

# Repentance: Divine or Human



Lionel D C Hartley

Philadelphia Publications

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# Repentance: Divine or Human

## Part 1: Divine Repentance

### a) The dilemma

Does God repent? The very first reference to repentance is found in Genesis 6:6-8 “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. 8) But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.”

Now you may think that this conflicts with verses such as Exodus 32:14 “God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent.”

To both understand and resolve this conflict we need to look at the original languages used to describe repentance.

Like many words in the Bible, the English word “repent” is used in the translation of more than one original word,

particularly as applied in the King James Version of the Bible.

In the Old Testament the two Hebrew verbs most commonly translated “repent” may be transliterated as ‘*shuv*’ and ‘*nacham*’.



## **b) Attitude (Sadness)**

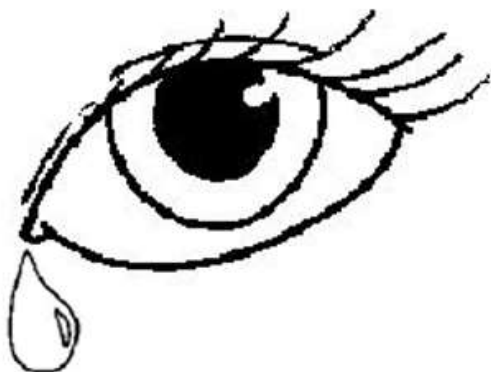
“Repentance is an attitude rather than a single act.”

—Richard Owen Roberts (1931- )

*‘Nacham’* literally means to sigh or breathe strongly, and by implication to be sorry, to pity, or to express profound regret or grief. This is the word used when God is described as exhibiting an attitude of repentance.

“God’s repentance is an Old Testament description of God’s reaction to human situations. The Bible uses the phrase in the sense of God’s being moved with great concern, His being grieved because of people’s sin.”

—D Briscoe et. al., *Adult Life and Work Lesson Annual*.  
Nashville, TN 1996



The word appears 110 times in the Old Testament and is used to refer to an attitude or an emotion expressed by

both God and man.

In Genesis 6:6, the same Hebrew word is translated “grieved,” expressing God’s response to the abundant sin of man. In Genesis 24:67 and Genesis 27:42 the word is used to refer to Isaac’s feeling of consolation. One primary characteristic of this word is clear: nacham is an attitude.

### **c) Action (Turning Around)**

The use of the word ‘*nacham*’ that is often translated “repent” contrasts sharply with another similarly applied Hebrew word, ‘*shuv*’. The word ‘*shuv*’ appears 1,339 times in the Old Testament. We find the word first used in Genesis 3:19 when it refers to Adam returning to the dust upon his death. In Genesis 8:3 it refers to the water receding from the earth following the flood. ‘*Shuv*’ literally means to return to the starting point. It consistently implies the act of turning around. One primary characteristic of this word is clear: ‘*shuv*’ is an action, and that action is to turn around.

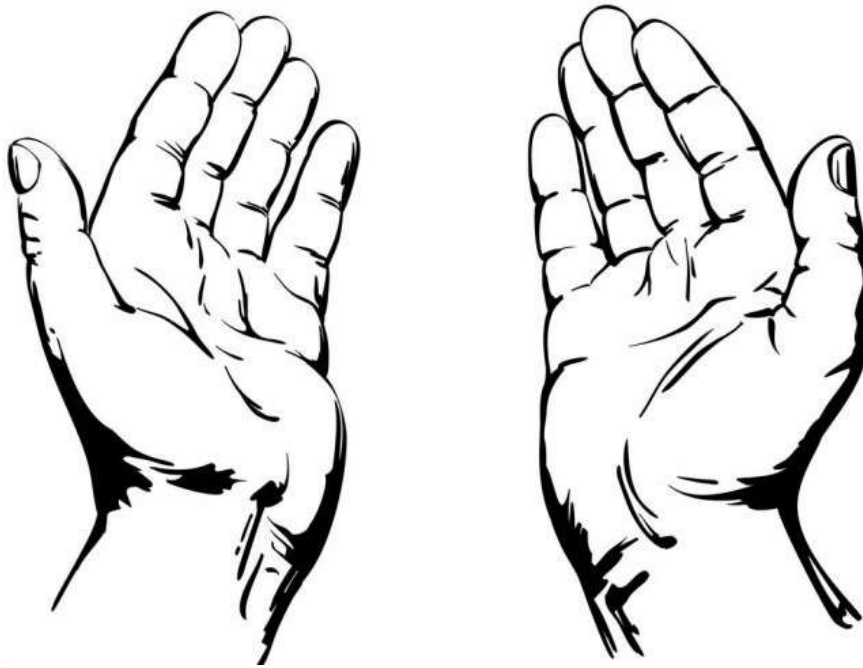
Comparing the use of the words in reference to God, we see that God expresses feelings of grief and consolation (*nacham*), but does not turn around or reverse Himself



