

*The
Road to
Eternal
Life*



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The Road to Eternal Life

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Introduction

" . . . Broad is the road that leads to destruction . . . and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Matthew 7:13-14, New International Version).

Do you believe in many roads to salvation? Although most churches have formal procedures for admitting believers into their group, their practices differ greatly. Each seems to take a different road. Even their baptismal ceremonies are different. Some sprinkle or pour. Others fully immerse



believers in a stream or lake. Some groups baptize babies, while others do not. Still others believe there is no need for baptism at all.

Most claim to obtain their authority from the Bible, yet they are widely diverse in their practices. Can such vastly different beliefs and customs be justified in the Bible? And does it really matter—to you or to God?

Baptismal ceremonies among churches differ greatly. Some sprinkle or pour. Others immerse believers. Some groups baptize babies, while others do not. Still others believe there is no need for baptism at all. Does it matter?

When you think about establishing a relationship with God, what comes to mind? Do you envision attending a revival meeting or following a televangelist? How about prayer meetings or church-sponsored bingo games? Perhaps your only contact with religion has been hard-sell, door-to-door evangelism or street-corner preachers.

Faced with so many varying and contradictory approaches, it isn't surprising that many people have become cynical of religion altogether. To some, the idea that one can live forever surely must be one of those too-good-to-be-true notions. To the hard-core cynic, baptism may sound like just an empty religious term or quaint custom, and suggesting that it's a necessary step for eternal life might seem preposterous.

Others simply don't know what to make of it.

But what about you? Do you know what the Bible reveals on this vital subject? Notice what Jesus Christ Himself has to say: "No one can come to Me *unless the Father who sent Me draws him*; and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:44, emphasis added throughout).



Baptism represents the most significant commitment we can make in this life. Though a simple ceremony, it acknowledges profound changes in one's heart and mind.

their sins (Acts 2:38). Then God gave those who did so His Holy Spirit, which He will also give to us if we follow these same steps, enabling us to live the new life to which He has called us.

Baptism represents the most significant commitment a human being can make in this life. Though a simple ceremony, it powerfully acknowledges profound changes in one's heart and mind. It represents utter rejection of past sinful ways and embarking on a new life of fully yielding to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

God earnestly desires that we take this path. Peter tells us, "The Lord is . . . longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish *but that all should come to repentance*" (2 Peter 3:9). Accepting His offer allows us to become His children. In John 1:12 we read, "As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God."

Baptism, as explained in your Bible, is much more than a means to join a church or just a religious ceremony for infants. It represents a mature decision, made only after careful deliberation. Jesus cautioned anyone who would follow Him to "count the cost" before committing (see Luke 14:27-33). Baptism portrays the magnitude of that commitment—and is a major step on the narrow road that leads to eternal life.

Clearly, coming to God is a process that He starts, and we must choose to accept or reject His way when offered. If we accept, we have a definite process to follow that He clearly reveals in Scripture.

On the Day of Pentecost following Christ's death and resurrection, the apostle Peter instructed those assembled to *repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of*

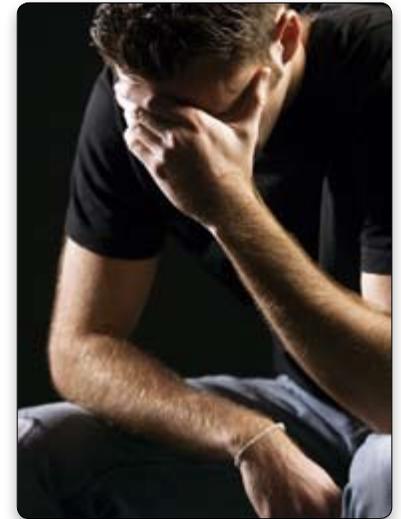
Repentance: Your First Step

"In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!'" (Matthew 3:1-2).

After God calls us, *repentance* is the starting point in our relationship with Him. Without repentance, we are cut off from 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).

However, God wants all to repent and become His children (2 Peter 3:9; John 1:12). For this to happen, God in His great mercy begins leading us to repentance (Romans 2:4).

Notice how God used the apostle Peter to instruct those He was calling. In Peter's first recorded sermon on the Day of Pentecost, he said, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."



The Bible describes repentance as a profound realization of our sins and resulting sorrow that leads us to change our thoughts and actions.

Those listening were "cut to the heart." They implored Peter and the other apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"

Peter replied, "*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 2:36-38).

But what does it mean to "repent"? Definitions of repentance include: a turning with sorrow from a past course of action; the changing of

one's mind for the better; regret or contrition; sorrow for sin with self-condemnation; abhorrence of past sins; complete turning from sin.

The Bible describes repentance as a profound realization of our sins and resulting sorrow that leads us to change our thoughts and actions: "For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2 Corinthians 7:10).

Godly sorrow allows us to see how totally selfish, corrupt and far from God we are and causes us to place our hope in Him. It leads to a deep, life-altering commitment. Worldly sorrow, by contrast, is shallow and superficial, producing no real and permanent change.

At its core, repentance is *change*. It is turning from our previous self-centered way of life to serve God and center our life around Him.

Peter, in his sermon quoted above, described repentance as a personal expression of deep and heartfelt *surrender* to God, the result of recognizing and acknowledging what Jesus, as our personal Savior, did to reconcile us to God the Father (Romans 5:8-10; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20). Repentance unites us with God the Father and Jesus Christ in an extraordinary relationship.

The miracle of repentance

Early in our relationship with God, we need to understand that repentance is a miracle. Through the Bible we see the opportunity to repent as a gift from God, possible only when God draws us to Him. As pointed out earlier, Jesus plainly stated, "No one can come to Me, *unless the Father who sent Me draws him*" (John 6:44).

It is impossible for anyone, acting alone, to completely surrender his or her will to God. Humanly we cannot comprehend the *depth of change* that God desires to see in our hearts and minds. We need help even to understand what sin is!

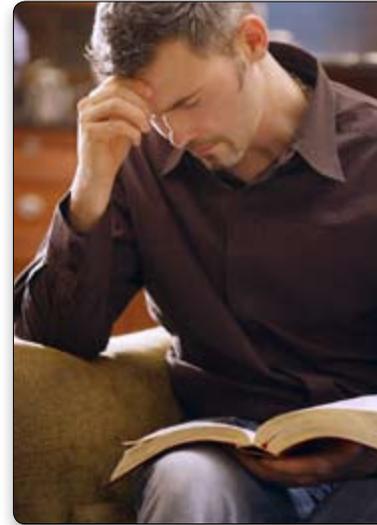
That's why God must *grant* us repentance (Acts 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25). In addition, we need the will—both the desire and the choice—to repent. This willingness to repent, too, comes from God: "For God is working in you, giving you the *desire* to obey him and the *power to do* what pleases him" (Philippians 2:13, New Living Translation).

