

BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

GOD LOVES YOU . . . AND HAS A WONDERFUL PLAN FOR YOUR LIFE!

The main theme of the Bible is God's love for us. The SIMPLE TRUTH is that there is a God who created us, who loves us very much, and who wants us to enjoy a relationship with Him. "What a marvelous love the Father has extended to us! Just look at it – we're called children of God! That's who we really are." (1 John 3:1, The Message)

The love of God is seen in His plan for us. "I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (Jeremiah 29:11, New International Version)

God's plan for us involves our future – not just in this life, but in eternity. God's plan is for us to live the kind of life that when we die we end up with Him in heaven.

Heaven is a FREE GIFT and cannot be earned. We can't achieve it, deserve it, merit it, or obtain it by human efforts – no matter how hard we might work for it. We can go to the store and buy anything – a new car, new clothes, food, toys, or furniture. If we have enough money, we can even buy a new home. But if we have all the money in the world, it won't buy our way into heaven, because the Bible says, "God gives us a FREE Gift – life forever in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23b, New Century Version) "It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing." (Ephesians 2:8-9, The Message)

We have the idea that nothing is free, we have to work for everything. But that's not true about heaven. The tragedy is that even though it's free, many people don't receive it. This can be seen more clearly when we understand what the Bible says about man.

However, we often make a mess of God's plan for us.

We have chosen to disobey God and go against Him. All of us have done wrong and failed to do what is right. How? By our sin. Sin means we have missed God's mark and God's plan for us. If we were to play a dart game, it would not matter if one person missed the bull's eye by 1 inch and the person missed it by 5 inches. In reality, both people missed the bull's eye. In fact, "We've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us." (Romans 3:23, The Message) This includes ALL of us; you, me, Billy Graham, Mother Teresa, the Pope – everyone; no matter how moral and upright we may seem on the surface. In fact, the Bible says, "There is no one who always does what is right, not even one." (Romans 3:10, New Century Version) If we search our own hearts honestly, we already know this is true. Our sin has caused a separation between us and the one who made us loves us, and wants to have a relationship with us.

"But there is a problem – your sins have cut you off from God. Because of your sin, He has turned away and will not listen anymore." (Isaiah 59:2, New Living Translation) Most of us are aware of this and so we try to do whatever we can to get us back to God – like being a good person, or giving to charity, or going to church; but it doesn't work. "There's a way of life that looks harmless enough; look again – it leads straight to hell." (Proverbs 14:12, The Message)

God is perfect, completely good, always right and fair. He cannot tolerate sin. He cannot simply overlook the fact that we have chosen to disobey Him. The Bible teaches that there are consequences for our sin. The sins we have committed have to be punished, and that punishment is death. "When people sin, they earn what sin pays for – death." (Romans 6:23, New Century Version)

Just as a neurosurgeon cannot operate on his own brain,
a heart specialist cannot perform surgery on his own heart;
a dentist cannot pull his own teeth,
and a doctor cannot remove his own cancer;
neither can man remove the cancer of sin by himself.

Since that's not God's plan for us, He did for us what we could not do, and that is build a bridge back to Himself.

Because God loves us, He cannot stand to allow this separation to remain. But because He is perfect, God cannot allow our sin to go unpunished. The sin-bill had to be paid. Religion and good living cannot pay it. So God paid for our sin Himself. He came to Earth as a human – Jesus Christ. "This is how much God loved the world: He gave His Son, His one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in Him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life." (John 3:16, The Message) God's solution is found only in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the focal point of salvation. Jesus willingly took our punishment upon Himself so we could be free to live with Him forever. "Christ never sinned! But God treated Him as a sinner, so that Christ could make us acceptable to God." (2 Corinthians 5:21, Contemporary English Version) It's like the story that is told of a farmer who noticed some birds in the middle of winter who were freezing to death and trying to find shelter. The farmer knew his barn was warm and would provide protection for the birds. So he went out and opened his barn doors, but the birds were afraid of him and would not go in. He tried to find a way to tell them or show them what they needed to do, how they could be saved from the freezing cold. He finally realized that the only way he could save the birds was to become a bird himself. God, in His infinite wisdom, realized that in order to save man, He Himself would have to become a man, which He did in the person of Jesus Christ.

Fantastic! Christ died for us!

