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BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

LESSON 1: SAVING THE LOST: GOD'S ETERNAL PLAN

1. The Theme of the Bible

- A. While the Scriptures offer much useful information on a variety of topics, the main theme is how God brought to reality a way for man to be saved from his sins. This process (from a human standpoint) took much time to prepare and execute. God's patience and love are demonstrated through the gradual unfolding of His redemptive scheme.
1. The decision to redeem faithful men by relation to His Son was determined "*before the foundation of the world*" (Eph 1:4).
 2. God's purpose to show His grace in Christ originated "*before time began*" (2 Tim 1:9).
 3. Thus Jesus "*was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you who through Him believe in God ...*" (1 Pet 1:20-21).
- B. In the earliest epochs of human history, God's plan was not known. But gradually His purposes were revealed by events and declarations generated from heaven.
1. The "mystery" (that which is unknowable to the human mind because it is unrevealed by God) "*was kept secret since the world began but now has been made manifest ...*" (Rom 16:25-26).
 2. Paul's desire was to "*make all people see ... the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God ... to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church ... according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Eph 3:9-11; cf. Col 1:26).
 3. **Question:** Who will benefit from the preaching of this "mystery"? (1 Cor 2:7-9)
- C. Thus God was wholly and unilaterally responsible for setting in motion this process of the reconciliation of sinners unto Himself. While God certainly did use man in implementing various aspects of the plan, man did not give God counsel or even deserve the benefits thereof. It was entirely the conception and implementation of God in all His wisdom and power. Inspired writers rightfully stand in awe of such an omnipotent and loving God:
1. "*Now all things are of God who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ ...*" (2 Cor 5:18; cf. 1 Cor 1:30-31).
 2. "*But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us ...*" (Tit 3:5).
 3. **Question:** What does Rom 11:33-36 say about man's contribution to God's plan of redemption?

2. The Theme of the Life of Christ

A. Jesus declared His interest in the spiritually destitute:

1. *“For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost”* (Mt 18:11).
2. *“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many”* (Mt 20:28).
3. *“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick ... For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance”* (Mt 9:12-13).

B. Jesus came to save the lives of His enemies – Rom 5:6-11.

C. **Question:** In Lk 15, what three figures does Jesus use to express His concern for the lost?

3. Reaching Out to the Lost: Participation in God’s Redemptive Plan

A. Rather than considering evangelism as a burden or nuisance, we should look more deeply at the implications:

1. God’s whole purpose in creating the world and man was to bring *“many sons to glory”* (Heb 2:10; cf. Rom 8:19).
2. These sons, however, would need redemption from the transgressions they would inevitably commit. Thus God embarked upon a long and arduous journey through the generations of mankind to bring that redemption through His Son.
3. Jesus clearly stated in word and example that His purpose in coming into the world was not for His personal glory or exaltation but to provide the offering that would result in man’s redemption and reconciliation.

B. There are frustrations and obstacles in living for the spiritual benefit of others, but Christians are compelled to do so by the salvation they have received, by their deeper insight into the eternal nature of things, and by their understanding of the value of a soul.

C. We embark on this study in order to enhance our appreciation of the lost, the privilege we have of working for their salvation and our knowledge in reaching and teaching them.

BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

LESSON 2: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE “LOST”?

1. Identifying the “Lost”

A. Those who violate the law of God and act contrary to His will cut themselves off from fellowship with Him. This is because God is absolutely pure, holy and just and cannot share His existence with those who are guilty of transgression. Such people are said to be:

1. Lost (Mt 18:11); ungodly/sinners (Rom 5:6, 8); sons of disobedience (Eph 5:6); darkness (Eph 5:8); transgressors (Jas 2:9).
2. Hopeless and without God in the world (Eph 2:12); children of wrath (Eph 2:3); enemies of God (Rom 5:10); condemned (Jn 3:18).
3. Dead while they live (1 Tim 5:6); dead in trespasses/sins (Eph 2:1); alienated from the life of God (Eph 4:18); perishing (2 Cor 4:3).

B. Who is “lost” in sin? In short, everyone. Every human being that is of responsible mental capacity (not immature in age or mentally impaired) has violated God’s will in some way. This is made clear in many Scriptures (cf. Rom 3:9-23), and this declaration is sustained in the consciences of men. *Evangelism will not result in conversion to the Lord if the realization of sin is weak or non-existent.*

C. Why do so many people not consider themselves lost or sinners?

1. Some have seared their consciences (1 Tim 4:2).
2. Others are truly ignorant of what God’s law teaches. What does 2 Th 1:8 teach about ignorance of God? Does it insulate from His vengeance? What about Acts 17:30?
3. Some live with a vague notion that doing a few good works offsets the sins they have committed. They characterize their lives as basically good and hope that “the man upstairs” will cut them some slack. These simply do not realize the magnitude of sin and the holiness of God. If a few good deeds save, then Jesus died in vain.
4. Yet others think that sin is only doing something heinous like rape, robbery or murder. But we become a transgressor by violating only one precept of God (cf. Jas 2:10-11). Heinousness of crime or sin is subjectively determined, but any society with an advanced system of justice punishes for a variety of offenses, not merely shocking or egregious ones. How much more so with God?!
5. We commit sin not only by doing what is prohibited but *failing to do* what is commanded and is our obligation to do. That is, we can sin by *omitting* what is our rightful duty (Jas 4:17). While many may have difficulty seeing themselves as guilty of doing “bad” things, nearly everyone will acknowledge *failing to do* all that he or she should.

2. Societal Impediments to Recognizing Sin – Comment on how each of the following items interferes with people’s willingness and/or ability to recognize themselves as sinners:

A. Psychology:

B. Darwinism:

C. Prosperity:

D. Religious turmoil and controversy:

E. Self-centeredness:

F. Sense of invincibility:

G. Religion taken for granted:

3. Breaking Through the Barriers

- A. Satan has constructed strong walls of resistance around many of our friends and neighbors. They are skeptical, satisfied, distracted and otherwise unconcerned about their souls. If people never sense their lostness, they will never look for the solution to it.
- B. Sometimes we don’t like dealing with discomfort over religious differences. We may not want to jeopardize a friendship or create tension among co-workers. The pluralistic climate in our nation discourages criticizing or openly discussing the differences in religious beliefs or practices.
- C. We must be alert to those who have had their resistance lowered through tragedy, loss, hardship or other circumstances and be prepared to offer them the hope that is in Christ.

These things are all designed by Satan to hinder us from openly teaching others. We must recognize these hindrances for what they are and refuse to be intimidated, cowed or otherwise inhibited from sharing with people the ONLY antidote to the spiritual death that is in the world.

BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

LESSON 3: THE ROLE OF THE SCRIPTURES IN SALVATION

1. God Has Spoken

- A. Because of Calvinistic teaching regarding the spiritual depravity of man; i.e., his incapability of responding to any overture of God due to his depraved nature, many have been convinced that salvation is something God gives you – or He doesn't. Calvinism clearly teaches that faith is wholly given to the Christian by God *without any response whatsoever* on the part of the saved one.
- B. But this is at odds with many doctrinal assertions in the Scriptures as well as the examples of conversion in Acts (to be studied later in the quarter). The NT teaches that faith is produced by the interaction of a teachable man with the revelation of God:
 - 1. *"Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God"* (Rom 10:17).
 - 2. *"Having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever"* (1 Pet 1:23).
 - 3. Jesus said *"The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life"* (Jn 6:63). The disciples finally understood this, and they acknowledged that Jesus had the *"words of eternal life"* (Jn 6:68).
- C. No one questions that God makes faith possible; no one denies that without God man could not produce saving faith on his own. God is the one who delivered and preserved the Scriptures, and it is by His grace and power through His word that we can know His will and His terms for salvation.

2. The Conviction of Sin

- A. As indicated in the last lesson, there may be circumstances in life that shatter one's sense of independence or indifference toward God. But such a frame of mind is not faith; it is merely a *receptiveness* to truths about God that will ideally produce faith.
 - 1. Describe the inquiry of the rich young ruler about "eternal life" in Mt 19:16-22. How would you characterize his interest in spiritual things?
 - 2. Cite an example in the gospels of someone who came in contact with Jesus who had been made receptive to Him by some circumstance.
- B. But it is not until the receptive heart is instructed by the gospel that he fully learns of his sinfulness. Note what the Scriptures do in the heart of such a one:
 - 1. They inform him of God's expectations. Paul said, *"I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, 'You shall not covet'"* (Rom 7:7). What is Josiah's reaction to finding the book of the

Law (2 Chr 34:15, 19-21)? When one compares his life to the demands of the law of God, he truly sees himself as he is.

2. They inform him of the reality of coming judgment (2 Cor 5:10).
 3. They reveal the penalty of sin and the wrath of God to be revealed against sinners (Rom 2:5-10; 6:23).
 4. They tell of the life of Jesus and the purpose of His death: to provide every sinner with the opportunity to escape the wrath and judgment of God (Jn 20:30-31; 1 Jn 1:1-4). They tell of His resurrection from the dead, thus giving hope to all that they, too, may be victorious over death.
 5. They tell of the glory of God, the blessedness of eternal life, the love which God has for His creatures, the desire He has to forgive and His forbearance and longsuffering. But they also tell of God's holiness, justice, awareness of every sinful thought and intent, righteous anger toward rebellion and disobedience. *"Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God ..."* (Rom 11:22).
 6. They tell of the lives of men and women of faith that lived long ago, inspiring the same kind of lives in people who read and learn of genuine faith in God (Heb 11).
 7. They tell of the brevity and vanity of earthly life and the emptiness of living for the here and now. Our life here is a "vapor"; it is as fleeting as warm breath on a cold night. The Scriptures urge us to prepare for our eternal future and *"lay up treasures in heaven."*
- C. Thus, the Scriptures give us the ONLY reliable information to be had upon the earth of truths that instill saving faith within the heart of those who wish for reconciliation with God. **Question:** What does the "implanted word" do for us (Jas 1:21)?

3. The Importance of Teaching and Preaching

- A. It is also true that God's way has always been to use other human beings in the process of salvation unto their fellow men. This is not only true in religious matters, but it is also the case in secular education, awareness of news and current events, etc. We learn most of what we know, for good or bad, from others.
- B. The word of God, just lying on the coffee table of an unbeliever, is often powerless because Satan has thrown up many roadblocks. Belief rooted in the word of God is often fostered by the latent example and the overt teaching of the lost by those already saved.
- C. Thus, we cannot comfort ourselves by simply saying that men have Bibles or that the gospel is preached in our meeting houses. We must search for opportunities to speak to men, reason with them, convince them of the truth of the Scriptures. Unbelief must be challenged, for it will leave the lost satisfied with their erroneous conclusions and incomplete knowledge of God.

BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

LESSON 4: ESTABLISHING THE AUTHORITY OF GOD'S WORD

1. God's Will vs. Self Will

A. God's word can be objectively understood.

1. People in our society have come to believe that the Bible is ambiguous, that it says one thing to this person and something else to another. Any contrary notion can be dismissed by a sweep of the hand: "That's just the way *you* see it. I see it differently."
2. But Paul urged the Ephesians to "*not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is*" (Eph 5:17).
3. The NT revelation of God is often stated propositionally, in a way that rational minds can draw definite conclusions. One such admonition: "*Consider what I say, and may the Lord give you understanding in all things*" (2 Tim 2:7). Can you find a similar exhortation which indicates that the Scriptures can be rationally understood?

B. The emphasis upon the Holy Spirit.

1. There has been a strong push from charismatics to deemphasize the name of Jesus in favor of the Holy Spirit. Of course, their basic concept of the Holy Spirit is flawed as He is made into some vague force instead of a literal person of the godhead like the Father and Son.
2. But this serves the purpose of discounting the clear and plain statements of the Scriptures in favor of some inner feeling or impulse. Thus we occasionally hear people respond: "Well, I know that's what the Bible *says*, but I just *feel* that God is OK with the way I'm living my life."
3. When we cannot agree on a common standard to which we can appeal, attempts to bring people into harmony with the will of God will be fruitless.

C. Of course, there are yet others who openly state their disinterest and lack of respect for anything God says. We must shake the dust off our feet from these and move on.

2. Denigration of Obedience

- A. Our attempts to lead people to Christ out of denominational error is compounded by the influence of Calvinism relative to obedience. The "once saved, always saved" thrust of Calvinism has instilled within many an indifference toward the need to obey God's word. Some even overtly say that the Scriptures aren't meant to be literally followed.

B. To acknowledge Jesus as Savior is also to acknowledge Him as Lord. This is what Jesus says about our responsibility to Him as our Lord:

1. *“But why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do the things which I say?”* (Lk 6:46)
2. *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven ...”* (Mt. 7:21; cf. verses 22-23).
3. In rendering to man *“according to his deeds,”* God will give *“to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness – indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil ...”* (Rom 2:6, 8-9).

C. The connection between love and obedience is clear in the Scriptures. Yet it is common to hear someone profess their love for Christ yet discount the need to obey Him. Write the gist of the following passages and discuss how you would respond to someone that says they love God but don’t think it’s necessary to strictly obey His will:

1. Jn 14:21:
2. Jn 14:23:
3. Jn 14:24:

3. The Old Testament vs. the New Testament

A. Another basic challenge in establishing the authority of God’s word is the differentiation between the Old and New Testaments.

B. Consider the following observations about the Law of Moses:

1. It was given only to the Jews: Heb 8:8-9. The purpose was to preserve them as a distinct nation until the Messiah would enter the world through them.
2. It was preparatory: Gal 3:24-25. We are no longer under a tutor.
3. It could not ultimately provide forgiveness of sin: Heb 10:1-4.
4. To live under it was to be under a “curse”: Gal 3:10. But Christ has *“redeemed us from the curse of the law”* (Gal 3:13).
5. It was symbolic, a mere copy of heavenly things to come in Christ: Heb 8:5; 9:9, 23-24.
6. It is called a ministry of death and condemnation: 2 Cor 3:6-9.
7. To return to the Law is to fall from grace: Gal 5:1-4.

