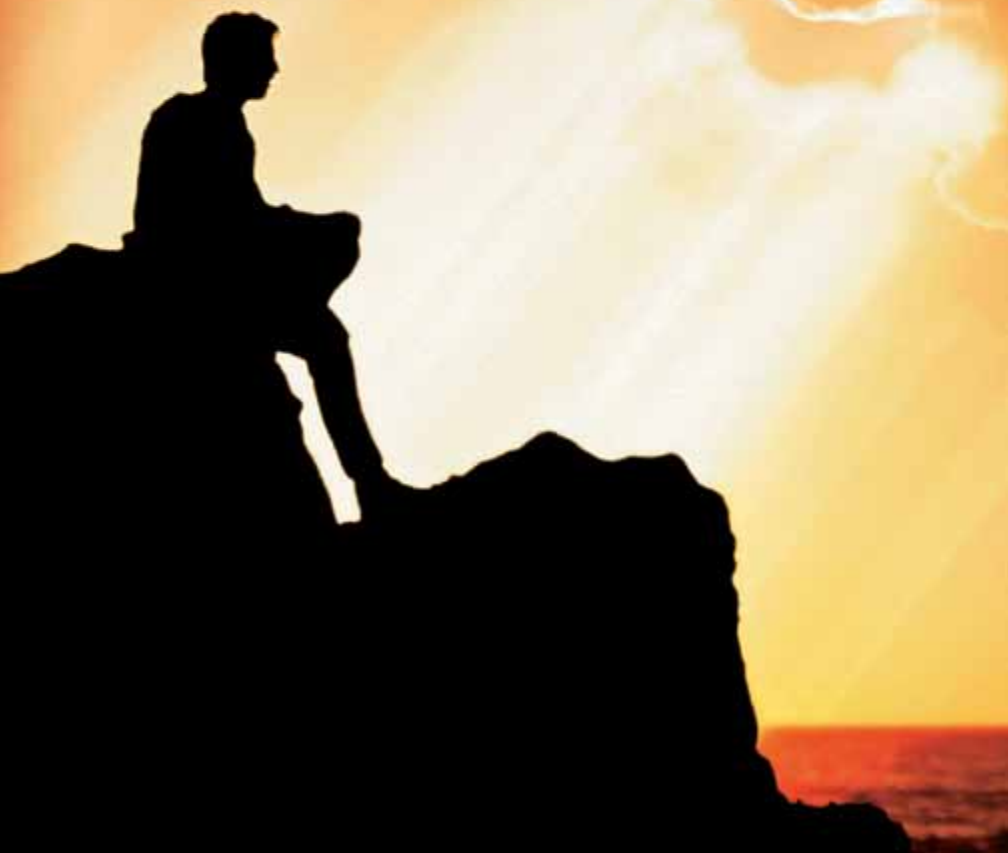


Transforming Your Life

The Process of Conversion



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Transforming Your Life

The Process of Conversion

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Introduction

The word *conversion* is heard often in religious circles. People commonly speak of their “conversion,” or how they came to be “converted.” What do these words mean?

Conversion, in a religious context, generally refers to a change from one belief system to another, or from non-belief to belief. But is that all there is to conversion?

Some use the word *conversion* to mean almost any dramatic change



for the better that people choose to make by their own efforts, sometimes erroneously giving the impression that all such self-induced changes are from God. This, however, is simply not true. People can and do change without God’s intervention—but *not* in the same way that conversion is described in the Bible.

Even without any religious

Just as a picture emerges when the pieces of a puzzle are fitted together, so can those whom God is inviting to be converted begin to understand the Holy Scriptures.

background, people understand that *conversion*—simply because of the dictionary definition of the word—refers to a change. If something is converted, it is *changed* in some way.

The biblical concept of conversion certainly involves change. For example, the Scriptures relate that Paul and Barnabas, as they traveled toward Jerusalem, “passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the *conversion* of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren” (Acts 15:3, emphasis added throughout).

But if a person is converted—*changed*—what is he changed *from*, and what is he changed *to*?

In the Bible, conversion is represented as a *miraculous, life-transforming process*—a process that is impossible without the direct, active intervention, participation and power of God. In fact, He initiates the conversion process. He first opens the minds of those He is calling, or *inviting*, to conversion so they can begin to comprehend the Scriptures with a clarity and depth of

understanding they could never attain on their own.

This wonderful, miraculous process usually begins when the individuals God is calling hear, or read, His truth accurately explained by His true servants. At that time God begins to open their minds to comprehend the true gospel of Jesus Christ.

God's Word now begins to make sense to them. Just as a picture emerges when the pieces of a puzzle are fitted together, so can those whom God is inviting to be converted begin to understand the Holy Scriptures. This is the *miracle* of God's calling.



What follows depends on the *choices they make* when they hear or read God's truth. They can respond to God and ask for His help to implement what they learn. Or they can turn their back on the understanding of the truth they have received.

Although He clearly encourages human beings to "*choose life*" (Deuteronomy 30:19), God does not force anyone to make the right choice. But, as we shall soon see, the consequences of our choices are enormous.

In this booklet we will examine the

Contrary to what many think, conversion is not just a one-time event. Instead the Scriptures reveal that it is a process.

Bible's teaching on conversion. Contrary to what many think, it is not just a one-time event. Instead the Scriptures reveal that it is a *process*.

The process begins with God's calling, followed by the key steps of repentance in faith, baptism and the receiving of the Holy Spirit—finally climaxing with the return of Jesus Christ, when the dead in Christ are resurrected to immortality and given eternal life. That is the ultimate transformation, being changed from a mortal to an immortal being!

Let's begin our quest—directly from God's Word—for an understanding of this marvelous transformation called conversion.

Who Are God's True Followers?

"Those who are with Him are called, chosen, and faithful"
(Revelation 17:14).

Jesus Christ exclaimed, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven [that is, the Kingdom of God, who is in heaven], but he who *does the will* of My Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21).

His warning should cause all of us to carefully consider our religious beliefs and assumptions. Why? Because many who claim to be His followers, who claim to have done great deeds in His name, will be *rejected* by Him. He will tell them, "*I never knew you*" (verse 23).

How, then, can we distinguish the authentic disciples of Christ, who really are doing the will of the Father, from those who call Jesus "Lord" but neglect or refuse to do God's will?

Today we are faced with hundreds of religious groups, each claiming to be Christian and regarding itself as possessing that special something that gives it God's stamp of approval. Most groups that profess to be Christian represent themselves as having a "calling," as being the "chosen" of the Lord. Even many non-Christian religious groups regard themselves as divinely chosen.

No matter how we look at it, the religious scene is confusing. No wonder millions are suspicious of all religion. Is it possible to sort the truth from this puzzling religious hodgepodge?

Indeed, it is—if we are willing to take an honest look at the facts and accept the truth as revealed in the Scriptures.

Jesus Christ is real. He was resurrected. He is alive. And His impact on the world has exceeded that of any other man who has ever lived!

Most people are familiar with the name Jesus Christ. But how many know what He taught? What was His mission? What makes His true followers different? Who truly represents Him?

Jesus said, "*I will build My church.*" The Greek word translated "church" in the Bible is *ekklesia*, meaning an assembly or, more precisely, "a calling out" or "called-out ones." *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* notes that *ekklesia* is "from *ek*, 'out of,' and *klesis*, 'a calling' (*kaleo*, 'to call')," and "was used among the

Greeks of a body of citizens ‘gathered’ to discuss the affairs of state, Acts 19:39” (1985, “Assembly”).

The book of Hebrews describes this body of believers as “the general assembly and church of the firstborn” (Hebrews 12:23). Paul describes it as “the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15).

Dangers of deception

Jesus warned that “*narrow* is the gate and *difficult* is the way which leads to life, and there are *few* who find it” (Matthew 7:14).

Should we be surprised? Most people simply ignore Jesus’ words when they don’t agree with them. Nevertheless, Jesus tells those who wish to be His true disciples that they must “enter by the narrow gate; for *wide* is the gate and *broad is the way that leads to destruction*, and there are *many* who go in by it” (verse 13).

Even if one becomes a disciple of Christ, he is still in danger of being swept back into the clutches of Satan, the archenemy of all who would be godly. The apostle Paul expressed his concern for those who had been converted to Christianity under his ministry:

“But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the Spirit you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough” (2 Corinthians 11:3-4, New International Version).

Paul was amazed that people could so easily turn from his teachings to believe a fraudulent gospel, to embrace a deceptive spirit and even accept a counterfeit conversion and Messiah. Satan is the master deceiver. Far too many people are easy prey, even after they have embraced God’s truth. They are enticed by persuasive teachers hawking a counterfeit righteousness.

Paul continues: “For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness” (2 Corinthians 11:13-15, NIV). No wonder so many varieties of beliefs falsely labeled “Christian” are taught under the name of Jesus Christ! His name serves as a mask for religious philosophies and doctrines that didn’t originate with Him or His apostles!

Jesus warns us: “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 7:22-23). The practice of lawlessness can negate all good deeds.

Disobedience is the way of man apart from God

Lawlessness is deeply ingrained in human nature. Paul wrote that “the mind-set of the flesh is *hostile* to God because it does not submit itself to God’s law, for it is *unable* to do so. Those who are in the flesh [that is, within its control] *cannot* please God” (Romans 8:7-8, Holman Christian Standard Bible). Our normal human inclination isn’t to obey God, but to resist Him and His way of life. As a result, alternatives to the true message of Christ have been devised to accommodate the human unwillingness to live by God’s commandments.

Most people who accept these lawless precepts are no doubt



Today we are faced with hundreds of religious groups, each claiming to be Christian and regarding itself as possessing that special something that gives it God’s stamp of approval.

sincere. They have accepted and believed a fraudulent message that has been pawned off on humanity for centuries.

This delusion is incredibly powerful. Paul foretold the effect it would have near the time of the end: “The coming of the lawless one [a great false religious leader] is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them a strong delusion, that they should believe the lie” (2 Thessalonians 2:9-11).

Under the influence of Satan, “the god of this age,” mankind has been thoroughly blinded (2 Corinthians 4:4). The devil’s unseen power so dominates humanity that “the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one” (1 John 5:19). Many people have accepted a counterfeit gospel and a corrupted idea of what conversion is all about.

Now, back to our original question: What sets apart Jesus’ authentic disciples from those who may think they are His true followers but in reality have fallen victim to Satan’s deceptions?

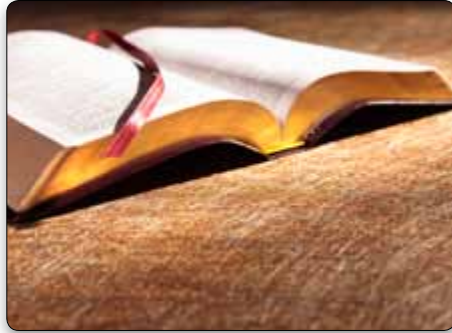
Called and chosen

The idea that one must be “called” and “chosen” originated with Jesus Himself, who told His disciples that “many are called, but few are chosen”

(Matthew 22:14). The concepts of being *called* and being *chosen* are both biblically legitimate, but they are rarely understood and routinely misused. Let's be sure to get them straight.

“Many are called, but few are chosen.” That's what Jesus said. But what does it mean? God's desire is to give salvation—eternal life—to all mankind. “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved” (John 3:17). The key, however, is that not all are being saved *at this time*, in this age (Romans 11:7-8, 25-26; Ephesians 1:7-10).

God *chooses* a person to receive



An accurate understanding of the gospel of Jesus the Messiah helps us to comprehend God's plan for us and why we must repent.

eternal life only when that person learns and accepts the truth, repents in faith and is baptized. But how can one distinguish truth from error?

The *truth*, Jesus explained, is what God reveals through His Word, the Bible (John 17:17). To become acceptable to God, all must recognize and accept God's Word as the source of truth. Our Creator “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:1-4).

All must repent

After learning the fundamentals of God's truth, one must repent. “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, *but everyone to come to repentance*” (2 Peter 3:9, NIV). There are no exceptions. God wants *everyone* to repent.

An accurate understanding of the gospel of Jesus the Messiah helps us to comprehend God's plan for us and *why* we must repent. That understanding of the future God has in store for us helps us to see why we need to surrender to God and transform our lives with His help.

But how can one gain this understanding? Paul's answer: “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).

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Paul says we must be taught by those who are truly *sent by God*, His faithful servants who do not teach lawlessness, who are faithful to God's Word, who teach obedience to God and that repentance is to cease from sin—to quit transgressing God's laws (1 John 3:4).