Jesus came to die for us and purchase our place in heaven. That means we don't have to die for our own sin! On the cross Jesus got what He didn't deserve so we could get what we don't deserve. This is the meaning of grace. It is a FREE GIFT!

We can't earn it.

We can't buy it.

We can't boast or feel a sense of accomplishment about achieving it.

It is given out of love. It can only be received. In fact, if we took the word grace and placed it in the form of an acrostic, it would be:

G – God's

R – Riches

A – At

C – Christ's

E – Expense

There is a story of a young person who was convicted of a crime. The judge, being a good judge, could not just let the law-breaker off. The penalty the law demanded was imposed – a fine of \$10,000. The fine was totally beyond the young person's ability to pay. But then the judge did an unusual thing. Taking off his judicial robe, the judge came around in front of the bench and paid the fine. The judge did this because the criminal was his son. It would not make very much sense for the child to refuse to allow the father to pay the penalty and to insist on going to jail. The point is that God is a good judge as well as a loving Father. As a judge, He sees our sin and says, "you've sinned against Me and the penalty for that sin is death." But as our Father he says, "I love you and will pay the penalty Myself." Then, as a Father, He took off His heavenly robe, stepped over to our side of the bench, and paid for our sins by His death on the cross. Christ paid the price when He died on the cross. In fact, that's how we get from where we are, back to where God wants us to be – on the Road to Heaven. Assuming these 2 roads (the Road to Heaven and the Road to Hell) are on opposite sides, like on 2 sides of the Grand Canyon, there is only one way to get from one side to the other. That's by a bridge. Jesus' death on the cross provides us with a bridge back to God, spanning the huge gap that has separated us from Him. "But God put His love on the line for us by offering His Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to Him." (Romans 5:8, The Message)

It is not just enough to know this. We must act on what we believe.

Although this gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ is for everyone, the Bible says that only those who receive Jesus Christ by faith have this free gift. FAITH is the key to receiving this free gift. All we need to do is put our trust in Him and receive what He has done for us.

"It's impossible to please God apart from faith. And why? Because anyone who wants to approach God must believe both that He exists and that He cares enough to respond to those who seek Him." (Hebrews 11:6, The Message)

Jesus says, "It's urgent that you listen carefully to this: Anyone here who believes what I am saying right now and aligns himself with the Father, who has in fact put me in charge, has at this very moment the real, lasting life and is no longer condemned to be an outsider. This person has taken a giant step from the world of the dead to the world of the living." (John 5:24, The Message)

Many people mistake 2 things for faith. First, some people think faith is intellectual agreement with historical knowledge. Most people believe there is a God, but not all who believe in the existence of God will go to heaven. The Bible says, "Do you still think it's enough just to believe that there is one God? Well, even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror!" (James 2:19, New Living Translation)

Other people think faith is trusting God for daily physical needs like food, clothing, shelter, health, etc. It's good to trust God for those things. But faith is trusting Jesus Christ alone for salvation. It means transferring your trust from whatever you've trusted in for salvation, to Jesus and Jesus alone.

A newspaper told a story about a family that awoke one night to find their house on fire. The family escaped from the burning home – all except for the 10-year-old son, Tommy. The noise of the fire engines caused him to wake up, but the fire had spread too far for him to run

downstairs. Tommy walked out onto the second-floor balcony. His only way to safety was to jump, yet all he could see below him was smoke.

Tommy then heard a voice urging him to jump. It was his dad. "Jump!" his father yelled.

Tommy cried, "How can I jump, Dad? I can't even see you!"

His father answered, "I can see you, Tommy. Jump! I promise I'll catch you!"

Tommy hesitated for a moment. He thought about his dad's love for him. He knew his dad would keep his word. So He jumped and landed safely in his father's arms.

This is the meaning of faith. In fact, if we took the word faith and placed in in acrostic form, it would be:

F – Forsaking

A – All

I

T – Take

H – Him

It's like the story of The Great Blondin. In the 1860's there was a famous tightrope walker named Blondin. He toured the entire country putting on exhibitions. He went to Niagra Falls to put on a 3-day show. Blondin stretched the tightrope across the Falls, and for 2 days he walked this rope. He did a backwards somersault at the middle of the Falls; went across on stilts; and stood on his head in the middle of the tightrope. On the third day, he walked across from one side to the other with a balancing pole in his hands. At the other side he laid down the pole and walked back without it. Then he said he was going to walk the rope blindfolded and pushing a wheelbarrow. He asked, "How many of you believe I can do that? They all raised their hands. There wasn't anyone in the crowd who doubted. So he climbed up on the rope and asked, "Who will come up and get in the wheelbarrow?" No one raised their hand. No one came forward. No one ultimately believed in the ability of The Great Blondin enough to put their life in his hands. That's the way many people are about their faith in God. They say they believe, but they don't believe enough to really get in God's wheelbarrow and go with Him.