C. We must impress upon people that we live under the New Covenant of Jesus Christ, and the Old Law of Moses is now defunct. It is not our standard of authority in life and worship.

1. Jesus: The Focus of the Gospel Message

- A. The spiritual and moral problems plaguing society can appear to be so complex that the simple message of salvation seems inadequate. But the fundamental principles of the gospel appeal to the unchanging, core interests and motivations of man regardless of the state of his culture.
- B. Note and discuss the following statements of the aim of gospel preaching:
 - 1. Rom 1:16-17 – Describe Paul’s sentiments about the gospel and its power to save:
 - 2. 1 Cor 1:18-2:5 – How did the unbelieving Jews and Greeks view the crucifixion? What was Paul determined to preach among the Corinthians? How can faith end up being in the wisdom of men instead of the power of God?
 - 3. How does Paul summarize his preaching of the gospel in Corinth (1 Cor 15:1-8)?
- C. Read Eph 1:3-14 and write the phrases connected with “in Christ,” “in Him,” etc.

2. The Temptation to Change the Message

- A. It is undeniable that the last generation in our nation’s history has declined morally and spiritually even as our liberties and prosperity have increased. This has created a tension between a drifting society and its former mooring to Biblical standards.
- B. The tendency, therefore, has been for religious groups (who were not tightly bound to the authority of God’s word) to compromise, water down and otherwise minimize the clear teaching of the Scriptures.
 - 1. Clear and forceful presentation of the demands of God has given way to pop-psychology and other human-based, self-analyzing, feel-good messages.
 - 2. Expository preaching has yielded to story-telling, jokes, the preacher’s personal experiences, secular references and other non-Scriptural source material. Certain appeals to outside sources are acceptable for the purpose of illustrating a Bible principle or connecting with the audience, but the balance has shifted away from the Scriptures. Bible illiteracy is extreme even among so-called believers.
 - 3. Emphasis upon Jesus has been replaced by a focus upon the Holy Spirit. This has created a vagueness that leaves room for people to ignore Jesus in favor of their own will.

C. Perhaps these compromises have many causes:

1. A “marketplace” attitude of many churches. They see themselves in competition with other groups for membership and revenue. This has led to an abandonment of insightful, demanding teaching in favor of building schools, gymnasiums, theaters, restaurants and other sensual attractions that cater to society at large. Of course, this is all done under the umbrella of attracting people to teach.
2. Preachers who have lost sight of their purpose. Some have come to see preaching as a comfortable vocation, a “position” to maintain rather than a spiritual obligation to teach and warn. Others have transformed preaching into a “career” and have become “off-Broadway” entertainers, TV talk show hosts, marriage counselors, etc. Their popularity, and thus their revenue base, is maintained by a certain politically correct posture.
3. The difficulty of converting people solely on the basis of the simple gospel message. The sheer number of prospects in unlawful marriages is daunting. Having disregarded the word of God relative to the issues of marriage and eligibility, we encounter more and more people whose marriages are adulterous. This presents enormous pressure to find some way to accept such people, since there are very few who will extricate themselves from such arrangements in order to please God.

3. The Culling Purpose of the Gospel

- A. The strength of a church is not numerically determined. We cannot rate churches like Fortune 500 companies: revenue, growth index, diversification, etc. Granted, God would like to see every person obey for He *“desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”* (1 Tim 2:4). But this is not going to happen, and God knows it.
- B. The gospel is designed to appeal to and save *every person that wants to be saved on God’s terms*. Paul said his Jewish brethren had *“a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God”* (Rom 10:2-3). And so it is today. ***True preaching of the gospel identifies those who truly love and respect God, and differentiates them from those who have their own agenda.***
- C. If we change the gospel, if we soften it and smooth out its rough edges in order to make it more appealing and palatable, we have frustrated the purpose of God in having it preached. When the Jews of Antioch rejected the gospel as spoken by Paul, he said: *“since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles”* (Ac 13:46). Thus, the preaching of the gospel is not only to save believers but to clearly identify those who are rebellious to the will of God.
- D. We must be committed to preaching the truth regardless of the numerical impact that such creates. Preaching the gospel will not have equal results in every era or every society. We are to plant and water, but it is God who gives (or withholds) the increase (1 Cor 3:5-9).

BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

LESSON 6: BECOMING A DIFFERENT PERSON

1. The Death of the “Old Man”

A. Some people may go through outward motions of obedience without ever truly appreciating what it means to be a Christian. List three shallow, inadequate reasons for associating with a local church:

1.

2.

3.

B. But true conversion to Christ involves the “death” of what we were before, a complete turning away of values, lifestyles, motives and goals that estranged us from God. Comment on and discuss in class the following passages on this process of dying to the old:

1. Rom 6:2-6, 11 –

2. Gal 2:20; 5:24; 6:14 –

3. Col 3:3, 5 –

C. When we truly appreciate the futility and vanity of living apart from God, when we understand the pain and damage caused by sin to ourselves and others, we will seek deep and wholesale change in what we are.

2. Repentance and Conversion

A. The process of change in orientation to sin is called *repentance*. Repentance involves much more than simply regretting the bad things one has done; it is a positive change of mind and purpose away from sin and toward God and His will. Note:

1. Repentance is a universal command (Ac 17:30).

2. Repentance results in spiritual life, and the ability to affect such change is made possible by God (Ac 11:18).

3. Evidence of true repentance will be present in one’s works (Ac 26:20).

- B. A companion idea to repentance is *conversion*. Conversion literally means a turning; specifically, a turning toward God. We might say that repentance is a change of mind that leads to a turning toward God.
1. Jesus warned: “*Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven*” (Mt 18:3).
 2. The Thessalonians “*turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God*” (1 Th 1:9).
 3. Paul urged the Jews to “*repent ... and be converted that your sins may be blotted out*” (Ac 3:19).
- C. The power to help sinful men and women affect such change in their lives is, as we have seen earlier, the word of God. Our own willpower fails us in changing personal habits, schedules and other matters of self-improvement, but the Bible has transforming power, and in it we find new motivations and new goals in living acceptably before our Creator. God will help us change, but there is no promise that such change will come easily.

3. Spiritual Renewal

- A. When we have submitted to the terms and conditions of the gospel, having turned to God from our sin and rebellion, the life we then live for God is called a “new” life. We have the same body and brain, but our outlook and orientation is transformed. Discuss these verses:
1. 2 Cor 5:17 –
 2. Rom 6:4 –
 3. Rom 12:1-2; Eph 4:23-24 –
- B. Changes in our thinking, in our desires, and in our tendencies will not completely change overnight. Sinful habits are often developed and reinforced over years of repetitive behavior. Our “default” reaction may be lust, anger, envy, selfishness or some other sinful motivation. The new spiritual life is an ongoing effort to conform to the image of Christ (Eph 4:13, 15; Col 1:28) – a tall order and a never-ending challenge while living upon the earth.
- C. This wholesale change scares many people away from Christ. They are comfortable with who they are; they like their lifestyle; they are wary of change and uncertain of what kind of person they will become. Others will pressure the prospective Christian not to change or the new Christian to change back to what they were (cf. 1 Pet 4:4). Facing the need to change one’s fundamental identity takes courage and faith that God will assist and lead us in the right direction.

1. The Power of An Oral Confession

- A. In many aspects of life we recognize the power of oral commitments:
 - 1. The reciting of marriage vows.
 - 2. Stating our intent to tell the truth in a court of law.
 - 3. Pledging our allegiance to our flag and the “republic for which it stands.”
- B. It is one thing to hold private convictions; it is quite another to take a public stand and the consequences that come with it.
- C. Discuss Joseph of Arimathea and the kind of disciple he was (cf. Jn 19:38; Lk 23:50-52).

2. Confessing Christ Before the Cross

- A. John the Baptist “bore witness” and “testified” of the true identity of Jesus: Jn 1:29-34.
- B. The apostles gradually came to the realization of who Jesus was. Write what was said of Him in the following passages:
 - 1. Jn 1:41, 45 –
 - 2. Mt 8:27 –
 - 3. Mt 14:33 –
 - 4. Jn 6:68-69 –
 - 5. Mt 16:15-16 –
- C. As time went by and Jesus grew more popular, there was great pressure applied by the Jewish leaders not to confess Jesus. Comment briefly on these passages:
 - 1. Jn 9:22 –
 - 2. Jn 12:42-43 –
 - 3. Lk 22:31-34, 54-62 –

3. Verbal Confession Unto Salvation

- A. Who does Jesus say He will confess before His Father in heaven (Mt 10:32-33)? Who will He deny?
- B. What does Paul say confession will result in according to Rom 10:8-10? Where does such a confession originate? Are there people who will confess Christ with their mouth and still be lost (compare Mt 7:21-23 and Ac 19:13, 15-16)?

4. The Fuller Meaning of Confession

- A. Not merely “accepting Jesus as personal Savior.” Such a phrase, which makes salvation the result of a fleeting, mental act is nowhere found in the Scriptures.
- B. Not a “one time” act as merely a “step” on the way to the baptistery.
 - 1. True, saving faith is of such a degree that it will verbally confess Christ, and that faith must be present and expressed before genuine conversion occurs.
 - 2. But acknowledging the person and position of Christ doesn’t stop there; it is a disposition of heart that demands expression and confession throughout life.
- C. To acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, is also to admit His identity in every respect. We cannot merely have a “one-sided” view of Jesus and worship the side that suits our desires. Our confession obligates us to His whole being.
 - 1. As Lord, we must submit to Jesus and obey Him in everything (Heb 5:9).
 - 2. As Savior, we must live for Him and not for ourselves (2 Cor 5:15; 1 Cor 6:19-20).
 - 3. As Judge, we must prepare to answer to Him for our lives and work (2 Tim 4:1ff).
- D. Confessing Jesus as God’s Son and our Savior brings a heavy burden of responsibility, but it also brings joy and gladness that we have been brought to such faith, that we are offered opportunity for fellowship with Him, that we have purpose of life in serving Him and that through Him we have hope of eternity.

***May we never be ashamed to stand before one or many and tell our fellow man:
“I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God!”***

1. A Matter of Great Controversy

- A. I have long been convinced that any person of the simplest intelligence could read the New Testament, particularly the book of Acts, and without a prejudiced mind conclude that – for whatever reason (though the Bible explains it) – a person must be baptized to be saved.
- B. The source of the controversy does not lie in the vagueness or uncertainty of the Scriptures. It arises in the clash between God’s clearly stated will and man’s unwillingness to yield to it. This may be due to various causes such as doctrinal prejudice, family pressure or the failure of a loved one to be baptized before death.
- C. There are many erroneous assumptions about baptism – its purpose, mode, etc. – that could be easily corrected by a humble reading of the Scriptures.

2. What is NOT Said About Baptism in the Scriptures

- A. Baptism is not “an outward sign of an inward grace” or a symbolic act of salvation already granted to an individual.
- B. Baptism is not an act administered in a variety of ways; i.e., sprinkling, pouring upon. Both by definition and practice in the NT, it is an immersion, a complete dunking of the body.
- C. Baptism is not an act consecrating children or cleansing them from inborn sin.
- D. Baptism is not a work of man whereby he merits salvation from God.
- E. Baptism is not the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Christian. Such was a promised endowment that was unilaterally dispensed by God on only two occasions. The baptism in water that is connected with becoming a Christian is a command to be obeyed, and it is the only form of baptism valid in our day (“*one Lord, one faith, one baptism ...*” (Eph 4:5).

3. What IS Said About Baptism in the Scriptures

- A. Jesus: “*Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned*” (Mk 16:15-16).
 - 1. This is Jesus’ instruction to the apostles in making disciples by their preaching .
 - 2. Jesus clearly says belief coupled with (and expressed by) baptism results in salvation. The one who does not believe (and thus will refuse to be baptized, or do anything else commanded by the Lord via belief) will suffer condemnation.
 - 3. There is no logical ground for saying “But Jesus didn’t say we would be lost if we

weren't baptized." In fact, He said *precisely that* when He said, "*He who believes **and** is baptized will be saved.*" The inescapable conclusion of that statement is that refusal to be baptized results in failure to be saved (condemnation).

B. Paul: "*For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ*" (Gal 3:26-27). This passage is similar to Mk 16:16 in that faith (belief) and baptism are inextricably tied together.

1. Again, faith is the condition for salvation, and Jesus is the object of our faith. It is through faith "in Christ," not in anything or anyone but faith directed squarely at our Savior, that results in our becoming "sons of God."
2. But is faith purely a mental act devoid of any activity or expression? No, and Paul continues to explain *how* and *when* faith results in salvation. Salvation comes when one is "baptized into Christ," resulting in his "putting on Christ." Relation with Christ is established by baptism.
3. The Israelites were said to be "baptized into Moses" (1 Cor 10:1-2); i.e., brought under his leadership between themselves and Jehovah, when they passed together with him through the Red Sea. There was no relationship between any Israelite and God apart from the relationship God had with Moses. Moses was the only mediator; any Jew that stayed behind in Egypt or wandered off on his own through the Sinai desert was hopelessly on his own.

C. Peter: "*There is also an antitype which now saves us, namely baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ ...*" (1 Pet 3:21).