Let's consider the difference between *called* and *chosen*. Paul wrote, “But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning *chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth*, to which He *called you by our gospel*, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14).

Here we see that people are *called* (invited) by the preaching of the gospel (the good news of the Kingdom of God). They receive the knowledge that they need to repent of their sins.

Those who respond positively to that calling, that invitation, are *chosen* for salvation. How? They are sanctified—set apart—through *believing the truth* and *receiving and being led by the Holy Spirit*.

Only those drawn by God will understand

The process of God's calling and choosing us is a sorting that begins with a miracle from God. Jesus says, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (John 6:44). He adds, “Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father” (verse 65). It is a remarkable testimony to the mighty power of God that He can still reach us in spite of Satan's influence, our flawed human nature and the pulls of this present evil world.

God *issues* the invitation. He *draws* our hearts toward Him. He *grants* us the desire to learn His ways, to submit our wills to Him. But our inclination is to resist submitting to His laws (Romans 8:7). Yielding our will to God is truly a miracle: “For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13).

Jesus uses the parable of the sower and the seed to illustrate people's varied responses to the gospel. In the parable all hear the truth of God's Word preached. But only those whom God calls grasp the truth and understand it. People respond differently to the message. You can read the parable of the sower and the seed in Matthew 13, where Jesus not only tells the story but explains what it means.

First Jesus explains the response of those who are not yet being called. They do not grasp what they hear. “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” (verse 19). Such people never comprehend the message and its significance.

Different responses of those who understand

Next He explains three different responses from those who do understand. God has opened their minds; they grasp the meaning. But they respond 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).

This person’s first response is joyful acceptance, but he quickly retreats. Why? He backs off because of pressure from other people who do not understand. He cares more about *what people think* than what God thinks. He is afraid to rock the boat. Conforming to those around him is more important. The tribulation, or persecution, he experiences from trying to live God’s way of life makes him stumble. He rejects the calling from God.

“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 not as concerned about the opinions of his peers. But he has another problem—*selfishness*. Maintaining his status and acquiring possessions consume his interest, time and energy. He has no time for God. He is too busy serving himself. Material things are more important than spiritual matters. He, too, 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).



“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.” This person understands God’s Word and takes it seriously. He puts it into practice. He changes his life!

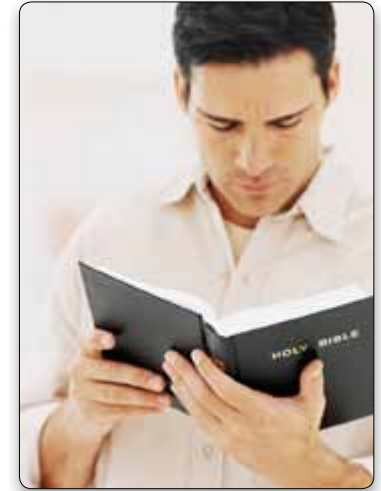
This person understands God’s Word and takes it seriously. He puts it into practice. He changes his life! This person was chosen for salvation.

He put God first in his life.

Many are called. Many receive the *opportunity* for God to work in them “to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). But *only a few respond*. Those few truly repent and surrender their will to God, making a commitment to obey His commandments. Those who *respond* to God’s calling *are chosen* by God because *they choose* to serve and obey Him and put Him first!

They must remain faithful

When God offers them an opportunity to serve Him, the *choice* is theirs. And that choice is not merely a one-time decision. They must *commit* themselves to that choice and *persevere* to the end (Matthew 24:13).



God has explained who His real disciples are. They are first called to repentance by having their minds opened to accurately understand the teachings of the Scriptures.

At the end of this age, resistant rulers of this world “will make war with the Lamb [the returning Jesus Christ], and the Lamb will overcome them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings; and *those who are with Him are called, chosen, and faithful*” (Revelation 17:12-14).

Notice that those who are with Christ are not just called and chosen; they are also *faithful*. Being called and chosen is not the end of the story. We must *remain faithful* to our calling to be saved.

At times we may be called upon to *prove our faithfulness* by enduring trials and overcoming obstacles to our faith as evidence of our continued commitment to serving God. His truly converted people are designated in the Scriptures as “the body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:27) and “the church of the living God” (1 Timothy 3:15).

God has explained who His real disciples are. They are first *called* to repentance by having their minds opened to accurately understand the teachings of the Scriptures.

If they respond by choosing to surrender their will to God so His Spirit can guide both their hearts and their conduct, they are *chosen* for salvation—to have a part in His eternal Kingdom. Then all who remain loyally obedient to Him are the true “called, chosen and faithful” people of God!

What Must I Do?

*“Repent therefore and be converted,
that your sins may be blotted out” (Acts 3:19).*

The New Testament Church—the spiritual body called and chosen to become God’s faithful people—began with God giving the Holy Spirit to Christ’s disciples on one of His annual festival days, the Feast of Pentecost. Acts 2 records how God’s Spirit came on those who had believed Jesus, accepted His teaching and faithfully followed Him. But the miracles didn’t stop there. Thousands of others who were gathered together that day were amazed by the miracles they saw and heard.

As the apostle Peter spoke on that day, he announced that the promised Messiah had come but was rejected and sent to suffer a brutal death. Peter explained that *every* human being bears responsibility in Christ’s death—not just the Roman soldiers or the small group of Jews who arrested and brought Jesus to trial.

In the audience were visitors from nations all around the Mediterranean world and as far away as Parthia and Mesopotamia to the east (Acts 2:7-11). Many of them may not have even been in Jerusalem when Jesus had been put to death earlier in the year.

To this diverse audience Peter declared: “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know—Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, *you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death*; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it” (verses 22-24).

“What shall we do?”

Some of Peter’s listeners recognized the significance of his words. Though they may not have been directly involved in causing Christ’s death, they grasped, from Peter’s powerful preaching, that the real reason the promised Messiah was crucified was to pay the penalty for the sins they and all other human beings have committed! To them Peter’s message was personal and pointed.

Peter continued: “‘Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, *whom you crucified*, both Lord and Christ.’ Now when they heard this, they were *cut to the heart*, and said to

Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, *what shall we do?*’” (verses 36-37).

Yes, they were “cut to the heart.” Their sense of guilt overwhelmed them. Hearing Peter’s rebuke, they did not reflect on their good deeds over the years but on the sins that had stained their lives. Indeed, *what were they to do?*

Peter responded immediately: “*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” (verse 38). And that’s exactly what they did. That day alone 3,000 “gladly received his word [and] were baptized” (verse 41).



God still commands repentance

Since that time, members of God’s faithful Church have continued to preach the same message that Jesus, our Messiah and Savior, brought—the good news of salvation, the Kingdom of God and that all must repent (Mark 1:14-15).

Though they may not have been directly involved in causing Christ’s death, some grasped that the real reason the promised Messiah was crucified was to pay the penalty for the sins they and all other human beings have committed!

The response to the message varies. Some pay no attention. Others show only a passing interest. But a few recognize it as the most exciting and important news they have ever heard—a pearl of great price! Perhaps you are one of those.

As we have already read, this present evil world is spiritually blinded by Satan (Revelation 12:9; 1 John 5:19). But God is calling a few out of their blindness. If you are one of those whom God is calling to understand His Word and live by it, then you may be asking yourself the same question those who heard Peter on the Day of Pentecost asked: *What must I do now?*

God’s Word tells us that *all* have sinned (Romans 3:23). That includes *us*. But it is so much easier for us to see mistakes and wrongdoing in others than it is to see our own faults and shortcomings.

Yet we all are guilty of thoughts and actions that are contrary to God’s law of love. “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the

truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8-9).

Like us, our original human parents were given freedom of choice. Although God urged Adam and Eve to obey Him, He did not force His way on them. Because of Satan’s influence in the Garden of Eden, they chose to disobey His instruction, to rebel against Him and follow the devil.

Since then Satan has wielded tremendous—but not absolute—power over humanity (2 Corinthians 4:4). His role in shaping our world’s entertainment, education, politics, advertising and moral standards has been enormous. Regrettably, we are all products of this world. Our minds, thoughts and motives reflect years of Satan’s influence over our lives (Ephesians 2:2-3). (For more on this, see *What’s Wrong With Our Human Nature?*” beginning on page 22.)

Yet, along with this knowledge, we must always keep in mind that God the Father is, as Jesus reminded us, “Lord of heaven and earth” (Matthew 11:25). He is always on His throne and is constantly overseeing the progress of His great plan and purpose on this globe.

Watching over those whom He has called to overcome sin in their lives is an integral part of His plan. Satan can do only what our Creator allows

Praying for a Right Spirit and New Attitude

Responding to God involves not just repenting of our individual sinful acts. It also involves a recognition that our hearts and minds have been corrupted by the world and the devil, “the prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2).

We must see the need for a new heart, a different way of thinking, a right spirit and attitude—a *transformed* mind. We must see that the human heart is deceitful and desperately sick (Jeremiah 17:9). We should desire to replace our mind with the mind of Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:5).

Like King David, we should cry out to God to “create in me a *pure heart*” (Psalm 51:10). Our heart—that is, our mind—is the main source of our problem with sin. Actions begin as thoughts. Our thinking is a deeply ingrained part of who and what we are. We must cry out to God for His divine help in

cleaning us from the inside out.

Consider David’s heartfelt plea of repentance: “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me” (Psalm 51:1-3).

David continues: “Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom. Purge me with hyssop [an aromatic plant used in ritual purification], and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me hear joy and gladness, that the bones you have broken may rejoice. 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” (verses 6-10).

for the time being. This we learn from the events described in the first two chapters of the book of Job.

James also explains, “Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). Individually, with God’s help, we can resist and overcome Satan’s influence over our lives.

Take a long look inside

Yet we have to live in a society that is growing increasingly evil, selfish and arrogant as the time for Christ’s return draws near: “But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: for men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power” (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

How, then, do we separate ourselves from such attitudes? True repentance includes our recognizing, with God’s help, how much these attitudes have affected every one of us. As Paul explained: “All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of [God’s] wrath” (Ephesians 2:3, NIV).

To repent, we must take a long, honest look at ourselves. Otherwise we will respond much like the Pharisees who criticized Christ for dining with those looked down on as sinners and tax collectors. Jesus responded to those unperceptive religious leaders: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance” (Luke 5:31-32).

The Pharisees were too spiritually blinded to see themselves as they really were. They were so comfortable with their presumed spiritual state that they closed their eyes to their sins. They neither recognized nor even understood Christ’s warning that they needed to repent.

The Scriptures tell us *all* have sinned. Therefore we have *all* earned for ourselves the penalty of eternal death (Romans 6:23). Without God’s intervention to help us change, we would all perish, never to live again!

But it is God’s will to transform us, to enable us to repent and be converted: “The Lord . . . is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish *but that all should come to repentance*” (2 Peter 3:9).

God provides a way to remove the sentence of death that hangs over us—without excusing or condoning our unrighteousness. He sent His Son to pay the penalty for us: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). If we willingly turn from a wrong way

of life, God is more than willing to substitute the shed blood of our Savior for the sentence of death we brought on ourselves through our sins.

What is repentance?

Jesus Christ solemnly warned a crowd, “Unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:3, 5; compare Acts 5:31-32).



We rarely hear the word *repent* anymore. Few understand what it really means. The Greek and Hebrew words translated “repent” both refer to a change of heart, a significant shift in our thinking, a transformation of purpose with emphasis on modifying one’s conduct.

Peter tells us to “repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out” (Acts 3:19). The word translated “be converted” means *to be turned*. Turned from what? Obviously, from the sins to be blotted out. Thus, when we repent we must *turn away from the sins*

Repentance should include a sense of sorrow and shame, but genuine, heartfelt repentance is much more than simply an emotion. Our lives must change.

we are guilty of committing, and we must *unconditionally surrender our will to God*. Put another way, we are to turn from the influence of Satan in our lives and commit ourselves wholeheartedly to God.

Though Christ came to take away our sins, we still have our part to do. He didn’t come to save us *in* our sins or while we *continue* in sin.

If a judge pardons someone of a crime, he expects that person to cease his criminal acts. He doesn’t pardon him so he can continue his life of lawbreaking. Likewise we are to *turn away* from sinful acts and thoughts. The apostle John tells us that “everyone who has this hope in Him *purifies himself*, just as He is pure” (1 John 3:3).

Repenting encompasses both believing and doing

Acts 16 records the imprisonment of Paul and Silas in Philippi and how an earthquake loosed their chains and opened the doors to their cells. The jailer, recognizing a miracle from God, asked them what he must do to be saved. They told him, “*Believe* on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be

saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31).