Although God "desires all men to be saved," He doesn't force anyone to repent (1 Timothy 2:4). His kindness and goodness *lead* us to repentance as mentioned (Romans 2:4), but He doesn't make the choice for us. The decision is still ours.

Those who choose to genuinely repent soon realize that God is active in their lives—working within them to instill a deep desire to change in whatever way is necessary to please Him. They want to learn God's will—to know what He expects of them. They study God's inspired

Word, the Bible, to better *understand* His will. They desire to submit to God and live according to His instructions.

Sincere study of God's Word, coupled with a strong desire to yield to His will, soon lets us see in ourselves the selfish desires that dominate the behavior and reasoning of most people. We begin to recognize the pervasive influence that the carnal or fleshly mind, as the apostle Paul called it, has on our thinking and behavior (Romans 8:7).



Before we can repent, God must convict us of sin (John 16:8), helping us to realize how far away we are from His ways. We must recognize the sin within us and comprehend our deep-rooted hostility toward Him.

To recognize sin in ourselves is an enormous step. The first step in changing a bad habit or avoiding a wrong act is to recognize the problem and admit that it exists. We must be willing to admit our faults and acknowledge our guilt. "If we confess our sins, He is

Sincere study of God's Word, coupled with a strong desire to yield to His will, soon lets us see in ourselves the selfish desires that dominate the behavior and reasoning of most people.

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 1:9-10).

What is sin?

In today's world, sin is not a popular subject. As a society we search for ways to absolve ourselves of responsibility for our actions. We hear experts say, "He was abused as a child, therefore we cannot hold him responsible for what he did." We reason that, if everybody is doing something, it must not be all that bad.

But God, through the Bible, goes right to the heart of the matter, clearly defining sin for us in 1 John 3:4: "Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and *sin is lawlessness*."

To what law was John referring? He made it clear in other verses in

this same epistle: “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” (1 John 2:3-4). And: “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3).

Sin, therefore, is defined as *breaking God’s commandments and laws*.

Why should we worry about transgressing God’s laws? Because our eternal life is at stake! Paul warned, “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). We readily consider such acts as murder, theft and adultery to be sin. However, Christ made it clear that we can sin by our very *thoughts*, not just our actions. He said that hatred and lust violate God’s commandments against murder and adultery just as surely as the physical acts themselves (Matthew 5:22, 28; 1 John 3:15).

We have all missed the mark. As Paul says in Romans 3:23, “For *all have sinned* and fall short of the glory of God.”

Jesus and His Apostles Affirm the Need to Obey God’s Commandments

In Matthew 19:16, Jesus was asked what must be done to inherit eternal life. His answer: “If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments” (verse 17). Jesus then listed several, including enough of the Ten Commandments to make clear which commandments He meant: “You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not bear false witness,’ ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (verses 18-19).

Today some people will tell you that keeping the commandments was fulfilled by Christ and obeying God’s law is therefore no longer required. But notice what Jesus Himself had to say about this idea: “*Do not think* that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. *I did not come to destroy* but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17).

Some try to deny His plain, simple statement by interpreting the verse to mean the law was not abolished until Jesus came and fulfilled it. They then interpret “fulfill” as “bringing to an end,” “superseding” or some other synonym for “abol-

ishing.” In essence they have Jesus saying, “I did not come to abolish the law, but to abolish it.”

Jesus, on the other hand, said heaven and earth would disappear before the smallest part of the law would do so (verse 18). He said the law would continue until everything is accomplished. Because the fulfillment of many biblical prophecies of Christ’s second coming is yet to occur (the prophecies have not yet been accomplished), we know the law has not ceased to exist.

The truth of the matter is that Jesus was speaking to people who believed in keeping all of the Ten Commandments. He reaffirmed the necessity for all who come to Him to do likewise. In Matthew chapters 5–7 Jesus explained how God *intended* for the Ten Commandments to be kept. By giving this explanation and exemplifying it in His life, He was fulfilling a prophecy about Himself from Isaiah 42:21: “The LORD is well pleased for his righteousness’ sake; he will magnify the law and make it honorable” (King James Version).

The word *fulfill* in Matthew 5:17 means “fill

In the same chapter he quotes several Old Testament passages in describing our natural, evil, rebellious state apart from God: “There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God . . . There is none who does good, no, not one . . . Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes” (verses 10-12, 15-18; see Psalm 14:2-3; 53:2-3; Isaiah 59:7-8; Psalm 36:1).

Repentance is change from the inside!

God is not harsh, even though He knows we are sinners. He does, however, require that we surrender our will to Him. He expects us to bring into our lives His way of thinking and living as revealed in His Holy Scriptures. He wants every one of us to rid ourselves of our former way of thinking and living and become a “new man” in thought, attitude

up,” “make full,” “fill to the full” or “complete.” Jesus came to magnify, or fill completely full, the meaning of God’s law. Jesus’ teaching that a man who lusts after a woman has already committed adultery in his mind represented Jesus’ magnification of all of the Ten Commandments. He explained the full meaning—the spiritual intent—of the commandments. He showed that He expects more than just a legalistic, letter-of-the-law approach; He also expects a submissive, yielded mind focused on love for God and love for our fellow man.

Jesus further clarifies: “Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (verse 19).

Clearly, *fulfill* does not mean “abolish”!

Another common misunderstanding is that the New Testament Church came to believe that it is not necessary to follow Christ’s example of obeying the law. But His apostles, who were personally taught by Him, certainly did not agree with this idea.

The apostle John said: “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).

Even the apostle Paul, who is most often cited by those attempting to do away with God’s law, himself refuted this erroneous idea, saying, “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). Far from condemning the law, Paul said, “The law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (Romans 7:12) and, “I delight in the law of God” (Romans 7:22). Indeed, he said that “keeping the commandments of God is what matters” (1 Corinthians 7:19).

We must avoid reading our own ideas into the Bible. Quoting from the prophet Isaiah, our Savior warned against trusting our own ideas instead of the laws of God: “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).