If we have a ring of keys, only one key will open a particular door. Although the keys may all "appear" to be alike, only one will open the door. By the same token, there appear to be many ways to get into Heaven, but there is really only one – Jesus Christ. "Jesus answered, 'I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.'" (John 14:6, New International Version)

We cross the bridge into God's family when we turn to God by asking Jesus to be part of our life. There's no such thing as a one-way relationship. God had done His part when Jesus died for us, now it's our move.

So, how do we put our trust in Christ?

Very simple. We demonstrate our faith in Jesus in 4 ways.

First, we RECEIVE Christ into our life by asking Him into our heart. Jesus said, "Look! Here I stand at the door and knock. If you hear Me calling and open the door, I will come in."

(Revelation 3:20, New Living Translation) "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Romans 10:13, New International Version)

We can invite Jesus Christ into our life right now by praying. Prayer is simply talking to God. Our prayer should be our own, from our own heart. But if we are not in the habit of praying, we may need an example. Such a prayer might go something like this.

“Dear Jesus, I know that I am a sinner and need Your forgiveness. I know that I have sinned by my own choice, and I am the one responsible for it. I know that I have earned punishment from You because of my sin, and that the fair punishment would be death. I know Jesus died in my place for me that I might have eternal life. I want to begin a relationship with You now. I realize that I cannot cover or take away my own sin. I turn from my sin. Please come into my life and save me from my sin. I place my faith and trust in Jesus Christ alone. I receive Him as the leader of my life and the one who forgives my sin. I am relying totally and only on Jesus. You are the only one who can save me. I receive You as my personal Savior and want to please You in every area of my life. Thank you for loving me and making me Your child. Amen.”

Next, we REPENT of our sin that has separate us from God.

“In the past, people did not understand God, and He ignored this. But now, God tells all people in the world to change their hearts and lives.” To repent means to “turn around or change your direction.” It’s a complete turnaround. It’s making a U-turn with our life. Turning to God means we are also turning from something. Since we can’t face 2 directions at the same time, if we turn to the west, we must turn from the east. It’s the same way with Jesus and sin. As we turn to Him, we turn from sin. Instead of living for ourselves and following the ways of the world, we turn away from our sin, turn back to God, and live for Him.

It’s like we are going down I-5 from Sacramento to Los Angeles. Halfway to Los Angeles we must take a detour. But we miss a turn and keep going. Eventually we turn around completely, 180 degrees, and head back in the opposite direction. We see where we missed the turn. We follow the correct path and get back onto I-5. That’s what repentance is. We have taken a detour from God and must turn around to head back in the right direction.

Then, we CONFESS our faith in Jesus before others.

“If you use your mouth to say, ‘Jesus is Lord.’ And if you believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, you will be saved. We believe with our hearts, and so we are made right with God. And we use our mouths to say that we believe, and so we are saved.” (Romans 10:9-10, New Century Version)

In a wedding, a man and a woman tell everyone in the audience that they have chosen to put the other person first in their life. It is important that they speak their promises. If a person does not confess their love for their spouse in a wedding ceremony, we question how much they really love the other person. The same goes with our confession of faith in Jesus. If a person is not willing to openly confess their faith in Jesus, we question how much they really love Jesus. God wants us to be proud enough to tell others that Jesus is first in our life. Jesus said, “If anyone acknowledges me publicly here on earth, I will openly acknowledge that person before My Father in Heaven. But if anyone denies Me here on earth, I will deny that person before My Father in Heaven.”

Belief and confession go hand in hand. Lack of confession indicates lack of faith. Belief and confession cannot be separated.

Finally, IDENTIFY with Christ by being immersed in water.