But what does such belief require? Having faith in Jesus is not simply believing that He is our Savior; it is believing His message, His promises, His instructions to the point of acting accordingly. Earlier Christ asked, “But why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46).

When we repent we *stop doing what is wrong* and *start living in harmony with God’s ways and laws*—His will! We stop sinning deliberately and knowingly!

Repentance should include a sense of sorrow and shame, but genuine, heartfelt repentance is *much more than simply an emotion*. Our lives must change. When God calls us He removes our spiritual blindness and enables us to understand His Scriptures as never before (John 6:65; Matthew 13:11). He enables us to see how contrary our ways are to His. We come to a major fork in the road of our lives. We face significant decisions.

We Must Change Our Way of Thinking

Jesus makes it plain that repentance includes changing *our thoughts*. “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 explains that what defiles us comes from *within*. He gives examples of the most basic evil attitudes and passions that dominate our thinking and behavior: “. . . 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).

The prophet Isaiah stated plainly that repentance involves changing the way we think: “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). Here Isaiah pinpoints two things we must forsake to receive God’s pardon—our sinful ways and our sinful thoughts.

To repent we must recognize that at least some of the pulls of human nature are at work in our minds, influencing or even controlling

our thinking. Not every human being constantly yields to every trait of human nature. But we all sin. We all have weaknesses. One person may succumb more often to greed, another to self-righteousness or pride. Yet another may have difficulty being truthful and honest. But in some way we all exhibit self-centered and self-serving thinking and behavior.

Repentance means we must examine ourselves and recognize our own particular weaknesses—the areas where we sin in thought or action. We must ask God to reveal what we need to change.

This, too, is a lifelong process. The more we submit to God and ask for His help in seeing what we need to change, the more He opens our minds to recognize our faults and weaknesses. This process goes on for years as committed and converted Christians “*grow* in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

Change in the way we think is the most important aspect of real repentance. After we receive God’s Holy Spirit, we are better able to sustain right behavior as the fruit of our new way of thinking.

The time of repentance is a major turning point in life.

True repentance is a gift from God (Acts 11:18). God leads us to that point if we respond positively to His working with us to open our minds, and He gives us understanding of His Word and ourselves (John 6:44; 2 Timothy 2:25).

Now—so we can understand that we must change—let’s carefully examine the biblical explanation of sin so we can better understand *what* we need to change.

Repentance Must Be With Faith

Repentance from dead works and faith toward God are listed in Hebrews 6:1 as part of the foundation that ultimately leads to perfection and eternal life. Jesus Christ set an important pattern in His preaching when He regularly called on hearers to “repent, and believe” (Mark 1:15). The apostle Paul also preached “repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21).

Repentance—turning back to obeying God after rebelling against Him—begins with crying out to God for forgiveness of our sins and our accepting Jesus Christ as personal Savior. This includes trusting in Christ’s sacrifice as bearing the penalty of our sins—believing that by it our repentance is accepted and our sins are forgiven. Repentance is a decision based not on emotion only, though as Acts 2:37 shows, heartfelt emotion is certainly an important part. It is a decision and commitment to sincerely obey God through faith in Jesus Christ. Christ’s righteousness becomes ours through faith in and from Him (Philippians 3:8-9; Romans 8:1-4).

This faith is a deep belief and trusting confidence in God (Hebrews 11:1). And we can’t come to God without it: “But 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). Such faith will lead to obeying God. It not only trusts in initial forgiveness of sin, but it recognizes that God will help the faithful to remain faithful.

While repentance involves sorrow over past sins, it includes joy over God’s forgiveness and the blessings and future He promises. In Mark 1:15, quoted in part earlier, Jesus specifically called for people to “repent, and *believe in the gospel*”—referring to the good news of the Kingdom of God. The expectation through faith of being a part of God’s Kingdom is certainly reason to rejoice—and it motivates those who take it to heart to do God’s will.

After repentance and baptism, God gives His Spirit to us (Acts 2:38). One important result of having the Holy Spirit within us is the development of faith (Galatians 5:22-23; 1 Corinthians 12:4, 9). “The faith of the Son of God” is what we now live by (Galatians 2:20, KJV). Indeed, the just (those who are justified or made right with God) *live by* faith (Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38).

The converted person continues through repentance and faith to rely on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to cover his or her sins in this lifelong process of overcoming. And through the miraculous help of Christ living in him or her through the Holy Spirit, the Christian is able to grow in God’s way of life, increasingly walking by faith in obedience to God’s law of love (Galatians 2:20; Philippians 4:13; Colossians 1:29).

To learn more about the crucial role of faith in the process of transforming your life, download or request our free booklet *You Can Have Living Faith*.

What Is Sin?

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

We have learned that our first step to becoming one of God’s called, chosen and faithful servants is to recognize that we are sinners (Romans 3:23; 1 John 1:8). But how does the Bible define sin? What is it?

The Bible clearly tells us what sin is in several scriptures, each enhancing our understanding. But, before we look at these passages, we should first learn what the word *sin* means in the Bible languages.

Two broad concepts

The Hebrew and Greek words translated “sin” throughout the Bible revolve around two major concepts. The first is that of *transgression*. To transgress means “to step across” or “to go beyond a set boundary or limit.” This concept can be compared with an athletic playing field with lines delineating the boundaries within which the game is to be played. When a player crosses over boundaries, he has committed a “transgression”; he has gone out of bounds. Limits are set that define the playing area, and the players are to keep inside the limits.

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 at which he was aiming.

This view of sin includes the concept of our intending to go in one direction but straying off course to the side and not continuing in the direction we planned, with the result that we don’t make it to the goal we intended. 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 achieve that standard, we fail the test or course. A minimum level of performance is expected, and anything less is failure. By not meeting the standard, we “miss the mark”; we don’t pass. We can miss the mark by *missing* our aimed-for goal, by *falling short* of the goal or by aiming *in the wrong direction*. In all of these situations we fail to reach the target set for us.

Both of these concepts, transgressing and missing the mark, imply a *basic requirement*. If we transgress, which means to cross over to the

wrong side of a set boundary or limit, then there must be a *boundary* or *limit* to cross over. If we miss the mark, there must be a *target* or *standard* to aim for. Sin, then, is *to transgress the boundaries* God has set for us—or *to miss His set target*.

This is where the biblical definitions of sin become especially important. The Scriptures reveal the righteous boundaries and standards God sets for us. They specify the *playing field* on which we are to live. They lay out the *goal*—the righteous character—we are to aim for, along with the standard God expects us to meet.

In other words, the biblical definitions of sin show us the standards God has given us as to what *is acceptable* to Him and what *isn't acceptable*. They show us what measures up and what falls short of those standards. They reveal 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 lives*. They reveal the spiritual principles by which He lives—the same standards of conduct He expects us to live by.

Transgressing the law of God

What, then, are the boundaries and standards God has set for us that define sin? The most basic definition of sin is in 1 John 3:4: “Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for *sin is the transgression of the law*” (King James Version). Here God defines a *boundary* for mankind. He says that sin is transgressing His holy, spiritual law (Romans 7:12-14). Breaking that law—crossing that divine boundary, that limit God set for us—is sin.

Other translations help us gain another important perspective regarding this verse. Here's how the New King James Version translates it: “Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and *sin is lawlessness*.”

The word translated “lawlessness” is the Greek word *anomia*, meaning “without law” or “against law.” The concept conveyed here is that sin is living like there is no moral law or the active *violation* of God's laws and basic moral principles.

God gave humanity His laws to show us His way of love. His laws *define* how to demonstrate love toward God and our fellow human beings (Deuteronomy 30:15-16; Matthew 22:35-40; 1 John 5:3). Sin is violation of God's law of love. God showed us a way to live in peace and harmony with Him and with mankind, and He defined this way of life by His law. When we sin, we violate—we transgress—that boundary by breaking His law.

Broader definition of sin

We find a broader definition of sin in 1 John 5:17: “*All unrighteousness*

is sin” Other Bible versions help us more fully understand the meaning: “Every *wrong action* is sin” (Twentieth Century New Testament). “Every *act of wrong-doing* is sin” (Phillips Modern English). “*Any kind of wrong-doing* is sin” (Weymouth New Testament in Modern Speech). “All *iniquity* is sin” (Moffatt translation).



The word translated “unrighteousness,” “wrong action,” “wrong-doing” and “iniquity” in these versions is the Greek *adikia*. The *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* defines it as “action that causes visible harm to other persons in violation of the divine standard” (Lawrence Richards, 1985, “Sin”).

Other meanings of the word and its verb form are “evildoers,” “dishon-

The Scriptures reveal the righteous boundaries and standards God sets for us. They specify the playing field on which we are to live. They lay out the goal—the righteous character—we are to aim for, along with the standard God expects us to meet.

est,” “unjust,” “wickedness,” “to be unfair,” “to harm,” “to mistreat,” “to hurt” and “to wrong [someone]” (ibid.).

These meanings go beyond just *physical* actions and cross over into *attitudes* and *motives* for our actions—what goes on in our minds. They involve *our thoughts*.

Jesus clarifies this in Matthew 5:21-22: “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ 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!’ [“empty-head”] shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ [in the sense of cursing another as worthless or condemned] shall be in danger of hell fire.”

Here Jesus draws attention to the law's underlying principle: If we pass judgment on other people, viewing them as worthless and undeserving of life or existence, this kind of angry, spiteful attitude puts us in danger of *eternal death*, not just physical stoning. Christ showed that sin includes not only our *physical actions*, but our *thoughts and attitudes*.

We should realize that sin starts in the mind. When we allow evil thoughts to enter our mind and stay there, eventually they can spring into

What's Wrong With Our Human Nature?

When God formed our first human parents Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, they were part of a created order that was “very good” (Genesis 1:31). Clearly they were not bent on evil. But in describing their creation as good, God did not mean that Adam and Eve were inherently good or were inclined to choose to live God’s way. Initially, they made no reasoned choice in terms of good and evil. Their way of thinking and behavior was neutral—a state sometimes referred to as *tabula rasa*, or “clean slate.”

As flesh-and-blood human beings, they did have the physical drives and material interests common to all mankind. They had desires for self-preservation, for physical pleasures, for appreciation, for learning and for bettering their circumstances. They were also naturally curious, desirous of avoiding boredom or, conversely, too much effort. The focus on self in such characteristics was not inherently sinful. But this self-oriented focus could lead to sin if it contradicted God’s direction and instructions.

Onto the scene came Satan the devil in the form of a serpent, and he wasted no time in tempting the first human beings to sin. He deceived Eve about partaking of the fruit God had forbidden, taking advantage of her desire to partake of enjoyable fruit, become wise and better her life. These weaknesses of her physical, fleshly existence—including her overall gullibility—made it easier for the devil to deceive her. Adam was not deceived, but he submitted to Satan’s scheming through Eve anyway—apparently to maintain his bond with her (Genesis 3; 1 Timothy 2:14).

Adam and Eve thus set a pattern the whole human race that would spring from them would follow—accepting the rule and influence of Satan rather than following God.

Following footsteps of Adam and Eve

From then on, human beings would be led to pursue selfishness and rebel against God’s commandments. Children would still be born with a neutral nature—*tabula rasa*—but, under the influence of Satan and in a world in which all

people were deceived into unwittingly following him and his ways, all children would very quickly develop the selfish-oriented nature of the corrupted human society and culture around them.

The tendency of human beings to exalt self and disobey God is known as human nature, referred to in the Bible by such terms as “the carnal mind,” “fleshly lusts,” “selfish ambition” and the like—signifying *selfishness* as the primary motivation rather than a desire to obey and please God.

But again, God did not *create* human beings with this selfish nature, nor are children born with it. We all fall victim to it through the influence of Satan. It is in reality *Satan’s own corrupt nature* that he has instilled in the whole human race (except that he himself has no accompanying fleshly weaknesses since he is a spirit being).

The Bible represents Satan as the master manipulator of human nature. Our weakness combined with the devil’s influence has led the whole world into sin (Revelation 12:9). Paul explains that, as “the god of this age,” Satan “has *blinded* the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel” (2 Corinthians 4:4).

Because our carnal human nature is sometimes referred to as *sinful* nature, some have the impression that it is only a problem of *some* people—those who are sinful. But the fact is that this nature is a problem for *all* people. Indeed, with the sole exception of Jesus Christ, “*all have sinned* and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

The apostle Paul, quoting a number of Old Testament passages, sums up the sorry spiritual condition of the human race this way: “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.’ ‘Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit’; ‘The poison of asps is under their lips’; ‘Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.’ ‘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” (Romans 3:10-18).

Satan’s influence on all mankind

Paul reminds Christ’s faithful disciples that “you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, *the spirit* who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also *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 2:2-3). This shows that Satan even “broadcasts” corrupt and sinful moods and attitudes to human minds.

