

**Questions
People Ask
About
the Bible**

John Thiesen

Published By:

World Evangelism Publications

P O Box 72

Winona, MS 38967

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Cover Design: Betty Burton Choate
Layout: Barbara A. Oliver

First Printing, 2002

World Evangelism Publications

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Publisher's Statement

Brother John Thiesen was born in Kansas, and later lived in other places across our country, including Missouri where he preached for churches of Christ for a number of years. He and his family eventually moved to Malawi, Africa as missionaries. They spent more than 20 years in Malawi, sponsored by the Pleasant Valley Church of Christ in Mobile, AL. He learned 2 of the local languages, preached throughout the northern part of the country, directed a Bible School, and wrote and distributed tracts by the millions.

During recent years John suffered a heart attack and other health problems, so in 2001, on the advice of his doctor in Malawi, they returned to the States to live. Having had a background of knowledge of the Spanish language in his youth, and wanting to continue in some type of mission work, John has agreed to serve as the Spanish translator for our magazine, **The Voice of Truth International**. We look forward to an on-going working relationship.

Last year, during our "World Evangelism Team Meeting", John mentioned the manuscripts he had written for radio sermons. The theme of his program was **Questions People Ask About the Bible**, with a format of many widely asked questions, and the biblical answer for each one. I suggested that we would like to print them in book form and now we are happy to be able to pass them along to you. I am sure that you will find the lessons to be scriptural, interesting, and challenging.

I am grateful to John for providing the material in this book, and I am sure that it will find its ways into the hands of many people here in the States, in Malawi, and around the world. Please read and profit from them.

J. C. Choate
March 20, 2002

Introduction

The use of the question and answer format in teaching the Bible has always been a favorite of mine in attempting to convey the great spiritual truths of the Holy Scriptures. The lessons in this book were first preached on a daily radio program over KDKD radio station in Clinton, Missouri. At the same time, a question and answer column of the same format was appearing twice a week in the "Clinton Democrat" and "The Clinton Eye".

Prior to preaching in Clinton, I used a similar method of teaching the Bible in a weekly television program called "Restoration" over KFEQ TV in St. Joseph, Missouri.

One great advantage of answering questions which people ask about the Bible in assisting them to understand God's plan and will for their lives is that you can immediately get to their heart's main concerns. They already have an interest in the question, otherwise they wouldn't stop to read the answer.

Examining specific questions also enables the Bible teacher to give more thorough coverage to all aspects of a certain topic. As a result, the hearer goes away with a sense that his question has been answered. This usually cannot be done in a general, broad-based sermon which is not designed to explore every facet of one point.

I want to thank J.C. Choate for putting these questions and answers into book form. For many years now, the Choates have been producing Bible study books of every description and shipping them to India, Africa and other places all over the world where such study guides are in short supply, putting them into the hands of preachers, teachers and congregations to use in their

soul-saving efforts and the edification of the churches. I am very pleased to have a part in this valuable service through this book, and also in translating the Choates' teaching magazine, **The Voice of Truth International**, into Spanish.

It is my prayer that the answer to the Bible questions in this present volume will help many to receive a deeper understanding of GOd and his Son and the Lord's eternal purpose for their lives. If the book will help someone to have a stronger faith and a closer walk with God, I will be very thankful to my Lord

— John Thiesen

Table of Contents

Publisher's Statement.....	i
Introduction.....	ii
What God Is Like	1
Why Are We Here?.....	4
The Preexistence of Christ	7
Unbelief	9
Eternal Life	12
The Heart of the Gospel	15
Judgment Day	17
Heaven and Hell	20
What Is Sin?	23
God of Mercy or of Wrath	27
Christ's Death for Sin	30
Born Again	33
The Church and Salvation.....	36
Conversion	39
Baptism Essential	42
The Reign of Christ	45
Hope	48
Peace	51
Authority in Religion	54
Sprinkling	57
Our Resurrected Body	60
Death-Bed Repentance	63
One Church.....	65
Christianity Is Different	68
The Rock of the Church	71
Miracles	74
The Sabbath Day.....	77

Evolution	81
Reincarnation	84
Church Discipline	87
Abraham's Seed	90
Modest Dress	93
Brotherly Love	96
Choosing a Church	99
Grace	102
Eating Pork	105
Perfection	108
Heaven	110
Hell	113
Fasting	116

What God Is Like

We are all curious about the nature of God, and the fact that God is invisible only increases our curiosity. This makes today's question one of the most interesting and profitable that we could ask. "What is God like?"

No one knows what God looks like. The only man who was permitted to see a part of God himself was Moses, and even he was not allowed to look on God's face. God told him, "*Behold, there is a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock; And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a clift of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen*" (Exodus 33:21-23). God explained to Moses, "*Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live*" (verse 20). On another occasion Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu and seventy elders of Israel were in some measure allowed to see God. "*And they saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his clearness*" (Exodus 24:9-10). However, the face of God was never seen by any man. To do so was to die.

Since the actual likeness of God is not described in God's word, and no one has ever seen his face, the best way to describe God is by his character and ways. A man is known by the life he leads just as much as he is by his appearance. The same is true of God. The first, most striking thing about God is his **holiness**. Those prophets who were permitted to glimpse his glory were made to realize their sinfulness in his sight. When the prophet Isaiah saw the throne scene in Heaven through a vision, and

heard the angels that surround the throne of God crying to one another, *"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory,"* Isaiah was so moved with God's holiness that he cried out, *"Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts!"* (Isaiah 6:1-5).

Habakkuk said to God, *"Thou art purer of eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look upon iniquity..."* (Habakkuk 1:13). This is an important feature of God that we must remember. God hates sin and cannot have anything to do with it. Sinful man cannot approach God in his sins. Those sins must first be removed before God will hear man. This is the great lesson taught by God down through the centuries through animal sacrifices. The death of animals, and finally of his own Son on the cross, was performed to cleanse man of his sins that he might be purified to approach this pure God.

God's **kindness, love and mercy** describe Him. The Bible reveals God's efforts to rescue the lost. He gave his Son on the cross out of his deep love to provide an atonement for sinful men. He feeds and clothes his enemies. People who do not love the Lord in this life, who never give him thanks, never worship him, never obey him, nor pray to him still get their daily portion of food and clothing and shelter. God could remove these things from them easily, but he loves his enemies and hopes that his goodness will impress them to repent some day. He graciously gives them space in this life to turn.

God's **justice** describes him. Mankind must learn this lesson about God before it is too late for many of them. Many think that they can sin and live as they please without God and that all will

be well with them. They do not realize that God has appointed a day in which he will have them on trial for every evil thought, word and deed they have committed. Then God will mete out justice for the spiritual crimes of mankind. No sin will be overlooked. Each sinner will receive his proper punishment, unless he has been forgiven through the blood of God's Son, Jesus Christ in this life. Sometimes men appear to get away with sin in this world. They don't, because there awaits a day of judgment ahead.

Why Are We Here?

Today's question deals with the purpose of our presence on this planet. This question has puzzled many down through the ages. Many have groped to find the meaning for life on earth. Unfortunately, far too many have not found the reason for our existence because they have looked in the wrong places for the answer. To some, man is here for the purpose of getting ahead in life materially. They are the ones who devote their lives to making money. To them, business is the most important thing in life. They regard it as a challenge, or they simply want more of the things that money can buy. Along with this class are those who think that the purpose of life is to lay up security for old age. And so their youth is dedicated toward that end. The problem with these attitudes towards life is that the people who hold to them are not laying up treasures in Heaven where moth and rust can't destroy and thieves can't get in to plunder, as Jesus said we should do (Matthew 6:19,20).

Then there are other people who think that life's object is to have a good time. Their god is the god of pleasure. Money doesn't mean much to them. Just enough money to have a good time on the town, buy a camper and boat, go on vacations, see all the good movies, eat in the restaurants and keep plenty of drinks in the refrigerator — these are the attractions that life offers them. The object is to enjoy yourself and have a good time, that's all. Multitudes by their actions show that this is their idea of man's existence on the earth.

Others have carried this philosophy to the extreme and feel compelled to indulge their lusts to the utmost. To this class, illicit sex, overindulgence in eating and drinking, and the wild and

violent things of life are their aim. They seem bent on self-destruction as they drive their bodies to an early grave. They can't seem to get enough of these things to satisfy their desires. The gratification of their lusts is all that matters to them, and they would rather be dead than to live in any other way.

There is still another class of people who think that life's aim is to improve themselves intellectually. They spend most of their time learning some new thing. They have such a great thirst for knowledge that their entire lives are bent toward improving their mind. They can't read enough books, attend enough lectures, or get enough schooling to satisfy their intense desire for knowledge. These are the ones who feel that life's purpose is wrapped up in the wisdom and knowledge that man may acquire on this earth.

The sad thing about all these different attitudes toward life is that they all miss the mark. Man was not put here simply to eat, drink, be merry, get ahead financially, or to expand his accumulation of facts. Solomon, the wisest man on earth, tried all these things. He tried accumulating properties and wealth and was made the richest man on earth, but then complained, "*Behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun*" (Ecclesiastes 2:11). Then he tried pleasure (remember that there was no pleasure that such a rich king could not have), and he said, "*I said in my heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore, enjoy pleasure: and behold this also is vanity. I said of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it?*" (Ecclesiastes 2:1,2). He tried knowledge to satisfy himself, and became a great writer, and then concluded, "*of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh*" (Ecclesiastes 12:12).

After trying every conceivable way to find happiness in life, Solomon turned to the true way and concluded, "*Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil*" (Ecclesiastes 12:13,14). The true purpose in life, then, according to the wisest man who ever lived, is to serve the living God and to prepare ourselves for the judgment ahead. If this is our aim, we shall both find happiness and fulfillment in this world, and in the time to come eternal life.

The Preexistence of Christ

“Where is the Bible passage that teaches that Jesus Christ had a preexistence?”

This is an excellent question. Many people think of Christ as having an existence which began on that day in Bethlehem when the baby Jesus was born in the stable and laid in a manger. But this was not the beginning of Christ at all. The Bible teaches that he had a preexistence, that is, he was alive and active from eternity and before the world was even made. Let's look at these passages today, because there are several and not just one passage which teach this truth.

On one occasion, Jesus told the Jews who were opposing him publicly, *“Your Father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad”* (John 8:56). Now, Abraham had been dead about 2,000 years at the time Jesus said these words to the Jews. This naturally confused them, and they replied, *“Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?”* (verse 57). Unless Christ had been around longer than his fleshly age, they felt that it would not have been possible for him to have had dealings with Abraham 2,000 years earlier. Notice Jesus' reply: *“Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am”* (verse 58). Christ without hesitation told them he was in existence before Abraham 2,000 years before! This angered his audience so much that they took up stones to stone him for his supposed blasphemy. But Christ walked right through them and passed on by.

On another occasion, while Jesus was praying to his Heavenly Father, he uttered these words: *“And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was”* (John 17:5). Observe that he

said he had had glory with God "*before the world was.*" He was recalling to his Father a glory which he once shared with Him before the world even sprang into existence at the command of God. Speaking of Bethlehem, there is a prophecy in the Old Testament which foretold that a ruler would come out of that little town — a ruler who would have a preexistence from eternity! Let's look at that prophecy while we are at it. The passage is found in Micah, the fifth chapter, verse 2: "*But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.*" Notice, this ruler had "*goings forth from of old, from everlasting.*" He had always been.

But not only did Christ have a preexistence before he entered into the flesh of the baby and was born of Mary with the name of Jesus, he was also in on the creation of the world itself. Paul tells us that God "*created all things by Jesus Christ*" (Ephesians 3:9). And as the apostle John put it, he was known as the "Word" and "*all things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made*" (John 1:1-3). This explains that strange statement made by God at the time he was creating the world, recorded in Genesis 1:26: "*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...*" God used the plural terms "us" and "our" when he expressed his intention of making man. Man was made after the likeness of God and certain other parties. Since God made all things by Jesus Christ, we see that he was part of this plurality involved in the creation.

Yes, Christ had a preexistence. He has always been and will always be. God sent him down from Heaven to take on human flesh for the purpose of dying for the sins of the race. But this was not the beginning, nor the end of Christ.

Unbelief

“What would cause a person not to believe in God?”

There may be several causes of unbelief in a person. However, there is no excusable reason for not believing in God. Paul pointed out, *“For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse”* (Romans 1:20). He said that men are without excuse who do not believe in God, because they can see God’s handiwork, the things that are made. A person would have to blind himself if he did not see that the material universe has been made. Let me put it this way: suppose I landed on a desert isle. On this little island, I ran across intricate machinery — engines, precision-made electronic equipment. If I then made the statement: *“These things were not made by any intelligent being; they just happened,”* the world would laugh me to scorn. But there is no difference between my saying this and a man saying that there is no God! Just enroll in a biology class and start dissecting a few frogs and other creatures, looking at their precision internal machinery, and you will see what I mean!

Some Don’t Want to Believe

But there may be a reason why I refused to acknowledge that an intelligent being had made that machinery on the little hypothetical desert isle. If I didn’t want to believe it badly enough, I could blind my own eyes to the truth. And this is one reason why some do not believe in God today. They do not want to believe in him. They recognize that, if God truly exists as the Bible says he does, certain changes will have to be made in their own lives.

They are not going to be able to continue to do many of the sinful things they like to do. The thought of meeting a righteous God in the judgment and giving an account to him for the deeds done in the body is distasteful to many.

Love of Sin a Hindrance

Jesus put it this way: *“And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved”* (John 3:19,20). Now, there is the heart of the matter! Many do not come to Christ because they love their sins more than the truth. They don't want to be bothered. They don't want to change. They would rather do as they please rather than please God. But the frightening specter of Judgment Day hovers over their heads should they accept that there is a God. For them, it appears that the only way to remove this fear is to deny the existence of God. Paul said, *“And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those which which are not convenient”* (Romans 1:28). In other words, by getting rid of God from their minds, they were now freed to practice all the evil things they previously were afraid to do on account of the thought of meeting God in judgment.

Unbelieving Teachers Plant Doubts

Another cause for some to disbelieve God is the teachings that they hear. Opponents of God spread their propaganda in books, speeches, tracts, and other information and entertainment media. Professors in some colleges teach theories of philosophy and science to boys and girls that are destructive to faith in God

and in his word. It is alarming how unbelief is planted in young minds today, causing students to doubt the existence of the God who made the world, after they have sat through courses of instruction at the feet of unbelieving or atheistic teachers.

Eternal Life

“What does the Bible teach about eternal life?”

