

The Calling of God



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“There is a great plan being worked out here below...”

—Sir Winston Churchill, British prime minister, 1940-1945, 1951-1955

Euripides, a fifth-century B.C. philosopher, asked: “What is God? What is not God? What is between man and God? Who shall say?”

Now, 2,500 years later, many of us are still fascinated and puzzled by our relationship with our Creator. Most think God’s relationship and dealings with man are simply a great, unfathomable mystery.

On the other hand, we all understand that relationships are important. Our lives revolve around our families, friends, neighbors and associates. But where does God fit in?

What is the meaning of God’s relationship with man? What priority does He place on it? Does man need a relationship with God? If so, what is the basis and purpose of that relationship?

In this lesson we will carefully explore these vital questions and see how the Holy Scriptures answer them.



God is building a family—His own family. He created us so we can have a special Father-child relationship with Him.

GOD WANTS A RELATIONSHIP WITH US

We have all faced the age-old question about which came first, the chicken or the egg. The question could apply to our relationship with God: Which came first, man’s need for a relationship with God or God’s desire for a relationship with man? Here is the answer:

“We love Him because He *first* loved us,” explains the apostle John (1 John 4:19, emphasis added throughout). John also tells us, “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (verse 10, New Revised Standard Version). Clearly, it was God’s desire and plan to establish a relationship between human beings and Himself.

We must keep in mind God’s purpose for creating us. Previous lessons of this Bible study course have

extensively covered His purpose and plan for humanity. We learned that God designed human beings to reflect His very character—to be like Him. “In the day that God created man, He made him in the likeness of God” (Genesis 5:1). “So God created man in His own image; in the image of God created him; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27).

We need to consider a few basic principles about relationships before we delve into the details of God’s commitment to and His expectations from His relationship with us.

First we need to ask, What is a relationship? *Webster’s New World College Dictionary* defines it as “the quality or state of being related, a continuing attachment or association between persons.”

God instituted this type of relationship with ancient Israel when He said, “I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people” (Leviticus 26:12)

These few words summarize what God wants in His relationship with people. Notice the two aspects of God’s simple statement.

First He expresses His desire that we acknowledge and accept Him as the Supreme Being. Then He expresses His desire to associate with—to have a relationship with—those who accept Him as their God.

Once we understand God desires a relationship with us, we should more than ever recognize we truly need Him. The apostle Paul reminds us: “There is no question of our having sufficient power in ourselves: we cannot claim anything as our own. The power we have comes from God” (2 Corinthians 3:5, Revised English Bible).

The apostle John briefly describes the nature of the relationship we are to have with God. “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! . . . Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 John 3:1-3).

Here we see the purpose for the creation of mankind: God is building a family—His own family. He created us so we can have a special Father-child relationship with Him. God plans to bestow His immortality on us. As Paul explains, “this perishable body must be clothed with the imperishable, and what is mortal with immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:53, REB). God wants an eternal relationship with us as His children.

Paul tells us that “God our Savior . . . desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:3-4). God has planned a way to make this relationship available to every human being according to His timetable. As Peter wrote: “The Lord

is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that *any* should perish but that *all should come to repentance*” (2 Peter 3:9).

Notice Peter says repentance plays an integral role in cementing the relationship between God and man. God is eager to establish that relationship. But He conditions it on our willingness to recognize, acknowledge and repent of our former ways and determine to seek Him. Only then can God redeem us from the penalty of death we deserve because of our sins. (For more details see “Why We Need a Redeemer,” page E11.)

WHO IS GOD CALLING?

Jesus said, “For many are called, but few are chosen” (Matthew 22:14). What is the difference between being called and being chosen? The Greek word *kletos*, translated “called,” can also be translated “invited.” A calling by God is His offer, His invitation, to repent and enter into a relationship with Him.

In Romans 8:28-30 we read: “We know that in everything God works for the good of those who love him. They are the people he called [*kletos*, invited], because that was his plan . . . And he decided that they would be like his Son so that Jesus would be the firstborn of many brothers. God planned for them to be like his Son; and those he planned to be like his Son, he also called; and those he called, he also made right with him; and those he made right, he also glorified” (Romans 8:28-30, New Century Version).

Yes, God must first call, or invite, us to enter into a relationship with Him. He does this by opening our minds to a basic understanding of the Scriptures and our need to repent.

Why must God invite us to have a relationship with Him? Christ answers that question in John 6:44: “No one can come to Me *unless the Father who sent Me draws him*; and I will raise him up at the last day.” If God did

not place some understanding of His Word into our minds and provide us an incentive to repent, we would never recognize how much we need to change.

But recognizing a need for change is only recognizing God’s calling. Only those who respond and repent are *chosen* for a special relationship with Him in the spiritual Body that is His Church. Paul addresses those who have accepted God’s invitation as “the church of God . . . , those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, *called* [invited] to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:2). Those who repent and are baptized (Acts 2:38) are then *chosen* “for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth” (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

God invites many more into this special relationship than respond. However, the Bible reveals that *most* people who are called *do not respond* to their invitation for several reasons. That is why many more are called than are chosen for salvation today.

In the parable of the sower and the seed (Matthew 13:18-23) Christ explained that the sower (God) casts the seeds of invitation to many people. However, for various reasons, including deception by the “wicked one” (the devil), lack of spiritual roots, pressure from friends and



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Few Have Ever Accepted God’s Calling

The Scriptures tell us the first human beings rejected God’s offer for a relationship with Him. Adam and Eve made the decision to disobey God’s instructions. As a result, He expelled them from the Garden of Eden.

Not long after our first human parents’ experience in the Garden of Eden, people began to replace the veneration of God with their own forms of worship. They quickly degenerated into idolatry by willfully rejecting God’s laws. As with Adam and Eve, they, by their actions, rejected a close relationship with God (Genesis 6:3-7). Mankind’s behavior grew so destructive that God finally destroyed the evil society of that day in the great flood of Noah’s time.

Notice where Paul places the blame for the breakdown in the relationship between God and man. “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them,

because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse” (Romans 1:18-20, New Revised Standard Version).