We, too, must be sure we follow Christ’s example instead of our own ideas!

and character (Ephesians 4:22-24). To each of us He says, “Be renewed in the spirit of your mind” (verse 23).

These admonitions mean a lifetime of growth and change for us, starting with the initial change—the repentance God expects before baptism. He asks us to reorient our hearts, aiming for a new direction in life.

“To be carnally minded is death,” said Paul, “but to be spiritually minded is life and peace” (Romans 8:6). We must be willing to let the revealed Word of God, the Bible, change our thinking. That is where real repentance begins. Repentance is our personal choice to let God change us inside and out! James says, “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (James 4:8).

God’s mercy is so great



God reveals His thoughts and mind through His Word. It contains His values, standards and principles. We learn to think like God by reading and studying the Bible.

that He will forgive us, provided that we forsake both our way (our wrong behavior) and our thoughts: “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 55:7).

We must learn to think like God

If change originates from the inside, with our thoughts, right behavior will follow. Godly behavior is only the fruit of righteous convictions, desires, emotions and attitudes—the *result* of our thoughts.

But how can we learn to think like God? How can we change our thoughts? God reveals His thoughts and mind through His Word, the Bible. It contains His values, standards and principles. We learn to think like God by reading and studying the Bible.

Proverbs 2:1-5 expresses it clearly: “My son, if you receive my words, and treasure my commands within you, so that you incline your ear to wisdom, and apply your heart to understanding; yes, if you cry out for discernment, and lift up your voice for understanding, if you seek her as

silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; *then you will understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God.*”

Jesus confirmed the importance of God’s Word as our guide to life. He said, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’” (Matthew 4:4). One with a truly repentant attitude will search God’s Word for instruction on how to live.

We must show “fruits worthy of repentance”

Repentance was an integral part of the message of John the Baptist, who “went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” (Luke 3:3). Notice that his message connected baptism, repentance and the remission (forgiveness) of sin. One cannot properly discuss one of these topics without discussing the other two.

John was popular among the people of his day. Crowds followed him, asking for baptism. But not all were welcomed by John. Some simply had no comprehension of repentance. John admonished them: “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore *bear fruits worthy of repentance*” (Luke 3:7-8).

John’s refusal to baptize everyone astonished them. Just what were these fruits he demanded? What did he expect? They asked him, “What shall we do then?” (verse 10).

John’s answer is one of the most penetrating and revealing descriptions of true repentance in the Bible. He showed that real repentance produces fruit—genuine results from a change of heart. John did not provide a dictionary definition of the words *repentance* and *fruits*. Instead he gave examples of how people need to *change* to be truly repentant before God.

“He answered and said to them, ‘He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.’ Then the tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, ‘Teacher, what shall *we* do?’ And he said to them, ‘Collect no more than what is appointed for you.’ Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, ‘And what shall *we* do?’ So he said to them, ‘Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages’” (Luke 3:11-14).

It was common for the tax collectors to demand more taxes of people than was legally due, greedily pocketing the difference. Soldiers, charged with the duty of maintaining law and order, often augmented their income by extortion—intimidating and abusing the very people they were supposed to protect.

Because these public servants had difficulty recognizing their own failings, as people often do, John chose examples that hit home to them,

asking for evidence of repentance from the heart. He demanded personal sacrifice, given willingly, that showed *genuine concern for others*. He told them to look inside themselves and examine the motives driving their attitudes and actions.

The specific fruit John called on these people to produce was *a change in their behavior*. However, he chose examples that typify the self-centered, self-serving nature in all of us.

Jesus makes it clear that the changes needed most come from the heart, from our thoughts. He said, “What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts” (Mark

7:20-21). He then listed ways these inward attitudes show themselves: “Adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man” (verses 21-23).

To some, the change God wants in us can appear so overwhelming that repentance and conversion to God’s way of thinking seem impossible. And that’s the point. Without God’s help, they *are* impossible!

When Christ compared entering the Kingdom of God to passing a camel through the eye of a needle, the disciples asked in amazement, “Who then can be saved?” (Mark 10:23-26). Jesus replied, “With men

Grace and Works of Obedience

Like John the Baptist, Jesus Christ said we must bear fruit: “He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit . . . By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples” (John 15:5, 8).

Some are confused at Jesus’ expectation of us to produce fruit. They interpret any requirement to obey God to mean that we somehow earn our salvation. Earning our salvation, of course, is impossible. Salvation is a free, undeserved gift from God. We could not earn salvation in a hundred lifetimes of performing good deeds.

We are not saved by our works. Only the sacrifice of Christ’s shed blood can cleanse us from our sins. Our thoughts cannot accomplish this, nor can any other actions we could take. Because Christ is alive and actively involved in converting us, we will be saved by His life. The apostle Paul made this clear:

“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 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” (Romans 5:8-10). Christ living in us enables us to do good works (see Galatians 2:20). God’s forgiveness of our past sins *and* His helping us to obey His law are

both aspects of His grace toward us.

Grace and obedient works are complementary rather than contradictory terms. The word *grace* comes from a Greek word that means “gift” or “favor.” Salvation, or eternal life, is a gift we receive by grace (Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:8-9). No amount of works or effort to obey God on our part could ever earn us eternal life. This is not to say that eternal life is free in an ultimate sense. Christ paid with His life so that we could receive the gift of salvation (Acts 20:28).

Yet while salvation is given to us as a gift, there are conditions attached. The first is that we repent. Repentance earns us nothing; we deserve no favors because we repent. But repentance is required. Why? Because repentance is a *condition* for forgiveness (Acts 2:38). God simply will not forgive those who willfully persist in sin as a way of life. Paul wrote: “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).

The direction of our lives must be changed as a prerequisite for receiving God’s gift of salvation. That is what both Christ and the apostles taught. Paul “declared . . . [we] should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance” (Acts 26:20). Works demonstrate our repentance to God, but they will never earn us the right to demand anything from Him or allow us

to boast that we deserve eternal life.

Indeed, it is God who leads us to obey Him (Romans 2:4; Acts 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25) and then empowers us to succeed (Ephesians 3:20; 6:10; Colossians 1:11). Both of these actions by God are aspects of His grace toward us. Our role is to cooperate with Him (verse 29).

God expects good works in our lives to demonstrate repentance and His love and faith active within us. The apostle James explicitly states that “faith without works is dead” (James 2:20, 26), and Paul makes it plain that God saves us by grace through faith for the very purpose of producing good works, even though those good works cannot earn our salvation:

“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).