(*shuv*). This is consistent with Malachi 3:6 which says, “For I am the LORD, I change not...”

God will take nine steps toward us, but he will not take the tenth. He will incline us to repent, but he cannot do our repenting for us.

—AW Tozer (1897-1963)



## Part 2: Human Repentance

A visitor to a sculptor's studio commented, "I saw some blocks of marble lying off in a corner. Out of one a hand emerged, out of another was a head, with face unfinished. Others had unfinished work. Why the abandoned pieces?"

The artist answered: "All those pieces showed great promise on the outside, on the surface. But as I chiseled deeper, flaws and defects in the marble that were not visible on the surface showed up. They had to be abandoned."

The difference between marble defects and human defects is that the marble cannot repent and be cleansed, but the human can. The defective heart becomes the perfect heart at the touch of the Master.

### a) What is Repentance

God says that it is necessary for people to turn from their wicked ways. A feeling of grief or sadness (*nachem*) is not enough. We must also turn (*shuv*) to Him, abandoning and forsaking the sin that caused the grief.

"Repentance is another way of saying that the bad past is to be considered as the starting point for better things."

—Dorothy . Sayers (1893-1957)

“Repentance is not a fatal day when tears are shed, but a natal day when, as a result of tears, a new life begins.”

—Ilion T Jones

When we find the word ‘repent’ in the New Testament we come up against the same scenario as two separate Greek verbs are used throughout the New Testament to describe the act of repentance. These are transcribed as ‘*metanoeo*’ and ‘*metamellomai*’. Like their Old Testament Hebrew counterparts, these two words also refer to an attitude and an action.

“[*Metamellomai* refers to] “an emotional attitude towards sin. The sinner has a different attitude, a different feeling towards sin,”

—Page H Kelley (*The Repentance of God*. Biblical Illustrator. 9 1982 (1). p 12.

The word is used six times in five verses of the New Testament (Matthew 21:29, 21:32, 27:3; 2 Corinthians 7:8; Hebrews 7:1), and though it is often translated as the English word repent, it always is always used to describe the changing of the mind toward an issue, or a form of remorse. It is never used in the context of a step towards salvation.

On the other hand, *metanoeo* refers to a “reverse or change of mind or heart in regard to sin. The sinner resolves to forsake his sin and return to God. (For example Acts 3:19, 20:21; 2 Corinthians 7:9-10) There are no less than 34 examples in the New Testament that illustrate this. Later we will look at some Old Testament examples.

### **b) Is Repentance a Gift?**

During the weeks before Pentecost, the disciples earnestly sought God in prayer. Acts 1:14 says that they were in “one accord in prayer and supplication.” This experience of “one accord” reveals a strong unity and harmony among Christ’s followers that would not have been possible without repentance and confession. Prayer and confession prepared them for what was going to come.

In Acts 5:30–32 Peter makes two critical points.