The Bible teaches that in the beginning man had eternal life. Man was not created to die, but to live forever and serve God. There was placed in the beautiful garden of Eden a tree called the “*tree of life*” (Genesis 2:9). It was not the forbidden fruit, but one of the fruits available to man in that garden. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was the one that God forbade man to eat of. When Adam and Eve sinned against God by eating of this tree, they were driven out of the garden. It was only then that man was denied access to the tree of life. The function of the tree of life was to impart eternal life. That is one of the reasons God drove Adam and Eve out of the garden, in order to keep them away from this tree. “*And the Lord God said, ‘Behold the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever;’ Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden...*” (Genesis 3:22,23).

God’s Preparations to Restore Eternal Life

From that day forth man did not have access to the eternal life he lost in the Garden, because he was not permitted to come near the tree of life. Death had entered into the world and has continued with mankind until this present day. However, the rest of the Bible reveals God’s preparations to restore eternal life to man. In fact, without this basic understanding, the message of the Bible is missed. The great central thread of truth running through all the Scriptures is that God sent his Son into the world to abolish death by his own death on the cross. By dying for our

sins, Christ satisfied the penalty of death for sin and enabled God to pardon us and pave the way for restoring eternal life. And so we hear Jesus saying, *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life”* (John 3:16).

Paul said that he and the rest of the Christians of his day were *“In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began”* (Titus 1:2). God had promised this life even from the very beginning. And then the apostle John said, *“And this is the promise that he hath promised us, even eternal life”* (1 John 2:25). John further told believers, *“These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God”* (1 John 5:13).

The End of Death

When Christ comes again, he will give a glorious body to each of those who have this promise. Then the death that entered into the world in the beginning will be overcome, and eternal life will be restored to the faithful. The tree of life that man had access to in the Garden of Eden will be restored to man again. Jesus promises, *“To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God”* (Revelation 2:7). When John saw a vision of that glorious city in paradise, he also saw the tree of life that imparts eternal life in it. *“And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life...”* (Revelation 22:1,2).

At that time, all the curses of death, sickness, disease, sorrow

and pain will be abolished for God's people for all of eternity. *"And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away"* (Revelation 21:4). This is what the Bible teaches about **eternal life!**

The Heart of the Gospel

“What is the heart of the gospel message?”

From time to time, people are heard trying to sum up the message of the gospel in a few words. Some have suggested that it is that we do good and live pure lives. I think everyone agrees that this is very much a part of God’s plan for us, and that no one will ever see Heaven who does not treat others right and doesn’t attempt to live a clean life in this world. The ungodly and impure are doomed to a devil’s hell; there’s no doubt that the Bible teaches this. However, people were being urged to live a pure life before the gospel entered the world. The Law of Moses taught a high type of pure, clean living with right-doing toward neighbors. But despite the existence of such a high moral code, the law failed to save the people from their sins, and they still needed a Savior. And although the gospel produces this kind of life in those who faithfully follow it, this is not the heart of the gospel.

The heart of the gospel is the **death of Jesus for our sins and his resurrection from the dead**. We must contact the death of Christ to have our sins removed and to participate with him in his resurrection. The fact that even those who lived the highest type lives as regards moral purity still had some sin in their lives shows the need for a cleansing from sin. Paul wrapped up the basic message of the gospel in a few words in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 when he wrote, *“Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain.”* Notice that Paul said that this gospel would save them unless they lost sight of it and forgot it, and so have believed in

vain. Now he defines the gospel, an old English word which means “good news,” as follows: “*For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures...*” (verse 3).

Paul is alluding to the fact that the prophets wrote Scriptures hundreds of years beforehand about a man coming into the world to die for the sins of you and me. Paul shows that Jesus Christ was that man. The punishment that he suffered on the cross was the penalty for the evil things that you and I have thought, said, or done. Christ did not die for his own sins, because he was without sin. He suffered horribly for us all. Our sins deserved to be punished, but God provided a substitute punishment for them. Jesus was the sacrificial lamb to bear the wrath of that fierce punishment. Now, instead of you and I paying the penalty in eternity for them, we can let Jesus pay it through his suffering on the cross.

Paul concluded, “*And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures*” (verse 4). The fact that Jesus came out of the grave the third day alive is the “good news” part of the message. It means that we can follow him into eternal life. If he lives again, so can we if we live for him. This is the very heart of the gospel message: the forgiveness of sins through the death of Christ and the hope of our own resurrection from the dead through him. Upon this truth rests the entire gospel system. The pure life that follows is produced because of this good news and on the strength of it. Those who turn to Christ in his appointed way are washed clean of all their sins and will live forever. We must never lose sight of this heart of the gospel message as we study all other questions from God’s word.

Judgment Day

“How do we know there will really be a universal judgment?”

We know there will be a judgment because God's word promises one. God has always fulfilled his promises. On various occasions in history God sent prophets to people warning of impending judgment on them for their sins. In each case, God fulfilled his warnings with a performance of them. The apostle Peter in his second letter concerns himself with this great truth. He points out that, in the latter days, scoffers shall come and demand, *“Where is the promise of his coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation”* (2 Peter 3:4). Peter then gives some examples to show that God's judgments are sure:

Angels Held for Judgment

First, he said that certain angels sinned and God did not spare them from judgment. He wrote, *“For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness to be reserved unto judgment...”* (2 Peter 2:4). If God didn't even spare the angels that sinned, how does man stand in his sight? Man is not better than the angels. The lockup of these angels in a place of detention until the judgment day is a sure indication that God will judge.

The Great Flood

The next example is that of the people during the great flood. Peter said, *“And spared not the old world, but saved Noah the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood”*

upon the world of the ungodly" (2 Peter 2:5). God had warned these people through a preacher of righteousness, Noah. But when they did not heed, God sent the flood that killed them.

Sodom and Gomorrah

Peter continues, *"And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes condemned them with an overthrow, making them an ensample unto those that after should live ungodly"* (verse 6). God rained fire and brimstone upon those cities in the plain for the very sins which multitudes are practicing today — the sins of fornication and homosexuality. This generation of loose sexual morals needs to take this example to heart. God will destroy them for their crimes against their bodies and the home by their adulteries.

The Certainty of the Coming Judgment

Just as God has warned peoples of ages gone by of judgment for sin, he has once again warned all mankind of another day of reckoning. Paul told the Greeks, *"Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained: whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead"* (Acts 17:31). God has already appointed the day. But observe that he has made that day a certainty by raising his Son, Jesus from the grave the third day by his great power.

Jesus said, *"But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment"* (Matthew 12:36). The apostle Paul said of that day, *"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad"* (2 Corinthians 5:10).

What is important for us to realize is that God has mercifully provided a way for us to escape being punished in the judgment. That way is through the death of his Son, Jesus Christ. If we turn to Christ in his appointed way, we can receive the forgiveness of our sins now in this life, and in the judgment God will spare us because we have been cleansed by the blood of his Son. Jesus promised, "*He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned*" (Mark 16:16).

Heaven and Hell

“Does the Bible really teach that there is a literal place of reward called ‘Heaven’ and a literal place of punishment called ‘Hell’?”

At one time this question was so fundamental that it wasn't even necessary to ask it. But changes have been taking place in the beliefs of many people so that today such elementary teachings of God's word are often wondered about. Even among those who purport to be preaching the gospel there are men who doubt the basics of it. In a survey by Betts in a publication of the Abingdon Press, under the caption of “Beliefs of 700 Ministers,” the results showed that 34 per cent of these preachers no longer believed in a future punishment of the wicked.

A very common teaching today is that there is no Heaven or Hell. Many have said that we have our Heaven or Hell on this earth. Some reason that a merciful God would not create a place of eternal punishment. Others hope that Hell, if it exists, is a place of instant annihilation where the sinner is extinguished in a puff of smoke and need not suffer long.

But those who believe the Bible is true, and that it means what it says, cannot escape the conclusion that it definitely teaches the existence of both Heaven and Hell after the judgment following the resurrection of the dead from the graves.

There Is a Heaven

First, let's consider Heaven. Jesus unmistakably taught its existence, contrasted it with the earth where we live, and taught men to lay up their treasures there rather than on the earth. He said, *“Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth where moth*

and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal” (Matthew 6:19,20).

The Hebrew writer spoke of men of faith in ages gone by who confessed that *“they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth”* (Hebrews 11:13). A stranger and pilgrim is one who is just here temporarily. He is passing through and this is not his country. What country were they looking for? The writer explains that it is an heavenly country. *“But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city”* (Hebrews 11:16). It is interesting to note that God has already prepared that heavenly city for them. It is there waiting for them now. This jibes with Jesus’ promise to his disciples: *“In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also”* (John 14:2,3). Where did Jesus go and from where will he come again? Mark 16:19 tells us that he was received up into Heaven and sat down on the right hand of God. Then Paul tells us that our conversation is in Heaven *“from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus”* (Philippians 3:20). These and many other passages plainly teach the existence of an heavenly land awaiting those who love God.

There Is a Real Hell

But the Scriptures also teach of another place prepared for those who do not love God. Jesus shall say to the unsaved in that day, *“Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared*

for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41). Notice that the fire is everlasting. Both Heaven and Hell are eternal. “And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal” (Matthew 25:46).

Christ described Hell as a place of unquenchable fire. He said it was better to get rid of anything that would keep us from serving God than to go there. *“And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:43,44).* At his second coming *“The son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; and shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 13:41,42).* Although it is called a place of fire, there shall be no light there. God is the source of all light, and shall withdraw himself from the presence of the damned. *“And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 25:30).*

So fundamental is this teaching that there will be a place of future punishment for sin, and a place of future bliss for the saved, that it is impossible to preach the gospel faithfully without it. If Christ died, why did he die? To make our forgiveness possible so that we would escape future punishment. Paul said, *“Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him” (Romans 5:9).* We escape the wrath of God for our sins through Jesus. We escape that place of eternal punishment through the Lord’s blood shed in his death. At the same time, we are saved to serve God in those mansions above where Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us.

What Is Sin?

“What is the Bible definition of sin?”

This is a very basic, but important question because many today don't really know what all constitutes sin. There are as many standards as there are people. Nowadays, with the rapidly changing standards of morality, a lot of men and women are genuinely at sea about this matter of what is sinful and what is not. Some parents are asking just what they should permit their teenage children to do and what to forbid. The adult population is about as confused as its young people for answers to these questions of right and wrong.

The main reason for all the confusion is that many do not know God's word. Few search the Scriptures for the answers. They usually rely on their own judgment or some code of ethics handed down from their parents or from the standards of society at large. A vast cloud of ignorance hovers over the world, and this is the reason Christ commanded the gospel to be preached to every creature. When Christ sent the apostle Paul out to preach to the Gentiles, he said that it was in order *“to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me”* (Acts 26:18). This is why Christ is called *“the light of the world.”* When we come into contact with Jesus, our own dark ignorance and sinful ways are exposed for what they are. We become guilty in this great light and see our urgent need for forgiveness. We are then turned from darkness to the light and purity of the truth of God.

What Sin Is

The Bible gives a simple definition of sin. The apostle John wrote its definition: "*Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law*" (1 John 3:4). A sinner is a law breaker. He transgresses, or goes beyond the boundaries of law. Law places restrictions on our actions. When we break the law, we sin. But what law is he talking about?

First, there are certain moral laws written on the consciences of men and common to all mankind. Paul showed how the Gentiles, although they did not have a written law from God as the Jews did, had a law of the conscience written in their hearts (Romans 2:14,15). We see this law at work in every nation of people, even in unenlightened nations where the gospel has not yet gone. Every nation and state has laws restricting murder, stealing, cheating, perjury and others. These sins are obvious to all and are highly destructive to society. If civil law did not step in and prohibit them, the world would crumble at the hand of the lawless.

God has ordained that there be civil powers to regulate the affairs of men. Even though we may not always agree that all the laws of the state are as good as they should be, we need to realize that God expects us to obey them. In fact, to disobey them is to disobey God. Not that God made the laws themselves, but he ordained the powers that be and gave them authority to make laws. Paul said, "*Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God; and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation*" (Romans 13:2).

And then, there are the written laws of God, such as those given to the nation of Israel through Moses. Later, Jesus was sent

into the world, and his commandments, given in the New Testament for people of all nations, form the final laws of God to his people. To violate the teachings of Christ is to sin against God himself. Jesus said, *"For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak"* (John 12:49).

Christ has revealed that we can sin in various ways: (1) in thought, (2) in word, (3) in deed, and (4) through omission. Illustrating how a person can sin by thought, Jesus said, *"Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart"* (Matthew 5:28). He also taught that hatred and harsh words will condemn men (verse 22). We offend in word when we take the Lord's name in vain, curse one another, lie, slander a neighbor, or speak evil of others. Jesus said of this kind of sin, *"Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment"* (Matthew 12:36)

We offend in deed when we do things with our bodies that are wrong in the sight of God. A glimpse of hell and its inhabitants is given in Revelation 21:8: *"But the fearful, and unbelieving, and abominable, and murderers and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."* Sexual sins of adultery and fornication will exclude us from the Kingdom of Heaven, according to the apostle Paul, as well as envyings, drunkenness, and a quarrelsome nature. Of these he concluded, *"they that do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God"* (Galatians 5:19-21).

We can sin by omission by simply not doing anything at all. In his picture of judgment day, Jesus turns to the goats (the lost)

and tells them that, because during their lifetime they did not feed the hungry, nor give drink to the thirsty, nor clothe the naked, nor visit the sick and those in prison, they are cursed and therefore must depart into everlasting fire (Matthew 25:41-46). This is the greatest tragedy of sin: it separates people from God in eternity

God of Mercy or of Wrath?

“Which is the true God — the God of wrath or the God of mercy? Both are preached, so which should we believe in?”

This question expresses a great misunderstanding about God. One philosophy about God goes on this proposition: “God is good. It wouldn’t be good to destroy man in a burning hell. Therefore God won’t do this.” On the opposite side of the pendulum are those preachers who are so preoccupied with God’s wrath that they never seem to get around to telling about his mercy, kindness and longsuffering. One class of preaching feeds us religion in a sugar-coated pill, the other makes us drink bitter water and scares us out of our wits. Which God is the Jehovah God revealed in God’s word?

God Is Both

The truth of the matter is that the true God is both a God of wrath and a God of unswerving kindness and mercy. The Bible reveals that he is both. Not that God is fickle or changeable — he is straighter than the straightest line and unchangeable, the same today, yesterday, and tomorrow. God takes no pleasure in the death of a man. He is kind and longsuffering and desires above all else that every man and woman turn from their sins and escape punishment. On the other hand, his justice decrees that no unbelieving, unrepentant person shall escape the penalty he deserves. God wants us saved, but not saved in our sins. He expressed it very well through his prophet Ezekiel long ago to the house of Israel. Since God does not change, he is the same today on this issue. Listen to what he told the Jews (Ezekiel 18:26-28):

“When a righteous man turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, and dieth in them; for his iniquity that he hath done shall he die. Again, when the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive. Because he considereth, and turneth away from all his transgressions that he hath committed, he shall surely live, he shall not die.”

