

What Is Christian Conversion?



Jordan River, Israel

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What does it mean to be converted? By the middle of the 20th century hundreds of millions of people had been *politically converted* to the atheistic way of life promoted by the Communist Party. The widespread adoption and conversion to communism's social and political ideals made it one of the most powerful belief systems in history. But conversion to that belief system led people *away* from God rather than drawing them to Him.

This should teach us a lesson: Not all conversions are God-inspired. Zealous advocates of almost all ideologies, philosophies and religions regularly attempt to convert others to their own way of thinking.

Wanting to convert others to a different way of life can be a noble aspiration. But who has the right or the authority to decide which way of life is best?

That right belongs exclusively to the Creator God. As our Maker, He alone can determine the standards we must follow if we are to live in peace and harmony with each other.

GOD'S COMMITMENT TO CHANGE OUR NATURE

God very much wants us to become converted—to be one of His *converts*. He wants us not only to *learn* but to *practice* His way of life—to become sincerely and thoroughly committed to it. He promises us His help if we willingly follow His instructions. Through His Spirit He will empower us to “*put on the new man which [is] created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness*” (Ephesians 4:24, emphasis added throughout). His purpose is to *change us, to convert us from the inside, from the heart*.

When one addressed Jesus Christ as “Good Teacher,” He responded: “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God” (Matthew 19:16-17). His point was that God is the only source of righteous character, not that something was wrong with Jesus' own character.

If we are not naturally good, then how do we become righteous in the eyes of God? Jesus supplies the answer: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance” (Mark 2:17).

The Bible explains why mankind so desperately needs spiritual healing. It also explains how that healing can come about. It reveals God's efforts to heal the character defects we generally label as human nature. It begins by showing how humanity became spiritually ill. It ends with spiritually healed human beings inheriting eternal life as the children of God.

In the Bible we find details of God's resolve to save us

from the spiritual malaise that has plagued us throughout history. It explains the source of our behavioral and spiritual problems. It contrasts God's divine nature with our human nature and describes His plan to change some of our most basic attitudes and responses to life's everyday situations. It reveals God's *commitment*—expressed in His “*exceedingly great and precious promises*”—to make us “*partakers of the divine nature*” (2 Peter 1:4).

Two major factors shape all that is wrong with human nature. First is the fundamental weakness inherent in our fleshly body and mind. Our thoughts and emotions are directly linked to our fleshly impulses and desires. We are born with them. But we are born with neither the *knowledge* nor the *power* to properly manage them.

Second, our natural impulses and desires are often affected and even manipulated by external pressures. Adverse influences arise from many sources—familial, educational, recreational, cultural and spiritual, to name a few. But they have one thing in common: They tempt our basic instincts and desires.

Our parents can teach us valuable spiritual knowledge, especially if their understanding is based on the standards and values of God. But only our Creator can give us the power to rightly manage our thoughts and attitudes and resist the temptations that bombard us. Therefore the process of becoming righteous is a *miraculous* process that requires *the direct and active intervention of God*.

First He calls us by opening our minds to understand the Scriptures. Then He begins turning our lives around—if we willingly respond to His calling and cooperate with Him.

WHAT IS CONVERSION?

The word *conversion*, as we use it in religious circles today, usually implies the acceptance of a religious belief

A Reminder

As we suggested in previous lessons, we encourage you to look up, in your own Bible, all the scriptural references mentioned but not directly quoted in this lesson. We include them for your benefit, to add to your understanding of this crucial subject. You can also enhance your understanding by looking up the scriptural references that are quoted in the lesson. This will help you build the habit of learning how each passage is used in its original context. If you have questions not answered in the lesson, you may contact us either through E-mail or the postal system. Members of our staff will do their best to answer them.

system. But the fundamental biblical meaning is “to turn”—usually to *turn to God*.

This, of course, brings up a crucial question: What do we turn *away* from when we turn *to* God; what do we set aside when we are *converted*? Or, in different words, why do we need conversion? What separates us from God in the first place?

The prophet Isaiah gives us the answer: “Behold, the LORD’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your *iniquities* have *separated* you from your God; and your *sins* have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear” (Isaiah 59:1-2). The apostle John adds: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves . . .” (1 John 1:8). To receive blessings and other help from God, we must turn to Him—recognizing and turning from our sins.

Jesus commissioned the apostle Paul to go to the gentiles and “open their eyes, in order to *turn* them from darkness to light, and *from the power of Satan to God*, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me” (Acts 26:18). Christ’s instruction to Paul provides us with a brief outline of how converts are added to His spiritual body, “the church of God” (1 Corinthians 1:2). Each new convert must *turn away* from Satan’s ways by *turning to* the ways of God. Each must accept and respond to God’s terms and conditions for the forgiveness of sin.

In this lesson we examine the process by which our lives can be *turned to* God—the process of *conversion*. We will learn what Peter meant when he exhorted his countrymen, “*Repent* therefore and *be converted*, that your sins may be blotted out . . .” (Acts 3:19). We examine how, beginning with *repentance*, new converts can turn from a life of sin to become servants of the living God.

WHAT IS SIN?

Throughout this course we see that God explains what sin is. But now we will see that the Scriptures give us an even broader view of sin than we have already encountered. So we begin this lesson by examining the aspects of sin most commonly referred to in the Bible. At the same time we will learn *why we sin* so we can better understand the necessity of the *conversion process*. We will then proceed to the other aspects of repentance, baptism and conversion.

How does the Bible define sin in its most direct form?

“Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4).

God’s law defines the difference between right and wrong, between sin and righteousness. As Paul explained, “by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20).

What is the core of God’s law?

“And [God] wrote on the tablets . . . the Ten Commandments, which the LORD had spoken to you in the mountain from the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly; and the LORD gave them to [Moses]” (Deuteronomy 10:4).