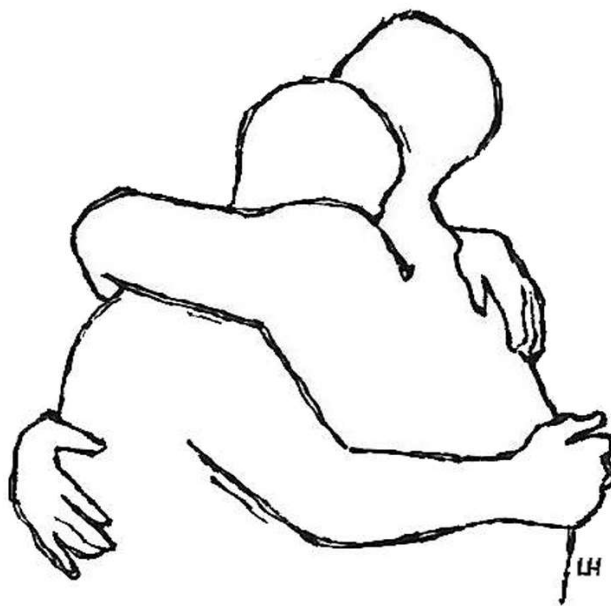
First, repentance is a gift. As we open our hearts to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, Jesus gives us the gift of repentance.

Second, the disciples themselves were witnesses in their own lives of the reality of repentance. They not only preached repentance, they experienced it.

“As the disciples waited for the fulfilment of the promise,

they humbled their hearts in true repentance and confessed their unbelief. As they called to remembrance the words that Christ had spoken to them before His death they understood more fully their meaning. . . . As they meditated upon His pure, holy life they felt that no toil would be too hard, no sacrifice too great, if only they could bear witness in their lives to the loveliness of Christ's character.”—Ellen G White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 36.

It is “the goodness of God” that leads us to repentance; it is the convicting power of the Holy Spirit that brings us to the realization of our need for a sin-pardoning Saviour. Repentance is a God-initiated sorrow for sin. It also includes a decision to forsake whatever specific sins the Holy Spirit brings to mind (Ezekiel 14:6, Zechariah 1:4).



### **c) True Vs False Repentance**

The difference between true and false repentance lies in this: the man who truly repents cries out against his heart; but the other, as Eve, against the serpent, or something else.

—John Bunyan (1628-1688)

There are some very specific examples in the Bible of people who sought repentance but were not forgiven by God. They wept. They were sorrowful. They confessed their sin but were not forgiven. For example: Pharaoh, Balaam, Esau, and Judas in Exodus 12:29–32, Numbers 22:32–35, Hebrews 12:17, and Matthew 27:4.

True repentance is always characterized by at least three things:

First, a sorrow that our sin has broken God's heart. We are hurt because we hurt the One who loves us so much.

Second, there is an honest confession of the specific sin that we have committed. True repentance is not laced with excuses for our behaviour. It does not place blame on someone else. It takes responsibility for our actions.

Third, true repentance always includes the decision to turn away from our sin. There can be no genuine repentance unless there is a corresponding reformation in the life.

False repentance, on the other hand, is self-centred. It is concerned with the consequences of our sin. It is an emotional state of sorrow because our sins often bring negative consequences. It makes excuses and lays the blame on someone else. It is unconcerned about the changing of behaviour unless the change will personally bring its own rewards.

True repentance is to be sorry enough to quit.

True repentance is always accompanied by confession of specific sins. The Holy Spirit does not give us vague feelings of guilt. He convicts us of our definite shortcomings.

“True confession is always of a specific character, and acknowledges particular sins. They may be of such a nature as to be brought before God only; they may be wrongs that should be confessed to individuals who have suffered injury through them; or they may be of a public character, and should then be as publicly confessed. But all confession should be definite and to the point, acknowledging the very

sins of which you are guilty.”

—Ellen G White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 38.

The purpose of the convicting power of the Holy Spirit is to reveal our need of the saving grace of Christ.

Repentance does not make God love us more; rather, it enables us to appreciate His love more. Confession does not earn God’s forgiveness; it instead enables us to receive His forgiveness. God does not love us more when we repent or love us less when we fail to. His love for us is constant. The only variable is our response to the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Later we will look at some of the benefits of repentance.

True repentance contains four elements:

**Cognitive** (understanding some things about God and sin),

**Emotional** (despise sin),

**Volitional** (determination to forsake sins), and

**Actional** (demonstrated by a changed life).

Arthur Pink in his book, ‘Repentance’ lists these elements: (1) the occasion of repentance is sin; (2) changed mind; (3) sorrow for sin; and (4) the fruit of a determination to change.