Although man has generally continued to reject Him, God has chosen a few people down through the ages to enjoy a personal relationship with Him.

We find in Genesis 6:8 that Noah “found grace in the eyes of the LORD.” Noah was a “just man” (verse 9). God called Noah to preach to pre-flood residents of the earth (2 Peter 2:5). But all of them rejected His message. Only Noah and his family survived the flood.

Hebrews 11 lists examples of other righteous people who lived before the time of Christ with whom God had a relationship. Hebrews 11 is often called the faith chapter because most of those mentioned in it were faithful to God.

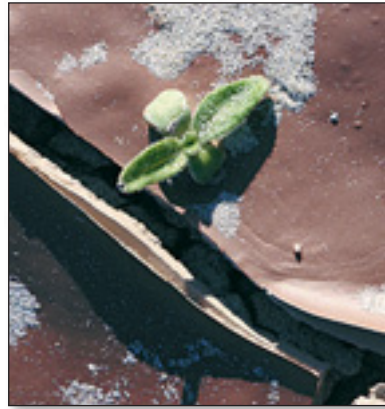
relatives and the distraction of the physical cares of this life, most do not accept God's invitation to have a close,

personal relationship with Him. Only a few do and eventually bear fruit.

We must keep in mind that God *sets terms* on our relationship with Him. Millions of people claim to have a relationship with God, but in reality they have ignored the terms He set for us to enter into a relationship with Him. They want to have a relationship with God, but one based on *their terms*, not His. Thus we must clearly understand the terms of the relationship God wants to have with us.

Let's examine that relationship. We will also review some historical relationships and see the lessons we may learn from them. Then we will consider what God expects

from us and offers us through a relationship with Him.



Christ explained that the Sower (God) casts the seeds of invitation to many people. However, most do not accept God's invitation to have a relationship with Him. Only a few do and eventually bear fruit.

GIFTS FROM GOD: THE FOUNDATION OF HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH US

Most relationships are based on real or perceived promises, commitments and expectations. For example, the marriage relationship is founded on promises of love, commitment, honor and respect. A friendship has expectations of understanding, trust, honesty and shared interests.

The primary basis for the relationship between God and us is simple: It is *love*. The Scriptures tell us that God's nature, the primary motivation in all He does, is love—an unselfish concern for all humanity. This is expressed by the apostle John: "And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. *God is love*, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him" (1 John 4:16). John adds, "We love Him because He first loved us" (verse 19).

Love is often expressed through giving. Jesus advised: "Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you" (Luke 6:38). As Paul explained, "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Gifts can enhance relationships, and God is the greatest giver of all (James 1:17).

Paul tells us: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8).

Let's now examine some important gifts from God. He intends that they all contribute to our receiving, as a gift from Him, eternal life.

What great gift most demonstrates God's love for us?

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

God's greatest gift of love is the redemptive sacrifice of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to pay the penalty for our sins. Through Christ and His sacrifice, we can have direct access to God and His gift of salvation.

Does God offer another special gift?

"No man is able to come to me if he is not given the power to do so by the Father" (John 6:65, Bible in Basic English).

Grace: How God Interacts With Us

The apostle John summarizes God's motivation and character in three simple words: "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). His dealings with us are motivated by His love—His care, His concern and even His correction—so we can receive His gift of eternal life as members of His family.

Several of the apostles summarize God's attitude and approach of loving care and concern for us with the term *grace*. Paul, Peter and John use the word quite often. What do they mean by it, and how can it help us better understand our Creator?

Grace is the word most frequently used in modern Bible translations for the original Greek word *charis*. There is no simple English-language equivalent. *Charis* means "that which causes joy, pleasure, gratification, favor [and] acceptance, for a kindness granted or desired . . . [and] a favor done without expectation of return; the absolutely free expression of the loving kindness of God to men in the bounty and

benevolence of the Giver" (Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 1993, p. 1469). It comes from the Greek verb *chairō*, which means "to rejoice" (same source).

Charis is also translated as "favor," "thanks" and "pleasure." A simple way to define *grace* would be to think of it as God's unearned, undeserved favor toward us—motivated by His love and concern for us, especially those of us who accept His invitation to enter into a relationship with Him. It encompasses all of the wonderful gifts God so graciously offers us.

Paul typically starts his letters to the churches with the phrase "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." In doing so he wanted to impress upon his audience God's favor toward those who accept His calling.

How does God express His love for us through grace?

- Through grace God reveals Himself and helps us come to

God's calling is a special gift not yet offered to everyone. Jesus explained this to His disciples. When they asked Him why He spoke in parables, He responded: "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given" (Matthew 13:10-11).

Those who are being called to everlasting life in this age are called "firstfruits" (James 1:18; Romans 8:22-23; Hebrews 12:22-23). This common scriptural term applied to the first part of a harvest, a portion given to God. God's human firstfruits are few in number (Luke 12:32). Their invitation to eternal life comes now. A beautiful part of God's plan, however, is that, after the return of Jesus Christ, God's calling—His invitation to enter into a personal relationship with Him—will extend to *all* of humanity. Many, many others will then be part of God's much greater harvest.

When God extends to us the gift of His calling, He must offer us another special gift before we can respond to Him in this relationship.

What does God offer in conjunction with His calling?

"And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth" (2 Timothy 2:24-25).

Repentance is a gift God grants to those who willingly accept His invitation or calling. In granting us repentance, God gives us the ability to see ourselves as He sees us—as we really are rather than how we perceive ourselves. Without this important spiritual insight, we remain spiritually blinded and cannot respond to God's calling.

It is only when we come to see our shortcomings and our unimportance in comparison to God and in the light of His Word that we may genuinely repent. "But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word" (Isaiah 66:2).

When we realistically see our insignificance and helplessness compared with the greatness and power of God, we should be humbled. This humbling leads us to want to change, to repent.

When we repent God forgives us and covers our sins with the gift of forgiveness. Notice John's explanation in his first epistle: "*If* we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. *If* we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9).

Notice that little word *if*. Some of God's actions toward us are conditional, based on our behavior. He expects positive responses from us if our relationship with Him is to progress. Just as in human relationships, the more positively we respond to Him, the more He graciously responds to us. Thus our relationship with Him deepens and grows.

