

HOW CAN I START A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD?

It has been said that relationships are the centerpiece of the human experience. Without them, life seems to lose its meaning. Even early in life, we begin to dream of someday finding our soul mate, starting a family, and enjoying the times together. Our life consists of an entire portfolio of various types of relationships. Friends, neighbors, rivals, and even strangers all contribute to the delicate blend of relationships that make up our experience of life. Needless to say, experiencing a relationship with God is a crucial part of the equation.

But there's a drawback to all these relationships, and invariably it leads to conflict and problems as we interact with others. By nature, entering into a relationship means giving up the freedom of going it alone. Instead of calling all the shots in our private nation, we are forced to revise our plans to include the desires of others. Frankly, it's an ongoing struggle.

The same is true with God. On one hand, we want a meaningful connection with our Creator. But on the other hand, we'd like to do things our own way. So in an attempt to establish good terms with God, we ask the question, "What do I need to *do*?" We want to quantify the ways that we can earn God's favor. We'll follow the rules, attend church, and give some money, whatever it takes to be good enough. Unfortunately, our true motive is simply to live our lives our way... as much as possible... without forfeiting the relationship we need so desperately. We want it *both* ways.

The problem is twofold. First, if we're not careful, we take what could have been a beautiful relationship and reduce it down to contractual terms. In lieu of sincerely putting God first in our lives, we began to "work" the list of dos and don'ts, looking for ways to get by without really knowing him. As a result, we exchange the very thing we want – relationship – for what we don't need more of – rules. But the second issue is even bigger: the nature of sin.

The apostle Paul says that we're all sinful (Romans 3:23), which comes as no new revelation. But, the problem with our wrongdoing is that we just don't see it the way God does. After all, humankind didn't think sin was that big a deal to begin with. Doubting God's wisdom was apparently worth the risk. Even today, we tend to be more concerned about inconveniences in our lives than with sin. We've become used to it. But if we could see sin through God's eyes, it would be quite sobering.

Our instinctive reaction to sin is to handle it the same as any other problem: solve it. When something catches on fire, you douse it with water. When something spills, you wipe it up. We have countermeasures for everything in life. So it's no surprise that our initial response when confronted with our sin is to counteract it with a corresponding quantity of good. We believe that's how we should reconnect with God. It seems to make sense.

In fact, the religious people of Jesus' time thought the same way. And who can blame them? The practice of blood sacrifice seemed to reinforce this problem/solution approach to sin. Every time a sin was committed, a sacrifice needed to be made. But as the Bible clearly teaches, there's more to dealing with sin than simply covering it over. Sin produces death. Whether it's just a little anger toward your brother, or full-blown murder. "After desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." (James 1:15, TNIV)

So, if the nature and consequences of our sinfulness are so severe, and if trying to keep a list of rules flies in the face of a genuine relationship, then what are we to do? The answer lies not in what we ourselves should *do*, but what has been *done* for us. God sent his son Jesus Christ to suffer the consequences of our sin and death. So that we might experience life and a relationship with God as we were meant to. Paul summarizes this good news:

"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6-8, TNIV).

This amazing gift of grace is extended to everyone. Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28, TNIV). That means that Jesus has a special place in his heart for those who have burned themselves out trying to work their way into God's favor. When we finally surrender our stubbornness and place our faith in Christ, we receive his forgiveness of our sins and enter into a new relationship with our heavenly Father.

There are no magical formulas, secret passwords, or elaborate ceremonies for starting this new relationship with God. Many people mark the occasion with a humble prayer of faith to God. Prayer is just a reflection of what we believe and feel in our hearts and the words don't need to be eloquent. Here's a simple example.

"God, I want a relationship with you. But I realize that my selfishness and sin has gotten in the way, because deep down, I just want to live life my own way. But God, I'm tired and I've come to the end of myself. And I now realize that what's been missing from my life is you. And you are so amazing because you knew I didn't need more rules, or more education, or a chance to be better. I needed a savior. Thank you for sending your son, Jesus, to be my savior. I believe he lived, died, and rose from the grave to forgive my sins, conquer death, and give me new life and hope. I place my trust in him and thank you for not giving up on me. I'm excited about growing in this new relationship with you. I know it won't always be easy, I know you'll continue to change me, and I'm going to trust in you. God, thank you for your amazing grace!"