All of Scripture’s commands and other laws are based on the principles contained in the Ten Commandments—and the Ten Commandments are based on the *two great areas of love* that reflect God’s character (Matthew 22:37-40; compare 1 John 4:8, 16; Romans 13:9-10).

Sin is behaving in a manner that does not show love to God or to our neighbor. It harms others as well as ourselves. It is especially destructive to our relationships with each other and God.

(For a fuller explanation of the damage caused by breaking God’s commandments, and the benefits we reap from keeping them, be sure to request your free copy of the booklet *The Ten Commandments*.)

What must we do first to be converted?

“. . . If a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live . . .” (Ezekiel 18:21).

To be converted—to *turn away* from sin and receive God’s forgiveness and the Holy Spirit—we must *stop* transgressing His laws and *start* developing habits of righteousness through obedience to them. “Again, when I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die,’ if he *turns* from his sin and *does what is lawful and right*, if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has stolen, and *walks in the statutes of life* without committing iniquity, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of his sins which he has committed shall be remembered against him; he has done what is lawful and right; he shall surely live” (Ezekiel 33:14-16).

How widespread is sin?

“As it is written: ‘There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one’” (Romans 3:10-12; compare verse 23).

The Bible tells us that we all have yielded to the lusts and selfishness of human nature and have violated God’s laws.

Let’s consider both how the Bible portrays various aspects of sin and, at the same time, explains *why* we sin.

Are some sins more easily recognized than others?

“The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19-21, NIV).

Almost everyone understands that outrageously aggressive, hostile and self-indulgent behavior is harmful. But not everyone clearly sees the *source* of such behavior. Therefore some aspects of sin are not as obvious as those Paul described to the Galatians.

Where does sin begin?

“But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart, and they defile the man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts . . .”
(Matthew 15:18-19).

Sin begins in our minds. It starts with harmful thoughts, desires and attitudes. Paul tells us that “we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others” (Ephesians 2:3; compare Romans 1:28-32; Galatians 5:24; Colossians 3:5-9).

Does Jesus give clear examples of such sins?

“But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire”
(Matthew 5:22).

“He answered and said to them, ‘Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: “This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me”’” (Mark 7:6)

“But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28).

Disobedience to God’s laws always begins in the mind. Jesus cited the evils of anger, hypocrisy and lust to illustrate this principle. The apostle Peter likewise understood that sin is the product of corrupted thinking. When rebuking Simon the sorcerer, Peter advised him, “Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you” (Acts 8:22; compare Psalm 81:11-13).

Is it a sin for us to defile our conscience?

“Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5).

“. . . Whatever is not from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23).

Our conscience is merely what we believe to be right or wrong, whether it is or not. When we violate our conscience, we are doing something we think we shouldn’t, and thus are compromising with what we think is wrong. Paul says that this, too, is sin.

We stress that no one is born automatically knowing right from wrong. As we have already seen in this *Bible Study Course*, an understanding of right and wrong comes from knowing God’s law. That knowledge becomes a part of our conscience. If we act contrary to that knowledge, in letter or in spirit, we sin. The apostle Paul also warned: “Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron” (1 Timothy 4:1-2). If we continue to sin

when we know better, we run the risk of “searing” our conscience so we become less sensitive to sin and thus hardened toward God.

Is it possible to see ourselves as more righteous than we are?

“Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others” (Luke 18:9).

In the parable that begins with the next verse in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus describes two men, each of whom looks at himself quite differently. Jesus illustrates that it is easy for one to consider himself righteous when he is not. “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood 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.’ 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!’” (Luke 18:10-13).

The Pharisee, a member of a respected religious body, observed the outward requirements of the law. He appeared righteous to others, but he entirely missed the overall purpose of so many of God’s laws—loving and respecting one’s fellowman. In his heart he still despised other people. He pointed to his outward obedience to exalt himself over others rather than cultivating real love for them.

In contrast, the tax collector, a member of a despised profession that was notorious for cheating people, could see that he had been sinning. He came to God repentant, seeking His merciful forgiveness so he could begin his life anew. Jesus concluded His parable by saying, “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” (verse 14). Only those who humble themselves enough to recognize their sinful attitudes, desires and motives can find true repentance. Those who remain righteous in their own eyes remain spiritually blinded.

OUR SINFUL NATURE

What within us leads us to sin?

“The mind of sinful man is death . . . ; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God” (Romans 8:6-8, NIV; compare Titus 1:15; Isaiah 55:7-8).

As human beings, we prefer to do things our own way. As a result we can easily develop, either consciously or unconsciously, resentment toward God’s authority over us (Colossians 1:21). This is especially true when His instruction forbids us to do as we wish.

It then becomes easy for us to convert, usually unconsciously, our resentments—our underlying hostility toward what we may perceive as God’s unnecessary interference in our affairs—into an active resistance to His

commands. We simply begin to ignore some of His laws or reinterpret them to fit our own views. This is how our *sinful nature*, more commonly called *human nature*, works. These wrong attitudes begin in our minds.

We usually disguise resentful and disobedient attitudes to such an extent that we deceive ourselves into believing they do not exist. As Jeremiah observed: “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9, New American Standard Bible). We easily deceive ourselves into believing we are doing nothing wrong. That is why the Scriptures tell us, “There is a way that *seems right* to a man, but in the end *it leads to death*” (Proverbs 14:12, NIV). We blind ourselves to the seriousness of our own sins.

Everyone must face the problem of a sinful, deceitful mind. There are no exceptions. Resistance to God’s instructions begins in our thoughts and attitudes. We have all sinned. We are all guilty.

Did Paul acknowledge his sinful nature?

“For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me” (Romans 7:14-17, New Revised Standard Version).