For example, when God forgives us He *forgets* our past sins. "For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more" (Hebrews 8:12; compare Psalm 103:11-13).

What gift follows repentance and forgiveness?

"Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 2:38).

Jesus Christ promised the gift of God's Spirit (Acts 10:45) just before His crucifixion: "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, . . . will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you" (John 14:26). God provides this gift to aid and comfort Christ's true disciples (John 14:16-17).

God will give us His Spirit if we respond positively to His calling and repent. He also instructs us to be *baptized* that we may receive this gift.

This illustrates something we read earlier. Expectations exist within any relationship. God expects us to

know Him and Jesus Christ His Son (John 1:14-16).

- God calls us through His grace (Galatians 1:15).
- Through grace God pronounces us "justified"—righteous and free of sin—as a result of Jesus Christ's sacrifice (Romans 3:24; Titus 3:7).
- God offers us salvation—His gift of eternal life—through grace (Romans 5:15-18; Titus 2:11; 3:5; Acts 15:11).
- Through grace God allows us to enjoy a relationship with Him (Romans 5:1-2).
- God saves us through His grace (Ephesians 2:5, 8).
- Because of God's grace, God offered Jesus Christ, and Jesus offered Himself, as a sacrifice for the sins of all mankind (John 3:16; Hebrews 2:9).
- Through grace God gives us mercy and "help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).
- Through grace God gives us not only what we need but enough for us to share with others (2 Corinthians 8:1-4, 9:8).
- God forgives us through His grace (Ephesians 1:7).
- Through grace Jesus Christ came in the flesh in the role

of a servant so we could have a Savior and receive eternal life (2 Corinthians 8:9; compare Philippians 2:5-11).

- God gives us consolation and hope through grace (2 Thessalonians 2:16).
- Through grace God grants spiritual gifts to His people for the benefit of those in His Church (Ephesians 4:7-16; 1 Peter 4:10).

God's grace—His dealings with humanity motivated by love—are part of the true gospel (Acts 20:24). The gospel—the good news—is the message of God's plan to offer eternal life in the Kingdom of God to all who have ever lived and will yet live. This is made possible through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in taking on Himself the penalty for our sins.

The gospel includes the wonderful news that God will intervene in human affairs to save us from ourselves and send Jesus to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. (To better understand the truth about the Kingdom of God, be sure to request your free copy of the booklet *The Gospel of the Kingdom*.)

respond to His gift of repentance by committing ourselves to Him through water baptism.

The Bible shows that, after baptism, God gives His Spirit through the laying on of hands (Acts 8:14-19). Paul encouraged Timothy, “stir up the gift of God [His Spirit] which is in you through the laying on of my hands” (2 Timothy 1:6-7). This laying on of hands normally should occur immediately after water baptism.

God said we become a part of His Church—the Body of Christ—through baptism. “For by one spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13).

God simply does not make His Spirit available to the unrepentant. Jesus Christ describes God’s Spirit as something “the world cannot receive” (John 14:17). God gives it only to those He calls and chooses. Those whom He is not now calling will have their opportunity later. (For a fuller understanding of repentance and baptism and God’s calling and choosing of His servants, please request our free booklet *The Road to Eternal Life*.)

Does God impose another condition for giving us His Spirit?

“And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit [which] God has given to those who obey Him” (Acts 5:32).

Again we read of responsibilities for those who enter a special relationship with God. He expects them to make every effort to *obey* Him.

Obedience to God’s ways leads to a positive fellowship with Him (1 John 1:3, 7). Having God’s Spirit will help us seek God’s will and follow His ways, developing His nature and character in us. Christ promised the Father would send a “Helper” (the Holy Spirit) that would assist His disciples in discerning between sin and righteousness and lead them into truth (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7).

What important gift does God promise us if we are genuinely repentant and become converted?

“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

Paul tells us God imparts *eternal life* as a gift. God looks forward to sharing this gift with us because He has planned this gift for mankind since the “foundation of the

world” (Matthew 25:34). Eternal life in God’s family is the hope of all those who follow God (1 John 3:1-3; Titus 1:2).

God has many gifts for us. They range from His calling to His priceless gift of eternal life. His gifts naturally follow one another as we begin to respond to Him and our relationship with Him grows (Romans 8:30).

Commitments and promises make up a major part of any edifying relationship. What commitments and promises does God offer us?

GOD’S PROMISES TO ABRAHAM

Hundreds of Bible prophecies tell us about the mission, purpose and ministry of Jesus Christ. The Scriptures are filled with prophecies of both His first and second coming.

What is the first Messianic prophecy of the Bible?

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel” (Genesis 3:15).

Shortly after Adam and Eve sinned, God promised to send a Messiah, a Savior, who would bring judgment on the serpent. The serpent is identified in Revelation 12:9 as Satan the devil.

This announcement of the Savior is the foundational promise God made to humankind because it paves the way for salvation through Jesus Christ. Without a doubt the promised redemptive work of the Messiah is one of the most important promises God has ever made.

What did God promise Abraham?

“No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations” (Genesis 17:5; compare Romans 4:17-18).

What an astounding statement! God had a close relationship with Abraham and promised him his descendants would ultimately comprise many nations. God even changed his name from Abram to Abraham, meaning “father of a multitude,” to reflect the importance of this promise.

How to Use Biblical Quotes and References

Although we quote many biblical references for your convenience, this is intended as a Bible *study* course. To receive the full benefit of each lesson, you must actively participate. Often after a Bible quote, we add one or more scriptures after the word *compare*. These verses are usually similar to the passage already quoted, but often they add understanding and a broader perspective. In going through each lesson, we recommend that you look up each scripture cited.

We also make comments that support important points in the lesson. Such statements are sometimes followed by

Bible references that are not quoted. Again, to receive the full benefit from these lessons, you should look up each reference. The extra time spent will be amply rewarded by increased understanding of the subject at hand.