God concluded this discourse on his justice and mercy with these words: *“For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God: wherefore turn yourselves and live ye”* (verse 32). You can’t ask for a more consistent policy than that. And God is revealed both in the Old and the New Testament settings in complete harmony with this policy of exacting justice and offering bountiful mercy. He loves man and wants to save him. But nobody, absolutely nobody, gets away with sin around God.

God’s Mercy and Justice in the Flood

This explains God’s actions throughout his dealings with mankind. In the days of Noah, God determined to destroy man from the face of the earth with a great flood. But first he offered them pardon and mercy. He sent Noah to preach to the people and to warn them. But when they did not repent, he killed them with that terrific deluge, sparing only the eight people who were obedient and the animals in the ark.

Sodom and Gomorrah

Genesis 18 records how God determined to destroy the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah with fire and brimstone. Abraham begged God to spare Sodom if only ten righteous were there. God promised to do so. But when ten righteous were not

found in the city, angels were sent to warn the only righteous ones there, Lot and his family. Only three eventually got out of the city, but the unrepentant people were burned to death that day in the awful, fiery destruction which rained down upon them from out of the sky (Genesis 19:24,25). Even Lot's wife became disobedient by looking back at the destruction after the angels warned her not to, and she became a pillar of salt (verse 26). The Bible abounds in such examples of God first extending mercy, people then rejecting it, and finally God unleashing his wrath in all its awesome fury.

God is the same today. He loves us so much that he sent his Son Jesus Christ to die for us on the cross. Then he mercifully extends the invitation to us to turn to Christ and escape our sins' just penalty. He has given us all the time and opportunity to do this. But there is coming a day when sinful men and women must face God in the judgment. Then time and mercy will run out as they begin an eternity of paying for their wicked rejection of that merciful God and his Son who had unselfishly given himself for all that they might escape this very condemnation.

Christ's Death for Sin

“What does the Bible mean when it says that Christ died for our sins?”

It means that Christ suffered punishment on account of our sins. The first great principle we must understand in order to see why Christ died on the cross is that sin deserves punishment, and that punishment is death. God said through his prophet Ezekiel, *“The soul that sinneth, it shall die”* (Ezekiel 18:20). Paul repeated this law when he said, *“For the wages of sin is death”* (Romans 6:23). **Physical death** in the world is proof of this great law. Adam and Eve would have lived forever if they had not transgressed God's commandment by eating the forbidden fruit. But when they did, God told Adam, *“In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shall thou return”* (Genesis 3:19). Because of his sin, Adam must die. Paul in the New Testament shows that death passed upon us, too, because of the existence of sin: *“Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned”* (Romans 5:12).

But there is also a **spiritual death** due to sin in which we all have had part. This is a death in trespasses and sins. Paul told the Ephesian Christians, *“And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins”* (Ephesians 2:1). This was a death in which the Ephesians had previously found themselves even while they were still alive physically. Although they had been alive in the body, they were dead spiritually. The Bible teaches that, if we go to our grave in this condition, we shall be cast into a future place of punishment forever. The Revelation letter

describes this eternal punishment as the “*lake of fire*” and calls it the “*second death*” (Revelation 20:14,15). This death is not simply vaporization in fire, but a separation from God in a place of punishment.

Christ Bore Our Punishment

Since the wages of sin is death, and all obviously have sinned, how could God satisfy the penalty of death and at the same time rescue us from it? The answer is through his own Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus would come among men and suffer a terrible punishment on the cross for them. God would then count Christ's death as a sufficient punishment for all of our sins. This is what the Hebrew writer meant when he said that Christ “*by the grace of God should taste death for every man*” (Hebrews 2:9).

Friend, if you and I will have it, that was our punishment Jesus was suffering on the cross. He personally became responsible for our transgressions, dying for them. Peter explains it in this way: “*Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree*” (1 Peter 2:24). Notice, he bore **our** sins in **his** own body. They were not his sins he was carrying but ours, because Jesus personally had no sin. He was the only perfect man who ever lived. He never once sinned. So the punishment belonged to others, not to him. An Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, prophetically looked down through the ages to that scene on the cross over 700 years before it happened, and said by the Spirit of God, “*The chastisement (punishment) of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed*” (Isaiah 53:5). What did he mean? Simply that our punishment would be borne by this man in order to make peace between us and God. His stripes, or the punishment he bore, stands for the punishment you and I deserve.

Forgiveness of Sin Through Christ

Since Christ died for our sins, God counts our debt of death for sin paid. Now he can justly and mercifully pardon us. But we must believe in Christ as our sin-bearer and be baptized into his death in order for it to count for us. Jesus said, "*He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned*" (Mark 16:16). It's up to us now. Will you and I obey him and have our sins pardoned, or will we stubbornly go to the judgment with our sins against us and suffer for them ourselves throughout eternity? The choice is ours to make! I have made up my mind to obey him. What about you?

Born Again

“What does it mean to be born again?”

This is the expression Jesus used when he spoke to a ruler of the Jews, Nicodemus, when he came to visit Jesus by night. Jesus told Nicodemus, *“Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”* (John 3:3). The strange words confused Nicodemus, so he asked Jesus, *“How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?”* (verse 4). Nicodemus thought Jesus was talking about natural birth. He couldn’t understand how a man could accomplish such a feat as to reenter his mother’s womb and be born. Jesus replied, *“Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God”* (verse 5).

If we keep in mind that Jesus was speaking to a ruler of the Jews, we will have a better understanding of why Jesus is giving this lesson. The Jews trusted in their fleshly birth as a basis for their citizenship in God’s kingdom. A person was automatically part of God’s Old Testament people by virtue of the fact that he was born into one of the twelve tribes of Israel. But Jesus was showing Nicodemus that terms for entrance into God’s eternal kingdom were different. A person’s fleshly descent had nothing to do with it. A new birth was required in order to enter this kingdom. It was not a natural birth of the flesh, but involved “Spirit and water”. It was to be a spiritual birth and one also involving water.

A Rebirth of the Spirit

When Jesus arose from the dead, he no longer spoke in para-

bles, but plainly gave the terms of entrance into the kingdom of God. He told the disciples to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. *"He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned"* (Mark 16:15,16). Is not this the same as the birth of the water and the Spirit which Jesus earlier spoke of to Nicodemus? If those who believe and are baptized are saved, and a person must be born again to be saved, then this must be identically the same process of rebirth.

Notice that both elements, water and Spirit are involved in Jesus' words in Mark 16:16. The spiritual change in the person is shown in the words, *"He that believeth"* Paul tells us that *"with the heart man believeth"* (Romans 10:10). The heart and the spirit are used interchangeably in the Scriptures. The spirit of man is his heart. When a man hearing God's word is convicted of his sins and comes to believe that Christ is the Son of God and that the gospel is true, there is a spiritual change or rebirth in that man's heart, effected through the Spirit of God operating through the gospel in the man's innermost being. It is the Spirit of God drawing the man to God through the faith planted in his heart.

A Rebirth of Water

Faith changes the heart, and baptism changes the state of the man. His previous state was that of sin. His sins had separated him from God and he was dead in these sins. Now that he has believed, he is baptized in order for his sins to be removed (Acts 2:38). The forgiveness of his sins in his baptism now puts him into a new state of salvation, with his sins having been washed away in the blood of the Lamb. Those who through their faith have repented and been baptized are said now to be in a *"newness of life."* Hear the apostle Paul on this point:

“Therefore, we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). Friends, if a man is walking in *“newness of life,”* he is a new man! He has been born of the water and the Spirit into God’s kingdom or people. As Paul explained it in another place, *“For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ”* (Galatians 3:26,27).

The most important need in this life is to be *“born again, born of the water and of the Spirit.”* Have you been born again? Don’t delay, for without this new birth, you can’t enter the kingdom of God, according to Jesus Christ in his conversation with Nicodemus.

The Church and Salvation

“Is the church essential to our salvation?”

This is a very important question, primarily because the church and its part in God’s plan is so very much underplayed today. People are being told that the church is a kind of an after-thought. That you can be a successful Christian without the church, but that it is good for you to belong to some church for even better spiritual growth. It is often regarded as a sort of “holy club” with which Christians can affiliate if they desire, but, if they don’t want to, that is still all right. But what does the Bible say? Whatever our attitude toward or understanding of the church, the Bible is true and what it says is authoritative. It is the word of God, the mind of Christ, and the teaching of the Holy Spirit until the end of time. It will set us straight on all spiritual questions, including this one about the role of the church.

Church Founded by God

According to the Bible, the church is the only organization except the family in existence today which was founded by the God of the universe himself! The prophet Daniel called it the kingdom set up by the God of Heaven! (Daniel 2:44). Christ, the Son of God, came all the way from Heaven to build it. In Matthew 16:18, he announced that *“I will build my church”* and then in the 19th verse identified it as the kingdom of heaven. It is the only organization in the world today which has a divine law. All other states, governments, nations, and peoples are governed by human law, but the law of the church is from God through his only Son, Jesus. The apostle Paul told the church that the gospel which he preached to the church and which would reg-

ulate the church in this world *“is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ”* (Galatians 1:11,12).

Again, the church is the only organization in the world that will last for ever, long after this world has passed from the scene! Daniel foresaw the glory of the church in eternity when he said, *“And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed...and it shall stand for ever”* (Daniel 2:44). The apostle Paul said the same thing: *“Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen”* (Ephesians 3:21).

Salvation Is in the Church

Finally, the church is the only organization in existence in which salvation from sins is found. In his Ephesian letter, the apostle Paul showed how God foreordained the church from the beginning of the world. Paul then called it the *“body of Christ”* (Ephesians 1:22,23). Then, in the second chapter he shows how God plans to reconcile all races of men to himself in Christ Jesus and in *“one body”* which is the church (Ephesians 2:16). To reconcile means to save, or bring back to God. This is why the church is called the body that Christ will save. *“And he is the saviour of the body”* (Ephesians 5:23). Again, Luke tells us in his book of Acts that *“the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved”* (Acts 2:47). When God saves a person, he automatically adds him to his church. They are one and the same process. This is because the “saved” and the “church” are one and the same thing.

From all this we see that the church is very much an essential part of God’s plan to redeem mankind. Friends, can’t you see

the importance of the Lord's church to you, since it is: (1) founded by God himself; (2) the only organization that will last beyond this world into eternity; and (3) the only body to which God adds the saved, because it is made up of all the saved?

Conversion

“What does it mean to be converted?”

The word “convert” means “to turn.” When we convert a store building into a residence, we change the building. Whereas previously it was one way, now it is made over for another purpose. It took some remodeling and changing to make it suitable for living in. The same is true of conversion to Christ. Man must be turned, or changed and remodeled to be suitable for service to God. Now, lets look at some of the changes which must be made.

A Changed Heart

First, the **thoughts and attitudes** of the man must be changed. God said, *“for the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth”* (Genesis 8:21). As a child develops into an adult, he is influenced by the wickedness around him. His thoughts begin to be molded toward evil things. Soon, he learns hate, anger, wrath and strife. He hears unclean stories told by other children and adults, and he begins to think on these things. He learns the crooked ways of the world and the sinful attitudes of his elders. His mind is gradually becoming polluted so that he grows into adulthood with these sinful thoughts and attitudes as part of him. No wonder the Bible says that men and women of the world are *“alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works”* (Colossians 1:21). Jesus said, *“for out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies...”* (Matthew 15:19). People must be converted from these sinful thoughts and attitudes. Unbelief must be replaced with faith. The mind must be converted to pure thoughts and holiness.

Changed Speech

Next, **the tongue of man must be converted.** The tongue is the window of the mind. Everything dirty or wrong thing inside a person will eventually come out through the mouth. Jesus said of the tongue and its relationship to the heart, *“A good man out of the good treasures of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things”* (Matthew 12:35). It’s like reaching into your treasure bag, Jesus said, and picking out what is in there. The bag is your mind. The tongue picks out of the mind things contained therein. If there are filthiness and corruption and hatred in the mind, it will come out in the speech of that person. He may guard against it around polite company, but it’s going to come out sooner or later. On the other hand, if the person is converted, and he has good treasure in the bag of his mind, the tongue will extract pure speech, clean, true and good things.

Changed Actions

A third area in which there must be changes is in the actions. The Bible tells us, *“For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God”* (Romans 3:23). This is a truth that our own experience confirms. We all have done things that were wrong. Therefore, the actions of man must be converted. We must change from wrong-doing to well-doing. The apostle Paul was writing to the church at Corinth, a group of converted people. He referred to their past life and conversion when he reminded them, *“Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers,*

nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. and such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

Yes, we must be converted in thought, word and deed in order to be saved from the sins that keep the unconverted out of the Kingdom of God.

Baptism Essential

“Is baptism essential to our salvation?”

In comparing the salvation of Noah's family from the flood with baptism today, the inspired apostle Peter wrote, *“when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls, were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us...”* (1 Peter 3:20,21). Here, Peter states that baptism is involved in saving us from our sins.

I realize that multitudes of religious people would take issue with this statement of Peter today. But they must argue, not just with Peter but with Christ, for it was Jesus who sent Peter to preach these words to the world. The apostles were Jesus' personal ambassadors, sent to preach to all mankind the message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:20). To reject their message is to reject Jesus Christ personally (John 13:20).

Perhaps one reason why many are not willing to accept baptism as a condition of their salvation is that they do not understand its relationship to other conditions God has given for the forgiveness of our sins. They cannot see it as the act of faith that it is. Baptism saves us, but not all by itself. There is no magical power in the water itself. The power to save rests with God and in the blood of Jesus Christ. Baptism is the act God has ordained for one who has come to believe in Christ to contact the saving blood. Without baptism, the sinner is not yet forgiven.

Faith and Baptism

Baptism saves us, but not without faith on the part of the one being baptized. When Jesus sent out the disciples to preach the

gospel to every creature, he did not say, "*He that is baptized shall be saved,*" but "*He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved*" (Mark 16:16). Baptism is a commandment to believers in order that they might be saved, not to unbelievers. Baptism without faith on the part of the one being baptized is of no avail. (This is why infants are not to be baptized). On the other hand, faith without baptism will not save either, because Jesus said, "*He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.*" We dare not be presumptuous and separate what God has joined together.

Also, this faith is not one that is hidden, but one openly confessed with the mouth: "*That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved*" (Romans 10:9).