Why should this be so difficult for people to believe and accept? It is simply walking in Christ’s footsteps, following His example (1 John 2:6).

Jesus said to His disciples, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). Though works do not earn us eternal life, they do glorify, or honor, God, and He requires that we honor Him by the way we live. People who refuse to include works in their lives are, whether they realize it or not, dishonoring God. “They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him,

being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work” (Titus 1:16).

Do works ever earn us anything? Revelation 20:12 says the dead are going to be judged “according to their works.” In John 14:2-3, we find Jesus explaining that He would “prepare a place” for His followers. In the coming Kingdom of God, He will grant various positions of authority to those who overcome (Revelation 2:26; 3:21). The resurrected saints will rule with Jesus Christ in His Kingdom (Revelation 20:4, 6). Through submission to God, allowing His Spirit to lead us and living a life of good works, we build righteous, godly character that will enable us to rule with Jesus Christ.

Though our works will not *earn* us salvation, they will *determine our reward* in His Kingdom. Jesus explained this in His parable of the talents (Matthew 25:20-29). Our Lord also made this clear in Revelation 22:12 when He said, “I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work.”

In verse 14 John further says, “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.” Through God’s grace, the gift of eternal life is given to those who demonstrate their faith in God by their obedience.

To better understand the relationship between law and grace in the life of a Christian, you may wish to send for or download our comprehensive free book *The New Covenant: Does It Abolish God’s Law?*

it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible” (verse 27). To truly repent, we must learn to trust and rely on God more than on ourselves.

In Luke 18:9-14, Jesus contrasted the attitude of an outwardly religious individual who trusted in himself for his righteousness with the attitude of a repentant tax collector who correctly perceived his own spiritual inadequacy and looked to God for help to become righteous. Jesus explained that God’s forgiveness (justification or making right) is extended to those who humbly look to God rather than to themselves for the power to repent and change their behavior.

Seek God’s help in faith

If you sincerely desire to commit your life to God, *ask Him* for His gift of repentance. *Tell Him* your intentions in prayer. *Seek His help*. Don’t rely on your own ability to perceive your sins and change

them all by yourself. If you have not yet developed the habit of regular prayer and feel awkward about praying, understand that God will help you. Jesus promised, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7). If you sincerely want to follow His commandments and instruction from the Bible, *tell Him*.

Of course, all of this requires that we believe in God and learn to trust Him. Indeed, faith in God is a key part of this entire process. Hebrews 11:6 says, “Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” Your part is to act on faith, then trust God to answer your prayers (see “The Crucial Role of Faith”). This is one of the most important steps in your entire life. Don’t delay! Take the time now—talk to God.

Let’s next examine the significance of baptism.

The Crucial Role of Faith

Where the Bible lays out the elementary teachings of Christianity in Hebrews 6:1-2, listed between “repentance from dead works” and “the doctrine of baptisms” is “faith toward God.” What is faith, and what role does it play in the process of repentance leading to baptism and salvation?

Many people believe *in* God. They assume He exists, but He is not real enough to them to affect what they think and do. To *believe* God, on the other hand, is to have faith that God will do for us whatever He has promised to do. He expects us to *act* on that belief. He requires that we have living faith in His existence, power and promises.

Faith isn’t some magical ingredient. It does, however, lead to a confident attitude *toward* God. Faith motivates our minds to the assurance of God’s power and will to act in our lives. Faith becomes more than a mental conviction as it grows into a commitment, not only to trust God to involve Himself in our lives, but to do His will.

God’s Word assures us that “the just shall live by faith” and “we walk by faith, not by sight” when we repent of our sins and begin to live dedicated, godly lives directed by our Savior, Jesus Christ

(Romans 1:17; 2 Corinthians 5:7). People who live by faith as followers of Christ and members of God’s Church are “believers” in Him (Acts 5:14; 1 Timothy 4:12).

God’s Word has a good reason for calling them believers. In the New Testament the Greek word for faith is, in virtually every instance, the same word for belief. Although translators choose whether “faith” or “belief” is intended based on their understanding of the context of each passage, the meaning is usually much broader than either word alone.

Even in modern language, to believe in someone, something or some cause is to have faith in that person, thing or movement—to believe it is true, just and worthy of one’s support and involvement. In the same way, to have faith as it is defined in the Bible is to fully believe in someone (God), to believe in and act on the truth of His Word (the Bible) and to live for the greatest of causes—salvation for all who believe in the coming Kingdom of God (Mark 1:14-15).

Faith is belief. But let’s not make the age-old mistake of thinking that if we believe in God—that is, that He exists—we therefore have faith. Many

hold to this mistaken idea. They say they believe in God; they think, therefore, that they have faith.

To believe in God is only the starting point of faith. But believing in God does not necessarily involve conviction or commitment to Jesus Christ and God the Father. Belief in God is profitable, but incomplete. As the apostle James noted: “You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons [fallen angels] believe—and tremble!” (James 2:19). We must go beyond the level of faith exhibited by demons.

The “faith chapter” of the Bible defines faith this way: “Now faith is the substance [realization, confident assurance, solid ground] of things hoped for, the evidence [conviction, reality, proof] of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). Faith is our assurance of the existence of things we cannot see.

The remainder of Hebrews 11 identifies real people who long ago lived examples of faith. They believed God, even to the point of death, confident that He would deliver them or resurrect them to eternal life in His Kingdom. They believed. Faith gave them assurance to carry on.

But faith is not wishful thinking, a pie-in-the-sky feeling that everything will be all right. Faith is a deep conviction that God deeply cares for us and will always act with our best interests at heart.

Each of us can have this kind of faith. In fact, we *must* have it if we wish to honor and love God, because “without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (verse 6).

The preceding passage describes two aspects of faith. First we must believe God exists. He is the all-righteous, all-powerful Creator and Ruler of the universe who cares about His creation, including us—something we can comprehend through the magnificence of the physical creation we see around us and within ourselves (Romans 1:20). Then we must believe God will ultimately reward those who humbly, obediently seek Him.

Changing our lives to submit to God—what the Bible refers to as repentance—is based on the conviction that He will intervene in our lives and ultimately grant us eternal life. Simply saying “I believe” without making accompanying life-altering changes is not sufficient. The kind of faith required for salvation includes not only understanding what God desires from us, but also our acting on that understanding. We must base our faith on a correct understanding of God’s Word and a commitment to live by that Word.