The context of the quote is important as well. Often space prevents us from quoting as much of a particular passage as we might like to. So it is well worth your time and effort to look up even those passages that are already quoted in the lesson and read the verses before and after. As you do this you will increase your understanding of and familiarity with God’s Word, the Bible.

God made many promises to Abraham. The patriarch had such a close relationship with God that a Bible writer called him the “friend of God” (James 2:23). Abraham’s descendants also received several great and far-reaching promises.

How many descendants did God promise Abraham?

“And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if a man could number the dust of the earth, then your descendants also could be numbered” (Genesis 13:16; compare Genesis 15:5; 22:17).

Abraham’s descendants were to number into multiple millions of people. Again we see that God made some wonderful promises to this faithful servant.

What territorial promises did God make to Abraham?

“Then He said to him, ‘I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it’” (Genesis 15:7; compare Genesis 13:15).

God said Abraham’s descendants would receive the “Promised Land.” This is the area his descendants eventually settled after God brought them out of captivity in Egypt.

What promise of international importance did God give Abraham?

“... I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:2-3; compare Genesis 18:18).

What was this “blessing” that would come to the whole world?

“The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; and to Him shall be the obedience of the people” (Genesis 49:10).

Every people and nation is to benefit from this promise. Genesis 49 explains the blessings promised to the 12 sons of Jacob. The same blessings God promised Abraham were passed on to his great-great-grandchildren. Most of the blessings were physical in nature. However, one of Abraham’s great-great-grandsons, Judah, received a special promise that the scepter—the pledge of royalty that would eventually include the Messiah—would not depart from Judah’s line of descendants “until Shiloh comes.”

Most commentators agree that “Shiloh” is a reference to the Messiah. Later prophets confirm that the Messiah was to come from the tribe of Judah. Isaiah 11:1-5 tells us the Messiah would come from the descendants of Jesse (the father of David), who emerged from Judah. Matthew 1 and Luke 3 list the genealogy of Christ through Joseph and Mary. Both show He was descended from Judah.

Romans 15:12 also shows us that Christ’s human roots

are in Judah. Plainly, one of the promises God gave to Abraham was the promise of the Messiah as our Savior.

What spiritual trait of Abraham was vital to his receiving promises from God?

“He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore ‘it was accounted to him for righteousness’” (Romans 4:20-22; compare Genesis 15:6; 22:18).

Faith became an integral part of Abraham’s character. He had great confidence that God would fulfill His promises. God viewed Abraham’s faith as righteousness. In other words, even though Abraham was not perfect, God regarded him as a righteous man because he deeply believed in and obeyed God.

Why did God choose to carry out His plan through Abraham rather than someone else?

“For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice, that the Lord may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him” (Genesis 18:19).

“... And in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws” (Genesis 26:4-5).

These crucial passages in Genesis tell us God gave Abraham the promises because he had faith, a faith that was evident by his obedient actions. Because of his confidence in God, he put his heart into trying to accomplish all God had commanded him. He also faithfully taught his children to follow God’s way of life.

Did Abraham and others who followed him receive all of the promises of God?

“These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13).

Abraham is mentioned prominently in the list of God’s faithful servants in Hebrews 11 (verses 8-12). Yet we read that neither he nor those who came after him have received the promises of the eternal inheritance God made to him. But God has not forgotten them.

When, then, will they receive the promises given to Abraham?

“And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us” (Hebrews 11:39-40).

“For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into

Christ have put on Christ . . . And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:26-29).

True Christians, those "baptized into Christ," are also the heirs of Abraham. They will receive the eternal aspects of these promises through faith, along with God's people from ancient times who served Him in faith. God wants His servants to exercise the same faith that was in faithful Abraham. All are to receive their eternal inheritance together, at the same time (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

What does God expect of us as Abraham's spiritual descendants?

"For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith'" (Romans 1:17).

"And not being weak in faith, he [Abraham] did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore 'it was accounted to him for righteousness' . . . Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (Romans 4:19-22, 5:1-2).

We, too, must have faith in God because through faith we are justified and receive the promises God made to Abraham. This faith, however, must be dynamic. When exercised properly, faith automatically builds a strong relationship and fellowship with God.

How does the Bible describe Abraham's faithfulness?

"But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working

together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.' And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only . . . For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (James 2:20-26).

God expects us to exercise faith by following His laws and ways. Following Abraham's faithful example will allow us to enjoy a friendship and ever-closer relationship with God. (To better understand Abraham's life of faith and how you can make faith a part of your life, be sure to request your free copy of the booklet *You Can Have Living Faith*.)

GOD'S COVENANT WITH ANCIENT ISRAEL

God made other promises recorded in the Bible. Often He gave them in the form of covenants. A covenant is an agreement, compact or contract between two or more parties. In the Bible, however, the term implies more of a formal treatylike commitment to a relationship. In the covenants God initiates, no negotiation of terms is allowed. God defines all of the conditions. The people could only accept or decline God's offer. They had no say in determining the framework of the covenant.

It should be obvious why God's covenants could not be negotiated agreements between equal parties. God is the Creator, and we are His creation. Our well-being is dependent on His love and favor. *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* defines the theological use of *covenant* as "an agreement which brings about a relationship of commitment between God and his people."

One of the most important covenants God made was with the Israelites, Abraham's descendants through his son Isaac and grandson Jacob (renamed Israel). The apostle Paul says of them: "They are Israelites; theirs the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; theirs the patriarchs,

God's Relationship With Ancient Israel

God's invitation for a relationship sometimes extends beyond the personal level. He invited the whole nation of ancient Israel into a relationship with Him. That association was based on a covenant that documented the promises, expectations and conditions important to the relationship.

Through Moses, God told the Israelites, "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a Holy nation" (Exodus 19:5-6).

This relationship, to a certain extent, was patterned after the marriage covenant. But it was not in Israel's heart to obey God. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God told Israel, "Surely, as a wife treacherously departs from her husband, so have

you dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel . . ." (Jeremiah 3:20). Earlier God had told Samuel, ". . . They have rejected Me, that I should not rule over them" (1 Samuel 8:7).

Notice God's assessment of their rejection of Him as their God and Ruler.

"Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth! For the LORD has spoken: 'I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me; the ox knows its owner and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, My people do not consider' . . . They have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked to anger the Holy One of Israel, they have turned away backward" (Isaiah 1:2-4).

What was God's response to this rejection? ". . . I raised My hand in an oath . . . that I would scatter them among the

and from them, according to the flesh, is the Messiah” (Romans 9:4-5, New American Bible).

How did Paul describe the covenants between God and Israel?

“. . . At that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12).

Note that Paul calls them “the covenants of promise.” Through them God offered great promises and blessings to the Israelites. If they obeyed, God promised to make of them a great nation and to protect, prosper and provide for them (Leviticus 26:3-13; Deuteronomy 28:1-14).

What were the terms of God’s covenant with ancient Israel?

“Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people . . .” (Exodus 19:5).

“Then all the people answered together and said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do’” (verse 8).

The Israelites agreed to God’s terms, and He confirmed His commitment to them. “. . . This is what I commanded them, saying, ‘Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people. And walk in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well with you’” (Jeremiah 7:23).

What did God say would happen if the Israelites failed to live up to their obligations under the covenant?

“But if you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands, and if you reject my decrees and abhor my laws and fail to carry out all my commands and so violate my covenant . . . I will bring upon you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and drain away your life. You will plant seed in vain, because your

enemies will eat it. I will set my face against you so that you will be defeated by your enemies; those who hate you will rule over you, and you will flee even when no one is pursuing you. If after all this you will not listen to me, I will punish you for your sins seven times over” (Leviticus 26:14-18, New International Version).

Most covenants include and define the duties and responsibilities each party is expected to perform. As with the covenant God made with Abraham, the covenant God made with Israel contained conditions, duties and obligations. The people’s acceptance of those conditions cemented their relationship with God. But their later disobedience cut them off from the blessings God had promised.

Did God promise to make a new covenant between Himself and Israel?

“‘Behold, the days are coming,’ says the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them,’ says the Lord” (Jeremiah 31:31-32).

What was the flaw in the first covenant between God and Israel?

“For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. Because finding fault with them, He says: ‘Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah’” (Hebrews 8:7-8).

Israel violated its covenant with God. The fault in that covenant relationship was with the *people*, not with the *covenant*. God fulfilled His part. The Israelites simply failed to live up to the commitments they had made to God.

Gentiles and disperse them throughout the countries, because they had not executed My judgments, but despised My statutes, profaned My Sabbaths, and their eyes were fixed on their fathers’ idols” (Ezekiel 20:23-24).

Although the ancient Israelites rejected God and spurned His invitation for a relationship, He still deeply desires a relationship with human beings. Though God punished the Israelites, He has never completely rejected them or their descendants. Paul explains: “I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew” (Romans 11:1-2, New Revised Standard Version).

Paul continues: “. . . I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved; as it is written, ‘Out of Zion will come the Deliverer; he will

banish ungodliness from Jacob’” (verses 25-26, NRSV).

Paul concludes: “As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as [their] election [as people with whom God has established a special relationship] is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable. Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God’s mercy to you . . .” (verses 28-31, New International Version).

Because of God’s great mercy He plans to bring the people of Israel to full repentance and, working through them, invite all other people into a similar relationship with Him.

God is faithful. He doesn’t give up on a relationship He establishes as long as there remains any hope for repentance and restoration of the parties involved.

How and why did the Israelites fail to fulfill their obligations under the covenant?

“They did not keep the covenant of God; they refused to walk in His law, and forgot His works and His wonders that He had shown them” (Psalm 78:10-11).

“And may [they] not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation that did not set its heart aright, and whose spirit was not faithful to God” (verse 8).

“Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!” (Deuteronomy 5:29).

By disobeying God—flouting His laws—Israel violated the terms of the covenant. The Israelites simply did not have a desire, commitment or willingness to follow God’s ways and instructions. They did what comes naturally for mankind, which is to disobey God and hate His law (Romans 8:7).

THE NEED FOR A NEW COVENANT

The problem with the Israelites was with their *heart*—their thinking and attitude. The Israelites did not obey God and fulfill their part in their relationship with Him for a simple reason: “. . . Everyone followed the dictates of his evil heart” (Jeremiah 11:8). God, however, had a solution: a different covenant, a new covenant, that would correct the problem.

Notice God prophesied He would someday create a new heart in His people by giving them His Spirit so they would obey Him: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God” (Ezekiel 36:26-28).

Why do we need God’s Spirit?

“For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His” (Romans 8:6-9).

People do not naturally like to obey God’s laws. It is not in our natural, carnal nature to follow God’s ways. Many people through the ages have tried to solve their own problems their own ways, without the Spirit of God. But those ways produce human misery and ultimately lead to death (Romans 3:16; Proverbs 14:12; 16:25).

What effect does God’s Spirit have on those who receive it?

“For if you live according to the flesh you will die;

but if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption through which we cry, ‘Abba, Father!’” (Romans 8:13-15, New American Bible).

God’s Spirit empowers us to put to death the deeds of the body, the evil works of the flesh such as adultery, fornication, hatred, jealousy, anger and selfishness (Galatians 5:19-21). When we have God’s Spirit dwelling in us, it enables us to have an attitude of enthusiastically and from the heart wanting to submit to God and follow His lead.

What is different in the New Covenant?

“‘Behold, the days are coming,’ says the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah . . . This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel: After those days,’ says the Lord, ‘I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people’” (Jeremiah 31:31-33; compare Hebrews 8:10; 10:16).

The New Covenant is God’s commitment to give His people His Spirit so they can obey Him. Notice in this passage that God’s law is included in the New Covenant. His *law* has not changed. What God commits Himself to change is *the human heart*. He will enable those entering the New Covenant with Him to willingly and wholeheartedly obey His laws.

Remember, God did not find a fault in His law under the terms of the Old Covenant. The fault was in the self-centered and rebellious thinking of the people. God’s law and way of life remain an integral part of the New Covenant. The New Covenant requires a genuine change in the heart and mind that can be accomplished only through the transforming power of God’s Spirit.