Paul well understood his human nature—how deceitful it could be. As a young Jewish boy he had been taught to do what is right. In line with his early training, he was exceptionally sincere. Yet, when Christ opened his mind to see himself as he really was, he recognized

he had deceived himself about his own righteousness. He could see he had sinned in *many* ways, both in action and attitude.

He concluded: “For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, within my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand” (verses 18-21, NRSV).

Paul had not deliberately chosen to sin. Nevertheless, he could look back on his life and recognize that many things he had done were indeed sinful, though at the time he hadn’t grasped that they were wrong and contrary to God’s will. In describing his blindness to his own sinful actions and his weakness in resisting sin, he is describing every one of us.

Must we recognize our sins and deal with them?

“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. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us” (1 John 1:8-10; compare James 1:13-15).

One of our great challenges is to recognize that our attitudes and actions often are not right in God’s sight. We can convince ourselves that our own ways are fair and just. But to be truly converted—to wholeheartedly *turn* to God—we must carefully and willingly examine our own motives. We must recognize we are all too

The Bible’s Broader Concepts of Sin

The Hebrew and Greek words translated “sin” throughout the Bible focus largely on two concepts. The first is transgression.

To *transgress* means “to step across” or “to go beyond a set boundary or limit.” This concept can be compared to an athletic playing field with lines delineating the boundaries within which the game is played. When a player crosses over those boundary lines, he has committed a “transgression” and gone out of bounds. Limits are set that define the playing area, and the players are to stay within the limits of that area.

Most of the other words translated “sin” in the Bible involve a second concept, “to miss the mark.” Again, to use a sports analogy, if a player aims for the goal and misses, how many points does he get? None. He missed the goal; he missed the mark he was aiming at.

This view of sin includes the concept of our going in one direction but *straying off course* and not continuing in the intended direction, with the result that we don’t make it to the goal. We miss.

This concept also encompasses the idea of *failing to measure up to a standard*. For example, most academic courses and tests are graded according to a minimum

standard. If we don’t meet that standard, we fail that test or course. By not meeting that standard we “miss the mark” and don’t pass.

Both of these concepts, *transgressing* and *missing the mark*, involve basic requirements. If we transgress, if we cross set boundaries or limits, then we must have boundaries or limits to cross over. If we *miss the mark* we must have a mark, target or standard to miss. Sin, then, is to transgress the boundaries God has set for us, to miss the target He has established.

This is where the biblical definitions of sin become important—because these scriptures *define the boundaries and standards God sets for us*. They define the playing field on which we are to live. They also define *the goals* we are to aim for, the *minimum standards* we are expected to meet. In other words, the biblical definitions of sin show us the *standards* God has given us that define *what is acceptable* to Him and *what isn’t acceptable*. They show us what *measures up* and what *falls short* of those standards, the fundamental principles God has given us to live by.

The definitions of sin in the Bible are not simply arbitrary dos and don’ts. Instead, they show us the way God wants us to live, the spiritual principles that reflect His character.

susceptible to desires that channel our thinking down the pathways of sin.

Jesus explained that our priorities—what is most important to us—usually determine our actions. He cited the common problem of greed as an example: “No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.’ The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, ‘You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight’” (Luke 16:13-15, NIV).

What we cherish the most determines how we behave. When our values are flawed we look for ways to justify our views and behavior, deceiving ourselves (James 1:22-24).

What is a common self-deception?

“He answered and said to them, ‘Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: “This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. 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 . . . All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition’” (Mark 7:6-9; compare Colossians 2:8).

Traditions not solidly based on God’s principles and laws often provide us with easy excuses to sin. Since almost everybody else practices them, we reason, how could they be wrong?

But many times they are wrong. Jesus showed that common religious traditions, while outwardly appearing righteous, in reality can be disguising sin. “For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother’ and ‘Anyone who curses

his father or mother must be put to death.’ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,’ he is not to ‘honour his father’ with it. Thus you nullify the word of God *for the sake of your tradition*” (Matthew 15:4-6, NIV).

One of the reasons Christ died for us was to pay our penalty for following traditions contrary to the Scriptures. The apostle Peter confirms this. “. . . Conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear; knowing 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 1:17-19). It is important that we examine the traditions we follow to be sure they are not in conflict with the Word of God.

HOW WE ARE TEMPTED

What, outside of the pulls of our flesh, is most responsible for tempting us to sin?

“But Peter said, ‘Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit . . . ?’” (Acts 5:3).

“And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts” (Mark 4:15).

“For some have already turned aside after Satan” (1 Timothy 5:15).

The Scriptures sometimes refer to Satan as the “tempter” (Matthew 4:3). He is a master at tempting us to yield to our weaknesses and selfish desires (Ephesians 2:1-3).

Paul cautioned Christians, having turned from Satan’s

The Devil’s Role in Religion

The Scriptures reveal that, as “the god of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:4), the devil has assembled a vast multitude of human assistants. Most of these are mere followers. But far too many of his followers are also deceived religious teachers.

Paul explains the connection between them and the devil: “For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if *his ministers* also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works” (2 Corinthians 11:13-14).

Blinded by false but popular doctrines and traditions that have passed from one generation to another, these deceived teachers are among Satan’s most influential tools of deception. He uses them to cleverly disguise his ways as God’s ways and lead people astray.

Some of these leaders, and the institutions they serve, are obviously based on nonbiblical concepts. In other

words, their beliefs are secular or pagan in origin. They make no pretense of following the Holy Scriptures.

But many others are counterfeits of the Church Jesus established. Jesus Himself predicted that false teachers would rise up who would “deceive many” (Matthew 24:5, 11, 24). This counterfeit Christianity began during the lifetime of Christ’s apostles (Galatians 1:6-7). Peter warned faithful Christians: “But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be *false teachers* among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And *many will follow their destructive ways*, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed” (2 Peter 2:1-2).