To learn more, download or request our free booklet *You Can Have Living Faith*.

Water Baptism and the Laying on of Hands

“But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women . . . Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:12, 17, NIV).

After one repents in faith, one’s next step is water baptism, a primary principle of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 6:1-2). Those who wish to travel the road to eternal life must understand and take part in two basic ceremonies—water baptism and the laying on of hands—to receive the Holy Spirit.

The words *baptize* and *baptism* are derived from the Greek verb *baptizo*, meaning “to dip or immerse.” *Dip* means “to immerse and then quickly take out.” *Immerse* means “to plunge under, so as to cover completely.” From these definitions, it is clear that immersion is the biblical method of baptism. Baptism by immersion symbolizes our death and burial, while rising out of the baptismal water symbolizes a resurrection to a new life in Christ (Romans 6:3-5).

Notice how Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch. The two men had stopped by a river, “and both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him.” They then “came up out of the water” (Acts 8:38-39). Why did they both go into the water? So Philip could baptize the eunuch by immersing him completely under the water. Then, rising from the water, the eunuch could begin a new life in Christ.

Jesus instructed His followers, “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” (Matthew 28:19). The Greek word here for “in” can also be translated “into.” When a minister of God submerges a new believer under the water, performing the symbolic burial of the “old man,” he performs the act in the name of, or by the authority of, Jesus Christ. He also puts the person in, or into, a new relationship with God.

A symbolic death and burial

Baptism symbolizes in part our being united with Christ in death and burial in a figurative sense: “Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death” (Romans 6:3-4).

In God’s eyes we are “united together in the likeness of His death . . . Knowing this, that our old man [the sinful person we were before] was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin” (verses 5-6).

Before the miracle of repentance, we are slaves of sin. Paul explained to the Romans that, once we are baptized into Christ, we are no longer trapped in sin (Romans 6:3-4). “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. For he who has died [through the symbolic death of baptism and eradicating our old ways] has been freed from sin” (verses 6-7).

But we are redeemed—bought back—from enslavement to sin by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:18-19; Revelation 5:9). Having

Baptism by immersion symbolizes our death and burial, while rising out of the baptismal water symbolizes a resurrection to a new life in Christ.

been purchased by God, we now belong to Him: “For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s” (1 Corinthians 6:20).

Being converted from slaves of sin to slaves of righteousness, we no longer serve sin (Romans 6:18). Our new way of thinking is one that bears the fruits of repentance (see Galatians 5:22-23). As Galatians 5:24-25 puts it: “And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.”

Resurrection to a new life

This life in the Spirit is also symbolized in the baptismal ceremony. For baptism pictures not only our death to sin, but also our being resurrected to a new life in Christ: “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). Once we are baptized and have hands laid on us by one of God’s ministers, He gives us His Holy Spirit as a “deposit” of our ultimate change to spirit and eternal life, “guaranteeing what is to come”

(2 Corinthians 1:22, NIV). Baptism, then, is the symbolic burial of our old self and the beginning of a new life as an obedient servant of God.

Paul compares our newness of life to a change of clothing: “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:27, NIV). We put on, or clothe, ourselves with Christ by replacing wrong attitudes, actions and habits with right ones. Colossians 3:12 says, “As God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (NIV).

Our new life starts us down the road that ultimately



God’s Holy Spirit is given to us by the prayer of and laying on of hands by God’s ordained ministers, serving as His representatives.

leads to eternal life and entrance into the Kingdom of God at the resurrection of the just, when Jesus returns to earth. “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:5, New Revised Standard Version).

Notice that our actual resurrection is yet *future*, at which time we will be changed into spirit (1 Corinthians 15:42-55). Even though we may not comprehend what it means to be changed into spirit, we can rely on John’s words in 1 John 3:2: “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.”

God’s Spirit given through laying on of hands

The next step on our road to eternal life is to receive God’s Holy Spirit, which comes through “laying on of hands,” as described in Hebrews 6:2. From the Scriptures, we find that water baptism is followed by the ceremony of laying on of hands, at which time we receive God’s Spirit. Acts 19:6 says, “And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them.”

Acts 8:12 shows that “both men and women” in Samaria understood, repented and were baptized. However, the Holy Spirit was not given until

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Peter and John prayed and laid their hands on them. Verses 15-17 say: “When they arrived, they [Peter and John] prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John *placed their hands on them*, and they received the Holy Spirit” (NIV).

We see that God’s Holy Spirit is given to us by the *prayer* of and *laying on of hands* by God’s ordained ministers, serving as His representatives.

The representation aspect here is important to bear in mind. In the laying on of hands, it is God’s divine power and authority that confers His Spirit. His human representatives have no supernatural power of themselves. It is God working in and through them. Nevertheless, God wants us to acknowledge the fact that He does work through human representatives.

This is part of a bigger picture of God’s Church working together in an orderly way. All are charged with the responsibility of helping and caring for, and submitting to, one another. Yet some have the special responsibility of serving others through leadership and teaching. God requiring the laying on of hands helps us to see that. (For more on becoming part of God’s Church, see “We’re Baptized Into a Spiritual Body” on page 30).

Why we need God’s Spirit

What is the role of God’s Spirit in our lives? On our own, we may

Should Children Be Baptized?

In Colossians 2:11-12, the apostle Paul compared repentance with circumcision. “In him [Christ] you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism” (NIV). Paul also said, in Romans 2:29, that circumcision is “of the heart.”

Physical circumcision—the surgical removal of the male foreskin, or prepuce, which God commanded be done in infancy (Genesis 17:12)—demonstrated for Abraham’s descendants that they were in a covenant with God. Circumcision of the heart serves a similar

purpose. When we change our way of thinking and behavior, we demonstrate our submission to God under the terms of a new covenant with Him.

Even though Paul likened baptism to the practice of physical circumcision, he did not mean that children should be baptized. Jesus did bless little children, but this was quite different from baptism (Mark 10:13-16). Unlike physical circumcision, baptism must wait until we are mature enough to understand repentance and the magnitude of committing one’s life to following God. The seriousness of baptism clearly makes it a decision for those who are mature.

strive, struggle and pray earnestly for victory over a sinful habit, but still come up short. After baptism and the laying on of hands, the same Spirit that leads us to repentance continues to work in us even more powerfully to help us see and overcome our sins and shortcomings.