1. "Now saves us" is pretty hard to get around. Those who insist that baptism has nothing whatsoever to do with salvation attack the plain language of this passage. One can only have a "good conscience toward God" when that conscience is freed from sin. The only power capable of doing that is the blood of Christ: "*how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?*" (Heb 9:14).
2. The principle is that our submission to baptism, by faith, is the point in time at which our sins are forgiven by the sacrificial blood of Christ. Such cleansing actually removes the guilt of sin from our conscience, leaving us filled with joy and confidence in our relationship with God.
3. Note another OT connection: Peter makes this observation after speaking of the time when "*God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water*" (1 Pet 3:20). Those who ridicule baptism as "water salvation" need to consider this passage carefully.

D. Why should we be baptized? Because Jesus and His apostles commanded it and connected it with cleansing and salvation. And, as we shall see later in this study, this is what the first converts to Christ did as they were taught by the apostles and other evangelists.

BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

LESSON 9: THE FIRST DAY OF THE KINGDOM: PENTECOST

(**Note:** In the next twelve lessons we will study various evangelistic episodes in the book of Acts. Each episode will be examined in the following format: the **teacher**, the **audience**, the **message** and the **result**. Such a study should help us see how and why men were converted to Christ, and why some were not.)

Occasion: (*Acts 2*) *The Jewish feast of Pentecost, less than two months after Jesus has been executed. Jerusalem is flooded with Jews from all over the Roman Empire. Jesus has ascended to heaven just ten days before the feast. Messianic interest would still be at a fever pitch, especially since rumors were circulating that the tomb in which Jesus had been buried is now empty.*

1. The Teacher – Peter

A. Peter (and the other apostles, but Peter most prominently) had been promised the “keys of the kingdom” (Mt 16:19; cf. Mt 18:18). Those with keys provide or deny access.

1. The authority to provide access to the kingdom on the day of Pentecost was indicated by the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, again as Jesus had promised (cf. Lk 24:49; Ac 1:4-5, 8; 2:1-13).
2. All the apostles were involved in speaking “the wonderful works of God” in the various languages of those assembled (Ac 2:4, 6-7, 11). It is Peter, however, who is singled out to address the multitudes that had been drawn by the unusual events.

B. Peter’s courage.

1. At the trial of Jesus two months previously, Peter had succumbed to fear. He had denied being a follower of Jesus – or even knowing Him. Yet he now stands “with the eleven,” all of whom had either fled into the night or followed incognito when Jesus was arrested, and addresses a crowd of thousands.
2. What had occurred to give Peter such boldness? Note what happens in these passages:
 - a. Lk 24:34; 1 Cor 15:5 –
 - b. Lk 22:32 – What does “*when you have returned to Me*” imply?
 - c. Jn 21:15; Mt 28:19; Mk 16:15 –

C. There would have been no *human expectation* of a successful outcome on this occasion.

2. The Audience – Jews from around the Empire as well as local Jews

A. Jesus had spent more time in Jerusalem and especially teaching in the temple during the last six months of His life. Residents of Jerusalem and Judea would know Jesus person-

ally and by reputation. People from Galilee would know Him best of all. Those attending the feast from other parts of the Empire know something of Him through the “grapevine.”

B. Tell how Peter addresses his audience in the following verses:

1. Ac 2:14 –
2. Ac 2:22 –
3. Ac 2:29 –
4. Ac 2:36 –

C. Of what do they stand accused (Ac 2:23, 36)?

D. This is a generation of Jewish people that Jesus has called “faithless and perverse” (Mt 17:17), “wicked and adulterous” (Mt 16:4), “evil” (Mt 12:39), fickle children (Mt 11:16). He has rebuked their leaders as a “brood of vipers” (Mt 12:34; 23:33), hypocrites (Mt 23:13-16, 23, 25, 27, 29), blind guides and fools (Mt 23:16-17) and murderers (Mt 23:31-35). It is a doomed generation (Mt 23:36). The outcome on Pentecost looks bleak, indeed.

3. The Message

A. Historical background:

1. Peter explains the phenomena of the baptism with the Holy Spirit as the fulfillment of Joel’s ancient prophecies – Ac 2:14-21. The result of such an outpouring: “*whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*” (2:21).
2. The person and work of Christ – Ac 2:22-24. List what Peter says of Jesus:
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
 - d.
 - e.
3. Peter then connects the resurrection of Jesus with the prophecies of David – Ac 2:25-34.

B. Peter’s main assertions in this sermon:

1. God attested miraculously to Jesus’ claims – Ac 2:22.
2. The present Jewish generation was guilty of rejecting and executing Him – Ac 2:23, 36.

3. God raised Jesus from the dead; the tomb was empty – Ac 2:32.
 4. The apostles were eyewitnesses of the resurrection, and they were the ones demonstrating the powers of the Spirit (speaking in unstudied languages) to verify it – Ac 2:32.
 5. God raised Jesus up to “*sit on his (David’s) throne*” (Ac 2:30). Thus Jesus had been “*exalted to the right hand of God*” (Ac 2:33) and had been made “*both Lord and Christ*” (Ac 2:36). The proof: “*He poured out this which you now see and hear*” (Ac 2:33).
- C. Whatever else Peter might have intended to say, he is interrupted at this point by the crowd. They were “*cut to the heart*” (Ac 2:37); they were convicted of their guilt both by the words of Peter and by the miraculous evidence that backed up his assertions. In their anguish of heart, they wanted to know: “*what shall we do?*” Never was a more important question asked by human beings, and never was a more important answer given (Ac 2:38):
1. “*Repent*” – Change your mind from stubborn rebellion to what God has been doing among you and submit to His will and expectations.
 2. “*Let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ*” – This reflects the exact command given to the apostles by the Lord in Mt 28:19; Mk 16:15-16. This is not a continuation of John’s baptism, although he implemented a baptism of repentance. This is baptism commanded and authorized by Jesus, who now reigns in heaven.
 3. “*For the remission of sins*” – This clearly explains the role of baptism in connection with forgiveness. Note Peter’s words carefully: “*Repent, **and** ... be baptized **for** the remission of sins.*” If Peter is saying they are saved *before* baptism, he is also saying they have been saved *before* repentance. They had asked what to *do* about their guilt; Peter is telling them what to *do* in having the guilt removed. They are not to be baptized because their sins *are already forgiven* but *in order to have them remitted*. See the exact same construction in Mt 26:28 where Jesus’ blood is shed “*for the remission of sins*”; that is, *in order to remit them*, not to show that they were already forgiven.
 4. “*You shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*” – Contextually, this refers back to the benefit to come upon all who submit to these conditions of pardon: “*whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved*” (Ac 2:21). The benefits of salvation are far more encompassing than the remission of sins. Also involved are the rights of prayer and worship, the protection of God, the benefits of local fellowship, etc.

4. The Result

- A. “*Then those who gladly heard his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them*” (Ac 2:41).
- B. Undoubtedly, there were many others who did not respond favorably, but the focus is upon these who first complied with the conditions of pardon under the New Covenant.
- C. Thus the kingdom begins in the very city of the Messiah’s rejection and encompasses some of the very people responsible for His death. The gospel is “good news,” indeed!

BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

LESSON 10: EARLY GROWTH OF THE KINGDOM IN JERUSALEM

Occasion: (*Acts 3:11-26; 4:4, 33; 5:12-16; 6:7*) Following Pentecost, converts to Christianity were made at a rapid pace. The three thousand on Pentecost were soon joined by thousands of others who heard the same message of salvation and were moved by it.

1. The Teachers – Apostles

- A. Though all the apostles continued to be involved in teaching, when one is singled out in these early times it is usually Peter. They are now fully engaged in the “fishing for men” to which Jesus called them 2-3 years earlier (Lk 5:10).
- B. These were men who were, by the world’s standards, ill-equipped and unqualified to begin a world-changing religious movement. They were not of classic Greek or Jewish education; they were not men of wealth; they were not men of charisma and rhetoric; they were not soldiers or shrewd politicians.
- C. They were, however, both inspired of God in the content of their teaching, and the authority of heaven substantiated their words by miracles. List the miracles in this section:
 - 1. Ac 3:1-10 –
 - 2. Ac 5:12, 15-16 –
 - 3. Ac 5:19 –

2. The Audience – Jews in Jerusalem

- A. After Peter and John healed the lame man, “*all the people ran together to them in the porch which is called Solomon’s, greatly amazed*” (Ac 3:11). This is in the temple, at the hour of prayer (3:00 pm; Ac 3:1). This leads to a short address to:
 - 1. “Men of Israel” – Ac 3:12.
 - 2. “You who delivered up and denied” Jesus – Ac 3:13.
 - 3. “You ... asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life” – 3:14-15. Peter holds his audience directly responsible for the murder of Jesus. Perhaps some of the Jewish leaders were actually in the audience, or maybe Peter is holding the populace responsible for caving in to the evil hierarchy. At any rate, Peter certainly does not buy into modern psychological theory of winning people by speaking “positive” messages and stroking their ego. He tells them the blunt, brutal truth.
- B. Little else is said particularly about the people hearing the preaching. Luke notes that “*a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem*” (Ac 5:16), and he also notes that “*a great many of the priests*” were converted (Ac 6:7).

C. God is fulfilling His promise that to the Jews “first” the gospel would be presented, and so the initial focus of preaching is upon Jerusalem and Judea (Ac 3:26; 13:46; Rom 1:16).

3. The Message

A. In analyzing Peter’s sermon in Ac 3:11-26, note what he says on the following themes:

1. The description of God – Ac 3:13, 25:
2. The description of Jesus – Ac 3:13-15, 26:
3. The power to heal the lame man – Ac 3:12, 16:
4. The Old Testament prophets – Ac 3:18, 21-24:

B. Peter then calls upon them to “*repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out ...*” (Ac 3:19). The whole purpose of Jesus coming was that the Jews might be blessed “*in turning away every one of you from your iniquities*” (Ac 3:26).

C. Other references to the specific content of the preaching at this time are scarce. Note:

1. “*With great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus*” (Ac 4:33).
2. The term “the faith” is used in Ac 6:7 to describe the body of teaching advanced by the apostles (cf. “apostles’ doctrine,” Ac 2:42). This is teaching of God’s word (Ac 6:2, 4) that initiates faith in the hearer and promotes continual faith as life progresses.
3. Some may wonder why Peter didn’t specifically tell the people in Ac 3 to be baptized as he did in Ac 2. Whether recorded or not, there is no reason to believe he omitted this or told them otherwise. We do not have a “five-step formula” being recorded every time someone obeys the gospel. Once the terms are understood, there is no need to recount them with every instance of obedience. (Note: Neither does he specifically tell them to believe, though that is certainly what he is calling upon them to do.)

4. The Result – Describe the response to this early preaching from the following verses. When does Luke stop counting the number of converts in Jerusalem?

A. Ac 4:4 –

B. Ac 5:14 –

C. Ac 6:7 –

BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

LESSON 11: EARLY OPPOSITION TO THE GROWTH OF THE KINGDOM

Occasion: (*Acts 4:1-31; 5:17-42*) As it began to dawn upon the Jewish leadership that the murder of Jesus of Nazareth didn't stamp out His influence, they began their harassment of the apostles. Imprisonment, threats and corporal punishment all follow, but to no avail. The apostles steadily maintain their course as mapped out by the Lord.

1. The Teachers – Peter, John and the Other Apostles

- A. Peter and John were initially apprehended because they healed the lame man and continued to teach in the temple (cf. 4:13).
- B. In the second arrest, “the apostles” are put in the common prison (Ac 5:18). After their release by the angel, “*they entered the temple early in the morning and taught*” (Ac 5:21; cf. 5:25). “*Peter and the other apostles*” (5:29) then answer the charges brought against them.
- C. These arrests partially fulfill the warnings Jesus had given earlier. Note what is said in the following passages:
 - 1. Mt 10:16-18 –
 - 2. Jn 16:2-4 –

2. The Audience – The Jewish Sanhedrin

- A. The first arrest is arranged by the priests and Sadducees (Ac 4:1). These are the ones who had control of the temple and its activities, and they take great offense that these men are usurping their authority. Further, they were “*greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead*” (Ac 4:2). The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection (Ac 23:8).
- B. They are called to give their defense to “*their rulers, elders, and scribes, as well as Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the family of the high priest*” (Ac 4:5-6). The leaders represent the Sanhedrin Council, the highest court of the Israelite nation (cf. Ac 4:15). These were the very ones that had engineered the execution of Jesus, and there is no reason to believe they will do less to these men who are withstanding their authority.
- C. List those involved in the second arrest from the following verses: Ac 5:17, 21, 27, 34:

3. The Message

- A. The exchanges between the apostles and the Council had more to do with authority than

with a straight sermon per se. The Sanhedrin is highly offended that these men are teaching contrary to their orthodox traditions, and they have resisted the Council's authority.

B. Their opening question: "*By what power or by what name have you done this?*" (Ac 4:7). This has intrigued them before (cf. Mt 21:23). Peter's answer is brief, but full:

1. The "crime" for which we are being accused was a good deed – Ac 4:9.
2. The man was healed by the "name," or by the authority of, Jesus, the very one whom they had killed but whom God had raised – Ac 4:10.
3. In so doing the Jewish leaders had fulfilled the prophecy that the Messiah would be rejected but made the "chief cornerstone" by God – Ac 4:11; quoting Ps 118:22.
4. Salvation is wholly invested in the name of Jesus, not in the names of any of the great Jewish teachers of the day (Gamaliel, Hillel or Shammai) or even Moses – Ac 4:12.
5. They insist that, threats notwithstanding, they are committed to speaking "*the things which we have seen and heard*" (Ac 4:19-20).

