



The Need for the Death of Jesus

Why Jesus Came

From the announcement of his conception, the mission of Jesus was linked to our spiritual recovery. The angel told Joseph that the child Mary was carrying was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

The child was to be named Jesus "because he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21) This redemptive theme was echoed throughout the ministry of our Lord. He said that he had come "to seek and to save what was lost" and "to give his life as a ransom for many." (Luke 19:10; Matthew 20:28)



Our Spiritual Condition

The Bible describes us as being lost, separated from God and unable to save ourselves. Ours is a hopeless condition indeed. Yet God wants to save us. The dilemma that faced God was this: **How can he forgive our sins and also carry out the justice that his law demands for violators?**

God cannot ignore the fact that we have broken his holy law and that carries a severe penalty.

In Jesus Christ, the Father found One whose death would fully satisfy the demands of justice, thereby enabling him to forgive our sins.

This is how the apostle Paul expresses the thought:

"God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus." (Romans 3:25,26)



The Need For The Cross

The cross of Christ vindicates God. It shows God to be just in that he did what his own law demanded. He is also the one who justifies/pardons all those who have faith in Jesus.

God has never been short of sacrifices. Rivers of blood flowed from Israel's altars, yet they were unable to satisfy God's justice. Martyrs too numerous to mention gave their lives sacrificially in the service of the Lord, yet not even their deaths could satisfy God.

Father Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish Franciscan priest, caught the attention of the world's press when his noble deed became known. He was a prisoner in Auschwitz concentration camp. When Kolbe heard that a married man with a family had been selected for execution, he volunteered to take this man's place. Kolbe became a substitute so that another man might live.

On Good Friday Jesus became our substitute when he took our sins upon himself: **"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree."** (1 Peter 2:24)

The debt incurred by our sins could only be paid by an adequate sacrifice offered on our behalf. Though two other men died along with Jesus on that Good Friday, only his death was able to cancel our debt. Peter captures the concept of Christ being our substitute and Saviour in these words: **"Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God."** (1 Peter 3:18)

In a crucified Christ we see the following: the love of God, the wisdom of God, the justice of God and a perfect sacrifice who has made forgiveness possible.



Not By Our Deeds:

What We Do Cannot Save Us

Forgiveness is not based on our good deeds no matter how many or how honourable they are. Forgiveness is a free, unmerited gift from God and we accept it by faith. Yet many try to earn their way to heaven.

They entertain the idea that God will inspect their lives and, based on how they did while on earth, either let them into heaven or banish them for eternity.

An inescapable conclusion comes from this line of thinking: If we are contributors to our own salvation, if our works can save us, then the death of Jesus was not only inadequate but unnecessary.

The apostle Paul put it this way:

"If righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing." (Galatians 2:21)

Jesus came to set us free, to give us new life, and not to supply us with a new set of rules and regulations to be obeyed in order to get to heaven. The last thing we need is a religion based upon our performance; what we need is someone to give a perfect performance for us, and we find that performance accomplished in Jesus Christ.

The Word of God speaks clearly on this subject:

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is a gift from God—not by works, so that no one can boast." (Ephesians 2:8,9)



The Religion of the Pharisee

Jesus pointed out the folly of trying to earn one's way to heaven when he told the parable of the Pharisee and the publican. (Luke 18:9-14) The lesson was directed to **"some who were confident of their own righteousness."**

Two men went up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee began his prayer by parading all his good deeds before God. Pride filled his heart as he thanked God that he was not like those around him: robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even the tax collector, whose profession was notorious for dishonesty.

He continued his prayer with a reminder to God that he fasted twice each week and gave 10 percent of his income to the Lord.

The publican also prayed, but in a different tone. Jesus said that he stood at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven, but in true repentance said, **"God, have mercy on me, a sinner."**

Which of these two people was forgiven?

It was the publican, Jesus said, and not the Pharisee that found favour with God.

Why didn't the Pharisee find favour with God?

After all, he believed in God, said his prayers and lived a good life.

Where did he go wrong?

The problem with the Pharisee was that he was trusting in the performance of his religious duties to save him. The Pharisee didn't believe he was sinless, but felt that his good deeds, which were many, would tip the scales of God's justice in his favour.

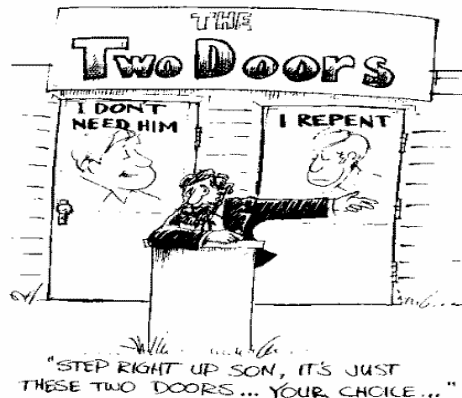
The good deeds of his life would more than compensate for his failings, and he would surely get a favourable verdict. But he was wrong.



The Religious Treadmill

The religious practice of the Pharisee reminds me of the time I saw two children playing on an escalator. They were trying to go up the stairs that were coming down. No matter how hard they tried, they failed: the stairs kept bringing them back to where they started.