As powerful as his influence is, however, we must understand that the devil cannot force us to sin. He simply seduces us through our fleshly weaknesses and the wrong ways of thinking he has led us into over time. Let’s consider some ways we are all too easily manipulated by Satan.

First, our *selfish, fleshly desires* often get us into trouble: “Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19-21).

Paul graphically describes the effect corrupt desires have on human behavior. “Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another . . . Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity.

“They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they

not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them” (Romans 1:24, 28-32, NIV).

Second, our *ingrained deviousness*, including *self-deception*, is a major weakness of the fleshly mind. “The heart is *deceitful above all things*, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9).

Subject to Satan’s influence, we naturally look for ways to justify our lusts, our sinful desires, and the behaviors that arise from them. We deceive ourselves into believing that, since our desires are natural, they are not so bad after all. But God’s Word reminds us that “there is a way that *seems right* to a man, but its end is *the way of death*” (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25). *Death* is the end result of living that wrong way (Romans 6:23).

Third, under the devil’s influence we have developed the tendency to *resent having our selfish desires limited by rules*, even God’s rules. Paul explains: “For those who live according to the flesh think about the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, about the things of the Spirit. For the mind-set of the flesh is death, but the mind-set of the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind-set of the flesh is *hostile* to God because it does *not submit itself* to God’s law, for it is *unable* to do so. Those who are in [that is, within control of] the flesh cannot please God” (Romans 8:5-8, HCSB).

We see from these and other passages that Satan is a powerful deceiver and manipulator, taking advantage of our self-focused nature by persuading us to give in even more to our human wants and desires than we normally would. But we play our part. Without the positive influence of God’s Spirit, our primary inclination is to serve ourselves and resist living according to all of God’s biblical instructions.

Because of this Paul warns: “If you live according to the flesh *you will die*; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are *led by the Spirit of God*, these are sons of God” (Romans 8:13-14). We need the leading of God’s Spirit to help us break free of the selfish nature we have developed under Satan’s influence and to develop a godly nature instead.

action, leading us to sin. We are what we think (Proverbs 23:7).

We should not violate our conscience

God's goal is to build spiritually mature, godly character in us over the course of this life, making us ever more like Him (Matthew 5:48). We have our part in building this character by remaining faithful to what is right in spite of pulls to the contrary. We have to resist the temptation to do things we know we shouldn't. We must live by faith that God will give us the strength to endure whatever trials we face in this life.

But when we compromise, we tear down the character God



This kind of angry, spiteful attitude puts us in danger of eternal death. Christ showed that sin includes not only our physical actions, but our thoughts and attitudes.

is helping us build. We give in. And every time we give in we find it that much harder to resist giving in the next time we face temptation. Being faithful is a necessary part of our character development.

Compromise is especially dangerous because of the insidious way it spreads. If we get away with something once, we find it easier to try it again next time. Compromise grows like a cancer. It comes on slowly, then spreads. Before we know it, we can find ourselves in grave spiritual danger, in a fight for our spiritual lives.

Compromise is not only a matter of violating clearly spelled out scriptural standards. We also compromise when we do something we think we shouldn't—even if that something is not itself actually a sin. What makes it wrong, a sin, in this case is attitude, since God requires that we have a mind-set of careful obedience and a desire to please Him.

It's even wrong to do if we merely think it *might* be wrong. Whatever we do, we must be confident that it's acceptable—or it's *not* acceptable. That is why God tells us that “*whatever is not from faith is sin*” (Romans 14:23). If our actions are contrary to what we believe to be right, we are sinning. We must be careful not to violate our conscience (1 Peter 3:15-16).

We need to be sure that what we do is done in faith and confidence, that it is right and acceptable to God—or we should not do it. Our motives need to be right and our conscience clear in everything we do. Therefore it

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is vital that we properly educate our conscience so it is in accordance with God's Word, the Bible. Our natural minds are not adept at discerning right from wrong (Jeremiah 10:23). Therefore we must first learn God's ways that define right and wrong (Hebrews 5:14).

God wants us to live within the boundaries and standards He has set for us and to change our values, attitudes, thoughts and actions so they are in line with *His* standards. The process of conversion may be simply defined as allowing God to work in us to replace *our* standards, values and thoughts with *God's* standards, values and thoughts.

Sin can even be what we *don't* do

The Scriptures tell us that we can sin by the things we do. But we can also sin by the things we *don't* do.

James 4:17 explains: “Therefore, *to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.*” This verse tells us that some transgressions involve *sins of omission*. James tells us that if we know to do good, and we recognize that we ought to be doing certain things but neglect to do them, *that failure is sin*. We miss the mark. We fall short of what we know we should be doing.

The four Gospels are filled with examples of this kind of sin. Jesus often clashed with people who were diligent about strict literal obedience to God's laws but never realized God expects *more* of us than our simply meeting minimum standards of behavior.

In Christ's day the Pharisees had compiled detailed lists of what they considered to be lawful behavior on the Sabbath. They were diligent about tithing—paying a tenth of one's increase to God—down to the last seed or grain of spice. They spent hours studying the law, fasting and praying. Yet Christ called them “blind guides,” “hypocrites” and a “brood of vipers.” Why?

These people simply didn't comprehend the *intent* of God's law. They put great effort into *not* committing sins. But they concentrated so much on this struggle that they failed miserably at applying many of the larger, even more important, *principles* of the law (Matthew 23:23; Hebrews 5:12).

Consider the conflicts they had with Jesus. Their biggest disagreements often were over the Sabbath. They were infuriated that Christ healed on the Sabbath. According to their teaching, one could provide medical help or treatment on the Sabbath only if the situation was immediately life-threatening. Thus when Jesus performed miracles on the Sabbath—healing people who had been crippled or sick for years—instead of rejoicing for those who were healed, they were enraged at Jesus.

The Pharisees were blind to the good Jesus was doing—showing the love, compassion and mercy that is the very foundation of God's laws. He eased the misery of people who had suffered for years. That Jesus

performed these acts of mercy on the Sabbath is proof that carrying out such acts is *not* a breaking of the Sabbath.

It was because of the Pharisees' willful spiritual blindness to the real purpose of the law—and their hostility, also violating the principle of the law—that Christ called them hypocrites and snakes.

What we are most change

Sometimes we can make the same mistake the Pharisees made. We may concentrate so much on a specific aspect of God's law that we lose sight of its *purpose*—concern for, and showing love to, others.

It is easy to think that merely avoiding breaking the *letter* of God's law is all that is required of us. But what did Jesus say? "So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are *unprofitable* servants. We have done what was our duty to do'" (Luke 17:10).

We please God only if we *exceed* the bare-minimum letter of His law. Only a few days before His execution, Jesus elaborated on this principle: "When the Son of Man comes in His glory . . . all the nations will be

gathered before Him . . . Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.'

"Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'

"Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' . . . And these

What's So Bad About Sin?

One of the fundamental principles of the Bible helps us understand why God wants us to quit sinning and turn to Him. That basic principle is *we reap what we sow!*

Paul puts it this way: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption" (Galatians 6:7-8). Speaking of humanity as a whole, he explains: "Destruction and misery are in their ways. And the way of peace they have not known" (Romans 3:16-17; compare Isaiah 59:7-8).

Sin—disobeying God—produces *suffering and pain*. God hates sinful attitudes and deeds (Proverbs 8:13) *because of their horrible effects*. Sin leads to broken relationships, violence and misery. It cuts us off from God (Isaiah 59:1-2).

The *utter selfishness* that lies behind sins that are inconsiderate of others and even inhumane is vividly described in Proverbs 1:

"My child, if sinners entice you, turn your back on them! They may say, 'Come and join us. Let's hide and kill someone! Let's ambush

the innocent! Let's swallow them alive as the grave swallows its victims. Though they are in the prime of life, they will go down into the pit of death. And the loot we'll get! We'll fill our houses with all kinds of things! Come, throw in your lot with us; we'll split our loot with you.'

"Don't go along with them, my child! Stay far away from their paths. They rush to commit crimes. They hurry to commit murder. When a bird sees a trap being set, it stays away. But not these people! They set an ambush for themselves; they booby-trap their own lives! Such is the fate of all who are greedy for gain. It ends up robbing them of life" (verses 10-19, New Living Translation, 1996). Or, as another translation renders the end of verse 19, "Greed kills selfish people" (New Century Version).

Sin is like a trap; lawlessness is a snare. It may look harmless until the consequences begin to appear. Then the sinner is trapped, ensnared by his own foolishness. Not only does sin harm others, but it destroys the sinner's character and often endangers his life.

There is no such thing as a harmless sin.

In the end, sin makes everyone a loser. Read Psalm 1 for a clear lesson in the fruits of living God's way contrasted with the outcome of living sinfully.

Yet often sin appears enticing because frequently it offers temporary rewards and pleasures. We, therefore, are constantly faced with choices. Most of all we need to consider the *consequences* of those choices.

For example, "Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward [that God would give him]" (Hebrews 11:24-26).

It's often difficult to see the end result of sin. Because the devil is the god of this age (2 Corinthians 4:4) and will favor those who will choose to sin (Matthew 4:8-10), evil can appear to be a fast and sure road to pleasure and enjoyable things.

But such ill-gotten gain comes with a hidden price, as is clearly expressed in Psalm 73:

"For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw

the prosperity of the wicked . . . They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth . . . Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. All in vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning . . .

"But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; *then I discerned their end*.

"Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms . . .

"For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works" (verses 3, 8-20, 27-28, English Standard Version).

No amount of temporary gain is worth the present and future consequences of sin!

[the ones who did none of these things] will go away to everlasting punishment, but the righteous [those who did these things] into eternal life” (Matthew 25:31-43, 46).

Jesus illustrated this point with other examples. His parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31) provides a prime example of a sin of omission. The rich man took no notice of a poor beggar, a man who had absolutely no significance in the wealthy man’s busy life but who was greatly valued by God.

Another wealthy man filled his barns with impressive provisions while neglecting to extend a helping hand to the needy (Luke 12:16-21). This man stored up treasures for himself, filling his storehouses to overflowing with far more than he could possibly use while showing no regard for others—another sin of omission.

Opportunities abound for us to do the good we know we ought to do. We can start in our immediate families by working to make them strong, warm, affectionate and encouraging sources of support for all family members.

We also have plenty of opportunities beyond our families. God’s Word tells us in James 1:27 that pure religion is to “look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (NIV).

God wants us to become more compassionate, to love people, to reflect His way of life. He wants us to become more like Jesus of Nazareth, who gave His life as a sacrifice for all mankind. Many opportunities exist for us to encourage, strengthen and otherwise show love for those in need. When we do those things, we are doing good works—sacrificing our time and energy for the well-being and benefit of others.

Understanding why we sin

Now that we have seen how the Bible defines sin—by what we do and don’t do—let’s examine another important question: *Why do we sin?*

The apostle Paul eloquently expressed the frustration we all have with sin: “For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do” (Romans 7:15).

Because Paul was human, just like us, he exclaimed: “If, then, I do what I will not to do . . . it is no longer I who do it, but *sin that dwells in me*. For I know that in me (that is, *in my flesh*) nothing good dwells; for to *will* is present with me, but how to *perform* what is good I do not find” (verses 16-18).

As Paul noted, we have only limited natural ability to conform properly to the standards and values God defines in His law.

Jesus explained that we may be *willing*—have a desire—to do what is right, yet we fail because our flesh is weak and susceptible to temptation. “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41). The *weakness of the*

flesh plays a major role in leading us to sin.

Let’s let the Scriptures explain why we often abandon our resolve not to sin and give into temptations.

James plainly states that sin is generated through our selfish desires, because “each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own *desires* and enticed. Then, *when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin*” (James 1:14-15). Our flesh is not inherently evil, but it is inherently *weak*. As a result, the selfish pulls and appetites of our flesh tempt us to sin.

Paul expressed the magnitude of the problem when he wrote: “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24). Paul’s answer: “I thank God; [deliverance will come] *through Jesus Christ our Lord!* So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but *with the flesh* the law of sin” (verse 25). Paul makes it abundantly clear that our sins arise from uncontrolled *desires of the flesh*.

When is desire evil?

Is desire always bad? When Paul said, “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) *nothing good dwells*” (Romans 7:18), did he mean that our every desire is evil?

Certainly not! He could have said, just as accurately, “I know that in

Must We Obey God’s Commandments?

Jesus explicitly shows that our obedience to God must include obeying the Ten Commandments.