Because it is impossible to be overcomers by keeping God's law in its full spiritual intent on our own, Jesus said He would send the Holy Spirit to guide and help us (John 14:16-18). When we do all we humanly can to be obedient, God gives us, through His Holy Spirit, the additional help we need to obey His truth and have a sound mind reflecting godly love (Acts 5:32; John 16:13; 2 Timothy 1:7).

His Spirit helps us overcome the weaknesses and selfish desires of human nature (Romans 7:13-20). It enables us to worship God in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24). It provides us comfort during trials and allows the mind of Christ to work in us (Philippians 2:5). Through His Spirit, God inspires, guides and leads us, and makes us His very own

Should We Want to Be Baptized With Fire?

John the Baptist proclaimed that the Messiah would come and baptize "with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matthew 3:11). Some, reading this, believe they need to receive this baptism of fire. But to understand what John was saying, let's take a closer look at this passage.

In verse 8 John demanded evidence from members of the leading Jewish sects of His day, the Pharisees and Sadducees, of their repentance from sin, making use of two metaphors to drive home his point. First, he noted that when a tree does not bear good fruit, it is cut down at the roots and burned up (verse 10). Jesus repeated this principle in Matthew 7:19.

John's second metaphor was of winnowing wheat. Winnowing means separating the wheat from the husks, stalks and chaff. John this time was picturing how Jesus will deal with people who bear no fruit. "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 3:12).

Both examples show the major theme of the Bible, that God wants us to become like Christ and produce fruit! For this, Jesus promises us eternal life, which is the message of the gospel. Those refusing to repent and change their way of thinking will be consumed by fire (Malachi 4:1).

Speaking of attitudes of sin, Jesus proclaims that "the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Revelation 21:8). Revelation 20:15 adds, "And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire."

This lake of fire is the second death, the baptism of fire for the unrepentant, and is certainly not something that we should desire to experience.

To learn more, download or request our free booklet *Heaven and Hell: What Does the Bible Really Teach?*

children (Romans 8:13-14; 1 Corinthians 2:10-11).

Overcoming our habitual sins and selfish nature does not happen instantly. It is a *lifelong process*, often involving great effort. The apostle Paul, more than 20 years after his miraculous conversion, described his continuing struggle to overcome the evil desires within himself. Those selfish pulls were so strong that he called them another "law" working within himself:

"I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing . . .

"So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members" (Romans 7:18-19, 21-23, NIV).

But Paul also noted that, with the help of God's Spirit, our sinful nature can be subdued: "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" (Romans 8:13).

Some mistakenly believe that once a person is baptized, God takes over and does everything. This is a misleading and dangerous concept. God expects us to resist sin and strive to make His Spirit an active part of our daily lives.

In 2 Timothy 1:6, Paul urged Timothy to "stir up the gift of God [the Holy Spirit] which is in you through the laying on of my hands," showing that we have a personal responsibility in our salvation. Timothy needed to "stir up" God's Spirit—not just sit back and let God take over. Paul restated, in Philippians 2:12, that we must work out our own salvation with fear and trembling.

The miracle of transformation

God's Spirit working within us helps us change and begin producing right fruit in our lives. Galatians 5:22-23 lists the fruit of God's Spirit—love, joy, peace, kindness, gentleness and self-control, among others—that become increasingly evident in us as we grow spiritually.

Producing the fruit of righteousness is important. It is also important for us to understand that the credit for that fruit goes to God. Paul expressed to the Philippians his desire to be acceptable to God by "not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law [attempting to keep the law on his own], but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith"—that is, obedience produced

through having Christ's faith within him by the Holy Spirit (Philippians 3:9, KJV).

Notice that Paul trusted God to produce righteousness in him, knowing "it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). Yet he understood that this was a partnership in which he had to cooperate. As he wrote in Colossians 1:29, "I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily."

When God calls us to be His children, He initiates a change in us from our formerly proud, selfish, disobedient ways. He transforms us by the renewing, or changing, of our mind—a process to which we must yield. Paul told the Romans, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Romans 12:2).

Paul explained that this transformation is not instantaneous. It requires ongoing changes in our thinking and outlook that permanently affect the way we live. We become "a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service" (verse 1).

Paul also admonished, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). He preceded this by describing both the attitude and behavior that would be evident in the converted mind:

"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" (verses 2-4).

Having the mind of Jesus Christ is what makes this great miracle of transformation possible.

The symbolic meaning of baptism, then, is profound. It represents both forgiveness of sins and newness of life in Christ. It should change our lives forever—particularly when we recall that these blessings have come at a great price. Jesus Christ sacrificed His own life so we may gain ours through the forgiveness of our sins—a matter we consider further in the next chapter.

Forgiveness of Sin

"And Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins . . .'" (Acts 2:38, Revised Standard Version).

How are we forgiven, and where do baptism and Jesus Christ fit in? The Bible says God forgives our sins and mistakes. Through faith in Christ's sacrifice, we have all of our sins and the guilt we harbor entirely removed. We are then completely clean in God's sight (Acts 22:16).

It is comforting to know that God not only forgives our sins, but



totally dissociates them from us: "For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more" (Hebrews 8:12).

David was awed by God's complete mercy and forgiveness. He wrote, "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

The Bible says God forgives our sins and mistakes. Through faith in Christ's sacrifice, we have all of our sins and the guilt we harbor entirely removed.

west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:11-12).

Through the prophet Isaiah, God tells us of the forgiveness that follows when we repent and turn to Him: "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good . . . Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isaiah 1:16-18).

Paul made it clear that the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9). He then explained how we are cleansed and made right with God: "And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God" (verse 11). Jesus Christ cleanses the

Church “with the washing of water by the word” (Ephesians 5:26).

This washing away of the accumulated filth of our sins is part of what is symbolized by baptism. Before Paul was baptized, Ananias said, “Why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22:16). By plunging our entire body under water, we are symbolically cleansed throughout.

Of course, the water is only a symbol. In reality, the cleansing of sin and reconciliation to God are by the shed blood of Jesus Christ, our Savior (Romans 5:8-10; Acts 20:28). Without His sacrifice, our sins cannot be washed away.

Leaving guilt behind

Thankfully, God does not keep a scorecard with good deeds on one side and bad ones on the other. Our slate is wiped clean of every



The cleansing of sin and reconciliation to God are by the shed blood of Jesus Christ, our Savior. Without His sacrifice, our sins cannot be washed away.

sin if we confess and repent of our sins and ask for His forgiveness. “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). As earlier pointed out, no good deeds, no physical effort of our own, can ever repay God for the precious gifts of forgiveness and the cleansing of our guilt.