C. In the second hearing Peter again states their intention to "*obey God rather than men*" (Ac 5:29). He then reiterates the same foundational themes he has preached before:

1. "*The God of our fathers,*" i.e., Jehovah, the God of antiquity whom Israel has served, has raised up Jesus whom they murdered – Ac 5:30.
2. God exalted Jesus to His right hand as Prince and Savior in order to offer the opportunity of repentance and forgiveness to Israel – 5:31.
3. Peter and the others are witnesses, and the Holy Spirit is also bearing witness to these truths. In saying that the Holy Spirit had been given to "*those who obey Him,*" Peter is in a backhanded way indicting the Jewish leaders of being disobedient, because the apostles were clearly the ones who had been granted the powers of the Spirit, not them.

4. The Result – The same men doing the same works and preaching the same message don't always enjoy the same results. The Jewish leaders remain stubbornly resistant to the miracles, the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and to the good news of the gospel.

A. Describe the Jews' behavior at the first arrest – Ac 4:15-18, 21:

B. How does the Sanhedrin respond to the apostles continued defiance? – Ac 5:17, 28, 33, 40:

C. For what do the apostles pray after their first release – Ac 4:23-31:

D. Describe the reaction of the apostles after their second hearing – Ac 5:41-42:

BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

LESSON 12: THE GOSPEL COMES TO SAMARIA

Occasion: (*Acts 8:1-25*) *Simmering resentment finally exploded into intense persecution against the church in Jerusalem. As brethren were forced from the capital city into the cities and towns of Judea and Samaria, they took the gospel with them. One of those preachers, Philip, has great success in Samaria and leads a whole city to Christ.*

1. The Teacher – Philip

- A. Philip was introduced in Ac 6:5 as a special servant of the church. He was selected on the basis of a good reputation and was full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom (Ac 6:3).
- B. These seven men had the apostles' hands laid on them, not only consecrating them to this service but imparting miracle-working power to them.
 - 1. This is evidenced in the case of Stephen, who is the first besides the apostles to work miracles in the kingdom (Ac 6:8).
 - 2. Philip was given miraculous ability also, for "*the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did*" (Ac 8:6).
 - 3. The connection between such miracles and their impartation by an apostle will be clearly explained in Ac 8.
- C. Comment on the courage of Philip to undertake such a challenge.

2. The Audience – Samaritans

- A. Jesus had found some Samaritans who were interested in spiritual things (Jn 4). They knew the Law of Moses somewhat, but their knowledge was mixed with erroneous doctrines and superstitions. Who was Simon and what influence did he have in Samaria (Ac 8:9-11)?
- B. What kinds of things plagued the people of Samaria (Ac 8:7)?

3. The Message

- A. Luke notes that "*those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word*" (Ac 8:4).
 - 1. Philip went to Samaria and "*preached Christ*" to them – Ac 8:5.
 - 2. He also "*preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ*" – Ac 8:12.
 - 3. Luke notes the apostles "*heard that Samaria had received the word of God*" – Ac 8:14.

- B. We should pay careful attention to the fact that apostolic preaching, and now the teaching of others besides apostles, rests squarely upon the person and teaching of Jesus. These men did not employ gimmicks, secular “bait,” humanitarian projects or other appeals to the flesh in order to attract people. They simply preached about Jesus, who He was and what He meant. Those who are truly hungry in spirit will hear and respond.
- C. The role of the miracles: Philip did not try to convert people to miracles but to Jesus. It was necessary in these early days to provide oral spokesmen (no written NT yet!) with credentials, especially where a man like Simon held such sway through deception.

4. The Result

- A. The genuine sparkled against the backdrop of the counterfeit: 1) “*The multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip*” (Ac 8:6); 2) “*They believed Philip as he preached ...*” (Ac 8:12); 3) Even “*Simon himself also believed*”(Ac 8:13).
- B. Then, consistently with previous teaching and example:
 - 1. “*But when they believed ... both men and women were baptized*” – 8:12.
 - 2. “*Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized ...*” – Ac 8:13.
 - 3. The implication is clear: to “preach the word,” “preach Christ,” “preach the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” is to instruct people on what to do when they believe and wish to devote themselves to God. They were taught to be baptized, just as those in Jerusalem were, because this is what the Lord commanded.
- C. The Samaritans’ misplaced confidence in Simon and their subsequent enslavement to him is replaced by physical healing and spiritual liberty. Little wonder that “*there was great joy in that city*” (Ac 8:8).

5. Is Something Missing in the Samaritans’ Faith?

- A. Peter and John, apostles of Christ, visit these new Christians and “*prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit*” (Ac 8:15). Luke further notes, “*For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus*” (Ac 8:16). Is their faith incomplete? Do they need some sort of endowment to be saved?
- B. The only thing that is missing in Samaria are men who can do what Philip had been doing. He is soon to be sent to other endeavors, and the apostles will remain in Jerusalem for the foreseeable future. In the absence of written instruction, the Samaritans will need someone who can continue to teach them the will of God and exhort them to faithfulness.
- C. This can be provided through someone who has special gifts of the Spirit, like Philip and Stephen had (cf. Ac 6:8). Luke now gives more detail on how this is done, whereas he had only briefly mentioned it:

1. When Philip, Stephen and the others had been chosen to serve, the apostles “*laid hands on them*” (Ac 6:6). We immediately begin seeing Stephen work miracles (Ac 6:8), the first time in Acts that someone other than an apostle did so.
2. We then read of Philip working miracles (Ac 8:6-7, 13).
3. Now Luke explains how this miracle-working power comes upon a believer: “*Then they (the apostles, Peter and John) laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit*” (Ac 8:17). This is something Philip could not do; it required the presence and the physical touch of an apostle.
4. What does Simon attempt when he sees such great power demonstrated (Ac 8:18-19)? What response does he get from Peter?

D. Several conclusions can be drawn from this episode:

1. There was nothing deficient in the Samaritans’ faith or salvation. Once they obeyed the preaching of Philip, their sins were forgiven and their relationship with God restored.
2. The only thing they lacked was a source of teaching to further confirm and establish them in the future. This was provided by the visit of Peter and John.
3. This passage is definitive as to the *method* of receiving spiritual gifts. It is the only text in the NT where the method of transmission is explicitly set forth. No amount of prayer would achieve it; no amount of money could buy it. It was a “gift” of God (Ac 8:20); it was not for sale. And God had determined that only apostles could endow someone with such power. Such was a part of their “binding and loosing” authority.
4. In the absence of the apostles today, and with the revelation of God being fully written and available, such miraculous gifts cannot be possessed in the present generation.
5. Men who claim to be “faith healers” and to work other kinds of miracles are in the mold of Simon the sorcerer, not Simon Peter. They deceive the multitudes by claiming powers God had reserved for these early days of His kingdom.

BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

LESSON 13: THE GOSPEL IS INTRODUCED TO AFRICA

Occasion: (*Acts 8:26-40*) Not only do we receive instruction from Luke as to how men and women came to Christ, we are also seeing how the gospel gradually spread from Jerusalem throughout the Roman Empire. We now turn to the conversion story of an important though unnamed man, the treasurer of the Ethiopian queen, Candace.

1. The Teacher – Philip

- A. Philip's job in Samaria is complete, and now the Lord can use him elsewhere. Note the willingness of Philip to travel wherever he is needed.
- B. The role of the angel (Ac 8:26). We must be very careful not to overly generalize or make assumptions without warrant. These were special times, and because of the uniqueness of the events (heaven's establishment of a "*kingdom which shall never be destroyed*" (Dn 2: 44) God used methods that were not destined to continue.
 - 1. This is similar to the inauguration of the covenant with Israel where God manifested Himself in unique ways in Egypt and at Mt. Sinai. Such displays would not continue.
 - 2. At a time when converts were few and written revelation was non-existent, God used miraculous means to connect a preacher with a seeker.
 - 3. Note this point carefully: *the angel does not appear to the sinner and tell him what to do*. Rather, his main goal is merely to instruct the preacher on how to make contact with the prospective Christian.
- C. The role of the Spirit (Ac 8:29). Similarly, the Holy Spirit does not communicate with the Ethiopian; He merely identifies the particular chariot that contains the potential convert. God's plan is clear: He has no intention of direct communication with sinners in order to instruct them in the way of salvation. This is to be done by those who have already come to recognize Jesus as their Savior.

2. The Audience – The Ethiopian Treasurer

- A. How would you describe this man relative to his background and spiritual interests? Comment on his purpose in going to Jerusalem, his position and what he is doing as he travels.
- B. The man is struggling to understand a passage from the OT (Is 53:7-8; cf. Ac 8:30-34). This is a prophetic passage that describes the atoning death of the coming Messiah (written about 700 years before Jesus was born).
- C. Note that no miracle is necessary where a man has genuine interest in finding truth. The treasurer was not a skeptic, deluded or otherwise resistant. He was open to teaching.

3. The Message

- A. *“Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him”* (Ac 8:35).
- B. While the words of God are not unduly obscure, ambiguous or complex, it is still often necessary to be instructed by those who are mature in faith and skilled in the proper application of Scripture.
 - 1. This is not a “fault” of the revelation of God, any more than it is the “fault” of a mathematics textbook to fail to instruct a student without benefit of a teacher.
 - 2. The “fault,” if it really is one, lies in the slowness of the human being to comprehend foreign concepts and reorient his thinking to new truths.
- C. Philip instructed the Ethiopian man on how Jesus fulfilled the passage in Isaiah, and he undoubtedly continued to explain many facts and details about Jesus previously noted by Luke in the book of Acts.

4. The Result

- A. Thus far in Acts, no one has specifically requested baptism but the treasurer says, *“See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?”* (Ac 8:36). How did the treasurer know to make such a request, and why did he think it to be so urgent as to interrupt his trip at that moment?
 - 1. The only reasonable response is that Philip included baptism as he *“preached Jesus.”*
 - 2. But why would he do that? Because it was Jesus, Himself, who said, *“He who believes and is baptized will be saved”* (Mk 16:16), and it was Jesus who commanded the apostles to *“make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”* and to teach new disciples *“to observe all things that I have commanded you ...”* (Mt 28:20).
 - 3. This content of Philip’s preaching and the request of the treasurer is totally in harmony with what we have learned thus far in Acts about conversion to Christ. It stands at odds with the way modern denominations downplay baptism into near irrelevance.
- B. Though the authenticity of Ac 8:37 is debated, neither its presence or absence detracts from the narrative. It is obvious that baptism rests upon the foundation of genuine belief in God, and apart from that belief baptism is nothing more than a good dousing.
- C. Describe the reaction of the treasurer after Philip baptizes him (Ac 8:39).

5. A Note on the “Mode” of Baptism

- A. Nothing has been said up to this point in Acts about the mode or procedure of baptism. There has been much controversy over what constitutes true baptism. But this episode

involving the conversion of the treasurer gives us a helpful clue.

B. Luke says: “*And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. Now when they came up out of the water ...*” (Ac 8:38-39).

1. This is consistent with the baptism of John: “*Then Jesus, when He had been baptized, came up immediately from the water ...*” (Mt 3:16).

2. Further, “*John was also baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there*” (Jn 3:23).

3. Would mere sprinkling or pouring water over the head explain these references?

C. The clearest evidence, though, as to the mode of baptism involves the very definition of the word.

1. W.E. Vine: “consisting of the processes of immersion, submersion and emergence (from *bapto*, to dip), is used (a) of John’s baptism, (b) of Christian baptism ... (c) of the overwhelming afflictions and judgments to which the Lord voluntarily submitted on the Cross ...” (Vol. 1, p. 96-97).

2. This is why baptism in water is a fitting symbol for the old man of sin dying and being buried, allowing the new man to rise to “*walk in newness of life*” (Rom 6:4). Just as “burial” is not accomplished by a mere sprinkling or pouring of dirt, so baptism is not accomplished by a ceremonial touch of water on the forehead or a sprinkling from a holy vessel.

3. Why does this matter anyway? Because it is the tendency of man to take liberties with the word of God and gradually move away from His commandments toward our own will and desires. Those who respect the inspired preaching of the gospel and the examples of what early men did to become Christians will not chafe at the command of God and the beautiful symbolism of baptism with the burial and resurrection of Christ.

BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

LESSON 14: THE CONVERSION OF SAUL OF TARSUS

Occasion: (*Acts 9:1-22; 22:4-16; 26:12-20*) As the pressure of persecution became severe against the fledgling kingdom, an unusual turn of events occurs. Saul of Tarsus, the most zealous and dangerous enemy of Christianity, is converted. Because we are first introduced to the one who needs conversion, Saul, we will alter our study and consider him first, then the teacher.

1. The Audience – Saul of Tarsus

A. The direct involvement of Jesus.

1. Because this particular convert will also be made an apostle, and because Saul (we will refer to him as Paul from hereon) was greatly feared by Christians due to his persecutions, it was necessary for Jesus to intervene directly (cf. Ac 26:16).
2. Note, however, that Jesus' involvement did not change the general pattern or requirements of others who were converted unto Jesus. *Jesus did not tell Paul the conditions for salvation, and He did not tell him at any time that he was already saved.*
3. If Paul had been given preferential treatment or if the necessity to obey like all others was waived, what an unfortunate precedent would be set for those in the future who wished to circumvent the commands of God. Remember the example of Jesus: *Even He was baptized "to fulfill all righteousness,"* even though John's baptism of repentance was for sinners (cf. Mt 3:13-17).

B. Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus:

1. Tell of the first events of the encounter: Ac 9:3-5.
2. Paul has been stunned by the revelation of his guilt, much as the Jews on Pentecost were shocked. Men so moved normally ask a similar question: "*Lord, what do You want me to do?*" (Ac 9:6; cf. Ac 2:37)
3. What Jesus *doesn't* say to Paul is perhaps as instructive as what He says, given the false ideas about salvation that abound today:
 - a. He DOESN'T SAY: "Paul, there's nothing you can do, for you are wholly depraved and thus unable to respond in any constructive way."
 - b. He DOESN'T SAY: "Paul, there's nothing you can do, for if you do anything it will be a work, and works are completely at odds with grace."
 - c. He DOESN'T SAY: "Paul, you don't have to do anything, for you are saved already."
4. What DOES Jesus tell Paul to do?