“Now behold, one came and said to Him, ‘Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?’ So He said to him, ‘. . . If you want to enter into life, *keep the commandments.*’

“He said to Him, ‘Which ones?’ Jesus said, ‘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.’” (Matthew 19:16-19).

Obedience to God begins with accepting the Ten Commandments as the permanent standard and foundation for our values and behavior. But our obedience must encompass the full spirit of the Ten Commandments.

Jesus also said: “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not

come to destroy but to *fulfill* [from the Greek *pleroo*, meaning to ‘fill to the full’]. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is *fulfilled* [from a different Greek word, *ginomai*, used in the sense of ‘come to pass’].

“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” (Matthew 5:17-19).

Sin is disregarding or refusing to do what God tells us to do. Jesus tells us He had no intention of annulling or abolishing God’s commands and that anyone who presumes to teach that is in grave spiritual danger. (For further understanding, download or request our free booklets *The Ten Commandments and The New Covenant: Does It Abolish God’s Law?*)

my flesh dwells nothing that is inherently evil.”

The flesh, in and of itself, is neutral in regard to sin and righteousness. In fact when God finished His creation, including Adam and Eve with their bodies made of flesh, as ours are, He observed “*everything that He had made*, and indeed it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). Nothing that God makes is inherently evil.

Our own observations should confirm that the appetites and other needs that are natural to our bodies have good and healthy purposes. If we had no desire for food, we would die of starvation. But that same desire, if not properly controlled, leads to over-



Paul uses the analogy of slavery to illustrate the degree of human subjugation to the pulls of the flesh, as they are influenced and manipulated by Satan.

indulgence and gluttony—and could even lead to stealing from others. It is not the natural desires or appetites of the flesh that are sinful. It is the way we *manage* them that is good or evil.

Without desires our lives would be drab and purposeless. Desires serve as motivating forces in our lives. That is why God created the fleshly mechanisms that stimulate desires within our bodies.

Our need for self-control

Our challenge, then, is to properly manage our desires. God expects us to seek and use His help to direct them into legitimate channels.

While defending himself before Felix, the Roman governor, the apostle Paul “reasoned about righteousness, *self-control*, and the judgment to come” (Acts 24:25). Maintaining self-control is one of the major points of the gospel. Paul admonishes us to “*make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts*” (Romans 13:14). Rather, we must control our desires so they do not become sinful lusts.

Sin tends to have a domino effect. It accelerates. Once a desire becomes an out-of-control lust, a series of other reactions begins. Attitudes toward God and other human beings are particularly affected. A wrong spirit develops. That is why Paul urges us to “cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Corinthians 7:1).

The carnal mind

A blinded mind, confused by its selfish “lusts of the flesh” and the “wiles of the devil,” is referred to in the Scriptures as a “*carnal mind*.” Paul writes: “For those who live according to the flesh *set their minds* on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be *carnally minded* is death, but to be *spiritually minded* is life and peace. Because *the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be*” (Romans 8:5-7).

Notice that Paul defines a “carnal mind” as a mind “set . . . on the things of the flesh.” The word *carnal* is simply a synonym for “fleshly.” (Be sure to read “What’s Wrong With Our Human Nature?” beginning on page 22.)

Paul uses the analogy of slavery to illustrate the degree of human subjugation to the pulls of the flesh, as they are influenced and manipulated by Satan. “Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one’s slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? But God be thanked that though you were *slaves of sin*, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became *slaves of righteousness*” (Romans 6:16-18).

Counteracting a weakness of law

God’s law is perfect (Psalm 19:7). It is spiritual, holy, just and good (Romans 7:12-14). But the apostle Paul explains that, although God’s law *defines* what is sin (verse 7), it cannot *prevent* sin. It gives us knowledge of the weakness of the flesh, but it *provides no direct power* to subdue the flesh.

“What the Law could not do, because human nature was weak, God did. He condemned sin in human nature by sending his own Son, who came with a nature [of physical flesh] like our sinful nature, to do away with sin. God did this so that the righteous demands of the Law [obedience to God’s commandments] might be fully satisfied in us who live according to Spirit, and not according to human nature” (Romans 8:3-4, Good News Bible).

The power to rule over our fleshly desires and impulses *must come from God through His Spirit*. “I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish” (Galatians 5:16-17).

Next we will see how our sins are forgiven so we can receive God’s Holy Spirit and have the power to resist and overcome sin.

Why Be Baptized?

“He who believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16:16).

Genuine repentance leads us to unconditionally surrender our will to God. Once we come to that point, Peter says the next step is to “be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38, NIV).

Water baptism is one of Christianity’s most ancient practices. Far from being useless and archaic, it holds deep symbolic meaning.

To understand the significance of baptism, let’s first consider its historical background. *The Holman Bible Dictionary* explains: “At some point close to the time of Jesus, Judaism began a heavy emphasis on ritual washings to cleanse from impurity. This goes back to priestly baths prior to offering sacrifices (Leviticus 16:4, 24). Probably shortly prior to the time of Jesus or contemporary with Him, Jews began baptizing gentile converts, though circumcision still remained the primary entrance rite into Judaism” (1991, “Baptism”).

Because of this precedent, no one considered it strange for Jesus or the apostles to emphasize the need for baptism. But, in addition to the symbolism of cleansing from impurities, did baptism have greater significance for Christ and the apostles?

Only a beginning

Baptism is a reminder of several deep spiritual truths. It represents death, burial and resurrection—both of Jesus and ourselves. Baptism shows that we accept the shed blood of Christ for our sins and pictures the death of our former life in the baptismal grave.

As Jesus was resurrected a spirit being, our coming out of the grave—rising out of the baptismal water—symbolizes our new Spirit-led life. Our understanding of the true meaning of repentance and conversion lifts baptism to much more than just a symbol; it becomes a profound, life-changing event.

Baptism is not the *conclusion* of the conversion process. It marks a *beginning* for us. In Romans 6 Paul refers to baptism as a summons to “walk in newness of life.” In verse 11 he states that, rather than facing death, we become “alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Baptism is an *outward* sign of an *inward* change of heart and mind. Paul uses this powerful picture of a new life committed to obedience and faith in Christ and the Father in Colossians 3:9-10: “Do not lie to each other, since

you have *taken off your old self* with its practices and have *put on the new self*, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (NIV).

Hebrews 9:14 tells us that Jesus’ sacrifice, which we formally accept at baptism, “cleanse[s] your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.” This means that, through repentance and baptism, we receive forgiveness and no longer should feel condemned for our past sins.



How great is God’s forgiveness? David tells us, “For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is [God’s] mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:11-12).

Through Isaiah God tells us, “Though your sins are like

The waters of baptism symbolize the washing away of the sin in our lives so we may go forward with a clear conscience.

scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be [white] as wool” (Isaiah 1:18). Through Christ’s sacrifice, the waters of baptism symbolize the washing away of the sin in our lives (Acts 22:16) so we may go forward with a clear conscience.

Why we need Christ’s sacrifice

The Scriptures tell us that “the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). That gift of life is made available to us through Christ’s sacrifice. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

Our sins have separated us from God (Isaiah 59:2). But through Christ’s death God opens the door so we can be reconciled to Him.

As Paul explains: “Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, and that is God’s proof of his love towards us. And so, since we have now been justified by Christ’s sacrificial death, we shall all the more certainly be saved through him from final retribution. For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, now that we have been reconciled, shall we be saved by his life!” (Romans 5:8-10, Revised English Bible).

“For in [Christ] God in all his fullness chose to dwell, and through him

to reconcile all things to himself, making peace through the shedding of his blood on the cross—all things, whether on earth or in heaven. Formerly you yourselves were alienated from God, his enemies in heart and mind, as your evil deeds showed. But now by Christ's death in his body of flesh and blood God has reconciled you to himself, so that he may bring you into his own presence, holy and without blame or blemish" (Colossians 1:19-22, REB).

Hundreds of years before Jesus' birth, the Scriptures explained that He would be killed as a sacrifice for our sins. Describing the future sacrificial death of the Messiah, Isaiah wrote: "He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

"Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment

How Baptism's Meaning and Method Are Related

What is the correct method of baptism—sprinkling, pouring, immersion or some other technique? As most Bible dictionaries show, the word translated into English as "baptize" is the Greek word *baptizo*, meaning "to dip into" or "immerse"—to completely submerge. The Greek language uses different words to express sprinkling or pouring, none of which ever refers to baptism.

All biblical examples reveal that baptism was always performed in a body of water large enough and deep enough for immersion. John 3:23, for example, tells us that John the Baptist "was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there." Matthew records that when Jesus was baptized He "came up immediately from the water" (Matthew 3:16).

All other examples of baptisms by Christ's disciples mentioned in the Scriptures follow this pattern. 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.

We find an important reason that immersion is the *only* proper form of baptism. In Romans 6 Paul describes baptism as a symbolic *burial* (verses 1-6). No other form of baptism except full immersion in water can depict a true burial. Baptism represents the burial of *the old self*.

The Scriptures show us that baptism should be performed in water deep enough to immerse—to completely submerge—the new believer. Baptism done in this manner is profound in its meaning.

Romans 6 shows that it represents not only the burial of our old self, but *our faith in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus* as our Lord and Master. It also pictures our rising from a symbolic death to a new, converted life—by our coming out of the watery grave of baptism. And it represents our faith that, just as Jesus was resurrected from the grave, so will God resurrect us to immortality at Christ's return.

that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:3-6, NIV).

Paul explains the connection between Christ's death and our baptism: "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore *buried with him through baptism* into death in order that, just as Christ



The prophet Isaiah wrote of the future sacrificial death of the Messiah: "Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering . . . he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him."

was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, *we too may live a new life*" (Romans 6:3-4, NIV).

He continues: "For we know that *our old self was crucified with him* so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin" (verse 6, NIV).

Bought with a price

Until our baptism the Bible describes us as enslaved to our selfish human nature. But, once we are baptized and our sins are forgiven, God regards us as servants of righteousness. We are *redeemed*—bought back—from a life of slavery to sin to become servants of God and of true righteousness (Romans 6:16-19).

What happens at baptism is a literal transfer of ownership. Our lives now belong to God. From this time forward we make a commitment to tell God, as Jesus did, "Not *My* will, but *Yours*, be done" (Luke 22:42).

Paul explains that this transfer of ownership came at a price: "You were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Corinthians 6:20).

Peter specifies the price: "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Peter 1:18-19, NIV).

Jesus commanded baptism

Jesus regarded the ceremony of baptism to be so important that He commissioned His Church to go all over the world baptizing disciples who believe the gospel message. “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations,” He said, “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Peter emphasized the need for baptism, after repentance, so we can then receive God’s gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

Baptism represents a serious, life-altering commitment. It is only for those mature enough to understand the importance of their decision.

Except on rare occasions for some in their later teenage years, children are simply not able to properly comprehend and make such a serious and lifelong commitment. 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 gravity of their decision (see “We Must Count the Cost” on page 37). Nowhere can we find a single example of an infant or child being baptized.

Water baptism symbolically cleanses us from our past sins (Acts 22:16). But Jesus Christ does not leave us alone to face the future. He offers us the precious gift of the Holy Spirit to empower us for a life of overcoming and serving in obedience and faith.

How God imparts His Spirit

When we repent—with faith in God and in Christ’s sacrifice in payment for our sins—and are baptized, we receive two gifts. One is forgiveness of our sins. All our mistakes of the past are blotted out. We are completely forgiven. Second, we receive the promised gift of God’s Spirit.

This comes through the ceremony, following baptism, of the *laying on of hands* by one or more of God’s faithful elders for the purpose of representing God in the giving of His Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14-17).

The laying on of hands is described in the Scriptures as part of the foundation of a believer’s beliefs and actions (Hebrews 6:1-2). This ceremony, like baptism, represents an important step in the conversion process. Why? Because most examples in the New Testament show that it is through the laying on of hands of Christ’s ministry that God *imparts His Spirit* to new converts.

Like baptism, the practice of laying on of hands has its historical roots in the Old Testament. In ancient times this practice, often accompanied by anointing with oil, was used to set men apart to serve God in the offices of king or priest. It was also sometimes invoked in setting apart sacrifices or other things for holy use. Similarly, laying on of hands after baptism

We Must Count the Cost

Baptism represents the most important commitment we can make. It signifies our willingness to surrender our lives fully and completely to our Creator—putting to death our old self and rising from a watery grave to live a new and transformed life.

Since this decision is such a major commitment, the Scriptures tell us not to take it lightly.

Many people were attracted to Jesus and His teaching, and great multitudes sometimes followed Him from place to place. Yet He pointedly challenged them to consider their level of commitment.

“Whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple,” He said to one such crowd. “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.’

“Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace” (Luke 14:27-32).

He used two examples to illustrate His point that we must count the cost—recognize and acknowledge the consequences—of our commitment to follow Him. First He used the example of someone starting an expensive and time-consuming building project. He noted that no one should begin such an endeavor without first determining that he can follow through on that commitment to the end.

In the second example He likened our commitment to a decision to go to war—to initiate a long, drawn-out struggle in which we will face repeated hardship, setbacks and defeats. Are we willing to remain committed to that struggle to the end, regardless of the personal

sacrifice it might take?

Our commitment, said Jesus the Messiah, must be total: “Whoever of you does not forsake *all that he has* cannot be My disciple” (verse 33). Baptism represents our conscious, deliberate commitment to put God above everything else regardless of the cost.

The commitment He expects from us is indeed great. But the reward is even greater. And we have the promise of God’s help: “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5).

Paul reminds us that “He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6). In spite of the hardships he faced, Paul remained focused on “the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8, NIV).

He knew that “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

We must carefully consider the cost before we are baptized. Once we repent, accept Jesus’ sacrifice, are baptized and receive God’s Spirit, there is no turning back. Jesus tells us we must not waver in our commitment. When one man wavered over whether to follow Him, Christ told Him, “No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62).

God offers us a future so glorious that the challenges and trials we face in pursuit of it are minuscule in comparison.

As Hebrews 2:1-3 tells us, “We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?” (NIV).

signifies that the newly baptized person has now been set apart for God and His purposes.

Since the days of the apostles, the laying on of hands after baptism has signified the actual moment of the receiving of the Holy Spirit and the setting apart of a convert as a child of God. It is only through the gift of God's Spirit that we can develop godly faith and obedience. The practice of laying on of hands for the receiving of God's Spirit is mentioned in Acts 8:17, 19:6 and 2 Timothy 1:6.



Since the days of the apostles, the laying on of hands after baptism has signified the actual moment of the receiving of the Holy Spirit and the setting apart of a convert as a child of God.

When we receive God's Spirit we begin a *new life* of spiritual growth, of replacing our selfish human nature with God's divine nature. Baptism points to our being set apart as children of God. The result is spiritual guidance and direction through God's Spirit dwelling in us, leading us to the Kingdom of God.

Do you believe God is leading you to a fuller understanding of Him and His Word? If the answer is yes, then you should seriously consider acting on the steps God is telling you to take.

One should be baptized by a true minister of Jesus Christ, one who fears God and obeys His laws. Paul wrote: "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).

Today the United Church of God has ministers in most parts of the world who are trained to counsel with and baptize those who turn to God in true repentance. If you perceive that God is calling you and you would like to counsel with one of God's ministers, then please contact us at the address for your area listed at the back of this booklet and we will put you in touch with our ministerial representative nearest you.

After baptism, God begins to transform our lives through the power of His Spirit. Let's now examine the role God's Spirit plays in a Christian's life after baptism.

The Holy Spirit: God's Transforming Power

"For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God"
(Romans 8:13-14).

None of us can overcome our sins and shortcomings without God's help. Even if we could by our own will alter our actions, only God can change our hearts.

This is why Paul appealed to members of the church in Rome not to be "conformed to this world, but [to] be *transformed by the renewing of your mind*" (Romans 12:1-2) through the power of God's Spirit.

Earlier in this epistle, in chapter 8, he helps us understand how the Holy Spirit works in the life of a Christian. In verse 14 he writes that "as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God." Here we see that, to be considered God's children, we must be *led* by the Spirit of God.

He continues this same thought in verse 9. Here Paul dogmatically states that if you do not have God's Spirit dwelling in you, you are "*not His*." This is why it is vital that we repent and be baptized—so we can surrender our lives to God and receive the gift of His Spirit.

Paul elsewhere writes that you have "Christ in you" if you are a Christian (Colossians 1:27). It is through the power and influence of God's Spirit that we allow Christ to live in us.

Having received God's Spirit, Paul described his new outlook on life: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, *but Christ liveth in me*: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20, KJV).

Buried with Jesus in the watery grave of baptism, Paul now lived a life that was no longer his own. He described his transformed life as one of allowing Christ to *live again within him*. This is how we please God—by emulating His Son. Paul urged other believers to "imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). He tells us to "let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5, New Revised Standard Version).

However, we cannot succeed at living a converted life strictly through our own efforts. We succeed through the use of *God's* power and help. Therefore, the glory and credit go to Him.

To imitate Christ we must ask God for help, through His Spirit, so we can bring our thoughts, attitudes and actions in line with His. We must allow His Spirit to become the guiding force in our lives to produce the qualities of true Christianity. We must ask ourselves whether we are truly *being led* by God's Spirit or are *resisting* it.

To grasp how God's Spirit works within us, we must understand what God's Spirit is. Many are confused on this point.

First, understand that the Holy Spirit is not a distinct "person," along with God the Father and Jesus Christ, forming a "Holy Trinity." There simply is no biblical evidence to support the common belief that the Holy Spirit is a distinct person alongside the Father and the Son. In Scripture the

Is The Holy Spirit a Person?

The Scriptures speak of the Holy Spirit in many ways that demonstrate that it is not a divine person. For example, the Holy Spirit is referred to as *a gift* (Acts 10:45; 1 Timothy 4:14). We are told that it can be *quenched* (1 Thessalonians 5:19), that it can be *poured out* (Acts 2:17; 10:45), and that we are *baptized with it* (Matthew 3:11). It must be *stirred up* within us (2 Timothy 1:6), and it also *renews* us (Titus 3:5). These are certainly not attributes of a person.

This Spirit is also called "the holy Spirit of promise . . . the guarantee of our inheritance . . . the spirit of wisdom and revelation" (Ephesians 1:13-14, 17).

In contrast to God the Father and Jesus Christ, who are consistently compared to human beings in Their form and shape, the Holy Spirit is just as consistently represented in a completely different manner. It is described as appearing as a dove (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32) and as "tongues of fire" (Acts 2:3). Jesus compared it with "living water" (John 7:37-39).

The Gospels record further evidence that the Holy Spirit is not a person. In Matthew 1:20, we read that Jesus was begotten by the Holy Spirit (Moffatt translation). Yet Christ continually prayed to and addressed the Father, not the Holy Spirit, as His father (Matthew 10:32, 33; 11:25-27; 12:50; 15:13; 16:17, 27; 18:10, 35). Never did He represent the Holy Spirit as His father.

Nor did Jesus speak of the Holy Spirit as a

third divine person; instead He only spoke of the relationship between God the Father and Himself (Matthew 26:39; Mark 13:32; 15:34; John 5:18, 22; 8:16, 18; 10:30; 13:3; 17:11).

If the godhead were a Trinity, surely the apostle Paul would have understood and emphasized this in his teaching. Yet we find no such concept in his writings. Paul's standard greeting in his letters to churches, as well as individuals to whom he wrote, is, "Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." There is no mention of the Holy Spirit.

This same greeting, with only minor variations, appears in every epistle that bears Paul's name: Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2; Colossians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:2; 1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:2; Titus 1:4; and Philemon 3. The Holy Spirit is *always* left out of these greetings—an unbelievable oversight if the Holy Spirit were indeed a person coequal with God and Jesus.

This is even more surprising when we consider that the churches to which Paul wrote had many gentile members from polytheistic backgrounds who had formerly worshipped numerous gods. Paul's epistles record no attempt on his part to explain the Trinity or Holy Spirit as a divine person equal with God the Father and Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul states clearly that "there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things . . .

Holy Spirit is instead described most often as *the power of God* at work in our lives. This power emanates from God, allowing us to be "led by the Spirit of God" (Romans 8:14).

What does God's Holy Spirit do for us as Christians? This question affects the core of our religious beliefs, because without the power of God's Spirit we can have no deep, close relationship with the Father, nor can we become His children. It is because the Spirit dwells in us that we are called the children of God (Romans 8:14-17).

We must understand what it means to be "led by the Spirit." God's Spirit doesn't drive, drag or push us around; it *leads* us. It will not prevent us from sinning, nor will it force us to do what is right. It leads us, but we must be

and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things" (1 Corinthians 8:6). He makes no mention of the Holy Spirit as a divine person.

The final book of the Bible (and the last to be written) describes "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1) wherein "the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them" (verse 3). Jesus Christ, "the Lamb," is also there (verse 22). The Holy Spirit, however, is again not explicitly mentioned—another inconceivable oversight if this Spirit is the third person of a Trinity.

"God is Spirit" (John 4:24)—that is, He consists of it. And it also flows out *from* Him. The Spirit emanating from God, the Holy Spirit, is described by an angel as "the *power of the Highest*" (Luke 1:35). It is the same power we can receive directly from God.

Many other scriptures also show the connection between the Holy Spirit and God's power. For example, Paul reminded Timothy that "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of *power* and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Timothy 1:7; see also Zechariah 4:6; Micah 3:8).

Luke 4:14 records that Jesus Christ began His ministry "in the *power of the Spirit*." Speaking of the Holy Spirit, which would be given to His followers after His death, Jesus told them, "You shall receive *power* when the Holy Spirit has come upon you" (Acts 1:8).

Peter relates that "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with *power*, [and Jesus] went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God

was with Him" (Acts 10:38). The Holy Spirit is here associated with the power by which God was with Him—the power through which Jesus Christ performed mighty miracles during His earthly, physical ministry. The Holy Spirit is the very presence of God's power actively working in His servants (Psalm 51:11; 139:7).

Paul expresses his desire that church members would "abound in hope by the *power of the Holy Spirit*," in the same way that Jesus had worked through him "in mighty signs and wonders, by the *power of the Spirit of God*" (Romans 15:13, 19).

This Spirit empowers Christians to live a life of growing and overcoming, of transforming their lives to become like Jesus Christ.

When the Holy Spirit is referred to by personal pronouns such as "he" or "himself" in the Scriptures, this does not prove the Holy Spirit is a person. The translators of the King James Version, influenced by their belief in the Holy Spirit as a third person in the Trinity, generally translated pronouns referring to the Holy Spirit as personal and masculine rather than neuter.

Translators of later English versions of the Bible, also operating from the premise of the Trinity, have gone a step further and most often translated *all* references to the Holy Spirit as masculine. Thus God's Spirit is almost always incorrectly referred to with such personal pronouns as "he" or "him" in English Bible translations.

For more on this topic, be sure to download or request our free booklet *Is God a Trinity?*

willing to follow if we are to allow God to work within us through His Spirit.

Divine help through God's Spirit

How does God's Spirit lead us? Let's consider a few ways.

The Holy Spirit keeps us in contact with God's mind. God's Spirit works with our mind. The apostle John describes it this way: "Now he who keeps

Why Can't Theologians Explain the Trinity Doctrine?

Many people assume that the Holy Spirit, along with God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son, form what is commonly known as the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity expresses a belief in one God who exists in three distinct but equal persons. Is the Holy Spirit truly a third divine person, along with the Father and Jesus?

In spite of these assumptions, the word *Trinity* doesn't appear anywhere in the Bible. In fact, it did not come into common use as a religious term until *several centuries* after the last books of the Bible were completed.

Notice this admission in the *New Bible Dictionary*: "The term 'Trinity' is not itself found in the Bible. It was first used by Tertullian at the close of the 2nd century, but received wide currency [common use in discussion] and formal elucidation [clarification] *only in the 4th and 5th centuries*" (1996, "Trinity," emphasis added).

The dictionary goes on to explain that "the formal doctrine of the Trinity was the result of several inadequate attempts to explain who and what the Christian God really is . . . To deal with these problems the Church Fathers met in 325 at the Council of Nicaea to set out an orthodox biblical definition concerning the divine identity." However, it wasn't until 381, "at the Council of Constantinople, [that] the divinity of the Spirit was affirmed" (*ibid.*).

We see, then, that the doctrine of the Trinity wasn't formalized until long after the Bible was completed and the apostles long dead in their graves. It took later theologians several centuries to sort out what they believed con-

cerning the Holy Spirit.

And by no means are theologians' explanations of the Trinity doctrine clear. A.W. Tozer, in his book *The Knowledge of the Holy*, writes that the Trinity is an "incomprehensible mystery" and that attempts to understand it "must remain forever futile." He admits that churches, "without pretending to understand," have nevertheless continued to teach this doctrine (1961, pp. 17-18).

Unger's Bible Dictionary, in its article on the Trinity, concedes that the Trinitarian concept is humanly incomprehensible: "It is admitted by all who thoughtfully deal with this subject that the Scripture revelation here leads us into the presence of a deep mystery; and that all human attempts at expression are of necessity imperfect" (1966, p. 1,118).