Repentance and Baptism

God has also coupled baptism and repentance. Baptism saves us, but not without repentance on the part of the believer. I may allow myself to be baptized, but if my mind has not been changed from sinful rebellion to trusting obedience to God, it won't do me any good. When the Jews in Jerusalem who had believed the gospel message wanted to know what to do to be saved, Peter told them, "*Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost*" (Acts 2:38). The remission or forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Ghost were promised to these people on the conditions that they repent and be baptized. God will not save a person who has not turned from his sins. Otherwise, he would just be going down into the water a dry sinner and coming up a wet one. But when repentance is coupled with it, baptism brings the remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Ghost, according to this inspired apostle of Christ.

In conclusion, baptism serves as that act of obedience on the part of a man or woman who has come to believe in Christ which enables him to partake of the atoning benefits of Christ's death. The apostle Paul explains that our baptism puts us "into Christ": and "*into his death*" (Romans 6:3). This is how we are joined to the Lord and enter into his death where our sins are cleansed. Since baptism is an immersion in water, it is a fitting symbol of the grave of Christ. The repentant believer "dies" to his old sinful life, is "buried" in a watery grave with Christ, and is "resurrected" from it into a new life. "*Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death; that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life*" (Romans 6:4).

Yes, baptism saves us, if it is accompanied by faith and repentance on the part of the one being baptized.

The Reign of Christ

“When is Christ supposed to begin reigning over his kingdom?”

This may come as a surprise to some, but Christ has been reigning over his kingdom for about 2,000 years now! Many theories pertaining to the reign of Christ have been put forward, with various ideas about when he will begin to rule. Dates have been set; fantastic tales about the future splendor of Christ's reign on this earth have been told. But all these theories entirely miss the mark and fail to recognize that Jesus Christ has been reigning gloriously in his kingdom for centuries. In fact, he is still at it at this very moment.

Old Testament Prophecies of Christ's Reign

God revealed to Old Testament prophets that Christ would be raised up to sit upon the throne of David in a great, eternal kingdom. God told David, *“And when thy days be fulfilled and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build an house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever...”* (2 Samuel 7:12,13). Notice that one of David's sons was to reign on David's throne forever in a kingdom which God would establish.

Centuries later, after Christ had gone back to heaven, just ten days later Peter said that this prophecy was fulfilled. He told the Jews that God had foretold through David that he would *“raise up Christ to sit on his throne; He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ...”* (Acts 2:30,31). Note that the resurrection of Christ was defined by Peter to be the fulfillment of all the

prophecies which said that God would raise up a man from David's descendants who would sit on David's throne.

Christ Now Reigns

Did Christ really occupy the throne of authority after his resurrection? He certainly did. Jesus himself said years later in his Revelation to the apostle John, "*To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame and am set down with my Father in his throne*" (Revelation 3:21). The throne of David was a position of kingly authority over God's kingdom. Christ arose and was exalted to that throne, described here as also being God's throne where Christ is sitting next to his Father. The fact that he is now reigning over his kingdom is often set forth in the New Testament Scriptures. "*For he must reign till he hath put all enemies under his feet*" (1 Corinthians 15:25). Notice that Christ is reigning right now and will continue to do so until he puts all his enemies under his feet. If Christ is reigning, then his kingdom is already established and in operation. He is not reigning over an empty kingdom without subjects. To this all the Scriptures agree. Paul told the church in Colosse that the Father "*hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son*" (Colossians 1:13). Observe that they were at that time actually enjoying the privilege of being in the kingdom of God's dear Son, Jesus Christ. If the kingdom was not in existence and in operation with Christ actively reigning over it, why were they said to be in the kingdom?

The Church Is Christ's Kingdom

From these and many other passages we can see that Christ is very much a king and that you and I today can be in his king-

dom. His kingdom is the church Christ built which was established with great power in the city of Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension to sit down on David's throne at the right hand of God, as described in the second chapter of the book of Acts. Christ had earlier announced his intention of building his church (Matthew 16:18). John the baptist had told the people before that the kingdom was at hand (Matthew 3:2). Then, Jesus also told them that the time was fulfilled and the kingdom of God was at hand (Mark 1:14,15). Just before he went to the cross, Jesus told his disciples plainly that the kingdom would come in their lifetime with great power. He said that "*there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power*" (Mark 9:1). His words were fulfilled on the Jewish feast day of Pentecost when with great signs and power the apostles preached the forgiveness of sins through Christ's death and announced that God had made him both Lord and Christ (King) and had set him upon David's throne at last (Acts 2:31-36). As a result of the apostles' preaching, 3,000 were baptized into Christ for the remission of their sins (Acts 2:38) and the "*Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved*" (verse 47). These were the first citizens in Christ's kingdom. Today, all faithful Christians are obedient subjects in this great kingdom and are living evidence of the Lordship and reign of Christ in their lives. They joyfully await in hope his return from Heaven to take them to receive their eternal inheritance above.

Hope

“What is hope and how do you get it?”

Hope, in the Bible sense, is closely allied to faith. It means expecting something or trusting that you will receive something, even though you have not yet seen it. The apostle Paul in the eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans speaks of the “redemption of our body,” that is, the raising of our bodies from the graves when Christ comes again. And then he said, *“For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope; for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it”* (Romans 8:24,25). Wrapped up in his words here is the definition of what hope is: It is something that you wait patiently to obtain despite the fact that you can not see it right now.

That’s why hope is so closely linked with faith. The very definition of faith is *“the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen”* (Hebrews 11:1). Faith is trusting or putting confidence in the promises of someone. Paul said he was putting his trust or confidence in God raising men from the graves on the last day. That was his hope. He often spoke of the resurrection as the hope that followers of Christ have, and also as the hope that Israelites waiting for the Messiah had, but which they could not enjoy until they turned to Jesus who was that promised Messiah, or Christ. He said that he had *“hope toward God, which they themselves also allow, that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust”* (Acts 24:15).

Hope of Heaven

This hope involves a glorious paradise home, described as being in Heaven. Paul spoke to Christians of the "*hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel*" (Colossians 1:5). Many hope for a future paradise on this earth. However, the Christian hope is not on this earth, but in Heaven, as Paul said. This earth is filled with sin and some day will pass away. But another place awaits the faithful: Heaven.

Hope of Eternal Life

Not only is it a hope for a beautiful dwelling place, but also of a life that will have no end. Paul called it the "*hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began*" (Titus 1:2). He further called it "*the hope of glory*" (Colossians 1:27). The brilliance and beauty of that future existence is glorious beyond mortal comprehension or description.

How to Obtain Hope

How do we get this hope? The very definition of hope shows that it comes from believing God's promises and following Christ to obtain them. Since hope is waiting patiently for something promised, having full confidence that it will come some day, we see that hope must come from examining the promises of the gospel. Paul said, "*Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God*" (Romans 10:17). The message of the gospel must first be heard before this hope can be planted in the breast of man. That message has in it the power to offer ample evidence to the intelligence, understanding, and heart of the hearer so that he may be persuaded to believe it, providing other worldly interests

do not crowd it out. It will depend upon the condition of his heart to receive it. If the temporal pleasures of sin are more important to him than the promises of the gospel, the seeds of hope can be extinguished within him.

On the other hand, those who come to believe the gospel from the heart will find hope growing in them. Hope belongs to those whose faith causes them to obey the terms of the gospel for their salvation. Jesus promised, "*He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved*" (Mark 16:16). He further pledged, "*Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life*" (Revelation 2:10). Certainly, this great hope is worthy of being faithful until death in order to attain the promise! People have always dreamed of a trouble-free paradise where there is no death. That hope is a reality to believers, and some day their hope will pay off in the actual enjoyment of the thing hoped for.

Peace

“Where can I find peace?”

We live in a world of turmoil and danger. No sooner does one war end but that another takes over where it left off. Our lives and security are threatened by many things: illness, financial reversals, death. Events are moving too fast, and the world seems to be rushing by and constantly changing. The individual is no longer as important as he used to be. We talk in terms of numbers and quantities rather than in living, breathing terms of individual human lives and values. In the midst of all this, people are looking for peace. Peace of mind and peace with others. Where can they find it in such an uncertain world?

Christ Our Peace

The answer is Jesus Christ. He is the peace God has provided for us while we journey through this troubled earth. Jesus told his disciples, *“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid”* (John 14:27). Jesus takes away the troubled, afraid heart and replaces it with one of peace.

First of all, he makes **peace between us and God**. The Bible teaches that you and I are the enemies of God because of our sins. Paul explained to the Christians in Rome, *“For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life”* (Romans 5:10). Whereas previously, due to their sins, they were enemies of God, now through Jesus’ death on the cross which removed their sins they were made God’s friends, being reconciled to him. Sin separates us from God. But Jesus died for those sins. When

we come to Christ, our sins are forgiven and we have the guarantee God doesn't hold them against us any more. One of the causes of a disturbed mind is guilt. People realize they are sinful in God's sight, and it worries them, nagging at the back of their mind. They sense that they must face God for those sins in judgment some day. But when Christ takes their sins away, they have a cleansed conscience. The result is **peace!** No longer do those past sins worry the Christian. He has been reconciled to God through the death of his Son.

Peace of Mind

Secondly, the Christian has peace of mind within himself. Because he trusts in God, he no longer has to worry about everyday things with which most people are concerned. As regards food, clothing and shelter, Jesus said, "*But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you*" (Matthew 6:33). Most of the world is deeply anxious over material security. Their whole life is devoted to laying up a nest egg against the future. But the Christian is not anxious over these things. He knows that God cares for the birds and feeds them, but loves his people more than birds. He believes Jesus' promise: "*Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?*" (Matthew 6:30).

Peace with One Another

Finally, the Christian lives at peace with his neighbor. He bears no ill will toward any man. Instead, he follows Jesus' command to "*Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you*" (Matthew 5:44).

Truly, those who believe in Christ have found peace in every area of their lives: peace with God, with themselves, and with their neighbors.

Authority in Religion

“What standard of authority should we follow in religion?”

In all affairs of life, there must be standards of authority, otherwise chaos would fill the earth. In business, government, recreation or what have you, someone has to make the rules for us to follow. If not, every man would be his own authority and society would fragment and crumble. The same is true in religion. There must be authority. However, there are several authorities being followed by people today in their worship of God. Let's first examine a few of these, and then take a look at the true authority.

Our Parents' Religion

Some accept the religion of their parents as their standard of serving God. Many pride themselves on the fact that they are from a long line of ancestors who were practitioners of a particular faith. But is this a safe authority? The answer is no. History teaches us that this can be disastrous. Ancient Israel changed religion many times, often with the passage of just one generation as they shifted back and forth between the worship of the true God Jehovah and the false gods of the nations around them. This was what brought God's displeasure down on their heads and resulted in their being carried away into captivity by their enemies.

The apostle Paul had to give up his fathers' religion when he learned the truth about Christ. He said, *“But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ”* (Philippians 3:7). Why did he give up his former worship? Because he found that

there was no salvation from and hope of heaven in his fathers' religion. So, then using our ancestors' faith as our standard is not a safe guide.

Conscience as a Guide

Others use their own conscience as their guide. Is this safe? If so, then we have as many standards as we have people. Most religious people are conscientious, but a great many of them are disagreed. The apostle Paul was a conscientious man before he obeyed Christ, but he was a lost man at that time. The conscience is good, but it is safe only when based upon truth. A conscience does not set the standards, it only approves or disapproves of conduct based on a given standard. If the standard is not a true one, the conscience can be perfectly clean but dead wrong. He may not be offending against his standard, but if the standard itself is faulty the clean conscience does not make the man right in the sight of God.

Following the Majority

Still others think that the safest course is to follow the majority. The trouble with this is that the majority often does evil. It was the majority that screamed for the blood of innocent Jesus, even though they did it ignorantly. Also, Jesus said that the majority are walking the broad path that leads to eternal destruction and that few will be saved (Matthew 7:13,14). Obviously to follow the majority in religion is to be found in the wrong way.

Church Councils

Some religious groups think that the safe course is to follow church councils and let the delegates decide what is a good way to approach God. The problem here is that church councils often

contradict one another, because different parties within the councils sometimes differ. Surely, our salvation should not hang on how the vote goes! As time passes, succeeding councils sometimes feel that the creed needs revision. What is believed this year may be discarded next year. Does it make sense to dangle the destiny of our souls on such a skinny thread?

The Bible as Authority

Finally, shall we accept the Bible as our only standard of authority? The answer is YES! The apostle Peter said that the gospel is the "*word of the Lord and endureth for ever*" (1 Peter 1:25). The Holy Scriptures of the New Testament contain the words of Christ, which Jesus said are the truth that will make us free (John 8:31,32). This word of God will give us an eternal inheritance (Acts 20:32). It is the "*engrafted word which is able to save your souls*" (James 1:21). The Scriptures can make us "*wise unto salvation*" and will furnish us to "*every good work*" (2 Timothy 3:15-17). My friend, the Bible is the only religious authority you and I can count on.

Sprinkling

“Is sprinkling an acceptable form of baptism?”

In order to answer this question, we need to go to the Bible to find out if there is more than one form of baptism commanded by Christ. However, if the Bible teaches that there is only one form, then that form will be all that is acceptable to the Lord. If it is sprinkling, then sprinkling will be all that is authorized by God. On the other hand, if the baptism that the Lord gave is something else, then sprinkling will not be accepted by him. Of course, sprinkling as baptism is accepted by many people today. But it is important for us to find out if God approves of it. Just because something is widely practiced does not make it right in the sight of the Lord. Sin, for instance, is popularly practiced everywhere, but it is not right in the eyes of God.

There Is One Baptism

In Ephesians 4:5, an inspired apostle of Christ tells us that there is “*one Lord, one faith, one baptism.*” So there is only one baptism given by the Lord. Which one is it? For there are several “baptisms” being performed in the world today for various purposes. Which one of these is the one baptism? Can there possibly be one baptism, but several “forms” with which to perform it? Let’s see.

The same apostle Paul devotes part of the sixth chapter of his letter to the Christians in Rome describing the one baptism. After reminding the Romans how they had been baptized into Christ’s death (Romans 6:3), he shows how they had put away their old sinful life, the old man of sin, and had been raised with Christ to walk in a newness of life (verse 4). Then he tells them, alluding

to their baptism, *“But God be thanked that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you”* (verse 17). Notice that he says baptism was *“that form of doctrine.”* He did not say, “one of those forms of doctrine,” but just one form for baptism patterned after the “doctrine.”

But of which form of the doctrine is he speaking? The form is found in verse 4. *“Therefore, we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.”*

The **doctrine** was Christ’s death, burial and resurrection to a new life. The **form** of the doctrine is the believer’s death to sin, his burial with Christ in the watery tomb of baptism, and his resurrection from this tomb to walk in a new life.