The devil plays an immense role in the religions of mankind. Only those who ask for God’s help, as they diligently study the Bible and compare their beliefs to what it teaches, can hope to overcome the deceptions that are so prevalent in today’s religious organizations and fellowships.

influence, not to surrender again to it. He knew this was a real danger (2 Corinthians 11:3). He wrote, “For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means *the tempter* had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain” (1 Thessalonians 3:5).

What is one of Satan’s primary ways of seducing people to sin?

“For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works” (2 Corinthians 11:13-15).

Few people understand the extent of Satan’s influence over the world’s religious institutions and practices. Satan has succeeded in providing people with every religious preference they could possibly imagine. Religious confusion is the result. Only by carefully reading and following the Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:13-17) can we extricate ourselves from the worldwide morass of religious confusion and deception. (Be sure to read “The Devil’s Role in Religion,” page 6.)

Because of this widespread religious deception, it is essential that we pray for God’s help to correctly understand His Word and repent of our transgressions. When we desire to change our lives, and from the heart to surrender our will to God, He has promised to hear us and respond. “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks [from the heart and according to His will] receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened” (Matthew 7:7-8). “And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight” (1 John 3:22).

God used the prophet Nathan to rebuke King David for committing adultery with Bathsheba after arranging for her husband to be killed in battle (2 Samuel 12:7-9). David humbly acknowledged his sins and repented before God in prayer. Be sure to read and meditate on David’s heartfelt prayer of repentance as recorded in Psalm 51:1-3, 6-10. God has preserved David’s prayer of repentance as an example of the attitude we should have when asking Him for forgiveness.

THE IMPORTANCE OF REPENTANCE

We have already learned that we repent by turning away from sin and surrendering our lives to God. Repentance begins with God’s calling—His opening our minds to correctly understand His Word. Then we must pray for His help and begin studying the Scriptures to find out what we need to change. We do this by comparing our beliefs, behavior, customs, traditions and thoughts to the Holy Bible. God’s Word is the only trustworthy standard by which we can measure our attitudes and behavior.

This thorough self-examination process is essential if

our repentance is to be genuine, and it may take a considerable amount of our time, especially if we are unfamiliar with the Scriptures. Now let’s see what the Bible says about real repentance and its importance to our relationship with God.

Did Jesus stress the importance of repentance?

“I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance” (Luke 5:32).

“Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel’” (Mark 1:14-15; compare Matthew 4:17).

Jesus taught that our most important priority should be to enter the Kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33). From the beginning of His public ministry He stressed that *repentance* is an integral part of reaching that goal.

Did God’s prophets of old preach repentance?

“And the LORD has sent to you all His servants the prophets, rising early and sending them, but you have not listened nor inclined your ear to hear. They said, ‘Repent now everyone of his evil way and his evil doings . . .’” (Jeremiah 25:4-5).

Must this same message continue to be preached to the whole world?

“Then [Jesus] said to them, ‘. . . All things must be fulfilled which were written . . . concerning Me . . . Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:44-47).

The Scriptures show God is consistent. From the beginning He has sent His servants with the same message: “Repent, and *turn* from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit” (Ezekiel 18:30-31).

Must everyone repent?

“I tell you . . . unless you repent you will all . . . perish” (Luke 13:3; compare Acts 17:30; 2 Peter 3:9).

Eternal life in the Kingdom of God is available only to those who repent of their sins! There are no exceptions, because “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

WHAT IS REPENTANCE?

What, in God’s sight, demonstrates that our repentance is genuine?

“Then [John the Baptist] said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance . . . Every

tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:7-9).

“First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, [Paul] preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds” (Acts 26:20, NIV).

Genuine repentance produces a change in the way we live, even in the way we think. Those who say they have repented but produce no “fruits worthy of repentance” (Matthew 3:8) deceive themselves. “They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him . . .” (Titus 1:16). “For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does” (James 1:23-25).

What is the attitude of the truly repentant?

“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!’” (Luke 18:13).

“My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself, and repent . . .” (Job 42:4-6, NIV).

True repentance is more than just acknowledging we are wrong. Even the desire to do wrong should become repulsive to us. God wants us to “hate evil” (Proverbs 8:13), especially the evil we come to recognize in ourselves.

We must earnestly want God to change our hearts. Like King David of old, we should ask God to create a clean heart and a right spirit within us (Psalm 51:10). We must see ourselves as sinners and be genuinely remorseful. We must recognize that our sins originate in our thoughts, often motivated by our pride and selfishness, anger and jealousy, our lust and greed—in short, our human nature.

Does Jesus confirm that sin starts in the heart?

“For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person” (Mark 7:21-23, NRSV).

Some of these inherently human traits may be more pronounced than others. Nevertheless, if we sincerely ask God to open our eyes to see ourselves as we are, we should be able to recognize in ourselves many attitudes and behaviors that the Scriptures define as sinful. Then we should go to God in prayer for the power we need to turn away from those ways and replace them with the nature and character of God as revealed in the Holy Scriptures.

Does repentance include changing our attitude toward others’ sins against you?

“And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses” (Mark 11:25-26).

“Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him” (Luke 17:3-4).

Since God’s law is based on loving Him and loving others even as we love ourselves (Mark 12:30-31), forgiving others is a significant part of our repentance. Jesus taught: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you” (Luke 6:27-28, NIV).

BAPTISM: WHY DO WE NEED IT?

What part of the conversion process follows true repentance?

“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).

“And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22:16).

It is through baptism that we formally make our commitment to permanently turn from sin and surrender our lives to God.

Did Jesus and the apostles baptize the repentant?

“Therefore, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John . . . , He left Judea and departed again to Galilee” (John 4:1-3).

“And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized” (Acts 18:8).

Does Jesus want His servants to continue baptizing new disciples?

“And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘. . . 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; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age’” (Matthew 28:18-20).