There are many references in the Psalms to true repentance and forgiveness.

For example: Psalms 51:10, 17) “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.” ... “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.”

Psalms 130:3-4 “If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? 4) But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.”

#### **d) Why Do I Need to Repent?**

“Confession will not be acceptable to God without sincere repentance and reformation. There must be decided changes in the life; everything offensive to God must be put away. This will be the result of genuine sorrow for sin. The work that we have to do on our part is plainly set before us: ‘Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before Mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.’ Isaiah 1:16, 17. ‘If the wicked restore the pledge, give again that he had robbed, walk in the statutes of life, without committing iniquity; he shall surely live, he shall not die.’ Ezekiel 33:15.”

—Ellen G White, Steps to Christ, p. 39.

No matter how good we are, every person who has ever walked the Earth (excepting Jesus) has sinned (Romans 3:23; Psalm 53:3; I John 1:8; James 4:17).

Sin separates us from God, and the result of sin is death (Isaiah 59:2; Romans 6:23).

Because of Jesus' death on the cross, we now have the opportunity to repent and receive redemption from our sins through the blood of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:7; I Peter 2:24).

Where there is sin there must also be death for the wages of sin is death, but through repentance, the blood of Jesus is applied to our lives, thus allowing His death to serve as the payment for our sin (Isaiah 44:22; I John 1:7-10).

### **e) What Does It Mean to Repent?**

To repent means to have godly sorrow for the sins and transgressions we have committed against God. This leads us to ask God for forgiveness (Psalm 38:18; I John 1:9; 2 Corinthians 7:9-10).

Repentance, however, does not end with sorrow and a request for forgiveness. To truly repent, we must earnestly attempt to turn away from our sins and turn ourselves and

our affection toward God (Ezekiel 18:21; 18:30-2; 2 Chronicles 7:14; Acts 26:20; 3:19).

Even after we repent, sometimes we will still make mistakes. God is always faithful to forgive us if we come to Him and repent. Through His grace we are taught to turn from our sinful ways (Matthew 18:21-22; Psalm 51:9-12; Titus 2:11-12).

### **f) Is Repentance Necessary for Salvation?**

“It is not repentance that saves me; repentance is the sign that I realize what God has done in Christ Jesus. The danger is to put the emphasis on the effect instead of on the cause. Is it my obedience that puts me right with God? Never! I am put right with God because prior to all else, Christ died. When I turn to God and by belief accept what God reveals, instantly the stupendous atonement of Jesus Christ rushes me into a right relationship with God. By the miracle of God’s grace I stand justified, not because of anything I have done, but because of what Jesus has done. The salvation of God does not stand on human logic; it stands on the sacrificial death of Jesus. Sinful men and women can be changed into new creatures by the marvellous work of God in Christ Jesus, which is prior to all experience.”

—Oswald Chambers quoted in *So Great Salvation*, Charles Ryrie, Victor Books, 1989, p. 91ff.

The Bible clearly states that to be saved we must first repent of our sins (Luke 13:3; 24:47; Acts 17:30; 3:19; 2:38).

Throughout Scripture God's people have been called to repentance.

**Old Testament:** Ezekiel 18:30-32; Psalm 51:9-2;  
2 Chronicles 7:14.

**New Testament:** Preached by John the Baptist (Matthew 3:2); preached by Jesus (Matthew 4:17); Jesus instructed the disciples to preach it after He left (Luke 24:47); preached by Peter (Acts 2:38); preached by Paul (Acts 26:20); And preached again by Jesus to five of the seven churches (Revelation 2:5, 15, 22, 3:3, 19).

**No matter what you have done,  
it is not too late to repent (2 Peter 3:9)**

While repentance by itself is not salvation, it is a necessary and vital first step that “leads us to salvation” (2 Corinthians 7:10).