This explains why, in every instance in the Bible when someone’s baptism was being described, both the baptizer and the one being baptized had to go down into the water and come up out of it. *“And they went down both into the water, both Phillip and the eunuch; and he baptized him”* (Acts 8:38). *“And when they were come up out of the water”* (verse 39). *“And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water”* (Matthew 3:16).

That baptism’s form is an immersion explains why it was necessary for John to be baptizing in Aenon, near to Salim *“because there was much water there”* (John 3:23). John had to go to that place in order to find enough water to immerse the candidates for baptism. If he were going to sprinkle them, or just pour water on their heads, he could have done it from a pan of water at home without journeying to another location.

The Word Baptize Means Immerse

Finally, let's consider the meaning of the word "baptize" itself. The New Testament was written in Greek, the common language of Jesus' day. What did the word itself mean to the people of that time when they heard it used? Greek scholars explain to us that the word baptize in the New Testament comes from a Greek word that meant: "1. To dip repeatedly, to immerse, submerge. 2. To cleanse by dipping or submerging, to make clean with water" (From **Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon**).

In conclusion, we see that sprinkling is not acceptable as baptism, because the word baptize was not used by Christ and his apostles to mean sprinkling. It was always used to mean immersion and was described as a burial with Christ into his death. In order to perform it, the person being baptized must "go down into the water" and "come up out of the water" in the likeness of Christ's own burial and resurrection from the grave. Neither the definition of the word baptize nor its mode of performance can be fulfilled by the act of sprinkling (nor of pouring). These acts were introduced into the church by uninspired men centuries after Christ and his apostles. They are substitutions and human inventions without the command or authority of God. The Lord has not given people the authority to change his laws, therefore sprinkling is not acceptable to him. Those who wish to please God will want to correct this error by submitting to Christ's one baptism if they have previously been sprinkled mistakenly thinking this form to be authorized by the Lord.

Our Resurrected Body

“What kind of body will we have in the resurrection?”

All of us are naturally curious about the nature and substance of the immortal body that we shall receive in the resurrection. However, at times curiosity has led to much idle speculation. There are some things which the Bible tells us about that body, and others which it does not reveal. Let's open the Scriptures and see what they tell us on this very interesting subject.

Christ said that the day is coming when everyone who has ever died will once again come to life and be raised bodily from the grave. He said, *“Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation”* (John 5:28,29). Notice, that both good and evil will be raised at the same time. However, there shall be a parting of the ways, as some go into life and others into condemnation. In this study, we want to learn about the resurrection of those entering into Heaven.

A Body Like Christ's

For those of us who are followers of Christ, what will our body be like? The exact nature of it we cannot now know. John said, *“...it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is”* (1 John 3:2). So, then, we shall be like Christ! Paul backs up this statement when he writes to the church in Philippi: *“...we look for the Saviour the Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall change our vile body that it may be fashioned like unto his glori-*

ous body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things to himself" (Philippians 3:20,21). The kind of body which Christ now wears in Heaven will be the kind that we shall wear in eternity.

A Changed Body

Perhaps we can get a better idea of what that body will be like by seeing what it shall not be. For instance, it will not be a body of flesh and blood like the one we presently wear. The apostle Paul devotes much of the 15th chapter of 1 Corinthians to discussing this body. He assures us, "*Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption*" (1 Corinthians 15:50).

Our corruptible body, the one laid in the grave, must undergo a change to fit it for a world not made up of things material, that is: of this earth. Paul said, "*We shall all be changed*" (vs. 51).

Like the Angels

Again, it shall not be a body capable of marriage and procreation. Jesus silenced this idea forever when he said, "*For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven*" (Matthew 22:30). This verse is the key to better understanding the nature of that body. Notice that the resurrected body shall be of the same substance and nature as the body worn by angels. The Hebrew writer tells us that God made his angels "*spirits*" (Hebrews 1:7). Therefore, the resurrected body is spiritual rather than material. And to this the words of Paul agree when he said, "*It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body*" (1 Corinthians 15:44).

Incorruptible and Eternal

Another aspect of that body is that it will not be subject to corruption or decay. *"It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption"* (verse 42). It will be a glorious body. *"It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory"* (verse 43). And it will also be powerful. *"It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power"* (verse 43).

But the most striking feature of our body in the resurrection is that it will no longer be prey to death, for it shall be an immortal body. Paul said, *"For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality"* (verse 53).

Someone may ask, "What guarantee is there that we shall have such a body, or that there will even be a resurrection?" We have the guarantee of one who himself came out of the grave on the third day, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus promised, *"For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will"* (John 5:21). The apostle Paul assured the people of Athens: *"Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead"* (Acts 17:31).

Friend, live your life by faith in this powerful Saviour so that you may receive such a glorious, immortal body at his coming!

Death-Bed Repentance

“Do you believe in death-bed repentance?”

We know that God wants all people to be saved. He is not interested in losing a single man or woman to the devil. If someone who has reached an advanced age comes to know the truth shortly before his death and truly turns to the Lord in his appointed way, there is no reason why the Lord would not accept his repentance with forgiveness. God is a gracious God, and anyone truly coming to him shall in no wise be cast out. We don't doubt that for a moment.

However, this does not give any comfort to a person who knows the truth but wants first to sow his wild oats with a view to making things right with God just before he dies. Anyone who deliberately lives a goat's life while hoping to die a sheep's death may be in for a big letdown when he faces Christ in the judgment. The reason I say this is that the Bible teaches that persons who repeatedly put off obeying the Lord, when they know what is right, can undergo a hardening process of the conscience which can put them into a state in which they are no longer capable of repenting. This is called by the Bible writers “hardening the heart.” There is a point of no return for such offenders. They may reach that ripe old age and have time on their death bed to repent, but due to this hardening process and calloused heart, be incapable of true repentance. They are their own victims — reaping in advanced age what they had sown in their youth.

A Hardened Heart

The passages to examine on this subject are these: First, Hebrews 6:4-6. In this passage, the writer describes a person

who was once a Christian but who then returned to a life of sin, leaving Christ. He reaches the point where the writer says "*it is impossible...if they shall fall away, to renew them again to repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.*" Notice, he said that in this condition it was **impossible** to get them to repent. They are out, gone, never to return again. There is no death-bed repentance for this type of person.

And then there is a class of people who, as the apostle Paul explains in 2 Thessalonians 2:10, "*They received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved.*" Because they rejected the love of the truth, and did not believe it when they heard it, Paul said that "*God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness*" (verse 11,12). In some manner, God sends "strong delusion" to those who love sin so much that they reject God's word when they hear it. As a result, they shall be condemned.

Again, we wouldn't doubt that God can receive a person shortly before his death, if he believed the truth and sincerely responded to it. But in the cases we have examined, isn't it plain that those who want to live a sinful life all their days with the thought of repenting at the last are doomed to failure? They doom themselves, because when that time arrives, their hearts are so hardened that they are not capable of repentance.

One Church

“How can all the denominations have unity? Why can’t there be just one church?”

The answer to this question is simpler than most present day solutions which have been offered. However, the achievement of unity is hindered by a disinclination to submit to the answer. The answer is this: when denominations cease to be denominations, unity will be accomplished. The word *denomination* means: “The act of designating; a sect, class, or division” (Webster). Therefore, the very existence of denominations destroys the possibility of unity, because denominationalism means division rather than oneness.

Let me illustrate: suppose I am going to pay you some money. I ask, “Do you want this all in fives, or different denominations?” The fives represented the same class of money. The denominations mean different classes of currency.

The same is true of churches. In the New Testament, we read of only one church made up of many congregations throughout the world. But they were all the same kind of church, each a part of that universal body for which Christ died. Paul said that “*there is one body,*” referring to the church (Ephesians 4:4; 1:22,23). In those days, when you entered a community and began looking around for a congregation with which to worship and work, you didn’t have to weed out all the denominations other than yours before you found where it met. There were no such groups as “Baptists,” “Methodists,” “Catholics,” “Presbyterians” or all the other modern day brands of churches. They were all simply members of the “*church of God*” or “*churches of Christ*” (1 Corinthians 1:2; Romans 16:16).

How did they manage to be one without denominational affiliation? The answer is that denominations had not yet come into existence. The churches were one on the basis of the word of God and their mutual love for God and Jesus Christ. Paul describes God's formula for oneness in Ephesians 4:4-6, which remains the only true basis for unity today. Listen to this plan from God:

"There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling: one Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God, and Father of all, who is above all, and through all and in you all."

Everyone agrees today that belief in the one God is a foundation for unity. So is faith in Jesus Christ as God's Son. If agreement on these is so readily reached, why can't unity be completed on the basis of the other "ones" mentioned in this passage? If people can go to the Bible and come up with the same God and same Jesus Christ, surely they can do the same with the "one faith" which is also given there. There is also "one Spirit," which all also agree upon. There is the "one hope" mentioned here, elsewhere in the Scriptures described as a resurrection from the dead to eternal life in Heaven, based on Jesus' resurrection.

However, the "ones" which people cannot seem to agree on are the one body, one faith, and one baptism. Why is this? Because to agree on these would destroy their denominational structures and do away with their distinctive groups. For instance, if denominations should take the New Testament as their only rule of faith and practice, they would have to throw away their respective creeds upon which they have been founded. But not many are willing to do this. If they accepted the one baptism of the Bible, they would have to do away with infant

baptism, sprinkling, and pouring which they have substituted for the one baptism of immersion for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38; Acts 8:38,39; Romans 6:4). However, to do this would be to destroy many customs and traditions dearly cherished by much of their membership.

These are some of the main reasons why there is no unity among many professed followers of Christ. An unwillingness to dissolve humanly erected barriers is the problem. Actually, unity can never come through negotiation on a high ecclesiastical level between leaders of denominations. In the early church, each congregation was independent, having no higher governmental structure than the local church and its elders. Their unity was based on their mutual faith in Christ and obedience to his commandments, teachings, and principles delivered to them by his apostles (Acts 2:42). This is the only way true unity can come today. Otherwise, efforts to return to the Bible and dissolve denominationalism become bogged down in the mire of human pride and party spirit. Any efforts to achieve unity which compromise Bible teachings and principles in order to please everybody will fail.

Christianity Is Different

“How is Christianity different from other religions? Isn’t there good to be found in all beliefs?”

The faith that came into the world through Jesus Christ is different from all other beliefs and religious practices. It is true that there are some elements of truth in various religions; that is, they make some true assertions about life and man, and have some good principles on how to treat our neighbors. These same truths are held in common by many people in various nations and are obvious from looking around us and observing God’s creation and the ways of mankind in general. However, the big difference between these human religions and that of Christ is that Jesus personally brought his down from Heaven with him. His gospel did not originate on this earth, and neither did he. Whereas all other religions came from the minds of men, the religion of Christ came directly from God. It is a revealed faith from the Lord.

Christ Spoke the Words of His Father

Jesus did not claim to be the inventor of his teachings. He attributed them to his heavenly Father. He said, *“But as my father hath taught me, I speak these things”* (John 8:28). Moses, another man through whom God spoke centuries before Christ, foretold that God would speak through the lips of Christ. God said of Jesus through Moses, *“I will raise them up a Prophet from among their own brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will*

require it of him" (Deuteronomy 18:18,19). So, God said he would use Jesus' mouth to deliver his words to the world, and that those who rejected Jesus' words would have to reckon with God.

When we hear Christ, we hear God because he spoke the words of God. God addresses all mankind today through his Son. He no longer speaks to us through prophets, as he did before, but through his Son! The Hebrew writer said that God spoke in time past unto the fathers by the prophets but "*hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son*" (Hebrews 1:1,2). So then, Christ is God's spokesman to all people today.

Christ Our Ambassador from Heaven

The greatest stamp of Christ's authority to speak for God is that he came from God. The Philippian writer explains that, prior to his entering the flesh of the little baby being born in the stable in Bethlehem, Christ was "*in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God*" (Philippians 2:6). He then stripped himself of his great position in Heaven and "*made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men*" (verse 7). The Lord descended to earth and took on human flesh. He grew to manhood, and then taught his disciples his great teachings from God. He crowned his work by dying for the sins of all of us and rising from the grave the third day, overcoming death for us.

While he was here, prior to his death, he worked many miracles and showed that he was from God by these. His miracles and resurrection prove him to be who he claimed to be: the Son of God. With this understanding, we can see how his teaching is superior to any other in the world. It is not only superior, but it

is the only way for you and me to go to Heaven and enjoy communion with God. The religions of men spring from their own imaginations and have no saving power in them. On the other hand, the faith of Christ comes from the mind of God and is able to free us from our sins and give us eternal life.

The Rock of the Church

“Did Jesus build the church upon Peter?”

Some have contended that Jesus built the church upon the apostle Peter. They draw their argument from the statement of Christ to Peter when he told him, *“And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”* (Matthew 16:18). Because Peter’s name means a “stone” or “rock” the argument sounds valid at first glance.

But a closer look at the context of the passage destroys this interpretation of Jesus’ meaning. The subject of the passage is not Peter, but Jesus Christ. In order to understand Christ’s words, we need to read the entire context. This is important in Bible study. A wrong meaning can sometimes be derived by simply failing to read the related material around the verse you are using as proof text. For example, the Bible says, *“Curse God and die”* (Job 2:9). If we took this at face value without examining the verses around it, we could use it as proof that you and I should curse God and die. But when we read the whole context, we see that Job’s wife spoke these words and, if he had taken her advice, he would have been sinning against God. Therefore, Job reproved her as a foolish woman for it.

Context Points to Christ as Rock

The subject of Matthew 16:13-19 is the identity of Jesus as the Son of God. When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples *“Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?”* (verse 13). They told him that men thought he was John the Baptist, Elias, Jeremias, or one of the other prophets of

old appearing again (verse 14). Notice, nobody was saying that he was the promised Son of God, the Savior of the world. They considered him a great man, a prophet, but not that promised Messiah. Jesus then asked his disciples, *“But whom say ye that I am?”* (verse 15).

Peter spoke up and said, *“Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God”* (verse 16). This grand statement of Peter, the faith that he possessed that Jesus was the promised Christ, was the reason Jesus uttered the words we have already quoted. The fact that Jesus is the Son of God is the rock upon which he would build his church. After Peter confessed Christ, Jesus told him also that he was Peter and then made his announcement that *“Upon this rock I will build my church”* (verse 16).

Other passages in the Scriptures bear out that this is the meaning of Christ’s words in Matthew. In 1 Corinthians 10:4, the apostle Paul said of the Israelites in the wilderness, *“...for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ.”* Then, he told the Corinthian church, *“For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ”* (1 Corinthians 3:11). He told them that they were built on the foundation of Jesus Christ. When we remember that Paul had earlier preached Jesus as the Christ to the Corinthians and the church had come into existence through this preaching (Acts 19:4,5), we can understand how he was their Rock. They were not built upon Peter’s identity as Peter, for Paul had not preached Peter to them but Christ. Rather, they were founded upon Jesus’ identity as the Son of God.