Jesus *commanded* His disciples to continue baptizing after His death and resurrection. His promise to be with them until the end of the age—which has not yet occurred—shows that He intended for baptism to be a part of His followers’ responsibilities through all intervening ages, including our own.

Why is baptism important?

“He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16).

Baptism goes right to the heart of God’s forgiveness of our sins and His gift of salvation. Through His death Christ paid the penalty (Romans 6:23) for our sins. At the Passover meal the night before His crucifixion, Jesus blessed a cup of wine and said to His disciples, “For this is [represents] My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matthew 26:28).

Paul explained that “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). Then He added, “. . . Having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him” (verse 9). Paul also wrote, “This is a faithful saying: ‘For if we died with Him, we shall also live with Him’” (2 Timothy 2:11).

In what way do we die with Christ?

“. . . Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?” (Romans 6:3).

Baptism is a symbolic *burial* ceremony—commanded by Jesus Himself—through which we accept His death as a sacrifice for our sins. “For I delivered to you first of all,” wrote Paul, “that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

Paul also explained: “. . . Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified [considered sinless] by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood . . .” (Romans 3:23-25, NRSV).

Through the ceremony of baptism we become

symbolically united with Christ in death. “For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin” (Romans 6:5-6).

What responsibility comes with baptism?

“Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

“In the same way you must regard yourselves as dead to sin and alive to God, in union with Christ Jesus. Therefore sin must no longer reign in your mortal body; exacting obedience to the body’s desires. You must no longer put any part of it at sin’s disposal, as an implement for doing wrong. Put yourselves instead at the disposal of God; think of yourselves as raised from death to life, and yield your bodies to God as implements for doing right” (verses 11-13, Revised English Bible).

Baptism signifies the end of a life of habitual sinning and the beginning of a new life devoted to righteousness. “. . . Denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, *that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works*” (Titus 2:11-14).

Does this responsibility include living an obedient life?

“It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’” (Matthew 4:4).

“But Peter and the other apostles answered and

Other Baptisms

When John the Baptist spoke of *baptism with fire* and *baptism with the Holy Spirit*, what did He mean? Notice John’s exact words: “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matthew 3:11-12).

The word *baptize* means to “put into” or “immerse” in something. John baptized in water by dipping people into the water of the Jordan River. But He was explaining that Christ would go beyond what he was doing. He immediately explained his reference to baptism with fire. Those who refuse to repent are to be regarded as “chaff” and, at the end of the age, thrown

into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15).

Jesus Himself explained the baptism with the Holy Spirit. He told His disciples that “John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1:5). This was fulfilled a few days later on the Feast of Pentecost when the disciples of Christ “were all filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:1-4).

What does Paul mean in 1 Corinthians 12:13 when he says, “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body”? Later in the same chapter Paul explains what he is talking about. “Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually” (verse 27). That body is explicitly identified as “the church of God” in Acts 20:28. One who receives the Holy Spirit is immediately “put into” and made a member of the “body of Christ,” the Church of God. (For more details on these other “baptisms” be sure to request your free copy of the booklet *The Road to Eternal Life*.)

said: *‘We ought to obey God rather than men’*” (Acts 5:29; compare 2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

The teachings of the entire Bible—both Old and New Testaments—become our guide to life. The New Testament explains *how* we should apply Old Testament teachings under the New Covenant. The emphasis of the New Covenant is on the proper implementation of the spirit—the intent—of God’s laws.

No longer can we live however we want, ignoring God’s instructions. Jesus made this abundantly clear: “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. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, *you who practice lawlessness!*’” (Matthew 7:21-23). We are to live *lawfully*, not lawlessly!

Why was Jesus baptized?

“Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he consented” (Matthew 3:13-15, NRSV).

“It came to pass in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan” (Mark 1:9).

Jesus was born to be a perfect example for us as a physical human being. Though He never sinned and needed no forgiveness, He was baptized to show us the example we should follow. As He was baptized, so should we be baptized. He personally showed us that baptism is the way He has established for us to unite with Him in death so our sins can be forgiven.

Should children be baptized?

“And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized” (Acts 18:8).

“Then those who gladly received his word were baptized” (Acts 2:41).

“But when they believed . . . both men and women were baptized” (Acts 8:12).

Baptism is for those mature enough to comprehend and believe the meaning of repentance and baptism. Except on rare occasions for some in their later teen years, most children are not old enough to evaluate why they sin. They simply are not mature enough to understand their own nature and what is wrong with it.

Children are precious to God. Jesus took little children into His arms and blessed them (Mark 10:13-16). But in every specific example of baptism mentioned in the Bible, we see that those being baptized were old enough and mature enough to understand repentance, baptism and the seriousness of their commitment. Only those who

are mature enough to produce the fruits of repentance should be baptized.

Is it ever necessary to rebaptize adults?

“And he said to them, ‘Into what then were you baptized?’ So they said, ‘Into John’s baptism.’ Then Paul said, ‘John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.’ When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 19:3-5).

Although these people had been immersed by the baptism of John the Baptist, they had not received the Holy Spirit (verse 2). Only those who receive God’s Spirit are converted disciples of Christ (Romans 8:9). Paul rebaptized them in the name of Jesus Christ so they would receive the Holy Spirit.

Today many people have been baptized who never understood what sin is or what real repentance entailed. They, too, would need to be rebaptized to receive God’s Spirit and be converted.

How should we be baptized?

“Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there. And they came and were baptized” (John 3:23).

“When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him” (Matthew 3:16).

Notice that John the Baptist chose a location where there was “much water” to baptize those who came to him. And Jesus *“came up . . . from the water”* when He was baptized. Why is this wording significant? The Greek word *baptizo* means to “immerse,” to “dip into” or to “submerge.”

