***“Repentance with Allah is only for those who do evil in ignorance, then turn (to Allah) soon, so these it is to whom Allah turns (mercifully), and Allah is ever Knowing, Wise” (4: 17).***

Is a new topic, to show that the phrase ***“in ignorance”*** in this verse is an explanatory clause, and that sin in general is ignorance – it has already been given as an alternative explanation in the commentary. This latter part is narrated also in Majma‘ ul-Bayan from the same Imam (‘a).

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[1.](#) See the Eng. transl. vol.6, pp.145–217 (ed.)

[2.](#) See the Eng. transl. vol.4, pp.279 – 82 (tr.)

[3.](#) Man la Yahduruh Al-Faqih.

[4.](#) At-Tafsir al- ‘Ayyashi.

[5.](#) Ad-Durr Al-Manthur.

[6.](#) Al-Kafi.

[7.](#) Al-Kafi.

[8.](#) At-Tafsir, al-‘Ayyashi.

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