Evangelist O. A. Newlin said, “Reformation is no more the whole of Christianity than cultivation constitutes the whole of successful farming. A farmer may plough and harrow his ground every day of the summer, and not permit a single weed to grow; that would be a high state of cultivation; but if he plants no seed in this field, he will gather no crop in the autumn. Simply ridding your life of the weeds of undesirable habits without planting the seeds of Christianity in your heart-garden is as great a folly as for a farmer to cultivate his ground all summer and sow no seed. Repentance pulls up the weeds now growing and plants the seeds of righteousness.”

“The man who attempts to improve by reforming is white washing his life, while the one who repents washes white his life, and there is a vast difference between the two processes. Morality can never save anybody. Painting the pump does not kill the typhoid germs and purify the water in the well. You may have literary circles and culture clubs, Carnegie libraries and schools of art, but this city will never be won to Christ until there is brought about an old time revival of genuine repentance.”

### **g) What about John’s Gospel?**

Some have argued that because John does not use the words repent in any of its various forms, then repentance is neither important nor necessary.

However, if a concept is not present or the absence of a word means automatically that that the author purposefully left it out and therefore it is no longer relevant, consider these notable omissions:

- 1) The concept of Jesus as Saviour is absent from Matthew, Mark, Romans, Colossians, Hebrews, and Revelation and yet none of us could legitimately deny Jesus as our Saviour.
- 2) The concept of grace is absent from Matthew and Mark, however grace is found throughout the rest of Scripture.
- 3) The concept of salvation is absent (in noun form) from Matthew and (in verb form) in Colossians and Revelation and yet the whole purpose of Scripture is to reveal to us God plan of salvation.

## **h) Consequences of Repentance**

### **1) Negative Consequences of Repentance**

Repentance is not merely sorrow for sin; there are many who weep over sin but without repentance immediately return to the same sin.

Doing penance is not repentance, for it gives the sinner the belief that by some merit he or she may earn favour in order to gain salvation. This often hinders true repentance.

As mentioned above, Judas Iscariot and Esau showed

sorrow for sin but they did not repent. (Heb. 12:17 “He [Esau] found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.”) Remorse and tears often accompany repentance, but they are not repentance in themselves.

## **2) Positive Consequences of Repentance**

It is a change of attitude that leads to a change in behaviour.

For example: (Matthew 21:28-32) “But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to day in my vineyard. 29) He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went. 30) And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not. 31) Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. 32) For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.”

In this parable, the one son at first refused to work in the vineyard but later repented, changed his mind and then went and actually worked in the vineyard.

Quite a few years ago, Governor Neff of the State of Texas received an invitation to speak at one of the penitentiaries in that state. He spoke to the assembled prisoners, and afterward said that he would be around for a while to listen to anything any of the convicts might wish to tell him. He would take as much time as they wanted, and anything they would tell him would be kept in confidence.

The convicts began to come, one at a time. One after another told him a story of how they had been unjustly sentenced, were innocent, and wished to get out. Finally one man came through who said to him, “Governor Neff, I do not want to take much of your time. I only want to say that I really did what they convicted me of. But I have been here a number of years. I believe I have paid my debt to society, and that, if I were to be released, I would be able to live an upright life and show myself worthy of your mercy.”

This was the man whom Governor Neff pardoned.

### **i) The Process of Repentance**

“Repentance is a key that opens any lock.”

—Jewish Proverb

### **1) The Nature of Repentance as Touching the Intellect**



For example Matthew 21:29 (above), “He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went”.

The son changed his mind, thoughts and views.

Repentance is a revolution touching our attitude and views toward sin and righteousness.

“Wabush, a town in a remote portion of Labrador, Canada, was completely isolated for some time. But recently a road was cut through the wilderness to reach it. Wabush now has one road leading into it, and thus, only on one road (the same one) leading out. If someone would travel the unpaved road for six to eight hours to get into Wabush, there is only way he or she could leave—by turning around. Each of us, by birth, arrives in a town called Sin. As in Wabush, there is only one way out—a road built by God himself. But in order to take that road, one must first turn around. That complete about face is what the Bible calls repentance, and without it, there’s no way out of town.”

—Brian Weatherdon.

Repentance teaches us to hate sin and learn to love holiness and purity. The prodigal son repented; he changed his mind about living in a far country and decided

to return to his father's household as a servant.