Jesus set us an example of being fully submerged in water in a place where there was “much water” to make this possible. All other examples of baptisms by Christ’s disciples mentioned in the Scriptures follow this pattern. For example, we read in Acts 8:38 that “both Philip and the eunuch went down *into* the water, and he [Philip] baptized him.” There is no biblical example of any other form of water baptism.

The *symbolism* of baptism, as the burial of the old self, *requires a ceremony picturing a true burial*. Only baptism by immersion fulfills this symbolic requirement. Therefore, following the example of our Savior, we too should be fully immersed in water when we are baptized, symbolically *burying* the old self with Him in a watery grave.

GOD’S GRACE AND FORGIVENESS

Since God forgives our sins at baptism, we need to appreciate how great forgiveness is. At the same time, however, we need to understand that forgiveness carries with it obligations. We also need to understand that some religious teachers, claiming to represent Christ, often misconstrue and misuse God’s mercy and forgiveness.

In the Scriptures God's forgiveness is often directly associated with the word *grace*, which refers to undeserved favor that we receive from God. *Grace* is also closely related to the word *gift*. It usually refers to an unearned gift or favor, such as God's gifts of forgiveness and eternal life. It is essential that we understand the real meaning and purpose of God's grace and forgiveness. The concepts are closely linked together in the Scriptures. Both are crucial to our salvation.

God's grace, however, is often falsely represented by many religious teachers.

How is God's grace misunderstood and misused?

"For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality . . ." (Jude 4, NIV).

Even in the days of Christ's apostles, clever "false apostles" (2 Corinthians 11:13) began misinterpreting the Scriptures and Jesus' teachings. They misrepresented God's grace—especially in Paul's writings (2 Peter 3:15-16)—as license to ignore God's laws. This particular twisting of the Scriptures, which continues in many religious circles, amounts to *permission to sin*.

What do such teachers offer in place of God's law?

"For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity—for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him" (2 Peter 2:18-19, NIV).

A false liberty—freedom from God's laws and authority—has always been the real goal of false teachers. Peter describes teachers advancing twisted concepts of "freedom" as "those who follow the corrupt desire of the sinful nature and despise authority" (verse 10, NIV).

In effect, they have misrepresented God's grace as independence from His law—the very law that defines sin. They have advocated a type of *freedom*—a release from any obligation to obey the commandments of God—that is nowhere taught in the Bible. They are ruled by their human nature, the *fleshly* mind that Paul describes as "not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be" (Romans 8:7).

Nevertheless, they have succeeded in convincing a significant part of professing Christianity that God's grace supports their false concept. We must be careful never to allow ourselves to be taken in by any teaching that turns grace into a license to sin.

How does Peter describe those embracing this deceptive freedom?

"For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them

not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: 'A dog returns to his own vomit,' and, 'a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire'" (2 Peter 2:20-22).

What kind of freedom does the Bible really teach?

"But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life" (Romans 6:22).

"So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty" (James 2:12).

"But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does" (James 1:25).

Today the teaching that faith is *all* we need for forgiveness and salvation is popular. But, according to the Scriptures, we are "set free from *sin*" that we may become the "slaves of God." We must be "a doer of the work." So let's examine what the Scriptures really teach about the relationship between faith, works and obedience to God.

Do the Scriptures reveal that faith must be accompanied by works?

"Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (James 2:17).

James goes on to explain why *faith without deeds* (actions that prove we genuinely believe God) is "*dead*"—utterly useless. "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).

James's point is that our actions demonstrate whether our faith is genuine. Abraham proved his faith was authentic by what he did. James explains that we need to follow Abraham's example.

Paul concluded a discussion on the importance of faith by emphasizing: "Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, *we establish the law*" (Romans 3:31). Both faith and the law of God are essential components of repentance—and the conversion process.

WHY MUST WE BE RECONCILED TO GOD?

How has sin affected our relationship with God?

"Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it

cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear” (Isaiah 59:1-2).

What is the solution to our alienation from God?

“Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon” (Isaiah 55:6-7).

How can we be reconciled to God?

“Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation” (Romans 5:9-11; compare 2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

Does God expect us to strive to be blameless after our reconciliation to Him?

“And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight; if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard . . .” (Colossians 1:21-23).

Those reconciled to God through faith in Christ’s sacrifice must continue living “in the faith”—that is, in harmony with the fundamental beliefs taught from all of God’s Word (Matthew 4:4).

What sins are covered by Christ’s blood?

“They [believers] are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed” (Romans 3:24-25, NRSV).

At our baptism God forgives our *past* sins—“sins previously committed”—that we have repented of and stopped practicing. But His grace and mercy never give us permission to continue sinning. Notice how Paul began his explanation of baptism: “What shall we say then? Shall we *continue* in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?” (Romans 6:1-2).

Christ died to pay for our sins and lead us to repentance. He never intended that we misconstrue grace and forgiveness as permission to ignore the core teachings that God revealed through the Scriptures before He was even born. Instead He taught, as we have already read, that

“man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God” (Luke 4:4).

Why do we need God’s grace?

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Nothing we do can earn us forgiveness and salvation. Both are gifts from God. “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. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (John 3:16-18).

Is faith in God’s grace through Christ’s sacrifice necessary for forgiveness?

“. . . You were . . . buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses” (Colossians 2:11-13).

“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, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thessalonians 1:11-12).

Should our faith in God’s forgiveness affect our conscience?

“Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Hebrews 10:19-22).

Once our “old man” is buried through baptism, God wants us to put behind us all feelings of guilt over past sins. He wants us to approach our future with confidence that our sins have been forgiven by Him. We are to begin a new life without fretting over the past.

Paul describes the attitude of a *clear conscience* God wants for us. “Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, *forgetting those things which are behind* and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. There-

fore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind . . .” (Philippians 3:13-15).

IS OUR CONSCIENCE IMPORTANT?

Should we strive to maintain a clear conscience after we are baptized?

“Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5).