- C. From the following verses, tell what Paul did for the next three days: Ac 9:8-9, 11. What would you say about his attitude toward Jesus at this point?

2. The Teacher – Ananias

- A. Ananias is a new name in Acts. What do we know of him?

1. Luke does not tell how he came to be in Damascus. His knowledge of Paul's persecution against the church in Jerusalem is hearsay (Ac 9:13), so if he lived or was converted in Jerusalem he left before this period began.
2. Luke calls him "a certain disciple" (Ac 9:10). The Lord knows him by name, as He does all of His brethren. Ananias is responsive to the address of the Lord.
3. Paul later calls Ananias "*a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there*" (Ac 22:12).

- B. Just as the angel and the Holy Spirit directed Philip to the Ethiopian treasurer's chariot, so Jesus directs Ananias to Paul (Ac 9:11). He also tells Ananias that Paul has been given a vision of Ananias coming to him (Ac 9:12).

1. Why does Ananias resist the Lord's instructions (Ac 9:13-14)?
2. How does Jesus further urge Ananias to go to Paul (Ac 9:15-16)?

- C. "*And Ananias went his way and entered the house ...*" (Ac 9:17). Ananias, like the apostles, was not without concern for his safety. Yet as they had sought for boldness to speak (Ac 4:29), so Ananias found the boldness he needed to approach Paul.

3. The Message

- A. There is little recorded of the conversation between Ananias and Paul. Actually, nothing is recorded of Paul's words; only Ananias'. But what is said is very important.

1. "*Brother Saul ...*" (Ac 9:17; 22:13). Some conclude from this that Ananias recognizes Paul already as a brother in Christ. But remember, these men are both devout Jews, and such would have been a natural greeting between fellow Israelites. Other things are said that will help us determine when Paul actually became a "brother" in the faith.
2. "*The Lord Jesus ... has sent me*" (Ac 9:17). Ananias gives further evidence to Paul of the divine origin of these events, for Ananias knows not only that Jesus appeared to Paul but also knows something of the commission given to him (cf. Ac 22:14-15).
3. "*That you may receive your sight*" (Ac 9:17). This occurs immediately (Ac 9:18; 22:13).
4. "*And be filled with the Holy Spirit*" (Ac 9:17). This cannot refer to the impartation of miraculous gifts, for only an apostle can do that and Ananias is not an apostle (Ac 8:18).

Neither is it the baptism of the Holy Spirit, for a human agent was not involved in bestowing the Spirit in this process (Ac 2:1-4). The events that transpire next can be defined as being “filled with the Holy Spirit.”

- B. Paul later testifies that Ananias then said to him: “*And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord*” (Ac 22:16).
- C. Again, this is not a new command, for we have seen it previously in conversion stories. Neither is Paul given an exemption because he is being made an apostle. It is clear that baptism was crucial to Paul’s obedience, and Paul does not even attend to the needs of his body after three days of fasting before being baptized (Ac 9:19).

4. The Result

- A. “*And he arose and was baptized*” (Ac 9:18). The immediate and crucial need for Paul to obey in this manner is made clear by the following evidences:
 - 1. Ananias explained that in being baptized, Paul’s sins would be washed away. After three days of prayer, fasting, contemplation and receiving a vision, nothing has suggested to Paul that his sins were *already* forgiven. Ananias did not lead him to believe that they were already forgiven. There is no basis to conclude that Paul’s sins were forgiven *before* his baptism.
 - 2. Ananias explained that in being baptized, Paul would be “calling on the name of the Lord.” While some want to circumvent baptism by making this a verbal calling on the Lord’s name for salvation, the phrase “calling on the name of the Lord” is a genuine appeal to do whatever is necessary to gain God’s favor. Peter’s quote of Joel includes this phrase (Ac 2:21), and when the audience asked what to do (Ac 2:37), Peter told them the same thing that Ananias told Paul.
 - 3. If a defector “called upon the name of the government” for asylum, such a call would not preclude going through official channels and complying with the rules and regulations about taking up residence in the U.S. or eventually becoming a citizen. We must appeal to God for salvation according to the conditions that He, Himself, placed upon receiving that salvation.
- B. The fact that Ananias was sent “*that you may receive your sight **and** be filled with the Holy Spirit,*” and the fact that Paul’s vision was immediately restored and he then was immediately baptized, indicates that there is a direct connection with being baptized and being filled with the Spirit. Whereas before his conversion Paul was “filled with Moses,” i.e., was devoted to the Law and wholly motivated to honor Moses and defend him against all adversaries, so now he would be “filled with the Holy Spirit.” His allegiance, his orientation, his whole framework of life would be dictated by the direction of the Holy Spirit, to whom he yielded at his conversion to Jesus Christ.
- C. This new orientation is evidenced by the immediate changes that occurred in Paul’s life (cf. Ac 9:20-22).

BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

LESSON 15: CORNELIUS: THE FIRST GENTILE CONVERT

Occasion: (*Acts 10:1-11:18*) Luke's next conversion story in Acts represents a new phase of kingdom expansion: the gospel is now broadened to Gentile audiences. Again, since the audience is introduced first, we will take note of Cornelius first, then Peter as his teacher.

1. The Audience – Cornelius

A. The character of Cornelius – Ac 10:1-2, 22, 30-31.

1. He is devout – Ac 10:2. W.E. Vine defines this word as “signifying sacred awe, describes reverence exhibited especially in actions, reverence or awe well directed ... In the N.T. it is used of a pious attitude towards God” (Vol. 1, p. 308).

2. He is just – Ac 10:22. Cornelius tried to do that which was right. He was not satisfied with a life of shallow religious piety but conformed to righteous behavior.

3. How does Cornelius demonstrate his devout attitude?

a.

b.

c.

B. The rest of this story is predicated upon the following observation: in spite of Cornelius' reverent attitude toward God, he is not yet saved. His works have not reconciled him to God. He yet needs the gospel, for it contains knowledge of God's sacrifice for sin and the conditions which one must fulfill in order to receive the benefits therefrom.

1. In a vision, an angel appears to Cornelius who addresses him by name – Ac 10:3.

2. The angel commends Cornelius for his piety – Ac 10:4, 31.

3. Instruction is then given for Cornelius to summon Peter, who is in the city of Joppa, about 30 miles south – Ac 10:5-6, 32. The angel says of Peter, “*He will tell you what you must do*” (Ac 10:6). When Peter retells this story in Jerusalem, he is more specific. The angel had told Cornelius to send for Peter “*who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved*” (Ac 11:14).

C. This is consistent with what we have seen before in reference to conversions. God never bypassed human agency and told men directly how to be saved, whether by an angel, the Holy Spirit or Jesus, Himself.

D. So intent is Cornelius on learning the will of God further that he gathers his household to hear what Peter has to say (Ac 10:24).

2. The Teacher – Peter

A. When we last saw Philip, he had come to the city of Caesarea (Ac 8:40). We might wonder why Peter was summoned from Joppa when Philip was in the city with Cornelius.

1. Since Peter was a Jew, and there were great prejudices between Jews and Gentiles, and since the Gentiles had not yet been afforded entrance into the kingdom, it was going to take someone of significant spiritual stature to handle this controversial assignment.
2. Too, it was to Peter that the keys of the kingdom had been given, and as he exercised them initially on Pentecost for the sake of the Jews, so now he would use them to open the kingdom to the Gentiles.
3. It was Peter, himself, who prophesied of this occasion: “*For the promise is to you and to your children (Jews), and to all who are afar off (Gentiles), as many as the Lord our God will call*” (Ac 2:39). Perhaps Peter had not fully understood the import of this prophecy, for it took some persuasion in order to convince him to go to Cornelius’ house.

B. Briefly describe how God persuaded Peter to go with the servants of Cornelius:

1. The vision of the sheet (Ac 10:11-16):
2. The instruction of the Spirit (Ac 10:19-20):
3. Peter later indicates that he drew the proper conclusions from the instruction given to him, for he says: “*God has shown me that I should not call any **man** common or unclean. Therefore I came without objection as soon as I was sent for*” (Ac 10:28-29).

C. Peter travels to Caesarea, taking with him six other brethren to confirm the events (Ac 10:23; 11:12). When Peter arrives, what well-intentioned mistake does Cornelius make toward him?

3. The Message

A. One can only imagine how much Peter might want to explain to this inquisitive Gentile! But he only speaks briefly before being interrupted (cf. Ac 10:15 – “*as I began to speak*”).

1. Peter now fully appreciates the universal nature of the kingdom – Ac 10:34-35.
2. He gives a very brief history of the prophet John and Jesus, indicating their familiarity with the events which had transpired (“*that word you know*” – Ac 10:37) – Ac 10:36-41.
3. He speaks of the eyewitness role of the apostles and the charge they had received to preach the coming judgment (Ac 10:39, 41-42).
4. When Peter mentions the remission of sins via Jesus, an unprecedented event occurs:

B. “*The Holy Spirit fell upon those who heard*” (Ac 10:44). How shall we understand this event? What are the implications? Is Cornelius saved by this action or before it? We cannot accurately understand it without Peter’s own explanation of its meaning (Ac 11:15-17). Note especially how Peter ties the events at Cornelius’ house with events that occurred on Pentecost, not with the normal instances of conversion that he had seen since then.

1. “*The Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning*” (Ac 11:15).
2. Peter then says the events brought to mind Jesus’ promise to the apostles about being baptized with the Holy Spirit (Ac 11:16).
3. He says “*God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed ...*” (Ac 11:17).
4. As the apostles had magnified God in unstudied languages when the Holy Spirit came upon them (Ac 2:11), so did Cornelius and those with him (Ac 10:46).
5. Just as the baptism of the Spirit had come upon the apostles unsolicited and by the unilateral decision of God, so it had happened to Cornelius. There is no foundation for someone praying for the Holy Spirit to come upon them or for thinking that some miraculous endowment of the Spirit is to be given to a Christian after his salvation.

C. Peter, the teacher, is now being taught. He and his Jewish brethren need to be fully persuaded that the Gentiles are to be included in the kingdom of God on equal terms and with full benefits as the Jews.

1. His explanation is offered after being “called on the carpet” in Jerusalem for eating with uncircumcised men (Ac 11:3).
2. He explains to his critical brethren after reviewing the facts: “*Who was I that I could withstand God?*” (Ac 11:17). Peter understood that the events in Caesarea were God’s stamp of approval upon the Gentiles, an unmistakable sign from heaven to convince the “unbelievers” (in this case Jewish Christians who yet didn’t believe that Gentiles would be equal heirs of the kingdom) that the events transpiring were from heaven. The very public outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost was to convince those outside of Christ that God’s stamp of approval was upon the apostles and the message they preached.
3. So, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit does not save Cornelius, is not an indicator that he is already saved and is no substitute for baptism. Remember, Peter was to speak “*words by which you and all your household will be saved*” (Ac 11:14).

4. The Result

- A. “*Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?*” (Ac 10:47). “*And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord*” (Ac 10:48), just as he did the lost Jews on Pentecost (Ac 2:38).
- B. The conclusion in Jerusalem after all was said and done: “*Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life*” (Ac 11:18; cf. Ac 5:31 – “*give repentance to Israel*”).

BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

LESSON 16: REACTIONS TO THE GOSPEL IN ANTIOCH OF PISIDIA

Occasion: (*Acts 13:13-52*) *The remainder of Acts focuses upon the work of Paul as he doggedly and untiringly travels across the Empire taking the gospel to the Gentiles. While on a preaching tour of Asia Minor, Paul and Barnabas come to Antioch in Pisidia, where the gospel gets a mixed reception.*

1. The Teacher – Paul

- A. It has been perhaps ten years or more since Paul was converted. He is finally taking his first steps on the great apostolic mission for which the Lord has called him.
- B. Paul and Barnabas have been appointed unto this work by the Holy Spirit (Ac 13:2), and they had sailed from Antioch in Syria to Cyprus where they preached in synagogues throughout the island (Ac 13:5-6).

2. The Audience – Jews and Gentiles in Pisidian Antioch

- A. As was their custom, Paul goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath (Ac 13:14). Assembled are “*men of Israel, and you who fear God*” (Ac 13:16, 42-43); i.e., there were Gentiles present who, like Cornelius, had an affinity for the Jews and their God.
- B. This is an example of the preparatory work God had done over the past hundreds of years to provide a hearing for the gospel throughout the world. The communities of Jews scattered around the Empire are traced to the deportations that occurred when Israel first fell to the Assyrians (721 BC) and Judah was later overcome by the Babylonians (586 BC).
- C. There are no further instances in Acts of direct intervention by angels or the Holy Spirit to put a specific preacher/hearer together. General directions will be given from heaven (cf. the vision of the Macedonian – Ac 16:9-10), but future connections will be made by happenstance or providential guidance. It is of great instruction to note how the miraculous elements attending the beginning of the kingdom gradually fade as it matures.

3. The Message

[Fill in the following outline of Paul’s sermon. Be as brief or specific as you wish:]

- 1. A broad overview of OT history leading to the work of John – Ac 13:17-26
 - A. Ac 13:17-19 –
 - B. Ac 13:20-23 –
 - C. Ac 13:24-26 –

2. The rejection of Jesus – Ac 13:27-29

- A. Ac 13:27 – How does Paul explain the rejection of the Messiah by the Jews?
- B. Ac 13:28 – What does Paul say of the Jews’ motives?
- C. Ac 13:29 – What does Paul reiterate about the Jews’ actions relative to the Scriptures?