Peter as a Stone

Much ado is made about Peter’s name meaning a stone.

Peter was a stone in the church, that is true, but he was just one stone among many. All the apostles are described as foundation stones in the church, built upon Jesus Christ as the Rock to form a spiritual temple to God. In Revelation 21:14, the church in glory is pictured as a city with twelve foundation stones for the walls, which are identified as being the 12 apostles of Christ. Here, Peter is simply one of twelve equal foundation stones. In Ephesians 2:20, the church is described as being *“built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone.”*

And then again, every member is called a stone in the church. Peter told Christians, *“Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house”* (1 Peter 2:5).

The church which Jesus built is founded upon himself as the Son of God, with all the apostles, including Peter, forming co-equal foundation stones and every Christian built upon this foundation in a holy, spiritual Temple of God.

Miracles

“Why doesn’t God work miracles today just like he did in Bible times?”

There is a very important reason why God has stopped the miracles in our time. Many people claim he still works them just as he did in Jesus’ time and earlier, but today’s so-called miracles are counterfeit and puny in the sight of the legitimate wonders worked by the prophets of God recorded in the Bible. Today we do not see men like Christ and his apostles walking about the land healing all that are oppressed with infirmities. They in the Bible accounts raised the dead. Where are those today able to raise the dead as Christ and Peter did?

Christ walked on water. No one walks on water today. Moses lifted his rod and the Red Sea parted to allow thousands to pass over. No one today can do this. Jesus fed five thousand with a few loaves of bread and some fish, and they took up 12 basketsfull of the leftovers. No miracle worker today is doing this. Why has God discontinued these great miraculous signs of his power and existence?

Our New Age of Faith

The reason for it is this: God purposely has stopped the miracles, because today we are living in an age of **faith, not sight**. All the miracles performed by Christ and the apostles and prophets were done in order to prepare the world for this age in which we live today. It is all wrapped up in the meaning of faith itself. The Hebrew writer defines faith in this way: *“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen”* (Hebrews 11:1). Notice, faith is not what you see. In verse

6, he identifies faith to be belief in God's existence and in Him as a "rewarder of them that diligently seek him." How do you and I obtain this faith? "So then, faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17). Faith, then, is having belief or confidence in God whom we cannot see, and it is a faith which we receive through hearing a message preached about Him. But before we could hear about God and believe in his great works, he first had to do something in the world to be preached about.

God's Spokesman

God has chosen to reveal himself and his will through spokesmen. In the ages before Christ, these were Moses and the prophets. God worked miracles through them and delivered his messages via their ministry. Then, succeeding generations of their children were taught about these great events and as a result also believed (Exodus 10:1,2). We believe in Christ today, even though we have never seen him. We were not there when he healed the sick, raised the dead, walked on the water, and conquered the grave. Nevertheless, we believe. Why? Because we have heard the message delivered by God's chosen witnesses who were present when the events occurred. Our faith has come **by hearing**. The events surrounding Jesus were recorded by eye witnesses and we believe their report, although we ourselves were not witnesses to the actual miracles. As one New Testament writer put it, "*But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name*" (John 20:31).

We do not demand to see a miracle from God in order to believe in Christ. We believe him because we believe the hearing, or report, concerning the things he did and taught. As Paul

put it, *“for we walk by faith, not by sight”* (2 Corinthians 5:7). To insist that God continue over and over down through the centuries to demonstrate visibly his existence, when he has already supplied abundant testimony in his word to it, is to express disbelief. When we reject the report which God’s chosen eye witnesses have written down in the Holy Scriptures, we the same as call God a liar. We do not walk by faith, but by sight. *“But without faith, it is impossible to please him, for he that cometh to God must believe...”* (Hebrews 11:6).

The Sabbath Day

“Is the Sabbath Day binding on Christians today?”

The Scripture reading “*Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy*” is one of the most misunderstood verses in the whole Bible. It is one of the 10 commandments given to Moses and Israel on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 20:8). Many sincere people think that they are obeying this command when they meet together on Sunday for worship. But this command has no reference to Sunday, which is the first day of the week, nor to the way it is observed by people today — even by those who want to keep it holy.

The sabbath day of the 10 commandments was the seventh day of the week. It always was that. It was never any other. “*Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work, but the seventh day is the sabbath to the Lord thy God*” (Exodus 20:9,10). Sunday is not the seventh day of the week, but the first. Matthew 28:1 plainly shows this when it reveals, “*At the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week...*” We see here that the first day of the week was the day after the sabbath. On our calendars, this day is called Sunday.

Some have thought that Christ changed the sabbath from Saturday to Sunday. But the word of God nowhere teaches this. Actually, the problem is solved when we understand that the sabbath never was given to Christians in the first place, but to the Jews to observe under the law of Moses. This is another example of the necessity of “*rightly dividing the word of truth,*” or putting things in their proper places when we study the Bible.

Sabbath Given to Nation of Israel Only

The first Bible passage in which we see the sabbath men-

tioned as being observed by people is in Exodus 16, when the Israelites were told to gather twice as much manna on the sixth day and to rest on the seventh. God doubled the production of manna on the sixth day so that they would have sufficient to eat during the sabbath day.

It is important for us to realize that the keeping of the sabbath was a law to the Jews only. The sabbath days were a "sign" between God and the nation of Israel only. God said, *"Wherefore, I caused them to go forth out of the land of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness. And I gave them my statutes and shewed them my judgements, which if a man do he shall even live in them. Moreover, also I gave them my sabbaths to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the Lord that sanctify them"* (Ezekiel 20:10-12).

Christ Has Given a New Covenant

The ten commandments, written on stones, were often called the "covenant" God made with the Israelites. *"And he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten commandments"* (Exodus 34:28). This covenant, which contained the ordinance of the sabbath, was given to the people of Israel after they came out of Egypt. It was never given to their fathers. In Deuteronomy 5:3, Moses pointed out, *"The Lord made not this covenant with our fathers."* So, the observance of the sabbath was peculiar to the Israelites this side of the Red Sea and was not kept prior to that time by the fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Neither was it given to be kept by any other nation of people. Gentiles were not allowed into this covenant.

When Jesus died on the cross, he removed this covenant, as the Jewish prophets themselves had foretold he would do. For

this reason, Paul, an apostle of Christ, told early Christians that they were not to be judged for not keeping the sabbath or any other of the Jewish ordinances. He said that Christ had blotted out "*the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross*" (Colossians 2:14). What was this handwriting of ordinances? In verse 16, he explains it was that handwriting of laws which God gave to Moses involving the observance of the holy days and sabbaths. "*Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days,*" he said.

This certainly was not true of those who were under the law of Moses and who had the Sabbath to keep as part of it. The penalty for breaking the sabbath was death (Exodus 31:14,15). There were certain essential laws surrounding the sabbath which also had to be kept to make it acceptable to God. For instance, those under the law were not allowed to do any work on that day — not even to kindle a fire (Exodus 16:29; 35:3). The sabbath was to be observed with the offering of animal sacrifices (Numbers 28:9,10). In order for us today to keep the sabbath as it was kept in those days, the laws accompanying it would have to be restored. But to restore the animal sacrifices, the priesthood, and other things of the law is to reject Christ as the final and true sacrifice for sin. Paul warned, "*Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace*" (Galatians 5:4).

The First Day of the Week

In the light of these Scriptures, we can understand why the New Testament shows Christians meeting on the first day of the week instead of on the sabbath day to worship God. For instance,

they met to break bread, or observe the Lord's Supper, on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7). They gave of their means into a common collection on that day when they assembled to worship (1 Corinthians 16:1,2). Not that this day was a new sabbath, but it was when they were appointed to meet for these acts of worship. The new covenant does not consist of the observance of holy days and sabbaths, but of daily living for Christ in faith, prayer, and obedience.

Evolution

“In the light of some current evolutionary theories about the origin of man, what does the Bible teach about his beginnings? Is man any different from the animals around him, or did all life evolve from a single-celled form?”

It is a pleasure for me to have an opportunity to answer this important question. Certain theories which sprang up in the 19th century about the origin of man still linger today. Although not all scientists go along with these ideas, they are still proclaimed to people as truth, even though they remain unproven theories. Tragically, even some Christians have been confused by these pseudo-scientific philosophies.

The Bible teaches that man was miraculously created from the dust of the earth on the sixth day of creation, as recorded in the book of Genesis. *“And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them”* (Genesis 1:26,27). And then, in greater detail, in Genesis 2:7: *“And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”*

Some have attempted to reconcile their ideas with the Bible account by suggesting that it took millions of years for God to make Adam out of the dust, through an evolutionary process. However, the Bible does not teach this. Paul said that Adam was the “first man” (1 Corinthians 15:45). He was not born from a mother of a lower form of life, but taken directly from the soil and constructed. At that time there was no female form of man on the earth. Genesis 2 shows how God made a woman after he

had already made the man, by taking a rib from Adam's side, forming Eve, and bringing her to him to be his wife (verses 21-25).

God Made Man Different

The Bible makes a great distinction between man and other creatures. It is said of man only that God made him in God's own image (Genesis 1:27). The superiority of man was decreed at the moment of his creation. God gave him dominion over the whole earth, saying, "*Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth*" (verse 26).

So vastly different is man from other creatures around him, that God further emphasized the distinction by telling Noah and his sons that they could kill and eat any animal on earth, but if they killed man, they would be killed. "*Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God made he man*" (Genesis 9:6). This decree of God is still being carried out in most nations of the world today. Death for murder is one of the most common causes for capital punishment on earth.

This is the reason why the animal sacrifices for the people's sins offered up in the Old Testament times could not totally remove sin. The Hebrew writer explains, "*For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins*" (Hebrews 10:4). Why couldn't animal blood do it? Because a man is different from the animals, of a higher form of life. One man is worth more than all the animals in the world. You could not stack bulls and goats high enough to be worth one man, for

he alone of all creatures on the earth is made in God's image. For this reason, God sent Jesus in the form of a man to die for our sins. When Christ appeared, John the Baptist pointed him out and said, "*Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world*" (John 1:29). Being both a man and the Son of God, Christ was well qualified to die for man's sins. No, my friend, there is not one drop of animal blood flowing through the veins of a human being.

I am reminded of the story about an ape, sitting in his cage, holding a book of evolution in one hand and a Bible in the other. A man passing by noticed his confused expression and asked him what was the matter. The ape replied, "I'm all upset. I can't decide whether I am my brother's keeper, or if my keeper is my brother."

Many are in this predicament today. But confusion will pass when they begin to trust what God has said in the Bible rather than the groundless theories of unbelieving men.

Reincarnation

“Is there any Biblical basis for belief in reincarnation?”

The idea of reincarnation is that the soul reappears after death in a different bodily form. Some believe that people can appear again as different kinds of animals. Others think that the human spirit merely enters the body of another person.

It should be understood at the outset that the Bible does teach a reentry of the spirit back into the same body it left at death. But the theory of a person's spirit entering into another person or animal has no basis in the Bible revelation.

In the first place, a human is superior to the animals. It is said only of man that he was made in the image of God. *“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him”* (Genesis 1:27). Later, God said that any living animal could be killed and eaten, but he forbade the slaying of a man, because *“in the image of God made he man”* (Genesis 9:3-6). Clearly a human being is different from all other creatures. If reincarnation were true, then God would not have permitted us to kill and eat any animal, otherwise we might be killing and eating a man reincarnated in the creature we were using for meat!

We Die Only Once

Another reason why reincarnation has no foundation in truth is that God has appointed for man to die only once, not over and over as he reincarnates from one creature to another. The Hebrew writer said, *“It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment”* (Hebrews 9:27). Notice, man is appointed once to die, just once, not twice or more. What follows this appointment with death? We await the judgment.

The Resurrected Body

Man is a three fold being. He is made up of spirit, soul, and body. Paul prayed that the church in Thessalonica would have a membership whose “whole spirit, and soul, and body” would be “*preserved blameless unto the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ*” (1 Thessalonians 5:23). One of the wonderful promises of the gospel of Christ is that of a miraculous reuniting of these three parts in a resurrection from the grave on the last day. Death temporarily separates them. The soul, or life of the body, departs at death and the spirit goes to the unseen world of Hades while the body lies in the ground. This fearful separation is only temporary, however. Christ assures us of a personal, bodily rising out of the grave at his return.

So confident were Christ’s apostles of this grand promise being fulfilled, that they spoke of their death simply as a departure to be with the Lord for a while. Paul told the church at Philippi that he had a “*desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: Nevertheless, to abide in the flesh is more needful for you*” (Philippians 1:23,24). To Paul, to depart was to be with Christ and in a far better state. But, since he was so much needed by the church at Philippi, he preferred to remain alive for a while longer for their sakes. On another occasion, he affirmed that he was both confident and willing to be absent from the body and present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). The apostle Peter called his body a “tabernacle” (or tent) which he must shortly “put off” (2 Peter 1:14)

However, it is obvious from the passages on the resurrection that when that spirit comes back from the unseen world of the dead, it will only happen once — at the time of Christ’s second coming. Jesus said, “*Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming,*

in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation” (John 5:28,29). In that day, Paul will receive back his own body, and Peter his. There will be no mixups. No cattle or horses will trot into the kingdom of God from the judgment bar of Christ. You and I will get back our own bodies and will spend an eternity in them, each in his own appointed place, in everlasting life or eternal shame, according to every person’s deeds done while in the body on earth.

Church Discipline

“What kind of discipline should the church exercise against members who are living ungodly lives?”

This is a very important question. Too many times the church is afraid to face the problem at all. It takes courage to correct an ungodly situation and usually it is easier to hide our eyes or bury our heads like an ostrich, pretending that we don't see it. However, this type of problem has a habit of not going away, but of becoming worse with the passage of time. The church which does not face it squarely and according to the will of God is in for big trouble ahead. Not only that, but the world is always ready to ridicule God's children, and this presents an ideal opportunity to do so. How often we hear people who are outside of Christ give the excuse that they want no part of church because there are so many “hypocrites” in it. Then they cite some case of ungodliness on the part of a member which the church permits to go on without attempting to correct the offender. Although it may be true that some of these people could be using this as an excuse to cover up for their own failure to obey the Lord, nevertheless it is also one of the evil fruits of the failure of congregations to discipline unruly members.

Restoring the Erring Brother

Just exactly what does the Bible teach about church discipline? The first step the Lord tells Christians to take is to attempt to win the erring member back to Christ by gentle pleadings and reasoning. The apostle Paul commanded, *“Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be*

tempted. Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:1,2).