Once a young man asked Jesus, “What good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” Jesus responded, “. . . If you want to enter into life, *keep the commandments*” (Matthew 19:16-17). Rules are involved in any relationship. God’s laws were part of the Old Covenant. They are also part of the New Covenant. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can have a heart able to respond much differently from those ancient Israelites who rejected God’s way of life.

The nature of God’s law is fundamental to the understanding of biblical covenants. The laws of God endure forever (Psalm 119:89, 160). He established them to last forever (verse 152). The notion of a covenant without rules that define the relationship simply makes no sense.

What makes the New Covenant a better covenant?

“. . . He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises” (Hebrews 8:6).

The major difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant is in the *promises* God makes. The

New Covenant is, in a sense, an expansion and renewal of the promises He made in the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant offered primarily physical blessings. How are the promises of the New Covenant better?

The New Covenant includes the promises God made to Abraham that were the basis of the Old Covenant. But its emphasis is on promises related to *conversion* through God's Spirit and to *eternal life*. Paul tells us that "the blessing of Abraham [has] come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Galatians 3:14). One of the promises was that of the Holy Spirit, which would bring the spiritual renewal of the heart. This, as we saw earlier, was the problem with the relationship between God and Israel under the Old Covenant. The Israelites didn't have a converted heart to obey their Creator.

Some of the requirements of the Old Covenant, such as animal sacrifices and temple rituals, pointed to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which replaced them when He died for our sins (Hebrews 9:1-14; 10:1-14). However, the laws of God that were the foundation of the Old Covenant relationship are also the foundation of the New Covenant relationship. Now they are infused in the hearts and minds of God's people instead of only written on stone or scrolls.

What "exceedingly great" promise does God make under the New Covenant?

"... By which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust" (2 Peter 1:4).

"Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world'" (Matthew 25:34; compare verse 46).

The greatest promise of the New Covenant is eternal life. The Old Covenant made no provisions for people to receive eternal life. However, under the New Covenant, "He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit [which] dwells in you" (Romans 8:11). Having God's Spirit makes it possible for us to receive God's gift of eternal life. The physical blessings of the Old Covenant, such as prosperity and protection, cannot compare with the far greater blessing of immortality available to us under the New.

As Paul exhorted Timothy, "fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the

Why We Need a Redeemer

Our sins have alienated us from God. The prophet Isaiah wrote: "... *Your iniquities* have separated you from your God; and *your sins* have hidden His face from you..." (Isaiah 59:2). *Sin* has built a wall that separates mankind from God. That barrier must be torn down before we can have a relationship with Him. But how can we remove this barrier?

John the Baptist, when Jesus came to him for baptism, said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29, 36). John recognized Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah who would redeem mankind by paying the death penalty for sin.

"Redemption means deliverance from some evil by payment of a price" (*New Bible Dictionary*, 1996, "Redeemer, Redemption"). Peter explains that "you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:18-19). Paul explains that the blood of Christ has "purchased" the "church of God" (Acts 20:28).

God planned from the beginning this wonderful gift of redemption. The apostle John elaborates: "All who dwell on the earth will worship... the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). Jesus Christ, as the Lamb of God, willingly "gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed..." (Titus 2:14).

Must we all be redeemed? Clearly the answer is yes. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), and "the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). In other words, we deserve eternal death. We have made ourselves,

through sin, unfit to receive the gift of eternal life.

How, then, can our problem be alleviated so we can enter into a relationship with God as His children?

God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to pay the penalty for our sins so we could be saved from the penalty of eternal death (John 3:16). Hebrews 2:9 explains the purpose of that sacrifice: "But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone." Jesus became the sacrificial lamb God offered for the sins of mankind.

The concept of redemption was made known to ancient Israel through the sacrificial system of the Old Covenant. In Hebrews 9:22, we read that "according to the law almost all things are purged with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no remission" (or redemption). In verse 28, the thought continues, "so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many." The apostle John adds that "the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

Redemption is defined as "a loosing, particularly by paying a price;... with reference to the special intervention of God for the salvation of mankind" (*Unger's Bible Dictionary*, 1972, "Redemption"). In other words, redemption is an act of God that frees us from the guilt we incurred through our sins by substituting the death of Christ for the penalty we deserve.

However, God will grant redemption only to those who sincerely repent. That is why repentance is our starting point for receiving redemption and establishing a lasting relationship with our Creator. Those who genuinely repent of habitually practicing sin will be forgiven and become the redeemed servants of God.

presence of many witnesses” (1 Timothy 6:12). God promises we will inherit His Kingdom and His nature, His holy, righteous character.

God confirms His promises are certain by a solemn oath. “Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us” (Hebrews 6:17-18).

God even assures us He will glorify us as Christ is glorified. “Therefore I endure all things for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. This is a faithful saying: For if we died with Him, we shall also live with Him. If we endure, we shall also reign with Him” (2 Timothy 2:10-12).

The New Covenant assures us of help from Jesus Christ, our living Savior and High Priest, through the Holy Spirit. It is the supreme expression of God’s love and His desire for us to have an eternal, everlasting relationship with Him as His children.

LOVE IS THE BASIS OF GOD’S RELATIONSHIP

The apostle John tells us: “He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him” (1 John 4:8-9; compare John 3:16-17; Titus 3:4-7).

As we have previously discussed in this lesson, God demonstrates His love through His many promises that relate to our receiving salvation and eternal life. God the Father personally desires to be involved in our daily lives. As Paul said, “it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). Paul explains that Jesus Christ, our elder Brother, lives in us if we are converted Christians (Galatians 2:20).

What assurance do we have that the Father and Jesus Christ will assist us when we need spiritual help?

“For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:15-16).

“Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him” (1 John 5:14-15; compare Matthew 7:7-8; Philippians 4:6).

Relationships are built on good communication. God’s Word reveals that He listens to us and answers our requests according to His will and our best interests. He wants us to respond to His love. We speak to God in our thoughts and prayers, and He speaks

to us through His Word, His Spirit and His servants.

How should we express our love towards God?

“Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked” (1 John 2:3-6; compare 1 John 3:22).

“By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:2-3).