Why do even those who believe in the concept of the Holy Spirit as a third person of a supposedly triune Godhead, along with God the Father and Jesus the Son, find it so difficult to explain?

Because the Bible does not teach it! One cannot prove something from the Bible that is not biblical. The Bible is our only reliable source of divine revelation and truth, and the Trinity concept simply is not part of God's revelation to humankind.

The Holy Spirit, rather than a distinct person, is described in the Bible as being God's divine power (see "Is the Holy Spirit a Person?" beginning on page 40). To learn much more about this, send for or download a copy of our free booklet *Is God a Trinity?*

His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit [which] He has given us" (1 John 3:24). Through God's Spirit, which He gives us, we can be influenced by Him for the good. This is in stark contrast to the world around us and our own nature, which influence us toward evil.

God's Spirit also helps us come to a deeper comprehension of His truth. When Jesus promised the apostles He would send the Spirit to them, He said it would "guide [them] into all truth" (John 16:13).

God's Spirit inspires a deeper understanding of His Word, purpose and will. As 1 Corinthians 2:9-11 tells us: "But as it is written, 'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.' But God has revealed them to us *through His Spirit*. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except [by] the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except [by] the Spirit of God."

Without God's Spirit a person cannot understand God's divinely expressed Word and will, "for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (verse 14).

The Holy Spirit makes overcoming possible. Nothing is too difficult for us with the power of God working in our lives. Romans 8:26 tells us that God's Spirit helps us in our weaknesses. Paul, who wrote the letter to the Romans, speaks for all of us when he said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

Jesus promises Christians, "With God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26; Mark 10:27). The Christian life is to be one of overcoming. We must realize God doesn't want us to remain just as we were when He called us. Instead, as we read earlier, we must "not be conformed to this world, but *be transformed by the renewing of your mind*" (Romans 12:2). Christianity is a lifetime of *overcoming* and *growing*—of transforming our thoughts and mind to become like Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:5).

The Spirit of God convicts our conscience and helps us see sin as it really is. Speaking of the Holy Spirit, which would be given to His followers after His death, Jesus said it would "convict the world of sin" (John 16:8). God's Spirit within us, working with our conscience, helps us to recognize and avoid sin. The guilt we feel is real when prompted by recognition of sins.

The Holy Spirit produces godly fruit in us. Just as an apple tree produces apples, God's Spirit produces a particular type of fruit in the life of a Christian. Paul lists the fruit that should be evident in those who are led by God's Spirit as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23, New Living Translation, 1996). Each aspect of this fruit is worthy of a detailed study in itself,

coupled with a self-analysis to see to what extent these traits are evident in our lives. You can download an article reprint series on “The Fruit of the Spirit” from our website (at www.ucg.org/reprints).



Paul lists the fruit that should be evident in those who are led by God's Spirit as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.

“But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.

“Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to *make your call and election sure*, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:3-11).

The Spirit of God also comforts, encourages and otherwise helps us. Jesus Christ promised to send His followers a “Helper” (John 14:16), “Advocate” (NLT) or “Comforter” (KJV). True comfort and reassurance come from God’s Spirit dwelling in us. We need not be unduly worried about what may happen to us. God’s Spirit gives us the assurance that whatever happens will be for the good “to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).

This assurance provides an outlook on life that is rare in our world. Yes, a Christian can get discouraged, but it is through the Holy Spirit that we can begin to look at life differently. As noted earlier, peace is another fruit of God’s Spirit in the life of a Christian.

The apostle Peter sums up the process of growing to spiritual maturity: “[God’s] divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of *the divine*

Growing to Spiritual Maturity

“Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection” (Hebrews 6:1).

Correctly understanding the scriptural truth that the Holy Spirit is God’s power that can transform our lives helps us better understand His purpose and will for us.

Paul wrote that “we must *grow up* in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Ephesians 4:15, NRSV). He also said, “Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding *be mature*” (1 Corinthians 14:20).

This growth process involves overpowering the pulls of the flesh, replacing them with the character of Jesus Christ. Where do we begin?

John tells us: “Those who are God’s children do not continue sinning, because the new life from God remains in them. They are not able to go on sinning, because they have become children of God” (1 John 3:9, New Century Version). The converted Christian does not habitually practice sin. He has, after all, determined to turn away from sin.

The sense here is not that, as a Christian, we will *never* sin (1 John 1:8), because we remain human and imperfect and can still be influenced by our nature and the degenerate world around us. Instead, the sense is that a Christian will not make it his *practice* to sin.

Note this paraphrase translation of 1 John 3:9: “People conceived and brought into life by God don’t make a practice of sin. How could they? God’s seed is deep within them, making them who they are. It’s not in the nature of the God-begotten to practice and parade sin” (The Message).

A truly converted Christian will stumble and sin at times, but his or her life will be one of striving mightily to avoid sin. This will involve learning not only to resist temptation, but to *flee circumstances* where one might be tempted into wrongdoing (1 Corinthians 6:18).

In Ephesians 4 Paul presents an easy-to-understand formula for overcoming sin. He illustrates the method with several examples so we may readily comprehend what is involved. When we examine these verses we notice three steps we need to take to shift from a sinful life to one that properly represents God’s working with us and in us.

Paul’s instruction regarding overcoming our inclination to sin is this: “to

put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to *put on the new self*, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:22-24, NIV).

Out with the old

The first step, says Paul, is to “put off your old self.” To do this we must

Does God Set Conditions on His Gift of Eternal Life?

In Ephesians 2:8-9, Paul explains that “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.”

Eternal life comes as a result of God’s grace. It is His gift, unearned and undeserved on our part. No one will ever be able to boast that he or she has earned or deserves the gift of eternal life.

But can doing things—or *not* doing things—disqualify us from receiving that wonderful gift from God?

If there is an authority on receiving eternal life, it has to be Jesus Christ. After all, He is the one through whom we receive it.

In Hebrews 5:8-9, Jesus is called the author of our salvation: “Though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation *to all who obey Him.*”

Since salvation is God’s gift, what does this passage mean when it speaks of “eternal salvation to all who obey Him”? If we must *do something* to receive God’s gift of salvation, how can it be a gift?

Gifts can have conditions

The fact is, the Bible shows that God sets certain conditions for receiving salvation. Some conditions *enable us* to receive that gift, and other conditions *disqualify us* from receiving it.

To use an analogy, if someone offered to send you a \$100 bill if you would send him a self-addressed stamped envelope, he would be offering you a gift. If you failed to send the envelope, you would not receive the gift. You might

complain, but you still would not receive the gift because you had not met the conditions. On the other hand, if you sent the required envelope and received the \$100 bill, you did not *earn* the gift. You simply met the necessary conditions. The fact that conditions are attached makes it no less a gift.

Since Jesus is the author of our salvation, let’s examine a few of His statements that tell us what we must do to receive that gift.

What must we do?

In Matthew 7:21 Jesus says, “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.*” Jesus made it clear that merely acknowledging Him as Lord and Master—saying “Lord, Lord”—is not sufficient. To inherit the Kingdom, we must *do something*. We must *do the will of the Father*, as He clearly stated.

Jesus wants us to understand that there is more to receiving eternal life than just mental acceptance. Our conviction that He is our Savior must be more than just a warm, comforting thought or intellectual concept. Jesus warns that simply calling on His name or recognizing Him as “Lord” is not enough.

At one point a wealthy young man asked Jesus how he could receive eternal life. “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” the man asked (Matthew 19:16). Christ’s reply, in verse 17, might shock some who think obedience to God’s law is unnecessary. Jesus responded, “If you want to enter into life, *keep the commandments.*”

realize that the old person is our carnal, selfish nature, which is hostile to God (Romans 8:7).

The “old self” to whom Paul referred is both our unconverted mind and the individual thoughts and acts of sin that spring from it. As discussed earlier, our former self must be put to a symbolic death through the waters of baptism (Romans 6:1-4).

Jesus didn’t answer that nothing is required other than believing in God or in Him. He told the young man that he must *obey the commandments of God* to receive the gift of eternal life.

As the apostle James points out, belief is pointless unless it is backed up by action and obedience: “You believe that there is one God. You do well. *Even the demons believe—and tremble*” (James 2:19).

He goes on to explain that faith—belief and trust in God—and obedience go hand in hand: “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?” (verses 20-22).

James thus explained that works of obedience as a result of our faith maintain our relationship with God and lead to *greater* faith and obedience, as God requires.

Baptism and laying on of hands

Jesus gave another condition for God’s gift of eternal life in Mark 16:16: “*He who believes and is baptized will be saved*; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” Water baptism—by full immersion—is a symbolic act representing the death of our old self and the beginning of a new life of serving God and striving to avoid sin (Romans 6:1-23).

Baptism is also followed by the laying on of hands, which allows us to receive God’s Holy Spirit and truly belong to Him (Acts 8:17; Romans 8:9). Unless we surrender our lives to God through baptism and the laying on of hands to receive His Spirit as instructed, we fail to meet—whether knowingly or unknowingly—His prerequisites for receiving His gift of salvation.

To those who would brush aside these and other plain biblical instructions Jesus replies, “But why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and *do not do the things which I say?*” (Luke 6:46).

In Matthew 10:22 Jesus listed another condition we must meet to receive God’s gift of salvation: “He who endures to the end will be saved.” We can lose out on salvation if we fail to endure to the end. Once we have committed ourselves to obeying God and surrendering ourselves to Him, we must stay the course to the end and not look back (Luke 9:62; 1 Corinthians 9:27).

Free, but not cheap

You may have heard the expression, “Salvation is free, but it isn’t cheap.” God’s gift of life to us cost Jesus Christ *His* life. He, the very Son of God, willingly surrendered His life so that we might receive God’s wonderful gift of eternal life.

But He expects us to surrender our lives in return. “If you want to be my follower you must love me more than your own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, more than your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple. And you cannot be my disciple if you do not carry your own cross and follow me” (Luke 14:26-27, NLT, 1996).

Our love for and commitment to Jesus Christ and God the Father must be more important to us than any other relationship. Each of us must be willing to bear his “cross,” to faithfully follow Jesus even through life’s most difficult challenges.

Verses 28-33 carry that thought, warning us to consider carefully that accepting the gift of eternal life comes at the highest cost we can imagine. “So no one can become my disciple *without giving up everything for me*” (verse 33, NLT, 1996).

As Jesus Christ gave His life for us, we must be willing to give our lives to follow Him!

Over time God can work miracles in changing the worst of us through the transforming power of His Spirit. He can free us from the many sins that imprison us—sins that we may think we can never overcome. We can be released from the bonds that have ensnared us and held us captive.

With God's help we are progressively liberated from a wrong way of life that Paul described as slavery (Romans 6:16). To break free of enslavement Paul tells us to “put to death . . . whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry” (Colossians 3:5, NIV).

As we study God's Word, even after we are baptized and converted, we continue to see details of our human nature revealed to us. The Scriptures help us identify changes we still need to make. The Word of God, if we let it, powerfully cuts and penetrates to the core of our being “and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

God's Word helps us identify our wrong practices and thoughts (see “Why Bible Study Is Necessary for Spiritual Growth” on page 51). We can then turn away from them and think godly thoughts and do godly works. *But we cannot do them alone!*

A High Priest Eager to Help Us

The key to solving the problem of sin in our lives is the help we receive through Jesus Christ. Jesus was born not only to make possible forgiveness of the past, but to *help us conquer the strongholds of sin*, the entrenched habits that are so difficult to dislodge from our lives. He is our merciful High Priest in heaven (Hebrews 2:17-18; 8:1-2; 9:11-14; 10:19-23), interceding with the Father on our behalf (Romans 8:34).

As John explained, “If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9, NRSV).

Jesus Christ is ever ready to help us *gain the victory* over sin: “And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 John 5:4-5).

The apostle John, while acknowledging our human weaknesses, encourages us not to give in to sin. “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).

This gives us every reason for encouragement in our daily struggle against sin. After all, Christ has experienced the same temptations and fully understands our plight: “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:15-16).

How do we receive that help? Jesus answers: “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 receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened” (Matthew 7:7-8).

We need to *stir up* the gift of God's Spirit within us (2 Timothy 1:6). That Spirit can renew us every day and will empower our new nature for the successful fight against sin (2 Corinthians 4:16). With the help of His Spirit we can “put to death the deeds of the body” (Romans 8:13).

Some stumble in their fight against sin when they attempt to overcome it by their own strength rather than relying on the power God makes available through His Spirit. Paul acknowledges this human deficiency. He knew full well the impact of human nature on our conduct. “Evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good,” he wrote (Romans 7:21). This scripture describes the struggle of Paul—and every Christian—between his human nature and his new godly nature.