From this, we see that Christians are to go to such a brother or sister, not in a harsh, holier-than-thou attitude, but in a spirit of meekness, realizing that they themselves are also apt to sin. They go to heal, not to destroy. Usually, the offender will be converted by this approach, and no further discipline will be necessary.

Withdrawing Fellowship

But suppose the sinner doesn't clean up his life, but gets worse and rejects the various efforts of his Christian friends to convert him? What then? In a case such as this, as the last resort, stronger disciplinary effort must be made. Not to destroy the erring brother, but to shock him into a realization of how far he has fallen, Christians are commanded to withdraw their fellowship from him. In the church in Thessalonica, there was the problem of certain members who were not working, but were becoming lazy troublemakers. Paul called them "busybodies" (2 Thessalonians 3:11). First, he exhorted them to go back to work and eat their own bread (verse 12). Then, he told the rest of the members, "*And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet, count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother*" (verses 14,15). They were to withdraw their company from him in order to admonish him and shake him back to his senses. Then, when he realized that fellow Christians no longer regarded him as acceptable to God, hopefully this would move him to repentance.

Sometimes, it was necessary in extreme cases of immorality to have a church assembly of all the members and put a member

out of the church — not by physical manhandling, but by collective censure of him. In the church at Corinth, there was a member who was committing fornication and would not repent. Paul told them to come together and “*put away from among yourselves that wicked person*” (1 Corinthians 5:13). Later, this man repented with tears and Paul told them to receive him back into their fellowship (2 Corinthians 2:6-8). So, we see that this severe type of discipline resulted in the man’s salvation. And this is exactly the purpose of all church discipline.

Abraham's Seed

“In Genesis 22:18, what did God mean when he told Abraham ‘In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed’?”

The word “seed,” when applied to people in the Bible, has reference to a person’s children or future descendants. For instance, this is the way that Eve used the word when she bore Seth, who replaced her murdered son Abel. Eve said that God had appointed her *“another seed instead of Abel, whom Cain slew”* (Genesis 4:25)..

When God was giving promises to Abraham, that faithful man, he foretold several blessings and difficulties for his seed, or descendants. On one occasion he told Abraham, *“Thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them: and they shall afflict them four hundred years”* (Genesis 15:13). This later came to pass as foretold when the descendants of Abraham, the Israelites, went down into Egypt and became the slaves of the Egyptians until Moses. A blessing which God promised Abraham at the same time was that his seed or children would inherit the promised land of Canaan and the surrounding territories. He said to Abraham, *“Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates”* (Genesis 15:18). The rest of the Old Testament history shows the Israelites being led to this promised land, inheriting it, and enjoying the promises.

Christ Is the Seed

But the greatest promise God gave through Abraham was that he was going to bless all nations through him, or through his

seed. A New Testament writer, the apostle Paul, explains this prophecy to us: *“Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, and to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ”* (Galatians 3:16). Paul pointed out that the singular term “seed” instead of the plural “seeds” shows that God was promising to bless all nations through only one of Abraham’s descendants. Then, Paul explains that the seed or descendant was Jesus Christ. Therefore, God was promising to send Jesus Christ into the world as a descendant of Abraham, and so in this way bless all men through his seed.

Jesus was a Jew, a direct descendant of Abraham. The Hebrew writer said, *“For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham”* (Hebrews 2:16). Jesus didn’t come into the world as a spiritual body like the angels, but when he came he entered the flesh of a little Israelite baby, the seed of Abraham. In the books of Matthew 1 and Luke 3, his fleshly lineage is traced back to that great man of faith.

How Christ Blesses all Nations

God foretold that all nations would be blessed as a result of this seed. Jesus Christ is certainly the fulfillment of that promise in every respect. Christ has blessed people of every nation down through the centuries. He paid for their sins on the cross, suffering a painful death *“that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man”* (Hebrews 2:9). His wonderful message of forgiveness from God has blessed multitudes of every age. The gospel promises the glorious hope of a resurrection from the graves for all. This blessing is the greatest known to man. Christ overcame death for us by conquering the grave and becoming the one who will raise us from the dead. He opened up the gates to

heaven by becoming our forerunner into its beautiful portals. He went there to prepare a mansion for each of his disciples, and promises to come back and take them so that they can be where he is. Truly, in Abraham's seed, all nations of the earth are being blessed to this very day!

Finally, if we walk by faith, as Abraham did, we also become the "seed of Abraham" in Christ. We become part of a spiritual race of faith, the descendants of Abraham through faith in Christ. *"And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise"* (Galatians 3:29).

Modest Dress

“Does the word of God tell us what kind of clothes to wear?”

The Bible is not a book of styles and fashions. The type of clothing we wear today is different from that worn 50 or 100 years ago. And the styles back then were vastly different from clothing worn by Christ and the people of his day. The gospel was designed to be practiced by peoples of all ages in many environments and dresses.

However, the Lord has laid down some guidelines which regulate the use of clothing for Christians, especially for Christian women. These guidelines are principally concerned with controlling showy and flashy type clothing which is unbecoming to Christian women. The apostle Paul, in writing to a preacher named Timothy who was laboring with the church at Ephesus, gave the following instructions concerning Christian dress:

“In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; But, (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works” (1 Timothy 2:9,10). Observe that Paul said they should be adorned in **modest** apparel. This is an easy instruction to understand in any age of time, no matter what kind of clothes are currently being worn. Any article of clothing or garment which is not modest is forbidden. Webster says that “modest” means: “2. Not forward; shy, or reserved. 3. chaste, decent, now, esp., not displaying one’s body.”

In other words, clothing which isn't forward, or pushy, or put on for the purpose of attracting attention. Chaste or decent clothing, as Webster says, and which is not worn to put the female body itself on display. In our time, two classes of women's clothing are available. One class is feminine, yet not bold nor provocatively designed to attract male stares. The other class is immodest, with the main purpose in design to accentuate the female form and draw the attention of passersby.

By way of illustrating this latter kind of clothing, we are reminded of the story of the little boy who was lost in the push and rush of the crowd. When he was found, he was asked why he didn't hang on to his mother's skirt. The little boy sobbed, "I couldn't reach it!" A Christian woman wearing clothing of this type would not be showing modesty or godliness.

Vanity in Dress

Costly clothing worn in order to show off and impress others is also immodest, Paul says. "*Not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array, but...with good works*" (1 Timothy 2:9,10). Some people like to "put on the dog" and show off their fine clothing. Again, they are reminded to be sober and to adorn themselves with good works. The man or woman who is serving the Lord is more interested in pleasing God than pleasing a style conscious world. Sometimes pride in clothing is carried to church. A common complaint of some outside the church is that there is too much emphasis put on wearing nice clothing to worship services. The poor often feel out of place and shabbily dressed when they visit the assemblies. Of course, there may be some excuse-making involved here by some in order to justify themselves for not going to church. However, in some cases there may be some truth in the accusations. This certainly hap-

pened at times in the early church, as James informs us in his New Testament letter:

“My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; and ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place: and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: are ye not partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?” (James 2:1-4). James went ahead to add, *“Ye commit sin”* (verse 9). They were sinning in fawning over the rich and in ignoring and despising the poor dressed in their tattered clothing.

The church was built by Christ for man's salvation. In it are found rich and poor. Both are on an equal level as brothers in Christ. It is wrong to bring in these worldly attitudes toward clothing. Instead, emphasis needs to be put on adorning ourselves with the good qualities and virtues which Christ wants us to put on.

Brotherly Love

“What is the greatest test of a true Christian?”

The greatest test of a Christian is brotherly love. There's not much of this in the world today, but without it a man will never see God. Some have thought that to love your neighbor as yourself is the greatest commandment for Christians. But this was an old commandment of the Law of Moses given long before Christ brought the gospel into the world. Moses told the Jews fifteen centuries earlier, “...*but thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself: I am the Lord*” (Leviticus 19:18). Jesus identified the commandment to love God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves as the greatest commandments of the law (Mark 12:28-31). However, Jesus taught his disciples a higher type love than these, and called it a “*new commandment.*”

Christ's New Commandment

Christ gave this new commandment on the night of his betrayal, telling his disciples, “*A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another*” (John 13:34,35). Notice that he called this a “*new commandment.*” It differs, then, from the commandment of the Law to love your neighbor as yourself. It is greater than that. He further said that, by this love for our brothers and sisters in Christ, all men shall know that we are his disciples.

What was involved in this new commandment of brotherly love? Was it that we are to love everybody around us? No, because Christ had earlier taught them to love everybody, even

their enemies (Matthew 5:44,45). That was no new commandment, but his was a brand new one. Notice that he was speaking to his disciples, later to be known in the world as "Christians." It was to these that he said "*Love one another as I have loved you.*" The new commandment, then, was the love that followers of Christ are to have for one another. A love like Christ's own self-sacrificing love, one that would move them even to lay down their lives for one another.

Brotherly Love Necessary for Salvation

This is the special love that Christians have for one another as children in the family of God in Christ. The apostle John wrote, "*He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him*" (1 John 2:10). So important is this feature of discipleship that John identified it as the way a disciple can tell if he is in good standing with God. He said, "*We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death*" (1 John 3:14). So vital is brotherly love to our salvation in the sight of God that the Lord even regards hatred of a brother to be murder. "*Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him*" (verse 15).

The Hebrew writer exhorted, "*Let brotherly love continue*" (Hebrews 13:1). The apostle Peter listed brotherly kindness (brotherly love) as one of the essential ingredients of a disciple which will give him an abundant entrance into God's everlasting kingdom, and the lack of which will cause him to stumble and fall from grace (2 Peter 1:5-11).

When we understand that Christians are the peculiar proper-

ty of God, purchased by the death of his own Son, we can see why loving fellow Christians is so important in God's eyes. In fact, it is impossible to love God and not love a Christian at the same time. John said, "*If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar; for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?*" (1 John 4:20). Since a Christian is made in the image of his spiritual Father, God, to despise this image is to despise the Divine Parent who fathered him. We cannot love God and hate our brother in Christ at the same time.

Choosing a Church

“Does it make any difference what church I am a member of?”

Yes, it makes a great difference. The very fact that there is a wide variety of choice in churches illustrates the difference more dramatically than anything I know of. When Jesus built his church in the first century, there were no choices. Christ only built one church according to the Bible. Paul called the church the *“body of Christ”* in Ephesians 1:22,23, and then tells us in the fourth chapter of that same letter, verse 4, that *“There is one body.”* This agrees with Jesus’ grand announcement when he declared, *“Upon this rock I will build my church”* (Matthew 16:18).

Division into Denominations Forbidden

It is true that the plural term, churches, is also found in the New Testament Scriptures, but in those places it was used to mean that there were many congregations of the church spread among the various cities. However, they were the same church, but simply that church meeting in different locations. If you and I had lived in those days, we would be able to enter any city where the church was and start worshipping with it. We would not have to find a city directory and start looking through it to locate the particular denomination of which we were members from among all the choices available. There was only one church in those days.

Division was condemned by Christ and his apostles as a deadly sin, destructive to the church, the body of Christ. Jesus prayed that his disciples would all be one (John 17:20,21). Paul

ordered the church in Corinth *“that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment”* (1 Corinthians 1:10).

How God Measures the Church

The law of faith for the church which Christ built is the New Testament. In the New Testament, we can read the divine pattern for the church, its worship, membership requirements, organization, and life. In our day, the only way we may test a particular congregation of people to see if they are indeed the Lord's church is to compare them with this divine standard, the ruler of God which is the New Testament. It remains the unalterable measuring stick for the people of God until the end of time.

Here are some important things to look for when we are seeking to know if the church we have chosen is the one Christ established: First, does it have a human head? Many churches have a human head, such as a pope, a president, or a central governing body at an earthly headquarters. Christ's church has only one head, Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:18). Its headquarters are in heaven where the head is, not on earth.

Second, is it necessary to belong to this church to be saved? If it isn't, it is not the church which Christ built. The Bible teaches that Christ adds the saved to his church (Acts 2:47; Ephesians 5:23) and that he bought it with his own blood (Acts 20:28). If salvation is not in it, it is the wrong church.

Third, does it wear Christ's name and the name of his Father? The apostles taught, *“Do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him”* (Colossians 3:17). In the New Testament, God calls his church the *“church of God,”*

and “*churches of Christ*” (1 Corinthians 1:2; Romans 16:16).

Does it worship according to the teaching of the New Testament, following the apostles’ doctrine, praying, singing, and taking the Lord’s Supper in remembrance of his death for sin? Meanwhile, doing these things “*in spirit and in truth*” (John 4:24). Do the members love one another as Christ loved them, which is a sign of true discipleship (John 13:34,35)?

Finally, does it teach Christ’s way of forgiveness? Jesus taught that we must (1) believe the gospel; (2) repent of our sins; (3) confess our faith in Christ; (4) be baptized (immersed) for the remission of sins; and (5) continue following Christ faithfully. (Read: Mark 16:16; Luke 24:47; Romans 10:10; Romans 6:4; and 1 Corinthians 15:58).

These are the ways you can test any group of people claiming to be the Lord’s church when choosing a congregation in which to serve God.

Grace

“Does grace place any demands upon mankind?”

It certainly does! A popular but mistaken notion about grace in our day is that grace puts absolutely no responsibilities or demands upon the person who receives it. By grace is meant the kindness or forgiveness of a merciful God toward sinful man. That unmerited favor that God extends to sinners, offering them pardon from their sins through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. If it were true that the grace of God puts no requirements upon those who benefit from it, then all men and women everywhere would automatically receive pardon from their sins. This would be inevitable, because *“the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men”* (Titus 2:11). If grace is unconditional, then all men are saved right now, since the grace has appeared to them. Its blessings are automatically theirs, because Jesus tasted death for every last one of us. However, the Bible teaches that only a few are going to be saved and that the majority will be lost. Jesus warned, *“Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it”* (Matthew 7:13,14).

Grace Is Conditional

Why is this? Why, since grace is available to all, are they not all saved? The reason is that grace is conditional, and only few comply with the conditions. For instance, one of the conditions to receive grace is **faith**. Without faith it is impossible to please God, we are told in Hebrews 11:6. There's a condition. Not the

only one, but nevertheless a condition. Unless men and women come to believe in the true God and in his Son, Jesus Christ, they cannot be rescued from the awful consequences of their sins.