“Like the father of the Prodigal Son, God can see repentance coming a great way off and is there to meet it, the repentance is the reconciliation.”

—Dorothy L Sayers (1893-1957)

When Peter at Pentecost asked the Jews to repent, he meant for them to change their minds about the Person of Christ. From considering Jesus a mere man, a blasphemer or an impostor, to recognizing Him as the Son of God, the Messiah, the Redeemer of the world.

Josh Billings wrote, “It is much easier to repent of sins that we have committed than to repent of those we intend to commit.”

## **2) The Nature of Repentance as Touching the Emotions**

2 Corinthians 7:9, Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance.

Very often feelings play a great part in repentance; repentance is a hard battle.

Luke 10:13, They (Tyre and Sidon) had a great while ago repented, sitting in sackcloth and ashes.

Luke 7:44, ...but she hath washed my feet with tears...(demonstrating repentance).

The publican in Luke 18:13, smote upon his breast indicating sorrow of heart.

Psalm 38:18, For I will declare mine iniquity; I will be sorry for my sin.

### **3) The Nature of Repentance as Touching the Will (and subsequent behaviour, i.e. turning around)**

“Man is born with his face turned away from God. When he truly repents, he is turned right round toward God; he leaves his old life.”

—Dwight Lyman Moody (1837-1899)

Luke 15:18, 20, the prodigal said, I will arise...and he arose.

Repentance is a crisis with a changed experience in view and is a twofold act of turning: (1) Turning from sin and (2)

turning unto God.

“A turn involves two things: it involves a *terminus a quo* and a *terminus ad quem*. It involves a turning from something and a turning toward something.”

—William Barclay (1907-1978)

### **j) The Bottom Line**

“An unrepented sin is a continued sin.”

—Corrie ten Boom (1892-1983)

If we put off repentance until tomorrow, we have a day more to repent of, and a day less to repent in.

“You cannot repent too soon because you do not know how soon it may be too late.”

—Sir Thomas Fuller (1608-1661)

**Turning from sin without turning to God is  
reformation without regeneration;  
reorganization without restoration,  
modification without rectification and  
renovation without transformation.**

1 Thesalonians 1:9 "...how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God."

Acts 26:18, "...to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God."

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Gipsy Smith in *The Bible Friend* wrote, "When I was in South Africa, a fine, handsome Dutchman came into my service, and God laid His hand on him and convicted him of sin. The next morning he went to the beautiful home of another Dutchman and said to him, "Do you recognize that old watch?" "Why, yes," answered the other. "Those are my initials; that is my watch. I lost it eight years ago. How did you get it, and how long have you had it?" "I stole it," was the reply. "What made you bring it back now?" "I was converted last night," was the answer, "and I have brought it back first thing this morning. If you had been up, I would have brought it last night."

## **k) Challenge Questions**

- 1) True repentance includes a putting away of sin. What happens, however, if we—struggling with that sin—fall into it again? Does that mean our repentance wasn't sincere? Does it mean we cannot be forgiven for it again?
- 2) How are we to understand the nature of biblical repentance while always keeping in mind the reality of our sinful natures?
- 3) How would you explain to another person why repentance a vital component in the whole issue of revival, reformation and salvation?

## **l) Finally...**

A poor German girl announced that she was going to give a piano concert. In order to attract people to come, she mentioned in the advertisements that she was the student of the famous Hungarian professor, Franz Liszt. But it was a falsehood. To her dismay, she learned the professor was going to visit her town on the day before the concert. What should she do now?

She went to meet him, confessed her guilt, and asked him to forgive her. The professor answered, "You made a

mistake. All of us make mistakes. The only thing that you can do now is to repent; and I believe that you have already repented. Sit down and play.” At the beginning, she played with much fear. The professor corrected a few of her mistakes and said, “Now truly you can say that I taught you. Go ahead and play at your concert tomorrow evening, and the last piece will not be played by you, but by your teacher.”

We are like this girl. We have sinned. There is nothing else we can do but repent. Then we will play the rest of our life under the supervision of Christ Himself. The last and the best piece will be played by Him.