As John explains, God expects us to demonstrate our love to Him and others by keeping His commandments. We have the life of Jesus Christ as a model of how we should live. Jesus kept the commandments of God (John 15:10). He pleased God because of His obedience and His desire to do the will of God. (For more information on this subject, please be sure to request your free copy of the booklet *The Ten Commandments*.)

As we are recipients of God’s love, He expects us to share that love with others. That love, Christ said, would characterize His disciples through the ages. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35; compare 1 John 4:11).

What other spiritual qualities should be evident in our lives as we strive to live according to God’s will?

“For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: for yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, my soul has no pleasure in him” (Hebrews 10:36-38).

“And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ” (Colossians 3:23-24).

“And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last” (Revelation 22:12-13).

The life of a Christian is not easy (Matthew 7:13-14; 2 Timothy 3:12). We are expected to endure, wholeheartedly seeking God while we patiently wait for the fulfillment of His promises.

As we consistently follow God and respond to His will, we enjoy the spiritual blessings He promises. But

many of the most important promises and blessings become a reality only when Jesus Christ returns. Jesus tells us that “in the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). One of the great blessings we receive is the strength, patience and ability to endure the problems we encounter in “this present evil age” (Matthew 10:31-38; Galatians 1:4).

Is it important that we live according to God’s will to inherit His promises?

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.” (Matthew 7:21; compare Luke 6:46).

Our living according to the will of the Father is important to Christ. He considers those who do the will of God to be His close family members. “For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:50).

Those who only *appear* to serve God—but in reality practice lawlessness, willfully breaking God’s spiritual law—will not be included in God’s Kingdom (Matthew 7:22-23). They will not be a part of His eternal spiritual family.

Who are members of God’s household, His family, in this age?

“. . . I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15).

The Church is the house, or household, of God. It is those who respond to His call and follow the divine will. Paul wrote to the Christians in his day: “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:19-22).

But what is the Church of God? In any discussion about the Church, we should first define its meaning. In the Bible the word *church* comes from the Greek word *ekklesia*. In essence it means “called-out ones.” This term is used to describe the believers whom God has called out of this world to follow Him.

The word *church* in the Bible never means a building, as some incorrectly believe. “It always represents either a group of committed Christians in any given locality [who] met to practice their religion, or the totality of these groups scattered throughout the world” (Translator’s New Testament, glossary, pp. 557-558).

Paul defines the Church as “the Body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12, 27). Among its members, it has elders who lead and teach the congregation.

“And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were

received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them” (Acts 15:4). Here the “church” is identified as those apostles, elders and other members in Jerusalem. Other scriptures refer to “the church” in other locations (Acts 13:1, Romans 16:1; 1 Corinthians 1:2).

Who founded the Church of God?

“. . . On this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).

Jesus Christ is the founder of the Church of God. He promised the Church would always continue to exist after its founding during the first century. It remains to this day.

What clearly distinguishes people who are a part of God’s Church?

“But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His” (Romans 8:9).

Those who have the *Spirit of God* dwelling in them are God’s true disciples and form the true Church of God. The Body of Christ is those who have the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13).

“For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God” (Romans 8:14). God’s Spirit distinguishes people who are His sons and daughters from people who are not yet called.

Who leads the Church of God?

“For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything” (Ephesians 5:23-24, compare Colossians 1:18).

Jesus Christ, as its Head, leads the Church of God. Christ loves the Church and constantly nurtures and works with the Church to prepare it as His bride (Ephesians 5:25-27).

What role do the elders of the Church serve?

“And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Jesus Christ chooses some to serve the Body of Christ and help members to grow spiritually. The word *minister* means “servant.” Pastors and other elders are called by God to serve the spiritual needs of His called-out ones. Sound teaching is one of their important responsibilities (verses 12-15).

The elders are to instruct in doctrine as well as helping Christians grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18). Paul told the elders he had personally taught: “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28).

On another occasion he explained the approach he and the other apostles took in serving the Church. “Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are fellow workers for your joy; for by faith you stand” (2 Corinthians 1:24).

The responsibility of the elders of the Church includes overseeing the flock of God, gently leading and caring for them as a good shepherd does his sheep (1 Peter 5:1-3).

What is the mission of the Church?

“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14).

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you . . .” (Matthew 28:19-20).

God calls people for several reasons, one of which is to help fulfill the commission given the Church to spread the gospel and instruct those God calls so they can understand and live His way of life. It is through the combined efforts of God’s called-out ones that this commission is fulfilled.

Paul says the church should always endeavor “to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). Paul encourages members of the Church to work for unity and to build on that unity as they spread the true gospel and make disciples.

Paul describes the kind of humble attitude that leads to true spiritual unity within the Church: “Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:1-5).

Members of the Church are admonished to love and care for one another as Christ loved His disciples and cared for them. This involves a collective as well as individual effort.

Are members of the Church expected to assemble together regularly?

“And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24-25; compare Leviticus 23:3).

Members of the Church are to work together to fulfill the commission Christ gave it, assembling together to encourage one another and be instructed in God’s truth as they show love and support for one another.

What else do those in the Church do?

“But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:23-24).

The Church also meets together to worship God.

Are You Being Called?

How can you know whether God is calling you to conversion? Begin by asking yourself what, if anything, is changing in your outlook toward life, especially in the way you think. The apostle Paul explained that “the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14). That is why Jesus said no one can come to Him unless the Father draws him (John 6:44).

In other words, God must first act, through the power of His Spirit, to open your mind so you can begin to see the wisdom of His ways and the error of your own. Then you can begin the process of real repentance.

Why must God first open our minds to give us understanding? “‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,’ says the LORD. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways,

and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Jesus gives an example that illustrates why God must first open your mind to comprehend your need to yield yourself to Him and allow Him to assist you in changing your life.

“And the disciples came and said to Him, ‘Why do you speak to them in parables?’ He answered and said to them, ‘Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given’” (Matthew 13:10-11). “Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: ‘Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive’” (verse 13-14).

A similar example is the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood

Notice that Christ said His followers would worship the Father in “spirit and truth.”

What is the “truth” Jesus Christ mentioned?