3. The resurrection of Jesus – Ac 13:30-39

- A. Ac 13:30-31 –
- B. Ac 13:32-37 –
- C. Ac 13:38-39 –

Warning: Ac 13:40-41 –

4. The Result

- A. A pattern emerges in Antioch that will be repeated often in the future: the Gentiles respond more positively to the gospel than do the Jews – Ac 13:42-45. In fact, the Jews were vehement in their opposition, contradicting and blaspheming Paul.
- B. But rather than wilt under the assault, “*Paul and Barnabas grew bold*” and declared that they would concentrate on the receptive Gentiles – Ac 13:46-49. Note again that God had favored the Jews with the opportunity to hear the gospel first (13:46; cf. Ac 3:26).
- C. So fierce and unrelenting was the persecution of the Jews that Paul and Barnabas were finally driven from Antioch (Ac 13:50-52). But they left behind a nucleus of Christians who rejoiced in their newfound salvation. Contrast what “filled” the Jews with what “filled” the Gentile brethren (cf. Ac 13:45, 52).

5. Special Note on Acts 13:48

- A. The phrase “*And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed*” is a verse often cited to support the Calvinistic doctrine of unconditional election.
 - 1. This doctrine states that God unilaterally and arbitrarily selects certain people to be saved and others to be lost.

2. This is because all are so spiritually depraved that none can respond to God in any way to facilitate their salvation. Since God must even put faith in the heart of each believer, and since it is obvious that all are not believers, then God “elects” some to salvation and leaves others in condemnation.
 3. Thus, one must be “appointed” by God for salvation in order to be saved. How do we answer this argument?
- B. Note that in this instance, as well as all the others in Acts, salvation comes by the free exercise of choice in regard to hearing truth presented. God has not unilaterally, directly saved anyone through some sort of divine operation. *Preachers* were sent to the *lost* with a *message* that could be *believed* or *rejected*. There is no suggestion anywhere that sinful men are unable to understand and respond through free will. How much more “depraved” can you get than murdering the Son of God, yet *they* heard and obeyed the gospel.
1. Thus, when the Jews rejected the gospel and blasphemed the truth about Jesus Christ, Paul places the blame for their unbelief squarely where it belongs – upon their own shoulders: “*But since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles*” (Ac 13:46). Paul says nothing about their *inability* to respond due to inherited depravity. Why rebuke them if they *could not* understand the truth, and God simply decided by His sovereign choice to leave them in their sins?
 2. It is the *gospel* that is the power of God unto salvation for *everyone* who believes (Rom 1:16). If a sinner *cannot* believe the gospel by his own volition, and it takes a direct act of God to place belief within him, then *the gospel is not* the power of salvation.
 3. God did not directly save Cornelius, but told him to send for Peter “*who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved*” (Ac 11:14).
- C. But what does it mean to be “appointed to eternal life”?
1. The basic meaning of this word (Gk. *tasso*) is to place in order or to arrange, to bring order to a situation of chaos or confusion. Note that Luke does not say they were appointed *by God* to this condition, but that may have been indirectly the case.
 2. Contextually, the Gentiles of Antioch were arranged or brought to order *in their thinking and attitude*, thus making them amenable to the preaching of the gospel by Paul. Because they were orderly and arranged in their thinking, they *believed* when they heard of salvation. Notice: the Gentiles “begged” to hear more preaching (Ac 13:42), they were “*glad and glorified the word of the Lord*” (13:48). They were *receptive* to that which is designed by God to produce belief (Rom 10:17).
 3. The Jews, on the other hand, were “*filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming they opposed the things spoken by Paul*” (Ac 13:45). In other words, their thoughts and attitudes were in spiritual disarray; they were *not appointed* or arranged or ordered so as to receive the saving gospel when they heard it. They were *resistant* to that which can produce belief in the willing heart. If God is arbitrarily responsible for accepting some and rejecting others, it makes the whole exercise of preaching the gospel a farce.

BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

LESSON 17: TWO CONVERSIONS IN PHILIPPI

Occasion: (*Acts 16*) *The gospel now spreads to the European continent as Paul and Silas travel at the Holy Spirit's bidding to Philippi. From these humble beginnings a great church will eventually emerge, a church that will repeatedly help Paul in his apostolic work.*

THE CONVERSION OF LYDIA (AC 16:1-15)

1. The Teachers – Paul and Silas

- A. The company of traveling workers includes Paul, Silas (cf. Ac 15:22, 32-34, 40), Timothy (Ac 16:1-4) and Luke joins them in Troas (note “they” becomes “we” – Ac 16:8, 10).
- B. At this time, another critical juncture in the spread of the gospel to new frontiers, the human preachers receive divine instruction to put them in contact with lost hearers (Ac 16:6-10).
 - 1. Where did the Holy Spirit prevent them from traveling?
 - 2. How does the Holy Spirit communicate the next destination for the gospel?
- C. Unlike the specific directions given to Philip in relation to the Ethiopian treasurer, the Holy Spirit now gives more vague instructions. Paul and company travel to Philippi in search of those who may be receptive to their message of salvation.

2. The Audience – Jewish Women, Specifically Lydia

- A. In Philippi, there apparently was no Jewish synagogue, for “*on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made*” (Ac 16:13).
- B. The weakness of the Jewish contingency in that city was also apparent in that only women were gathered for prayer; no Jewish men were present. Reese notes: “There had to be at least ten family heads (ten Jewish men) in a community to have a synagogue. Where fewer Jews than this lived, they often had a meeting place near any body of water suitable for their many ceremonial washings” (*New Testament History – Acts*, pp. 575-576).
- C. From a human standpoint, we might see little potential in this humble gathering. But the gospel is at heart a very personal message of salvation, and thus each person that can hear it is important. Paul was not put off by the meager Jewish presence in Philippi. He shared the gospel with those who were available to hear it.

3. The Message

Luke bypasses the content of what was spoken by Paul and the others to these Jewish women. We might rightfully conclude that there was nothing unique in it but that it merely reflected the themes already outlined in Acts.

4. The Result

- A. Lydia, one of the Jewish women present, was convinced by Paul's words and was baptized along with her household (Ac 16:14-15).
- B. But what does it mean that "*the Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul*"? Again, this is cited by pro-Calvinists as an evidence that a sinner cannot be saved until God miraculously, in a direct operation other than merely preaching the gospel to them, makes their heart receptive to salvation. How did God open Lydia's heart?
 - 1. First, note that Lydia was a woman "*who worshiped God*" **before** Paul ever came with the gospel. That is, she was *already* knowledgeable of God according to the Law of Moses; she served God according to the understanding that she had from the first covenant. She was not "totally depraved" and utterly unable to spiritually respond to God.
 - 2. Thus, in her life, the Law did what it was designed to do: As a "tutor" (Gal 3:24) it conditioned her mind to receive the truths of the gospel. As a "*shadow of the good things to come*" (Heb 10:1), it prepared her spirit to recognize the true substance when it came.
 - 3. Lydia was a woman with spiritual yearnings, who had an expectant and yielding attitude toward the things of God that He, Himself, had created within her. In fact, nothing is said of Lydia that isn't true of every believer: we all must have our hearts opened by the Lord, we must be softened and humbled by what He has revealed of Himself – whether through the Law of Moses or other manifestations of His divine power and nature – if the gospel is going to make any impact upon our spirits.
- C. ***One thing is clear:*** Lydia, like the other converts in Acts, is not saved until she responds in obedience to the gospel. This includes being baptized for the remission of her sins.

THE CONVERSION OF THE PHILIPPIAN JAILER (AC 16:16-34)

1. The Teachers – Paul and Silas

- A. Describe how Paul and Silas come to be imprisoned. What makes this abuse particularly galling (Ac 16:37-39)?
- B. How do these men react to their treatment (Ac 16:25)? What does this say about their (and our) attitude relative to preaching the gospel?
- C. When the opportunity presents itself to teach, Paul does not harbor any bitterness toward his captor that would withhold the message that would save his soul (Ac 16:28, 31). Surely Paul had unique understanding and sympathy for this man who persecuted believers, no?!

2. The Audience

- A. Surely there would not seem by human standards a more unlikely place to find an opportunity to preach and save a soul than a prison, but the Lord uses unique means to arrest the attention of the jailer.

1. An earthquake (Ac 16:26). This may seem incidental except that the earthquake managed to open the cell doors and unlock the shackles. Not a normal earthquake!
 2. The jailer's contemplated suicide (Ac 16:27-29). This man's responsibility to safeguard dangerous men came with a high price for failure. Fearing the consequences of an entire prison population escaping, the man was preparing to end his life. What is his emotional state when he comes before Paul?
 3. Though there is nothing said of a proselyte mindset or of anything favorable toward Judaism (as in the case of Cornelius), has not God in His own way opened the heart of the jailer just as surely as He had opened Lydia's heart?
- B. While he may not know much about Paul, he has come to learn something about himself: *"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"* (Ac 16:30).

3. The Message

- A. The jailer has expressed in the only way he knew how his spiritual destitution and his desire to ensure the well-being of his soul. But he has no knowledge whatsoever of the true God, His provision for salvation through Jesus, what conditions are placed upon receiving those benefits or what expectations God has for a faithful life thereafter. He has barely taken the first step, but it's a step that all men must take if they are to be saved.
- B. Paul responds upon the very basic level the man is on:
1. *"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household"* (Ac 16:31). The man must come to know how God has provided salvation for him and for all men. It is every man's response to Jesus that will determine his eternal destiny.
 2. This conversion is no different than any before it, with the exception that this man appears totally ignorant of God and Christ. To use this story to support a denial of previously stated conditions of salvation or to eliminate steps in coming to God that are made clear elsewhere in Acts and the rest of the New Testament is a misuse of the Scriptures.
- C. Thus, after giving him a cursory overview of what is required, i.e., belief in Jesus, *"then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house"* (Ac 16:32). This unlikely audience is now fully informed of the way unto God through Christ.

4. The Result

- A. The jailer and his household were baptized (Ac 16:33). How did he know about baptism?! Was it not the same way that the Ethiopian knew to request baptism when he saw water?
- B. *"He rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household"* (Ac 16:34). "Having believed" covers all the elements of his response: a receptive heart, hearing the gospel, submitting to baptism and the other conditions not expressly spelled out by Luke in this account. "Belief" is not some superficial, verbal statement about Jesus. It is the comprehensive, submissive response to God as a result of exposure to the gospel.

BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

LESSON 18: VARIED REACTIONS IN MACEDONIA AND ACHAIA

Occasion: (*Acts 17*) Paul continues through cities in Macedonia, seeking out synagogues and preaching about Jesus to Jews who should be eagerly expectant of the Messiah. But as Paul found strong Gentile opposition in Philippi, he now stirs vehement anger among the Jews. Our format of study will change as Luke turns from individual conversions to the response of various cities and regions to the gospel.

IN THESSALONICA AND BEREIA (AC 17:1-15)

1. Preaching in Thessalonica

A. Paul's presentation of the gospel – Ac 17:1-3.

1. It was Paul's "custom" or general procedure to seek out those of Jewish ancestry and offer the gospel to them first (Ac 17:2). But Luke gives further insight to this process.
2. Paul "*reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead*" (Ac 17:2-3). These terms involve argumentation, the advancement of propositions with supporting evidence and the refutation of contrary notions. This continued for three Sabbaths.
3. This is contrary to modern religious ideology which is more directed to the emotions than the mind. Western society is becoming increasingly oriented to feelings, perceptions, subjective assessments and is abandoning objective truth. This trend runs counter to genuine gospel preaching, which is the advancement and defense of truth against hostile and contrary concepts.

B. The gospel, as we have seen previously, separates men into two basic categories: those who appreciate and receive the message and those who reject it. And those who reject it often do not remain ambivalent but become highly adversarial.

1. Explain how the Thessalonian Jews react and how Paul responds to their threat (Ac 17:4-9). How had Jews previously responded in this fashion (Ac 6:8-14)?
2. How does Paul later refer to this situation in an epistle (1 Th 2:14-16)?
3. Why did Paul send Timothy back to Thessalonica (1 Th 3:1-5)?

2. Escape to Berea

A. Paul and Silas are covertly sent away from Thessalonica and make their way to Berea, a city about 50 miles to the southwest (Ac 17:10-14). What quality do we see in Paul from the reference in Ac 17:10?

B. Notice how Luke explains the effect of the gospel in men's hearts (Ac 17:11-12):

1. "*These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica ...*". One's ability to respond favorably to the gospel is not dependent upon "unconditional election," i.e., God's arbitrary choice to place faith within some and withhold it from others. The response is determined by *attitude*, whether one is "fair-minded," open-minded, interested and willing to look at the gospel in a critical light as one searches for what is ultimately true.

2. The Bereans "*received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.*" The Bereans critically investigate whereas the Thessalonian Jews only saw the gospel as a threat to their beloved convictions.

3. What is the result of such open-minded investigation (Ac 17:12)?

C. Note: Some people are afraid to investigate new ideas. They are insecure in their ability to discern the truth, or they equate changing their convictions with weakness or an admission of previous error (which is the basic principle of repentance – turning from what is *wrong*). Some would rather cling to error than endure the upset of repentance and change.

D. How do the Jews from Thessalonica create problems in Berea (Ac 17:13)? What does this say about the zealousness of unbelief?

IN ATHENS (AC 17:16-34)

1. Paul's Reaction to Gentile Idolatry – Ac 17:16-21

A. Athens was a city literally filled with idolatrous statutes and temples. How does Luke describe their idolatry and Paul's reaction to it?