It is normal for us to feel guilty when we sin, and the pain of penalties for past mistakes often lingers. Guilt, however, need not remain as a debilitating weight dragging us down.

Guilt can spawn needless feelings of inferiority and bitterness. After we repent, God totally forgives our sins, and there remains no reason to feel guilty unless we sin again. Even then, we should immediately repent, ask God to forgive us and put the guilt behind us. God, in His infinite mercy, applies Christ’s sacrifice to cover and remove our sin and guilt.

We are told in Hebrews 10:22: “Let us go right into the presence of God, with true hearts fully trusting him. For our evil consciences have been sprinkled with Christ’s blood to make us clean, and our bodies have been washed with pure water” (NLT). A clear conscience is one

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of the most wonderful gifts God gives His children.

King David was a man after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22). He was not perfect, but he did strive to prevent sin from separating him from God. In Psalm 139:23-24, David prayed, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (NRSV).

He also prayed: “Hide Your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Psalm 51:9-10).

How is sin forgiven?

Sin is the transgression of God’s sacred law (1 John 3:4, KJV). The penalty we all have earned for sinning is death (Romans 6:23). This cause-and-effect relationship is absolute and automatic. The penalty of death must be paid.

We cannot jump out of a 10-story building, futilely trying to break the law of gravity, without paying a penalty for our actions. In the same way, when we break God’s spiritual law, the death penalty for doing so must be paid. Forgiveness does not mean *eliminating* the penalty for our sins. Rather, it means *transferring* of the penalty from us to someone who could accept and pay that penalty in our place. The question is, who pays that penalty?

Because all have sinned and the death penalty hangs over everyone, God knew that a Savior was needed to die for the sins of the world. Notice Peter’s words: “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed . . . , but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake” (1 Peter 1:18-20, NIV).

The apostle John spoke of God’s great love for us and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ that pays the penalty for our sins, making forgiveness possible. “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2, NIV).

And: “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:9-10, NIV).

God actually created all things through Jesus Christ (John 1:1-3, 14; Ephesians 3:9; Colossians 1:16-17; Hebrews 1:1-2). As mankind’s Creator who, being the perfect Son of God, lived a sinless life in the flesh, Jesus Christ was able to serve as the *perfect sacrifice* for the sins of all humanity for all time.

Jesus Christ's perfect love and sacrifice

The incredible truth is that “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). Even more amazing is that God loved us when we were still sinners; we were still under the death penalty when He called us to conversion (Romans 5:8).

Jesus has a deep, burning desire to help mankind share eternity with Him (Matthew 23:37). The book of Hebrews says that we should be “looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (12:2).

It was anything but joyous to go through scourging and crucifixion, an incredibly brutal and torturous form of execution. Isaiah 52:14 prophesied that Christ's appearance would be “disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness” (NIV).

Psalms 22 describes some of the thoughts and feelings of anguish and pain Jesus faced when enduring His betrayal and death. Yet He had the spiritual vision to look past His own suffering to the joy of spending eternity with others who would choose the road to eternal life (Hebrews 12:2).

He willingly accepted the curse, the death penalty meant for us, “having become a curse for us (for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’)” (Galatians 3:13). (To learn more about who Jesus actually was and what He went through for us, download or request our free booklet *Jesus Christ: The Real Story*.)

Christ's sacrifice was so complete that no sin ever committed is too big or small for God to forgive (Psalm 103:3). Paul called himself the chief of sinners, yet God used him powerfully after his conversion (1 Timothy 1:15). Throughout the book of Psalms, King David praised God's mercy. He saw God's mercy as endless, filling the earth (Psalm 119:64).

Such examples inspire great hope. No matter what our background or past mistakes, when we genuinely repent and are baptized, God promises complete forgiveness.

Humanly devised teachings of psychology can make us feel good about ourselves and seek to improve our self-image. None of these human efforts, however, can forgive sin and completely remove the spiritual penalty associated with it. Only Christ's sacrifice can permanently cleanse and forgive us.

Burying the past

As God no longer associates us with our old sins, so should we put the past behind us. With our old sins now buried in the grave, as pictured

by baptism, we should not go back and dig them up. Considering the symbolism involved, this would be akin to grave robbing.

For some, such grave robbery in the form of continuing to fret about past sins may seem like repentance. But it's more a way of punishing oneself. We need to understand that God wants *repentance*, not penance. He does not want us to throw old sins back into His face by continuing to be consumed with thinking about them. He expects us to trust Him and His desire to completely forgive and forget.

We need to learn from our mistakes; but once we have done so, we need to leave them buried in the past. We are to “walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). An individual who does this, in God's eyes, becomes a new person, someone completely forgiven as though he or she had never sinned.

It is important that we see ourselves from this perspective and focus on the future. Paul expressed the concept this way in Philippians 3:13-14: “One thing



With our old sins now buried in the grave as pictured by baptism, we should not go back and dig them up. Considering the symbolism involved, this would be akin to grave robbing.

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.”

Realizing how complete forgiveness is possible through Christ's perfect sacrifice, we must look ahead to maintaining the right course. In the next chapter we will see how to stay on the road to eternal life.

Staying the Course

“Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19).

Baptism and the related steps we must take are only the beginning of the road to eternal life. Before we arrive at our ultimate destination, however, we have miles of road to travel. In this chapter we take a look at some of the aspects of our journey revealed by our road map, the Bible. Remember that we are traveling a *narrow* road (Matthew 7:14, NIV). A clear sense of purpose and direction can help us stay the course.

When we respond to God’s calling through repentance and baptism, many blessings and opportunities await us. Our minds will change. We will grow in wisdom, knowledge and understanding (Proverbs 2:1-11). We will learn to think and act as God thinks and acts.

Keep going forward

Trials will come and sacrifices will be required (Matthew 10:35-39). These tests help us build godly character. James, half brother of Jesus Christ, wrote: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2-4, NIV).

Jesus cautions us to count the cost of traveling this road, just as we would with any major life undertaking: “For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it—lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish’” (Luke 14:28-30).

Speaking to one potential follower who wanted to set conditions on his commitment, Jesus said, “No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62). Jesus expects His followers to finish what they start.

Just as a small child learns to walk, we may be wobbly at first, stumbling in this new way of life. The temptations and trials we face will sometimes cause us to stagger and fall. But remember that God the Father and Jesus Christ are there to comfort and help us each step of the way.