“They [Christians] are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” (John 17:16-17).

Christ indicated that His disciples would be those who were sanctified—set apart—by the truth of God. For centuries mankind has debated what truth is. Adlai Stevenson, 20th-century American statesman, noted that “you will find that the truth is often unpopular and the contest between agreeable fancy and disagreeable fact is unequal.”

So many have accepted fanciful traditions and customs as part of their religion that God’s truth is obscured. The truth of God is in the entirety of God’s Word, the Holy Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments (Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4; 2 Timothy 3:15-17).

The Word of God must stand as the basis for our beliefs, rather than the traditions and customs of men (Mark 7:9-13). Jesus said: “And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men” (verses 7-8).

Did Christ say His Church would be a large, influential body?

“Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32; compare Deuteronomy 7:7).

Christ indicates the body of true believers would be a “little flock,” a relatively small group.

Where is that Church today? The Church is not a building. It is the people called by God to enjoy a special relationship with Him. It is the called-out ones who have responded to the invitation to receive God’s Spirit. The Church is a relatively small number of believers who

follow the truth of God and the teaching and example of Jesus Christ. These people also emulate the examples of the apostles of the first-century Church.

The Church is a spiritual organism that includes elders to help with the edification and spiritual growth of its other members. Members of the Church work together toward the goal of spiritual maturity. Working toward a common goal, members of the Church are dedicated to accomplishing the mission Jesus Christ gave them almost 2,000 years ago. (For a better understanding of the Church, be sure to request your free copy of the booklet *The Church Jesus Built.*)

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

When we started this lesson, our focus was on God’s desire to enter into an everlasting relationship with His human creation. He wants to share His divine nature with His children. Over the centuries God has invited individuals—as well as a nation—into special covenant relationships with Him. The resulting divine agreements included many promises God has fulfilled and will fulfill for His people.

Beginning almost 2,000 years ago, God invited a *spiritual* nation, those called into His Church (Galatians 6:16), into a relationship with Him. He established a process for that to happen. The Bible calls it *conversion* (Acts 3:19; 15:3).

God calls us into a personal relationship with Him. Notice it is God’s “good pleasure” to impart to us His promises and gifts: “Therefore we also pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power, that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him . . .” (2 Thessalonians 1:11-12).

In the beginning God gave man a crucial choice symbolized by two trees in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). God again offers His people the opportunity to partake of

and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess’” (Luke 18:10-12).

The man knew the Scriptures. He could apply them to others and see their shortcomings. But he had little or no understanding of how much *he* needed to change.

That is the point of the parable. Jesus directed it to those “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others” (verse 9).

In contrast, notice how the tax collector responded. “And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (verses 13-14).

The tax collector correctly perceived that God, through the inspired words of the Scriptures, was explaining to him how he could change his own life. He got the point. God

was working with him so he could correctly comprehend the Scriptures.

The first awakening to this need for personal change often results from discovering the truth of the Scriptures. As Paul explained to his converts, “God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14).

If you understand what you are learning in this study course to the extent that you see the need to change your life and begin obeying God’s commandments from the heart, God *is* working with you. He is drawing you toward Him. This incentive to yield your life to God is a gift you should appreciate. Pray for the strength and wisdom to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

The next lesson of this Bible study course will explain, in considerable detail, repentance and conversion. Be sure to study it thoroughly.

Jesus tells us: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last. Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city” (Revelation 22:13-14).

Remember the sure fulfillment of the inspiring promise of the New Covenant relationship we have with God. He will bring His promises to pass! He summarizes for us the relationship He wants with all of us: “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away. Then He who sat on the throne said, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’ And He said to me, ‘Write, for these words are true and faithful’” (Revelation 21:3-5).

God calls—invites—us into this eternal relationship with Him as members of His family. In the next lesson we will explore how God wants us to respond to His calling and develop our relationship with Him.

This lesson has briefly covered many important aspects of God’s plan and purpose for humanity and His dealings and relationships with us. To better understand the vital points covered in this lesson, be sure to request the following free booklets:

- *What Is Your Destiny?*
- *The Road to Eternal Life.*
- *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion.*
- *You Can Have Living Faith.*
- *The New Covenant: Does It Abolish God’s Law?*
- *The Church Jesus Built.*
- *The Gospel of the Kingdom.*
- *The Ten Commandments.*

For your free booklets, please contact our office in your country (or the country nearest you) listed below or access our Web site at www.gnmagazine.org.

Points to Ponder

These questions are intended as a study aid, to spur further thought on the concepts discussed in this lesson and to help you apply them on a personal level. We suggest you take the time to write out your answers to these questions and compare them to the scriptures given. Please feel free to write us with any comments or suggestions, including questions about the course or this lesson.

- Must God first invite—or call—people to become part of His family, or is it up to each of us to first call on Him? (Matthew 13:1-8, 10-11, 18-23; 22:14; Romans 8:28-30; John 6:44, 65; 1 Corinthians 1:2).

- What immense sacrifice did God make in order for mankind to have access to Him and salvation? (John 3:16; Hebrews 2:9).

- What kind of attitude does God need to see in us? Do we need to see our shortcomings and smallness in comparison to Him? (2 Timothy 2:24-25; Isaiah 66:2; 1 John 1:8-9; Acts 2:38).

- What help does God offer us to enable us to have a relationship with Him? Are there any conditions to receiving that help? (John 14:16-17, 26; 15:26, 16:7; Acts 5:32; 10:45; 1 John 2:3-6, 5:2-3).

- Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, God extends the opportunity for a relationship with Him, and offers each person an eternal, priceless gift. What is this gift? (Matthew 25:34; 1 John 3:1-3; Titus 1:2; Romans 6:23; 8:11, 30; 1 Timothy 6:12; 2 Peter 1:4).

- God made a covenant with Abraham and then with ancient Israel. Did God say He would make a “new” covenant? (Jeremiah 31:31-33; Hebrews 8:6, 8).

- Who are members of God’s family, His household? (1 Timothy 3:15; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Corinthians 12:12, 27).

- What distinguishes the true disciples of God and makes them a part of the true Church of God? (Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 12:13).

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