B. What does Ac 17:14-16 say about Paul's courage?

C. What do the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers think of Paul? What do they request of him?

2. Paul's Discourse on Mars' Hill – Ac 17:22-31

A. What an opportunity! Paul now stands amid the city which has been the heart of Greek culture which has so influenced the world in his day. He has an opportunity to speak to inquisitive but ignorant Gentiles about the true God. So much to say, and so little time!

B. Briefly note the themes of his short discourse:

1. How does he gain their favor at the start (17:22-23)?

2. How does he describe the God they do not know (17:24-26)?
 3. What does he say about our search for God (17:27-28)?
 4. Now that he has established a foundation, what does he say about idols and images (17:29)?
 5. What is God's present expectation for men (Ac 17:30)? Why has this now changed from times in the past?
 6. What warning does Paul issue to these Gentile hearers (Ac 17:31)?
 7. What point does Paul make that effectively closes the minds of his hearers (Ac 17:32)?
- C. How is this sermon different from what was preached to Jewish audiences?
- D. How again do we see dual reactions to the preaching of the gospel?

Conclusion: This trip of Paul through Macedonia and into Achaia presents both challenge and reward for Paul. But this is the nature of gospel preaching. It will divide men based upon their reactions to the will of God. It will result in favor and extreme disapproval at times. But Christians must learn to be as resilient as Paul and be proud of the message we are trying to bring to the lost.

Occasion (Ac 18:24-19:1-10) *On his way back to Jerusalem at the close of his second missionary journey, Paul briefly passes through Ephesus (Ac 18:19-21) and returns a short time later (Ac 19). Two teaching episodes are worthy of note to us: the further education of Apollos and the conversion of twelve citizens of Ephesus. These stories address men who, unlike the Philippian jailer or the men of Athens, have some working knowledge of the redemptive purposes of God but are yet unaware of the fullness of conversion and the blessings of God. Note how the conversion stories in the book of Acts deal with different people in different situations. Luke is describing people who are taking the same journey, just starting from different places.*

APOLLOS (AC 18:24-26)

1. The Teachers – Aquila and Priscilla

- A. This godly couple had become acquainted with Paul in Corinth and worked with him there during his 1½ year tenure (Ac 18:2, 11).
- B. When Paul left Corinth for Jerusalem and Antioch, Aquila and Priscilla accompanied him as far as Ephesus where they remained (Ac 18:18-19).
- C. Ephesus had been bypassed earlier at the direction of the Holy Spirit, and Paul will return about a year later for a protracted stay of three years (cf. Ac 20:31). In the meantime, Aquila and Priscilla live and work in the city, doing what they can to teach those with whom they came into contact.

2. The Student – Apollos: A Bold Preacher with Incomplete Knowledge

- A. Note the descriptions of this man:
 - 1. Eloquent – He had polished oratorical skills which require ordered thought and linguistic dexterity.
 - 2. Mighty in the Scriptures – He was not only intelligent but disciplined. Higher education in that time was not widely available, and the man who had access to it would have to apply himself in adverse circumstances (no modern conveniences such as computers, artificial lighting, etc. to make study easier). Even personal copies of the Scriptures were rare; synagogues and libraries were the repositories of Scripture.
 - 3. Instructed in the way of the Lord – Apollos had some knowledge of Jesus, but it was limited by the following notation of Luke.
 - 4. Fervent in spirit; taught accurately the things of the Lord “*though he knew only the baptism of John*” – Apollos did the best he could with what he knew, but he was not aware of the developments concerning Jesus in the aftermath of John’s preparatory work. John’s baptism was only preparatory; he stressed the One who would come after him.

- B. Speculation of how much Apollos knew or didn't know is useless. What we can say is that his knowledge did not go far enough. But the providence of God has brought him into contact with those who could further instruct him.

3. The Message

- A. Luke simply says Aquila and Priscilla, upon hearing this man speak in the synagogue, *"took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately"* (Ac 18:26).
- B. We may assume that this was comprehensive instruction, like *"they spoke the word of the Lord to him"* (Ac 16:32), *"Philip ... preached Jesus to him"* (Ac 8:35), *"he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ"* (Ac 8:12).

4. The Result

- A. Luke does not specify what Apollos did in order to comply with his newfound knowledge of the gospel, but based on the other examples of conversion in Acts, it would be reasonable to conclude that he did what others were commanded to do. This would include submitting to baptism under the authority of Christ (as we shall see in the next story).
- B. The *fruit* of such change is readily apparent as Apollos travels to Corinth and becomes a great asset to the church in that immoral city (Ac 18:27-28).
- C. What "position" in the church did Priscilla and Aquila hold? What can we learn from their example?

THE TWELVE DISCIPLES IN EPHESUS (AC 19:1-7)

1. The Teacher – Paul

Paul, now on this third "missionary journey," returns to Ephesus as promised. He will now spend an extended time in this region, and the gospel will be spread throughout the province of Asia with great success.

2. The Students – About 12 "Disciples"

- A. The term "disciple" is not synonymous with "Christian" in that it simply means "a learner." It is a broader term than Christian, thus, all Christians would be disciples, but not all disciples would be Christians. Men who are in various stages of knowledge, such as Apollos, may be agreeable and receptive to truth but not exposed to it completely as yet. Such people need further teaching in order to become all the Lord would have them to be.
- B. Exactly who these men were or why they do not appear to be associated with the "brethren" in Ac 18:27 is not stated. They may have simply been a small enclave of John's disciples in a populous city, unknown to the others until Paul happens upon them. Apollos is now gone, and Aquila and Priscilla are not mentioned. They, too, may have departed Ephesus.

- C. Paul's inquiries reveal that these people had been baptized into John's baptism, but they were unaware of the fullness of blessing in their lives by the Holy Spirit (Ac 19:2-3).

3. The Message

- A. Again, John's preaching and baptism was preparatory, and Paul declares to these men the One that John anticipated: Jesus Christ (Ac 19:4).
- B. Even though the baptism of John was commanded by God, it had a specific purpose and duration. It was no longer valid. To act on this baptism beyond the scope of God's intentions for it brings no profit. The same is true of the Law of Moses. It, too, was given by God for a particular time and purpose. It, like the baptism of John, was superseded by something more perfect.
- C. *One must act in accordance with the proper covenant, which includes the proper baptism, in order to be pleasing unto God.* This has been consistently demonstrated through Acts.

4. The Result

- A. *"The men were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus"* (Ac 19:6). Having now learned of the authority and lordship of Christ, and having been informed of His command to be baptized "for the remission of sins," these men gladly comply. There is no argumentation, no hesitation, no delay until a later week or month. There is urgency in obeying the gospel in its entirety. Thus they are justified in being called "disciples."
- B. In a *subsequent* action to their salvation, Paul lays hands on them and *"the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied"* (Ac 19:6). This is consistent with the actions of Peter and John in Samaria where they imparted spiritual gifts to new believers in the absence of written Scripture (Ac 8:17-18).
- C. We can infer from the first epistle to the Corinthians that Paul had done likewise in Corinth. They had multiple spiritual gifts, including prophecy and speaking in tongues (1 Cor 12-14), but unfortunately had misused such rich blessings of God for their own ambitions.

Observation: Many people who consider themselves true believers resist change when they learn something new about the faith. Perhaps it is a matter of pride, or maybe they find their current level of knowledge and the lifestyle that accompanies it too comfortable to change.

But these two stories illustrate one important aspect of discipleship: we must have an openness to new ideas and be willing to adapt our lives to them. It is uncomfortable to admit that one's understanding has been incomplete or even erroneous, and it takes effort to investigate and discover what is right. But Paul, Apollos, Lydia, the jailer, the Samaritans, the Bereans, the Ephesians, the Jews on Pentecost – all these were willing to make the necessary changes to please God. Others were not. May we not be in the latter category.

BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

LESSON 20: FELIX, FESTUS AND HEROD AGRIPPA II

Occasion: (Ac 24:24-26; 26:24-25; 26:26-29) *Paul is imprisoned in Caesarea, having been arrested in Jerusalem. He is patiently awaiting a just resolution of his case, but he finds the Roman procurators and Jewish king more interested in their political maneuverings than in his freedom. While imprisoned, Paul has opportunity to preach before these men. Unfortunately, none of them favorably respond to the message.*

FELIX (AC 24:24-26)

1. The Audience – Felix and Drusilla

A. Secular history tells of the treachery and tyranny of Felix. He ruled with cruelty because of his high connections in the court of Claudius Caesar (his brother, Pallas, was a close confidant of Claudius and was extremely influential). He had also seduced Drusilla from her lawful husband to become his third wife.

B. Why did Felix let Paul languish in prison for two years (Ac 24:26)?

2. The Teacher – Paul

A. Paul had gone to Jerusalem fully aware of the persecution that awaited him (cf. Ac 20:22-23; 21:4, 11). He had been saved from a murderous mob by the Romans, but now was awaiting the disposition of his case.

B. What agony this must have been for one so driven to spread the gospel as Paul! Churches were being undermined by Judaizers; new territory lay unevangelized; beloved brethren had not been seen for years. Even though Paul could receive visitors (Ac 24:23), he would naturally yearn for freedom for the sake of the kingdom.

3. The Message

A. While Felix had “*more accurate knowledge of the Way*” (Ac 24:22), “*he sent for Paul and heard him concerning the faith in Christ*” (24:24).

B. In addition to the general principles that we may assume were spoken by Paul, Luke includes some specific things addressed directly to Felix. What does Paul “reason” about?

1.

2.

3.

C. Like Jeremiah some 600 years before him, Paul was not willing to suppress or sugar coat the truth in order to gain the favor of his captor (cf. Jer 37:16-20).

4. The Result

- A. How would you characterize Felix's reaction to the message (Ac 24:25)?
- B. What did Felix say he was waiting for in refusing to submit to the gospel?

FESTUS AND AGRIPPA (AC 26:1-25)

1. The Audience – Festus, Agrippa II and Bernice

- A. Festus tried to correct the injustices and mismanagement of Felix, who had been recalled to Rome to stand trial. Festus inherits Paul's case as a "leftover" from Felix. He is not as aware of the Way as his predecessor (cf. Ac 25:20), but Paul tells him *"to the Jews I have done no wrong, as you very well know"* (Ac 25:10).
- B. Festus enlists the help of Agrippa II who has come to Caesarea to welcome the new governor. Present with Agrippa is Bernice, his sister, who was widely rumored to be incestuously involved with her brother. Agrippa is more well-versed in the political goings on of Palestine, and a great assembly of dignitaries gathers to consider the case against Paul (Ac 25:23).
- C. What must have gone through Paul's mind as he entered the chamber full of the leading social and political figures of that realm! He has already been told by the Lord that he would bear witness in Rome (cf. Ac 23:11), and he has exercised his right of Roman citizenship to appeal his case to Caesar (Ac 25:11-12). But for now, he has the chance to preach the gospel before those who could alter the climate in favor of God's people.

2. The Message

- A. As was the case in Athens, Paul is interrupted just as he gets to the subject of the resurrection (cf. Ac 17:32; 26:23-24). This was a volatile issue in that day with many competing doctrines of Scripture and mythology.
- B. Though Paul is giving his personal defense, note how he weaves the following spiritual concepts into the discourse:
 - 1. The hope of the promise made by God to our fathers – 26:6-7. This invokes the entire history of the Jewish people back to Abraham as a pertinent issue in this case.
 - 2. Resurrection – 26:8.
 - 3. The vision, commission of Jesus – 26:14-16.
 - 4. The universal message of salvation – 26:17, including repentance, forgiveness, faith and eternal inheritance (26:18, 20).

5. The fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies in Christ – 26:22.
 6. The execution and resurrection of Christ – 26:23.
 7. The connection between his work of preaching and the resurrection – 26:23.
- C. Paul, himself, is “Exhibit A” for the gospel, for he claims to have seen and heard Jesus, received an apostolic commission, changed loyalties from Judaism to Christianity, and has been engaged in teaching truth about Christ. He is not guilty of apostasy from Judaism; rather, he is preaching the natural extension of it – Jesus is the Messiah.

3. The Result

- A. Festus interrupts with incredulity: *“Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!”* (Ac 26:24).
1. Paul’s response: *“I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason”* (26:25). Those who have no spiritual inclination or interest often consider God’s way to be irrational and senseless. Jesus’ opponents accused Him of being possessed by demons.
 2. Paul then focuses his attention on Agrippa, for he seems to think that the king has an insight that might make him more able to grasp the logic of what he is saying.
- B. Paul challenges Agrippa to fully embrace what he believes: *“King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe”* (Ac 26:27). Paul calls upon the king to consider his claims in light of the Messianic prophecies, which were given to confirm that the facts surrounding Jesus were, in fact, foretold hundreds of years before.
- C. Agrippa’s response has been immortalized in Scripture and the song “Almost Persuaded” (Ac 26:28). While we do not know the tone or inflection of Agrippa’s answer, whether it was offered wistfully or with a scoff, secular history suggests that his “almost” remained unfulfilled. How does Paul treat Agrippa’s answer (Ac 26:29)?

Observation: We must be realistic regarding evangelism: the majority of the people we talk to and teach will reject the gospel. We must resist the temptation to suppress the truth because of this rejection. The apostles, evangelists and brethren we read about in Acts kept trying to teach those who might listen: groups of philosophers, governors, kings, fellow inmates, idolaters, misguided Jews, those involved in witchcraft, etc. Our job is to offer and to teach; it is the gospel’s job to discriminate the saved from the lost.

Felix, Festus and Agrippa had the same opportunity to respond as others to whom the gospel was presented. Their rejection of the truth was their own, not a result of God’s unconditional election that did not include them. What a pretense, what a farce, what a waste of Paul’s time and breath if they *could not* obey by their own free choice. They did have the freedom to choose, and they chose to reject salvation.

BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

LESSON 21: WHAT ABOUT THE THIEF ON THE CROSS?