Several Conditions Involved

Another condition that grace puts upon men if they are to receive it is **repentance**. God has commanded that all men everywhere repent (Acts 17:30). Surely, a command is a condition. Repentance, Jesus said, is necessary to receiving forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47). To repent means to change our minds and turn from a heart of sin and rebellion against God to obedience to him. Repentance is a reformation of heart. But this repentance must involve also a **reformation of life** to be effective, which constitutes still another condition of grace. When Paul told Titus that the grace of God bringing salvation had appeared to all men, he went ahead and explained that this grace placed conditions upon those who receive it. He said that the grace *“teacheth us, that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously and godly, in this present world”* (Titus 2:11,12).

Now, I may believe that Jesus is God’s Son, but if I don’t live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world, God’s grace will not be with me. Faith must lead to reformation, otherwise it is a dead faith.

A person must be baptized, or immersed in water, as the word means, in order to contact the grace. Peter told the Jews to repent and be baptized for the remission of their sins (Acts 2:38). And Paul said that, when we are baptized, we are buried with Christ to arise to walk in a newness of life (Romans 6:4,5).

We must serve God in his church in order to continue in his

grace. The church is made up of the saved, bought by the shed blood of Christ (Acts 2:47; Acts 20:28). Unfaithfulness cuts us off from the grace of God. Yes, grace is conditional. Although we do not deserve Heaven, still there are some conditions to receiving the grace of salvation that takes us there.

Eating Pork

“Is it wrong to eat pork?”

No, it is not wrong to eat any kind of meat on earth. An inspired apostle, the apostle Paul said, *“I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself”* (Roman 14:14). He also said, *“Let no man therefore judge you in meat”* (Colossians 2:16). No man has the right to condemn you in what kind of food you eat. But if this is so, where do people get the idea that it is wrong to eat certain kinds of meat? Here we have the simple task of rightly dividing the word of truth. People are going to the Old Testament laws, which God gave to the Jewish nation only through Moses, and are reading where God pronounced certain foods unclean to them for religious purposes. To Israel living under the law of Moses, pork and many other meats were declared to be unclean.

Unclean Foods Under Law of Moses

For a full list of ceremonially unclean animals in that law to the Jews, read Leviticus 11. Some of these were: the camel, the coney, the hare, the swine, water creatures without fins or scales, the eagle, the osifrage, the ospray, the vulture, the kite, the raven, the owl, the night hawk, the cuckow, the hawk, the little owl, the cormorant, the swan, the pelican, the gier eagle, the stork, the heron, the lapwing, the bat, and many creeping things. These laws of clean and unclean creatures were never given to the Gentiles, but to the Jews to keep until Christ came and nailed the law of Moses to the cross, taking away the meat and drink ordinances (Colossians 2:14-17). Now, Paul says in this passage, that no man has the right to condemn you for eating these things. It

is simply a matter of putting Scriptures in right places when you study the Bible. When we realize that these dietary laws were the religious ordinances God gave to the Israelites alone in order to separate them as a nation until Christ came, we will have no problem understanding and reconciling these passages.

No Meat Unclean to Christians

The religion that Jesus Christ brought into the world is different. It does not involve the keeping of holy days and the eating of and abstaining from certain meats. Paul showed the difference when he said, *“For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink but righteousness and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost”* (Romans 14:17). He even showed a vision to Peter to illustrate this truth to him. In the vision, he commanded Peter to eat the very creatures that under the law of Moses the Jews were forbidden to eat. When Peter refused, saying, *“Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean,”* God told him, *“What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common”* (Acts 10:11-15). God has cleansed that which under the law was called common or unclean. He even commanded Peter, a Jew, to kill and eat such creatures.

The apostle Paul explained it like this: *“For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer”* (1 Timothy 4:4,5). Notice, God’s word has sanctified all foods. God has freed every creature so that it is no longer common or unclean. And when a man gives thanks before eating it, this also cleanses it for eating. God is pleased with his faith and the meat is a blessing to the man. God has put a blessing in it for our body’s use. That is, it is a blessing unless we turn it into a curse through gluttony.

In conclusion, it is not wrong to eat pork or any other creature nourishing to eat. At one time God sanctified certain foods to the Jews and pronounced others unclean for religious purposes, but he no longer has such meat ordinances in effect. Christianity is not one of holy days and meats, but one of daily righteous living in God's sight through Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Perfection

“How perfect must I be before I can become a Christian?”

Sometimes we hear people say that they intend to obey Christ some day and serve God, but they feel that they are too sinful to do it yet. They feel that they must first develop themselves into a high state of perfection before they will be worthy of wearing the name “Christian”.

This attitude shows what a high regard these people have toward the Christian life. They realize that it involves one of high morals and standards. However, they are failing to understand one thing: Christ died to save sinners, not perfect people. Secondly, they do not comprehend that even the highest code or standard cannot make a man worthy of salvation, because all have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory. The gospel is God’s way of helping people to come to him when they have failed to achieve perfection through their own efforts.

Christ Our Helper

Christ is God’s help to us. If we had been absolutely perfect there would have been no need to send Jesus. But God saw us stumbling along the way and realized that, without something to remove our sins and give us another chance, not one of us would be fit for the kingdom of God. There is in the heart of each of us the desire to do right. Even the most hardened criminal has had moments when he wished for something better out of himself. All of us realize that we are happiest when we are square with God and with our fellow man. But, unfortunately, the flesh usually overcomes our spiritual side and temptations deceive us and lead us off into wrong paths.

God knows this, and so has provided a cleansing for our sins. He had his Son Jesus Christ pay the price for our transgressions on the cross. This enabled God honorably to offer a complete pardon to us, even though we were guilty of death. Jesus is our best friend, dying in our place on the cross so that we may be forgiven.

Another Chance

The gospel gives us another chance. We failed the first time; now we have an opportunity to try again. God takes us as imperfect people, cleanses us of all our past mistakes, sins, and disobediences, and mercifully gives us a break. Jesus paid our penalty for us, so now we have another opportunity to make good. Christians are imperfect people who have made mistakes in their lives, but who are now doing their best to improve and serve God. It was not to non-Christians, but to Christians, servants of Christ that these words were written by the apostle John: *"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us"* (1 John 1:8-10).

This is not to say that a Christian is not obligated to live the highest standard of life he possibly can. But, when he falls short, God makes available a cleansing for sin and the chance to try again and again, provided the Christian turns from his sin and seeks God's forgiveness. The opportunity to be saved is offered to the willing-hearted, not to the unrepentant.

Heaven

“Do we have any idea what Heaven will be like?”

The only way that we can understand something invisible like Heaven is to read what the Bible has revealed about it. Not everything about that place has been released for our information. There are some things which Paul called “unspeakable” about it which it is not lawful for God’s prophets to report. On one occasion the apostle Paul had been caught up to what he termed the “*third heaven*” (2 Corinthians 12:2). He said that he was “*caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter*” (verse 4).

Heaven Is “Up”

However, there has been sufficient said about this paradise by both Jesus and his inspired apostles to make us want to go there. The first thing we definitely know about it is that Heaven is beyond all the known universe. It is higher than the heavens where all the stars and planets are. This is why it is always described as being “up.” When Jesus rose in a cloud and disappeared completely out of the apostles’ sight, an angel told them: “*Why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven*” (Acts 1:11). The apostle Paul later described Christ as having “*ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things*” (Ephesians 4:10). Notice the expression, “*far above all heavens.*” This place is beyond the heavens God made to set the universe in. It is the heaven of heavens. It is the heaven where God himself dwells. We know this to be true, because Mark tells us that, when Christ went up into the

cloud, he was *“received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God”* (Mark 16:19).

How do we know that this is the same Heaven God has promised to us? Because Jesus promised to come back and take his disciples to the same place where he is now. He said, *“I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also”* (John 14:2,3). Christ went to Heaven. That’s where he is now. He has promised to take us where he is. Therefore, he is going to take his followers to Heaven.

A Land Free of Suffering

Many pleasant and happy promises are offered concerning that place. For one, all source of sorrow will be banished there. John describes what he heard about Heaven in Revelation 21:3,4: *“Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”*

If you can imagine what it would be like to live where no one ever died; where no one ever cried, where your body never felt pain or an ache, then this very well may satisfy all you need to know about what Heaven will be like. Man has never seen it so good on this earth. Everyone has seen days when everything seemed to go just right and the world seemed rosy. But such times did not last forever. In Heaven, such blessings are forever available. Observe also that God himself is present with his people. In fact, his presence does away with the need for the sun or the moon which supply us with light on the earth. *“And the city*

had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it; for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof" (Revelation 21:23).

We Shall Be Immortal

Another great blessing of that eternal land is the kind of body its inhabitants will wear. Our body on this earth is weak and subject to death. We are often plagued with pain and disease that threaten to shorten our years. With time, our bodies slowly waste away as old age overtakes us. But in Heaven, we will have new bodies; described as "glorious," just like Christ's own body (Philippians 3:21). Those bodies will not be subject to disease, injury, or mortal wounds. Just like Christ's body, they will "*shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father*" (Matthew 13:43). So glorious was Christ's body that the light shining from it blinded the eyes of Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-9). If we follow Christ in this present life, our sins will be washed away in his blood and we shall inherit a body just like his in Heaven.

Yes, there is enough revealed about Heaven to make us want to have a part in it!

Hell

“What will Hell be like?”

This is not a pleasant question to answer. Nobody really wants to find out what Hell is like, especially not firsthand. However, the threat of a place of punishment for sin is one on which Jesus often taught. In fact, this was the very reason that Christ came into the world: to save us from the wrath of God for our sins. No wonder he warned of it so often! It will be important for us always to keep in mind the very real danger of going there. God knows that many will not want to hear about Hell. But until they do, multitudes will continue in their sins unprepared to escape it. They will not feel inclined to serve God until they become genuinely terrified of the sinner's awful destiny.

Hell Is Forever

The first thing we notice about Hell is that it is eternal. That means there is no end to it. Jesus will say to some on that day, *“Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels”* (Matthew 25:41). There is no need to bicker over this word “everlasting.” It is the same word used by Christ to describe the never-ending life in Heaven of the righteous. If Hell is not an eternal place, neither is Heaven, for both are described in one verse by the same Greek word as lasting the same amount of time. *“And these shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into life eternal”* (Matthew 25:46). Here, again, the terms “everlasting” and “eternal” are merely translations from the Greek word “aionion,” denoting an endless period of time. One class of people will spend eternity in Heaven, the other in Hell.

Another expression Jesus used to show that it is a place where punishment never ceases and the punished never cease to feel the pain is Mark 9:43-48. Listen to Christ: *“And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched: And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out; it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire: where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.”*

Friend, fires of this world are quenched. They go out after a while, because they consume the fuel. Any carcass eaten up with worms thrown into fire in this life is burned up and the worms die in the flames. But not so in Hell. *“The worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched.”* Don't let anybody tell you that Hell is just a momentary thing in which you suffer for a little while and then black out into blessed extinction. The body cast into that fire is not like your present body. It will not be consumed by that fire.

The Inhabitants of Hell

Another bad feature of Hell is its undesirable occupants. A picture of some of the people who will inhabit Hell is given in Revelation 21:8: *“But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.”*

If you and I should go to Hell, we would be surrounded by

the wickedest, basest, sickest, filthiest types of humanity. People we avoided on earth would be our companions in eternity. All adulterers, liars, and murderers will be there, as well as thieves. Filthy speakers and the dirty-minded will be there. Lawbreakers and rebellious persons of every conceivable kind will share that place together, grinding their teeth and shrieking their torment throughout eternity. Jesus warned of that place that "*there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth*" (Matthew 13:42). However, the worst occupants of Hell will be Satan himself along with his wicked angels, for whom Hell was originally prepared. If through sin we serve Satan in this life, we shall have the dubious distinction of living with him in eternity.

What is important for us is to believe God who has warned us of the existence of Hell, and to take advantage of his grace which he has offered to us through his Son whom he sent to the cross in order to die and provide a covering for our sin. Many people are trusting in their own morality to save them rather than in Christ's atoning death for them. They pride themselves in that they are not lawbreakers, murderers, adulterers or such like. But let's not forget that the Bible also says that unbelievers will share the same lake of fire with these (Revelation 21:8). To God, a "believer" is a follower of his Son Jesus Christ and who is obeying him. But, when Christ comes, it shall be "*in flaming fire, taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (2 Thessalonians 1:8). Christ is our only refuge and escape in that awesome day of flaming retribution against sin. Let's flee to him in order to escape that day when Hell shall be revealed to an unbelieving and disobedient world.

Fasting

“Is fasting and abstaining from certain kinds of food beneficial to the Christian’s spiritual life?”

The early Christians practiced fasting on occasions. Their fasting was not a “church ordinance” but individual and self-imposed. That is, they were not commanded to do so, neither did Christ set it in the church as a command. Nevertheless, it is evident that fasting is beneficial, since it was done by early disciples. Usually, fasting was practiced because of special situations where intense and prolonged prayer was called for. For instance, when Saul and Barnabas were selected by the Holy Ghost to be sent out into the mission field to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, the prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch *“fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away”* (Acts 13:2,3). Obviously, the gravity and importance of the occasion of sending out gospel preachers to the Gentiles called for solemn prayer and fasting.

Paul told Christian husbands and wives to render to one another their marital dues, *“except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency”* (1 Corinthians 7:5). From this we see that it was common for Christians to fast.

But there is a great difference between this self-imposed, voluntary fasting and the kind that some church leaders impose today. The practice of commanding abstinence from meats as a religious observance is condemned in the Bible. Paul told Timothy that *“in the latter times, some shall depart from the faith”* (1 Timothy 4:1). As he further describes some of the char-

acteristics of this departure from the faith that Christ delivered into the world, he said that men in those days of apostasy would be "*forbidding to marry and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth*" (verse 3).

From this we learn that no man has the power to forbid either marriage or the eating of meats. All food is clean and wholesome at all times if it is received with thanksgiving and prayer. The religion of Christ does not involve abstaining from any particular kind of food. As the apostle Paul put it, "*For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost*" (Romans 14:17).

During Old Testament times, God did for that period of history forbid the Jews to eat pork and some other creatures which he had pronounced "unclean." But this was a temporary situation which God imposed until Christ came. The food itself was not unclean, but God ceremonially pronounced it unclean for the Jews. He had a certain religious purpose for doing so. But the way of life he delivered through Christ does not require such observances. An apostle of Christ said, "*I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself*" (Romans 14:14).

When Christ died on the cross, he removed the laws of clean and unclean foods. Then he sent word through his apostles to "*let no man, therefore, judge you in meat or in drink*" (Colossians 2:16). We are neither saved nor condemned by our eating. No creature has been pronounced unclean in our age of time, so we do not sin by eating.

On the other hand, the Christian who wants to fast on his own

or with others as he attempts to increase his concentration while praying to God is not doing any wrong. If it was beneficial to the apostles and early Christians, it can be for him too.