Our job is to keep striving with God’s help and to become mature Christians. Hebrews 5:13-14 tells us: “Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid

food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil” (NIV).

Living God’s way must always remain our priority. We must continually “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness” (Matthew 6:33).

Keys that can help us remain oriented to God’s way of life include regular prayer and the study of God’s Word. Furthermore, fellowshiping with other believers can be a tremendous encouragement in living our new lives dedicated to God.

In Matthew 7:21 Jesus said, “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.” We are given a choice as to what we will do, but Jesus clearly expects that we do our part in remaining faithful to Him. As explained earlier, we must produce fruit in our lives that is pleasing to God.

The end of the road: the Kingdom of God

Now let’s notice a few things about the coming Kingdom of God and eternal life, the end of our spiritual journey.

We should remember that the Kingdom of God is the heart of the gospel message Jesus proclaimed. Mark 1:14-15 says that “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.’” In appearing to His disciples during the 40 days after His resurrection, Jesus continued to speak to them about the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3).

At a time soon ahead of us, Christ will return to the earth and establish that Kingdom. Revelation 11:15 speaks prophetically of that awesome day: “Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!’”

The Kingdom of God will be a literal kingdom ruling over the earth, replacing all human government and authority. As Daniel 2:44 foretells, “The God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever.”

The early Christians fixed their eyes firmly on the future Kingdom of God. Acts 8:12 explains that the message of God’s Kingdom was a major reason for people believing God’s truth and choosing to be baptized: “But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized.” We, too, must “believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

Today, if we remain faithful to God throughout our lifetime, we will share with Christ the role of kings and priests in His coming Kingdom (Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 20:6). We can look forward to becoming spirit and

living forever (1 Thessalonians 4:14-17; 1 Corinthians 15:42-55). As His resurrected children, we will inherit from God all things—not just the earth but the entire universe and spirit realm (Matthew 5:5; Revelation 21:1-7; Hebrews 2:6-8). To learn more, download or request your free copy of our booklet *What Is Your Destiny?*

You will get there with God's help

God holds out such wonderful and unimaginable promises of the brightest future possible. Yet to reach that destination it is vital for us to persist in following Him—to continually repent when we stumble, remaining focused on the goal.

We're Baptized Into a Spiritual Body

One is not baptized into any particular sect or denomination. Rather, through baptism as taught in the Bible one becomes a member of the spiritual Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 2:19-22).

In 1 Corinthians 12:13 we find that “by one Spirit we were all baptized into *one body*—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.”

This body is called the Church of God (Acts 20:28). Membership in this Church is granted by God upon genuine repentance and baptism and is not determined by men or human organizations. The Greek word for “church” is *ekklesia*, denoting a called-out assembly. Simply put, God calls those He chooses out of this society to be part of the spiritual body that is His Church.

Jesus said His disciples, or followers, would need to be taught (Matthew 28:19-20). In Ephesians 4:11-13 Paul explained: “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 of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”

We see here that the Church, as the body of

Christ, has an obligation and responsibility to help Christians grow spiritually, which requires working together under the guidance of called and faithful ministers. God admonishes us to strive for unity and recognize the need we have for each other (1 Corinthians 12:12-25; Ephesians 4:1-3).

Finding a church—a called-out group of believers—in which we can learn sound doctrine and fellowship with people of like mind is important in staying on the road to eternal life.

Hebrews 10:24-25 tells us, “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.”

We in the United Church of God recognize the need to provide opportunities for God's people to assemble and receive biblical instruction and fellowship. Meeting regularly with God's people will be a vital aid to your spiritual growth.

Information on how to find the nearest congregation of the United Church of God can be found at the end of this booklet. We meet in locations all around the world. Visitors are always welcome. If you'd like to learn more, download or request your free copy of the booklets *The Church Jesus Built* and *This Is the United Church of God*.

Despite the claims of many who teach “once saved, always saved,” it is always possible, in this life, for those who initially commit to God to subsequently deny Him and lose out on salvation (Hebrews 2:1-3; 6:4-6; 10:26-31).

Nevertheless God speaks of our salvation as sure—as indeed it is as long as we don't come to a point of rejecting Him and His way, whether through persistent neglect or bitterness.

For those willing to commit their lives to Him, God offers this wonderful perspective in Ephesians 1:13-14: “In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, . . . the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.”

And Philippians 1:6 encourages us with these words: “He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.”

As long as we actively seek God's will and allow His Holy Spirit to work in our lives, our eventual salvation is guaranteed. Yes, God promises to help us every step of the way, through every turn in the road, if we will repent, have faith in Him for the forgiveness of our sins, be baptized and look to Him and His coming Kingdom. (To learn more, download or request our free booklet *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*.)

Now what?

Now that you know what to do, will you act on it, or will you let this precious calling from God go unheeded? Through the prophet Isaiah, God gives us an invitation and a promise: “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).

In 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14, Paul writes, “But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God *chose you to be saved* through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter” (NIV).

If God is calling you, will you respond?

The apostle Peter exhorts all of us: “Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:10-11, NIV).

Laid before you, then, is the road to eternal life—the *only* road. May you follow it, without veering, to the awesome destiny God has planned for you!

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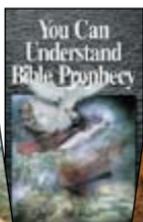
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Who we are: This publication is provided free of charge by the United Church of God, an *International Association*, which has ministers and congregations throughout much of the world.

We trace our origins to the Church that Jesus founded in the early first century. We follow the same teachings, doctrines and practices established then. Our commission is to proclaim the gospel of the coming Kingdom of God to all the world as a witness and to teach all nations to observe what Christ commanded (Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20).



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We are grateful for the generous tithes and offerings of the members of the Church and other supporters who voluntarily contribute to support this work. We do not solicit the general public for funds. However, contributions to help us share this message of hope with others are welcomed. All funds are audited annually by an independent accounting firm.

Personal counsel available: Jesus commanded His followers to feed His sheep (John 21:15-17). To help fulfill this command, the United Church of God has congregations around the world. In these congregations believers assemble to be instructed from the Scriptures and to fellowship.

The United Church of God is committed to understanding and practicing New Testament Christianity. We desire to share God's way of life with those who earnestly seek to follow our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Our ministers are available to counsel, answer questions and explain the Bible. If you would like to contact a minister or visit one of our congregations, please feel free to contact our office nearest you.

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