1. Why Appeal to the Criminal Who Died Along with Jesus?

- A. Usually, people appeal to this episode when trying to escape the force of the teaching that baptism is commanded for the remission of sins.
- B. But even if the story of the thief on the cross is an exception to the rule (which it is not), the exception would not invalidate the rule.
- C. The real issue is: Does the NT command sinners to be baptized in order to receive forgiveness of sins? If it does, then how should we understand this exchange of Jesus with the thief? Is it an exception? Did baptism apply to the thief? What are the implications of not being baptized? Let's examine the issue more closely.

2. What Happened at Calvary? Luke 23:39-43

- A. Jesus has been crucified along with two others. As His life is ebbing away, one of the criminals blasphemes Him by chiding about His ability to save (23:39).
- B. The other criminal rebukes the first for his impertinence (23:40-41). He declares Jesus' innocence.
- C. Whatever else he knew about the Lord, or whether this is the first meeting or knowledge of Jesus (which is highly unlikely, given the events of the past few months in and around Jerusalem), he states his respect for Jesus ("Lord") and requests to be remembered "*when you come into your kingdom*" (23:42).
 - 1. Again, what the man did or didn't know about the kingdom is debatable, especially since the apostles themselves still don't have a firm grasp of what is unfolding. Still, John the baptist and Jesus have been teaching for three years that "*the kingdom is at hand*" (Mt 3:2; 4:17, 23; etc.). The man must have some prior knowledge, for Jesus has not said anything to him on the present occasion.
 - 2. The man has nothing to offer at this point in his life. He, too, is expiring, and all he can do is exhibit a humble and submissive attitude toward Jesus, which he does.
 - 3. Jesus' response, gracious and magnanimous as it was, has filled many with false hopes: "*Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise*" (Lk 23:43). This statement is exactly what it appears to be: a promise of salvation granted on the spot, clemency, exoneration, forgiveness and the issuance of eternal life to a dying criminal.
- D. **Question:** *Does this constitute a pattern for salvation under the New Covenant? Should we understand this exchange to take precedence over every other command and example that comes afterward? Do the apostles cite this as the precedent for all others to emulate; specifically, to simply request God's mercy as did this man with no other obligations?*

3. Defining the Issues

A. What Jesus says to this man takes place within the context of the Law of Moses. The New Covenant does not take effect until Jesus dies (cf. Col 2:14; Heb 9:16-17). Thus, what Jesus says to this man is not the standard of salvation to come afterward.

1. **Objection:** Jesus said many things while under the Law of Moses that are authoritative later, like His teaching on divorce and remarriage. Why would one apply and not the other?

2. **Answer:** Jesus taught some things about the coming spiritual kingdom, but not everything. Much supplemental teaching is given by the apostles, and issues are addressed that Jesus never touched. The spiritual kingdom was not inaugurated (in an earthly context) until Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the apostles and the terms for entrance into this kingdom were preached by Peter. But when the new covenant was established, terms of forgiveness were clearly stated for all men. The examples of conversions in Acts demonstrate that all new believers were expected to comply with these terms in order to receive the benefits of Jesus' atoning death.

B. Jesus, according to the prerogatives of sovereignty, had the authority to save any person at any time under any circumstances (cf. Jn 8:11; Mk 2:5-7). If He wanted to suspend the demands of the Law of Moses and extend grace to the man, that was His right. (Did the thief have a chance to offer a trespass offering for his sin?!) We cannot determine common practice from the unique exercise of divine prerogative.

1. **Objection:** If Jesus showed the thief special favor, this would mean that He acted with partiality, something that Peter said God would not do (Ac 10:34).

2. **Answer:** Showing favoritism does not mean that God gives equal opportunity or blessing to everyone. The Scriptures are full of examples where God blessed some men above others. But God does not reject a man simply on the basis of his race or culture, *"but in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him"* (Ac 10:35).

C. The thief's confession and request amount to "deathbed repentance," actions undertaken in the extremity of impending death. We should not make the admission of a man in his dying moments a rule of life for those who have the luxury of considering Jesus while in the vigor of health and wealth of opportunity. Too, this example is unique in that there were only two men who ever lived who had such an opportunity presented to them: the two men that died on either side of the Lord. Other men died in the Roman Empire that day, but only two died in close proximity to the Son of God. Only two men could examine their lives while listening to the Son of God be ridiculed and blasphemed. While it seems clear that God will accept genuine repentance even at the time of death (cf. Mt 20:1-16), we certainly should not count on such an opportunity. First, no one knows how he will leave this world, whether suddenly in illness or accident, or in a state of gradual deterioration. Secondly, there is no guarantee that even in death our heart will be subject to repentance. Many die in a state of spiritual rebellion or indifference. A man who deliberately rejects Christ in the hope that he can obtain mercy in the moment of death has sealed his own fate.

4. Other Objections to the Necessity of Baptism

- A. If baptism is necessary, then you are saying my dear loved one is lost because they weren't baptized.

Response: Our reaction to the consequences of the law do not change or nullify the law. It is truly a sad thing to learn a truth that a spouse or parent didn't understand or agree with in their life. But our heartache does not determine what the law states. If we find ourselves in rebellion to God because we disagree with His laws or His punishment for disobedience, such an attitude will keep us at enmity with God. God is the one who enacts and enforces His laws; we as His servants merely proclaim them. Further, does it make sense to deny the truth we have learned for the sake of the dead at the expense of the living? Should we not put the truth into practice and then try to convince others of our family and friends to comply with what we know to be right? What will continued denial do but condemn others?

- B. If what you are saying about baptism is true, then a man who is killed on the way to the baptistery will be lost.

Response: Again, this is reasoning from a perceived *consequence* of the law rather than what the law actually states. We may as well reason that manslaughter cannot be a law because it would mean that someone could be convicted of taking a life without intending to do so. God's laws are not subject to our perception of *fairness*. But in addition to this, do we believe God is so callous and so powerless as to allow the chance forces of nature to claim a life that is in the process of pursuing redemption?! Does the book of Acts not show the lengths to which God has gone to offer salvation to everyone who desires it? This is not a serious response to the clear demands of God regarding baptism.

- C. If baptism is necessary, then what about all the millions of people who die all over the world who have never heard of baptism?

Response: Yet again, most of the objections offered stem from unpleasant consequences, not what the law of Christ actually states. But this objection goes beyond baptism. What about all the people who die who never heard of Jesus? What of the people who die who never repented? This certainly places a premium upon the preaching of the gospel, for our fellow human beings are dying daily in ignorance of the new covenant of Christ. I personally believe, and I think Acts upholds the principle, that God will provide a way of salvation to anyone, anywhere who genuinely wants to know how to be reconciled to Him. The real issue is not *availability* of truth; it is *desire* for it.

Conclusion: The simple command of baptism for the remission of sins serves as a test of the heart. Whether we understand its significance or not, whether we agree with God's right to demand it or not, whether we think it is inconvenient, silly or downright humiliating, the command tests our willingness to comply with God's wishes. And many fail the test, for they have been trained by Calvinistic doctrines to deny the need to do *anything* to receive the cleansing of Jesus' blood. The statements which demand and explain baptism in the NT are not difficult, ambiguous or obscure; they are plain and they are illustrated by real life examples in Acts. The command to be baptized puts us to the test of obedience from the very first step of Christian life.

1. Different People, Different Responses

- A. We have contended in this study that all men have free will; they have the choice of how they respond to God, either through the general evidence of creation or the special revelation of His word.
 - 1. *“But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned”* (1 Cor 2: 14).
 - 2. No one will heed the gospel unless he has genuine spiritual interests. When men try to attract the lost with carnal enticements, they will only attract people with carnal interests.
 - 3. In any given society, if spiritual concerns have diminished and carnality holds sway, the gospel will have little appeal. Such a society, or individuals within it, must reach a “saturation” level where it is finally realized that the proliferation of wickedness has not satisfied the soul.
- B. Through God’s providence, the world under Roman political domination and Greek culture had reached a point called *“the fullness of the time”* (Gal 4:4). The time was “ripe” for the sending of His Son and the establishment of a spiritual kingdom. Judaism had become spiritually bankrupt, and the brutality and immorality of Roman society, together with the emptiness of idolatry and superstition, had created a climate favorable to the gospel.
- C. Even so, the gospel only attracted a small minority of the citizenry of the first century. Acts tells of some success in some places where the gospel was preached, and it also tells of rejection and persecution. There will always be some people who will listen to the truth, and the majority will reject it. Not all cultures experience this reaction in the same ratio.

2. Evangelism in Our Culture and Community

- A. It is self-evident that both material and philosophical changes that have taken place in the United States have made this country less spiritually receptive than in the past.
 - 1. People are more aloof and insulated in their personal lives. It is harder to make inroads into people’s schedules for Bible discussions and study.
 - 2. There is a general skepticism about religious outreach. As more churches fund their projects through general appeals and sales to the public, more prospects assume churches want something *from* them when approached. The heart of evangelism is *giving* to people what the soul needs most: a restored relationship with God.
 - 3. Entertainment and other amusements, which are outgrowths of prosperity, have undermined people’s interest in spiritual things.

4. Divorce has poisoned the well of prospects as more and more people we encounter are unlawfully remarried.
- B. Just because interest is booming in charismatic circles, “New Age” philosophies and other quasi-religious contexts **does not mean** that people are receptive to **the truth**. The days of protracted gospel meetings where many denominational visitors attended over a period of two or three weeks and were converted by the dozens are gone.
- C. We face many obstacles, some of which are unique to a small, Bible Belt town where the church has had a fifty-year presence in the community. What does it take to effectively evangelize in Hueytown, U.S.A.?

3. What Is Our Responsibility?

- A. It is imperative that we remember what our chief duty **is not**: It is not to *convert*. That is the job of the gospel, itself. Our duty is to *preach* and to *exemplify* the truth in our lives.
- B. What collective efforts can we make in evangelizing our community?
1. Sermons and Bible classes offered in a public venue. This is what we do every week from our building as well as three special efforts by visiting speakers during the year. Granted, many people are reluctant to go to a strange place and seek out knowledge of God, but the city of Hueytown cannot say it doesn’t have access to the preaching and teaching of the gospel.
 2. Occasional articles in published area journals. This has been done in the past via *The Western Star* and presently in *The Shopping News*.
 3. Billboards advertising an opportunity for correspondence courses (done last spring).
 4. SpringFest booth to advertise our presence in the community (washed out in 2002; done 2001).
 5. Neighborhood home studies. Some of our middle school classes have attracted young prospects.
 6. Other? Mailed literature? More Bible correspondence course distribution? More newspaper articles? Radio programs? Better visitor contact? Sermon cassettes? **Discuss.**
- C. How can we improve our individual efforts?
1. Identify your own abilities. Not everyone can take someone from an initial conversation through baptism. But can you leave an informational flier with your waitress? Your cashier? Your bank teller? Can you smile and offer a simple: “We’d welcome your visit!”? Warmth, friendliness and genuine concern can open many doors in this cold, cruel world. But remember: we are not trying to convert people to a friendly church; we are trying to convert them to their Savior!

2. Pray for opportunities. We have seen in our study how much the providence of God was involved in putting seeker and teacher together. Is it any different today? Fervent prayer that God would open a door of opportunity (Col 4:3) might lead us to those who are searching.
3. Heighten our awareness of the lost. Prayer will help do this, but that is not the only reason to pray. We must learn to see the people around us every day – co-workers, fellow shoppers, strangers – as being in need of the gospel. Maintain a list of contacts that you can pray for, send meeting announcements to, an occasional card of concern, etc. Be especially aware of those who attend our worship and reach out to them.
4. Study the Bible to give us more confidence in our ability to handle a spiritual conversation. We may avoid religious interaction with people because we are uncertain of our knowledge. Or, we may with all good intention say something misleading to those with whom we discuss the Bible. There is no substitute for knowledge and experience. You only get knowledge by study, and you only get experience by interacting with people.
5. Don't shut ourselves off from society. This is the tendency we are facing in our electronic world. Cell phones, answering machines, computer accounts, drive-thrus and other conveniences serve to insulate us from others. When we are too busy with life and only take the convenient route, we not only lose the opportunity to let our light shine, we simply lose the richness of getting to know people by talking to them and spending time with them.

4. When All Is Said and Done

- A. In the parable of the sower (Mt 13:18-23), Jesus clearly identified **the soil** as being receptive to the seed or resistant to it. It was not the fault of the sower or the seed when the gospel was rejected **but the soil**. Not all soil is equally receptive, as seen in the parable.
- B. What **is not** in our control:
 1. Whether the soil in Hueytown is fertile or not. We can do little about the community's negative prejudices and assumptions about our beliefs or past influences that have damaged our reputation.
 2. The content of the gospel. We must teach it as it is, without excuse or apology (but with love). This alone will drive many people away, especially in our time of diminished personal responsibility, hedonistic desires and doctrinal liberality.
- C. What **is** in our control:
 1. How much we love and care for the lost; how often we pray for them and ask God to use us in reaching out to them.
 2. Our personal courage in speaking out for the gospel.
 3. How well we model the principles of the gospel in our personal lives.

Copy these sheets to begin a file of people you wish to try and influence. Or make up your own system. "Even a blind hog can root up an acorn every once in a while" may work in golf, but we need to be a bit more deliberate in seeking the lost.

Prospect List

Name:_____

Address:_____

Phone:_____

Visited at worship:_____

Religious affiliation:_____

Send card or called:_____

Name:_____

Address:_____

Phone:_____

Visited at worship:_____

Religious affiliation:_____

Send card or called:_____

Name:_____

Address:_____

Phone:_____

Visited at worship:_____

Religious affiliation:_____

Send card or called:_____

Prospect List

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