

Discovering Jesus Course

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Repent and Believe

As we saw in the last lesson, Jesus travelled throughout Galilee with a bold message: “The time has come...The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (**Mark 1:15**). We saw that the Galileans would have understood this term “good news” as referring to the messianic prophecies of **Isaiah 52:7** and **Isaiah 61:1-2**. But what of the statement “repent and believe”? What did *that* mean to them?

N T Wright provides this important advice:

“In our world, telling people to repent and believe is likely to be heard as a summons to give up personal sins and accept a body of dogma or a scheme of religious salvation. This is a classic occasion where we have to unlearn our normal readings...of first-century texts and allow the first century itself to tell us what to hear instead.”¹

How can we “allow the first century itself to tell us what to hear,” as N T Wright puts it? It would help if we could find another first century Jew using the term “repent and believe,” wouldn’t it? Was there such an occurrence?

As you’ve probably guessed, there was indeed. A Jewish aristocrat and historian by the name of Flavius Josephus was born just a few years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. In AD 66, just as the infamous Jewish Revolt was about to begin (which would ultimately result in the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple), Josephus was a young army commander. He was sent from Jerusalem to speak with some rebel leaders in Galilee.

“His task...was to persuade the hot-headed Galileans to stop their mad rush into revolt against Rome and to trust him and the other Jerusalem aristocrats to work out a better *modus vivendi*.^{*} So when he confronted the rebel leader, he says that he told him to give up his own agenda and to trust him, Josephus, instead. And the words he uses are remarkably familiar to readers of the Gospels: he told the brigand leader to ‘repent and believe in me’...”²

Josephus used the expression “repent and believe in me” not in a religious sense but in a thoroughly practical sense. He was not asking the brigand leader to give

^{*} *Modus vivendi* literally means “mode of living.” It refers to a compromise, or a practical arrangement that allows conflicting people, groups, or ideas to coexist.

up sinning and to have a religious conversion. Rather, he was pleading with the rebel leader to turn aside from his agenda of rebellion and military confrontation and trust Josephus' agenda of peace with the Romans.

“Even if we end up suggesting that Jesus meant more than Josephus did – that there were indeed religious and theological dimensions to his invitation – we cannot suppose that he meant less. [Jesus] was telling his hearers to give up their agendas and to trust him for his way of being Israel, his way of bringing the kingdom, his kingdom-agenda.”³

When Jesus invited his hearers to “repent and believe” him, he was not asking them simply to forsake sins (which was an important part of his message). He was challenging them to embrace a whole new way of living – a kingdom lifestyle *in the here and now*. Instead of preaching active military conflict in order to bring about the kingdom of God, as some were doing, Jesus was challenging the people to live the kingdom lifestyle *now*, even before the kingdom had appeared in its full glory.

It is only when we understand Jesus' message in these terms that we can begin to appreciate what his moral teachings meant to the Jews of the early first century. When Jesus spoke of “turning the other cheek” and “going the extra mile,” he was not just describing the lifestyle of the coming kingdom, but also his agenda for seeing that kingdom arrive in Israel. This kingdom would not come through outward observation (as the Pharisees taught) or through military action (as the Zealots taught) but through a change of heart and a radical lifestyle that mirrored kingdom values.

“Jesus' [preaching] was thus revolutionary indeed – doubly revolutionary, in fact. Not only did the kingdom challenge the power and policies of Herod, of Caiaphas, and of Rome itself, as the revolutionaries would have insisted, it also challenged the military aspirations of the revolutionaries themselves. And it challenged, within all of that, the injustice and oppression that Jesus saw as endemic within his own society...At the purely political level, one could have predicted that someone who put his finger on all this would end up being attacked from all sides and even misunderstood by his own followers.”⁴

Jesus' challenge was not simply a call to repentance on an individual level. It was a call to the entire community of Israel to repent and believe him. It was not just about individual salvation, but also about national salvation. And, said Jesus, the consequences of rejecting his message would be dire. As he said in **Matthew 11:21-22**:

“Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you.”

¹ NT Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, co-authored with Marcus J Borg (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2000), p.38.

² NT Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p.44.

³ NT Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p.44.

⁴ NT Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, co-authored with Marcus J Borg (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2000), p.36.

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