“Therefore you must be subject [to governing authorities], not only because of wrath but also for conscience’ sake” (Romans 13:5).

“For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully” (1 Peter 2:19).

Will God forgive us if we sin after baptism?

“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:1-2, NRSV; compare 1 John 1:7-9).

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

We should diligently strive not to sin, especially after we are baptized. But we are not yet perfect beings. As Paul said: “I know that I have not yet reached that goal” (Philippians 3:13, New Century

Version). Therefore, when we genuinely repent of sins committed after baptism, God forgives us just as He does at the time of baptism.

The key lies in our repentant attitude of heart. After having rebuked the members of the Corinthian church for certain ungodly attitudes (1 Corinthians 3:1-4), Paul commended them for repenting. “For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it. For I perceive that the same epistle made you sorry, though only for a while. Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that *your sorrow led to repentance*. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing.

“For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. For observe this very thing, *that you sorrowed in a godly manner*: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter” (2 Corinthians 7:8-11).

How great are God’s mercy and forgiveness?

“‘Come now, and let us reason together,’ says the LORD, ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool’” (Isaiah 1:18).

“For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in mercy to all those who call upon You” (Psalm 86:5).

King David prayed: “Do not remember the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions; according to Your

A Stirring Example of Faith

We find an inspiring example of God helping His faithful servants in a time of crisis in the book of Daniel. Three Jewish captives were ordered by the king of Babylon to bow before an idolatrous image or be killed. Their situation could not have been worse. Yet their commitment to God was unwavering. They believed His promise to help them. They trusted Him.

Notice their response to the king: “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up’” (Daniel 3:16-18).

The king carried out his threat and had them thrown into the fire. But God miraculously spared their lives. Then, in amazement, the king summoned them to walk out of the fiery furnace (verse 26). “And the satraps, administrators, governors, and the king’s counselors gathered together, and they saw these men on whose bodies the fire had no power; the hair of their head was

not singed nor were their garments affected, and the smell of fire was not on them. Nebuchadnezzar spoke, saying, ‘Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, who sent His Angel and delivered His servants who trusted in Him, and they have frustrated the king’s word, and yielded their bodies, that they should not serve nor worship any god except their own God!’” (verses 27-28).

This and other biblical examples of God’s love and faithfulness are preserved in the Scriptures to give us the courage and faith to believe He can help us with difficult circumstances that may arise in our lives. These young men did not know whether God would intervene to spare them or not. Nevertheless, they were determined to remain faithful to Him regardless of the consequences. Their outstanding example of faithful obedience remains an inspiration for us today.

If we always put God first He has promised never to abandon us. Regardless of whether He chooses to intervene for us when we want Him to, “. . . He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ So we may boldly say: ‘The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?’” (Hebrews 13:5-6).

mercy remember me, for Your goodness' sake, O LORD" (Psalm 25:7). In other psalms he praised God for the kindness and mercy shown him. From David's words we, too, can learn to appreciate God's abundant love, mercy and forgiveness.

David writes: "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgives all your iniquities, . . . who redeems your life from destruction, who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies" (Psalm 103:2-4).

"The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy . . . He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us" (verses 8-12).

David continues: "As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust . . . But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him . . . [and] keep His covenant, and to those who remember His commandments to do them" (verses 13-18).

So great is God's mercy we also should be able to say, "Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever" (Psalm 118:1-2).

FAITH, CHOICE AND COMMITMENT

What should be our top priority once we repent and are baptized?

"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness . . ." (Matthew 6:33).

"You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3).

"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24).

God wants us to put obedience to Him and seeking His righteousness and His Kingdom ahead of everything else in this life. Our commitment to serve Him wholeheartedly, however, may present us with difficult choices. Paul explains: ". . . All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12). Therefore we need to evaluate, ahead of time, how strong our commitment to God is so we will be prepared to make the choices He wants us to make.

Does God promise to help those who trust Him when they face difficult choices?

"No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13, NRSV).

God tells us that "many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all" (Psalm 34:19). For an excellent example of God delivering His faithful servants from a crisis, be sure to read

How Important Are Our Choices?

In His parable about the sower and the seed, Jesus illustrates that people make different choices when they hear God's Word explained to them. In this parable each participant hears the Word of God. But each responds differently to what he hears. You can read the parable in the 13th chapter of Matthew. Jesus recites the parable, then tells what it means.

First He explains the response of one whom God has not yet called. "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and *does not understand it*, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside" (Matthew 13:19). He never gets the picture.

Next Jesus explains three different responses from those who understand His message—those whom God has called. God has opened their minds. All three grasp the meaning of Jesus' message. But each one responds differently—and for different reasons.

"But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles" (verses 20-21). His first response is one of joyful acceptance. But his enthusiasm is quickly quenched. Why? He reacts to pressure

from others. He cares more about pleasing people than pleasing God. He is afraid to rock the boat. Conforming to the customs and expectations of his family, friends and society is more important to him than serving God. He wilts under pressure and eventually *rejects* God's calling.

"Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful" (verse 22). This person is somewhat different. He is not as concerned about the opinions of his peers. But he does have a problem: He, too, refuses to put God first in his life. He is distracted by other things. Satisfying his personal needs and maintaining his status consume his interest, time and energy. He is too busy serving himself. He has no time left for God, so, through simple neglect, he also rejects God's calling.

"But he who received seed on the good ground is he who *hears* the word and *understands* it, who indeed *bears fruit* and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty" (verse 23). This person not only understands God's Word but takes it seriously. He puts it into practice. He changes his life! Of all the examples in this parable, only this person is *chosen* for salvation. He puts God first in his life. He makes a commitment to God and keeps it. Will we follow his example?

“A Stirring Example of Faith,” page 13.

How does God respond to those who refuse to trust Him?

“Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD, they would have none of my counsel and despised my every rebuke. Therefore they shall eat the fruit of their own way, and be filled to the full with their own fancies . . . But whoever listens to me will dwell safely, and will be secure, without fear of evil” (Proverbs 1:29-33).

Our commitment to God is necessary (Mark 8:34-38). He tells us, “But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word” (Isaiah 66:2, NASB). His response to us depends in large part on whether we trust Him, whether our faith in Him is solid. (Be sure to read “How Important Are Our Choices?,” page 14.)

WHY WE NEED THE HOLY SPIRIT

Do we, on our own, have the ability to carry out our commitment to God?

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God . . .” (Ephesians 2:8).

“. . . Jesus said to His disciples, ‘Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.’ When His disciples heard it, they were greatly astonished, saying, ‘Who then can be saved?’ But Jesus looked at them and said to them, ‘With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible’” (Matthew 19:23-26).

At baptism we commit our life to God. But, within ourselves alone, we possess neither the power nor the faith to keep that commitment as we should. We desperately need divine power to assist us in fulfilling God’s wonderful calling. That strength comes as a gift from God.

How do we receive strength from God?

“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you . . .” (Acts 1:8).

As Paul explained: “. . . It is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). He also wrote, with great confidence, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

Is receiving God’s Spirit, like baptism, a necessary part of conversion?

“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).

“But Jesus answered, ‘I tell you the truth, unless one is born from water and the Spirit, he cannot enter God’s kingdom. Human life comes from human parents, but spiritual life comes from the Spirit’” (John 3:5-6, New Century Version).

How and when does God give His Spirit?

“Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit . . . Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:14-17).

The Scriptures, by example, show that God normally gives the Holy Spirit to those who are baptized when the true ministers of Christ pray for them as they are *laying their hands* on them (Acts 8:14-17; 19:5-6). In Hebrew 6:1-2 the “*laying on of hands*” is listed among “*the elementary principles of Christ*” that make up the foundational doctrines of the Church—showing it is a procedure we should still practice.

WHEN SHOULD WE BE BAPTIZED?

How soon was Paul baptized after God called him?

“And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22:16).

After Christ appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, He sent to him a man named Ananias who spoke the words above that Paul might regain his sight, be baptized and be filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17-18). Paul was baptized immediately.

Sometimes people delay baptism because they think they must first become perfect. Others think they have not learned enough. But such reasoning is incorrect. The Scriptures record many examples of people who, when they heard the truth of God explained, saw their need to be baptized immediately (Acts 2:41; 8:12, 26-38; 16:30-33; 18:8).

Being baptized and receiving the Holy Spirit are the *beginning* of a new life in Christ. We should request baptism as soon as possible after repenting. Once we understand that our previous way of life needs to be changed and we sincerely want to change it, we must have God’s help to go forward. We receive that help by being baptized and receiving His Spirit.

With whom should we counsel for baptism?

“How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent?” (Romans 10:14-15).

Since baptism is one of most important actions we can ever take in this life, we should be sure to counsel with a minister who is truly “sent” by God—a minister who faithfully teaches and practices keeping all of

God's commandments and correctly understands the teachings of the Scriptures.

WHAT NEXT?

It is beyond the scope of this lesson to cover everything God does for us through His Spirit. In the next lesson, however, we will examine how God, through the Holy Spirit, works in those who have repented and are baptized to *transform* their character to reflect His holy, righteous character. We will explore the details of how God continues the conversion process after baptism, creating, in His servants, His own *divine nature*.

In the meantime we suggest you set aside time to carefully study the Gospel of Luke. This account of the good news of Jesus Christ is particularly focused on His teachings relating to repentance and conversion. We suggest you begin each study period with prayer. Ask God to give you understanding. Ask Him to assist you in applying what you read to your life. After you have finished studying Luke, we suggest you review what you have learned in this lesson.

If you desire personal counseling, you may contact our office nearest you for information on how to get in touch with a faithful minister of Jesus Christ who is serving your area. All of the ministers we recommend keep the commandments of God and are well trained in Bible understanding. They reside in many areas throughout the world. You may request their free counsel and guidance without any obligation on your part.

For additional information on the subjects covered in this lesson, be sure to request the following booklets:

- *What Is Your Destiny?*
- *The Road to Eternal Life.*
- *The Ten Commandments.*
- *You Can Have Living Faith.*
- *The Church Jesus Built.*
- *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion.*

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.

• How does the Bible define sin, and how widespread is it? (1 John 3:4; Deuteronomy 10:4; Matthew 22:37-40; Romans 3:10-12, 20, 23).

• Are some sins obvious while others are hidden within us? (Galatians 5:19-21; Mark 7:20-23; 1 Timothy 5:24).

• What within us leads us to sin? What must we do to deal with and to overcome self-deception? (Romans 8:6-8; Jeremiah 17:9; Proverbs 14:12; 1 John 1:8-10).

• What influences outside ourselves can tempt us to sin? (Acts 5:3; Mark 4:15, 18-19; Matthew 13:20-21; Ephesians 2:1-3).

• Is God's help necessary to even start to repent of sin and turn to God? (John 6:44; Hebrews 4:15-16; Romans 2:4).

• Must everyone repent? (2 Peter 3:9; Acts 17:30; Luke 13:1-3).

• What is repentance, and what are some of its fruits? (Psalm 51:1-3, 6-10; Luke 18:13; 3:7-9; James 1:23-25).

• Why is baptism important? What does it represent, and what responsibility comes with it? (Mark 16:16; Romans 6:4, 11-13, 17-18).

• Without God's great mercy and grace, is there any way to be made right with Him? (Isaiah 59:1-2; Romans 5:9-10; Ephesians 2:8-10).

• Does God's Spirit make it possible for us to carry out our commitment to God? (Matthew 19:25-26; Acts 1:8; 2:38; Philippians 2:13).

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