“Each of you must turn from your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38, New Living Translation)

To be baptized means to be “dipped, plunged, or immersed” in water. Baptism is a symbol of the commitment we make to God in becoming a Christian. We are “buried” in water – representing the fact that our sins and old way of life are put to death. Then, we are “raised” from the water – just as Jesus was raised from the dead, so that we may live a new life for God. The Bible puts it this way: “When we went under the water, we left the old country of sin behind; when we came up out of the water, we entered into the new country of grace – a new life in a new land! That’s what baptism into the life of Jesus means. When we are lowered into the water. It is like the burial of Jesus; when we are raised up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus. Each of us is raised into a light-filled world by our Father so that we can see where we’re going in our new grace-sovereign country.” (Romans 6:3-4, The Message) Baptism is the outward declaration of an inward reality. It is an open evidence of the faith in our hearts. There is no other physical act we can do that identifies us more with Jesus than water baptism.

Baptism is also a pledge. In a marriage ceremony, a man and a woman enter into an agreement together and they sign their names on a license (contract) – before witnesses. In a similar way, baptism is that point in which we “sign” our names on the contract with God. When the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is presented, we can either receive it or reject it. There is no neutral ground. We answer either ‘yes’ or ‘no’. If we choose to say ‘yes,’ we finalize the covenant by being baptized. This pledge is like signing our name on the dotted-line of a marriage license. “The waters of baptism do that for you, not by washing away dirt from your skin but by presenting you through Jesus’ resurrection before God with a clear conscience.” (1 Peter 3:21, The Message)

Baptism is to faith in Christ what a wedding ring is to marriage: they both symbolize transactions – they are signs of the covenants. A wedding ring is not a marriage, but it is the symbol of the marriage. Baptism is not the relationship with God, but it is the symbol of faith in Jesus. If a person does not wear a wedding ring, we assume that they are not married. The same goes with baptism. If a person is not immersed in water, as a sign of their faith in Jesus, we assume that they are not saved.

In a nutshell,

the Bible tells us that God loves us and wants to be a very vital part of our lives. However, we have sinned against God and gone our own way. God loves us so much that He sent Jesus to die for us and take the penalty for our sin. All God asks us to do is believe in Him and receive His gift of eternal life and forgiveness of our sins through faith in Jesus Christ. We put our faith in Jesus by asking Jesus to come into our lives, changing our hearts and lives, publicly confessing our faith in Jesus, and by being immersed in water.

True Christianity is not about attending a particular church, or how our parents raised us, or what country we were born in. Being a Christian means that we have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, that He is the Leader of our life (Lord), and the one who forgives our sins

(Savior). It's not good enough that our priest, pastor, mother, or aunt knows Jesus – we must know Him for ourselves.

They cannot believe in Him for us, we must believe for ourselves.

They cannot repent for us, we must repent for ourselves.

They cannot confess their faith in Him for us, we must confess our own faith.

They cannot be baptized for us, we must be baptized for ourselves.

Having received Christ as our personal Savior, we are assured of eternal life. “What this means is that those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun.” (2 Corinthians 5:17, New Living Translation)

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Now that we have put our faith in Jesus, what do we do next? As a newborn baby grows, so we must mature as Christians. “Now, like infants at the breast, drink deep of God's pure kindness. Then you'll grow up mature and whole in God.” (1 Peter 2:2, The Message) We do this by:

1) ATTENDING CHURCH REGULARLY. “Some people have gotten out of the habit of meeting for worship, but we must not do that. We should keep on encouraging each other, especially since you know that the day of the Lord's coming is getting closer.” (Hebrews 10:25, Contemporary English Version) We grow as we share with other Christians.

2) READING GOD'S WORD DAILY. “It takes more than bread to stay alive. It takes a steady stream of words from God's mouth.” (Matthew 4:4, The Message) Just like we have to eat physical food for our body to live and grow, we have to eat the spiritual food of God's Word for our spirit to live and grow.

3) PRAYING TO GOD. “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up and went to a place where He could be alone and pray.” (Mark 1:35, Contemporary English Version) Jesus set the example for us. If He needed to spend time alone with His Heavenly Father, then we need much more to spend time in prayer.

4) LIVING BY THE HOLY SPIRIT. “So I advise you to live according to your new life in the Holy Spirit. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves.” (Galatians 5:16, New Living Translation) This enables us to be filled with Christ's love and to live like He expects us to.

5) TELLING SOMEONE ABOUT OUR DECISION. “Go back home and tell people how much God has done for you.” (Luke 8:39, New Century Version) Share what God has done for you. Good news is always worth sharing.