It is through Jesus dwelling in us that we can live a new, godly life (Galatians 2:20). We can be redeemed “from every lawless deed” and purified as “His own special people, zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14). With God's help we can overcome.

In with the new

If we strive only to put off the old self, the process of overcoming is incomplete. Now comes the most challenging part. We must, with God's help, build into our character the positive traits that are the opposite of the flaws we have identified. As Paul explained, we must “put on the new self” (Ephesians 4:24) with all its godly attributes. We must focus our attention and effort on the godly behavior we desire to practice.

We must concentrate on the positive to eliminate the negative. This is where the examples Paul uses are so instructive and helpful: “Therefore, putting away lying, ‘Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor’” (verse 25).

When is a liar not a liar? He doesn't cease being a liar just because he keeps his mouth shut. He is still a liar between lies, so to speak. The only way a liar can demonstrate a change in his character is to “speak truth with his neighbor.”

He must put off the old by putting on the new. When a former liar consistently begins telling the truth, his old ways of dishonesty and evasion begin to shrivel up and die. This is what happens when, with the help of God's Spirit, we strive to overcome our old ways of living and replace them with God's ways.

Paul lists another example, that of stealing. When is a thief not a thief? Someone who is not at this moment stealing something may be a thief “between jobs.” The only demonstrable proof that a thief has changed his ways is if he begins consistently to do the opposite.

Stealing is simply the act of unlawfully taking. The opposite approach to a selfish, thieving attitude is *giving*. With God's help a thief should learn

to *work* “that he may have something to *give* him who has need” (verse 28).

Destructive or constructive words?

Paul cites yet another example of the way we communicate. Our tongue is often an accurate indicator of our dominant nature, whether good or bad. Jesus noted that “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34). James tells us that the unbridled tongue is “a world of iniquity” (James 3:6).

Keeping silent so that no corrupt communication slips out may be a step in the right direction. But keeping our mouth shut is not proof in itself that our nature has changed. After all, “even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace” (Proverbs 17:28). Our nature has fundamentally changed when we begin using our tongue in a positive way. “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Ephesians 4:29, NIV).

To overcome the wrong use of speech, we need to ask God, through the power of His Spirit, to help us concentrate on *encouraging and building up others* instead of berating them or tearing them down. Our words should spring from “a well of life” (Proverbs 10:11). Our talk should be as “choice silver” (Proverbs 10:20). We should pray to God that our speech be “always with grace” (Colossians 4:6).

We can overcome our base traits by concentrating on upright behavior. Through applying this formula with the help of God’s Spirit, change becomes a lasting part of our character.

Which spirit will be with you?

God’s Spirit is contrasted with the spirit of “bitterness and wrath” in Ephesians 4:31-32: “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.” When we indulge the nature of our old self with all its corrupt practices, we “give the devil a foothold” (verse 27, NIV). When we are kind and forgiving we reflect the Spirit of God.

Perhaps now we can understand why we quench God’s Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19) if we refuse its leading and indulge in stealing or corrupt communication such as lying. Satan thrives in such an environment.

But, when we put on the new man led by God’s Spirit, the opposite results prevail. Satan hates godly behavior and cannot prevail in such a setting. God’s Spirit, however, flourishes in a person who strives to live a godly life.

All this beautifully illustrates some simple yet profound truths: When we “submit to God” and “resist the devil,” he will flee from us (James

4:7). As Paul explained, “Walk in the spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16).

The simplest way to remove the air from a cup is by filling it with water. Likewise God can overcome our human nature by filling our minds

Why Bible Study Is Necessary for Spiritual Growth

Paul scolded the Corinthian Christians for their unspiritual attitudes and conduct (1 Corinthians 3:1-4). He explained that their problems were caused partly by some of them having *too little knowledge* of God’s ways. He wrote: “Awake to righteousness, and do not sin; *for some do not have the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame*” (1 Corinthians 15:34).

We cannot properly honor and serve God or His Son, Jesus Christ, unless we have *knowledge of His will* (Romans 12:2; Colossians 4:12; Hebrews 10:36). We acquire that knowledge through *regular, diligent Bible study*. Paul says, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, *handling accurately the word of truth*” (2 Timothy 2:15, New American Standard Bible).

He explained to Timothy, “You must continue in the things which you have *learned* and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known *the Holy Scriptures*, which are able to make you *wise for salvation* through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:14-15).

What makes the Scriptures so necessary to our salvation? Paul continues, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, *that the man of God may be complete*, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (verses 16-17).

We learn God’s ways by carefully reading and reflecting on the meaning of His instructions. Consider the attitude toward God’s Word and His law expressed in Psalm 119:97-104:

“Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. You, through Your commandments, make me wiser than my enemies; for they are ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for Your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the ancients, because I keep Your precepts.

“I have restrained my feet from every evil way, *that I may keep Your word*. I have not departed from your judgments, for You Yourself have taught me. How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! *Through your precepts I get understanding*; therefore I hate every false way.”

Notice this criticism of some who had not taken the time to accurately discern God’s will from diligent study of His Word:

“Although by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the basic principles of God’s revelation again. You need milk, not solid food. Now everyone who lives on milk *is inexperienced with the message about righteousness*, because he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature—for those *whose senses have been trained to distinguish between good and evil*” (Hebrews 5:12-14, HCSB).

Growing spiritually through regular and meaningful personal Bible study is vital. As Paul summed up: “This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more *in knowledge and depth of insight*, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God” (Philippians 1:9-11, NIV).

with His nature and its many wonderful attributes.

As 2 Peter 1:5-8 tells us: “Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (NIV).

This does not mean we will never sin again, for as long as we are physical we remain subject to human weakness. However, we need not become discouraged in the face of our sins. Indeed, we should be thankful that we are

How to Stir Up God’s Spirit

The apostle Paul admonished members in one of the churches he started, “Do not quench the Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 5:19). He also urged the young evangelist Timothy: “Stir up [rekindle] the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (2 Timothy 1:6-7).

Paul likened God’s Spirit to an ember in a dying fire. He encouraged Timothy to stir up that live coal, to fan it into flames. He knew that we must guard against neglecting the gift of God’s Spirit and letting it grow cold.

How can we maintain the courage, strength and love God gives us through His Spirit? We find the answers in several scriptures.

Paul tells us in Ephesians 6:13: “Take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day . . .” Satan will do all in his power to discourage us, to induce us to become disillusioned and afraid—to abandon our confidence in God. What, then, did Paul mean by putting on “the whole armor of God” as our defense? What may we use to resist such self-defeating attitudes as fear, apathy and discouragement?

Paul continues: “Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be

able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of [the hope of] salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (verses 14-17, NRSV; compare 1 Thessalonians 5:8).

Paul tells us we need to stand fast in the truth we have learned, concentrating on living righteously regardless of circumstances. We also must be active in doing our part in furthering the spread of the true gospel, never losing sight of eternal life as our goal and using God’s Word as the sword that cuts through all deception.

But equally important is what Paul mentions next in Ephesians 6: “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people. Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should” (verses 18-20, NIV).

Our ability to remain spiritually strong and active depends on how much we rely on God. And our line of communication for that help is through prayer.

Paul encouraged Christians to make it their practice to pray not only for themselves but also for him and for others. “Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving; meanwhile praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the

mindful of them, because awareness is the first step toward their eradication.

Paul shares with us that he never attained perfection in his efforts to eliminate sin from his life. But he gives us this perspective: “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” (Philippians 3:13-14).

From the book of Hebrews come these encouraging words: “Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession [the faith we profess]. For

mystery of Christ, for which I am also in chains, that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak” (Colossians 4:2-4).

One of the main keys to keeping the working of God’s Spirit active and stirred up in our lives is keeping our minds on the big picture of what God is doing. If we dwell excessively on ourselves and our own problems we become far more vulnerable to Satan’s negative influences. Paul urged all new converts to see themselves as part of a great work that God is doing. As the point man for the work of God in their region of the world, he encouraged them to enthusiastically support his efforts through their prayers.

He explains why their prayers were so important: “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced . . . But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers” (2 Corinthians 1:8-11, NIV).

Paul mentions his deep love for those converted under his ministry. “I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:3-6, NIV).

It is important that we also keep our confidence in God alive and active. Sometimes we

need to combine fasting with our prayers to stir up our zeal and renew our dedication and commitment to Him. King David wrote that he “humbled [him]self with fasting” (Psalm 35:13). Fasting is abstaining from food and drink as a means of getting our minds back on the reality that we are not self-sufficient. Fasting helps us realize just how fragile we are and how much we depend on things beyond ourselves. And it serves as an exercise in self-mastery with God’s help.

The Bible records that great men of faith such as Moses, Elijah, Daniel, Paul and Jesus Himself fasted that they might draw closer to God (Exodus 34:28; 1 Kings 19:8; Daniel 9:3; 10:2-3; 2 Corinthians 11:27; Matthew 4:2).

Jesus was approached with the question, “Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?” He responded: “Can the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast. But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days” (Mark 2:18-20).

Jesus knew that His true disciples, once He was no longer there in the flesh with them, at times would need to fast to regain and renew their zeal to serve Him. They would need to “stir up” the gift of the Holy Spirit within them.

James tells us, “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (James 4:8). Through constant prayer and occasional fasting we can do this. We can make it our practice to stir up and rekindle the Spirit of God within us.

we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:14-16).

“Therefore . . . *let us throw off everything that hinders* and the sin that

The Prayer God Will Hear

God is aware of everything we say and do. Not even a sparrow can fall to the ground without His knowing it (Matthew 10:29). Therefore when anyone prays to God He is well aware of the words that are spoken. But does He really consider all the requests that are directed to Him?

Not always!

First, let the Scriptures explain: “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).

Jesus Christ gives additional instruction: “Whenever you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites, because they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by people. I assure you: They’ve got their reward!” (Matthew 6:5, HCSB).

What then must we do for God to hear our prayers?

Jesus continues: “But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions [saying the same words over and over] as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words” (verses 6-7).

The Scriptures show that public prayers are appropriate in proper situations. But most of our prayers should be sincere, private conversations between just us and God.

God has promised to hear us if we sincerely approach Him in this manner, with an attitude

of seeking to do His will and a willingness to allow His Word to guide and correct us. “For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and *His ears are open to their prayers*; but the face of the LORD is against those who do evil” (1 Peter 3:12).

God looks on our attitude, our heart (1 Samuel 16:7), rather than on our past sins. He can see the direction we want to go, and that is what is important to Him.

He expects us to have *faith* that He hears us and to *trust* His judgment. “But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind” (James 1:6).

God is especially aware of our motives when we pray. If we sincerely *want* to do what is pleasing to Him and pray accordingly, He is delighted to hear us. He responds *according to His judgment*, according to what He knows is best for us.

Regrettably, not everyone prays from pure motives: “You ask and do not receive, because you *ask amiss*, that you may spend it on your pleasures” (James 4:3). God will not honor the requests of those who are interested only in satisfying their own desires but have no interest in pleasing Him.

Again, God looks at our attitude. He knows why we ask, and He knows what is in our hearts.

Prayer is *essential* in our relationship with God. Therefore, we are told, “Rejoice always, *pray* without ceasing [habitually], in everything *give thanks*; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). When we pray in this attitude, God will hear us.

so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Hebrews 12:1-3, NIV, 1984).

Our ultimate transformation

The entire conversion process concerns the wonderful *transformation* that God—through Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit—makes in us. The final and most dramatic aspect of our transformation will occur at the resurrection of the dead when Jesus returns.

The apostle Paul reveals what will happen to the “called, chosen and faithful” disciples of Christ at that time: “What I mean, my friends, is this: flesh and blood can never possess the kingdom of God, the perishable cannot possess the imperishable. Listen! I will unfold a mystery: we shall not all die, but *we shall all be changed* in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet-call.

“For the trumpet will sound, and *the dead will rise imperishable, and we shall be changed*. This perishable body must be clothed with the imperishable, and what is mortal with immortality. And when this perishable body has been clothed with the imperishable and our mortality has been clothed with immortality, then the saying of scripture will come true: ‘Death is swallowed up; victory is won!’” (1 Corinthians 15:50-54, REB).

Daniel 12:2-3 also speaks of this marvelous occurrence: “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament [the sky], and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever.” (To learn more, please request our free booklet *What Is Your Destiny?*)

Finally, Paul describes the wonderful conclusion to all that God is doing for us: “We eagerly await a Savior from [heaven], the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will *transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body*” (Philippians 3:20-21, NIV).

Therefore, Paul writes in Titus 2:12-14, by “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.”

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