Finally they got off and went over to the stairs that were moving upwards, stepped on, and let the stairs take them to the top.



The Need to Repent

"This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." (Luke 24:46-47)

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)

"I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus." (Acts 20:21)

Repentance figured prominently in the ministries of our Lord Jesus Christ, John the baptist, and the apostles. And today we must be faithful in calling people to repentance.

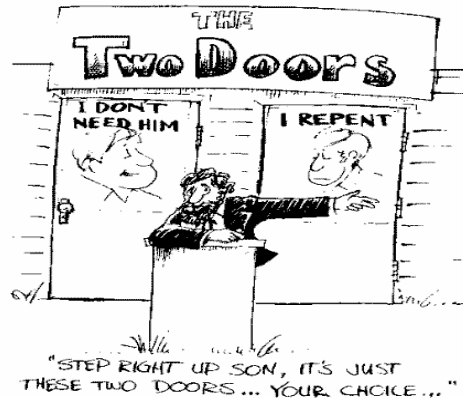
Repentance is a word that has strayed far from its original meaning. Being sorry for sin and promising never to do it again is the standard understanding most people have about repentance, but that meaning is quite different from how the Bible defines it.

For example, a person can spend an evening consuming alcohol. The next morning, with head throbbing and nerves jumping, he stumbles toward the medicine cabinet vowing, "Never again. I'll never touch another drop as long as I live."

What he has expressed is remorse, regret, but is not godly repentance. Scripture says this about repentance:

"Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." (2 Corinthians 7:10)

Having Godly sorrow means that we see our sins as having offended God and for that we are genuinely sorrowful. By repenting we make a conscious decision to turn away from sin and to turn our life to God.



An Example of Repentance

Zacchaeus was a wealthy tax collector who heard about Jesus. Anxious to see Jesus, but prevented because of his small size, Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus as he passed by. When Jesus saw him he called out, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly."

Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus moved his heart to repentance. "Here and now," he said, "I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything I will pay back four times the amount." That is godly repentance. Because of his penitent heart and faith in Jesus, the Lord said to Zacchaeus, "Today salvation has come to this house." (Luke 19:1-10)

The call to repentance is a recurring theme in the Scriptures. John the Baptist insisted that his disciples "produce fruit in keeping with repentance." (Matthew 3:8) John wanted the people not only to believe in Jesus the Messiah, but to demonstrate that they had turned their lives away from sin by displaying the evidence of true repentance.

Jesus commanded that "repentance and forgiveness of sins... be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." (Luke 24:47) Peter told his audience that they were to "repent and be baptised..." Later he told others, "Repent, then, and turn to God." (Acts 2:38; 3:19)

Repentance must not be thought of only in negative terms: we stop committing sins. It is much more than that. The positive side of repentance is that we decide to change the direction of our spiritual lives and to follow God. That is true godly repentance!

What must I do?

Grace & Faith at Pentecost

A brother from a Bible church asks: "I wonder if you can explain why Peter, when asked on Pentecost 'what must we do?' didn't say, 'Why, there is nothing you can do, it has already been done -- just accept what we have told you and rely totally on the grace of God.'"

Perhaps it was because Peter perceived that the Pentecost audience, which included many who had demanded Jesus' death less than two months before, were not asking a question to which that was the answer.

These are not inquisitive students striving to comprehend the theories and mysteries of salvation. They are desperate souls, deeply convicted of their sin against Jesus himself -- whom they just learned is Israel's resurrected Messiah and now-ascended Lord (**Acts 2:22-24,36**).

They are ready and eager to do whatever Jesus desires, and Peter instructs them according to the Lord's own parting commission. (**Luke 24:47; Matt. 28:19**)

The apostle commands the conscience-stricken audience to make a spiritual U-turn on the inside ("**repent**") and to express that repentance individually in a tangible, physical way on the outside ("**be baptised**").

Gospel baptism is a specific act of submission and surrender to the crucified and risen Messiah ("**in the name of Jesus Christ**"). Because Pentecost marks the beginning of the "**last days**," God will fulfill his ancient promise to save and to give his Spirit (**his personal, powerful Presence**) to everyone who calls on the Lord -- all those whom God calls to himself (**Acts 2:38; Joel 2:28-32**).

These truths are not limited to the Pentecost audience, or even to Jewish people, but are applicable to men and women from all nations throughout the gospel era. (**Acts 2:39**)

It is right to remember that baptism does not cause God to love us. Baptism does not make us merit salvation or earn God's forgiveness. It is not part of the underlying work which sets us right with God.

That work was fully accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth before we ever heard of it. Only because Jesus finished that saving work, which both demonstrated and justified God's love for sinners, can anyone "**repent and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins**" -- to use Peter's very words of instruction to his Pentecost audience. (**Acts 2:38**)

There is no conflict between grace and faith on the one hand, and repentance and baptism on the other hand, so long as those who repent and are baptised do so trusting only God's grace as shown in Jesus Christ.



Real Faith in Jesus

"And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." (Hebrews 11:6)

"You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." (Galatians 3:26-27)

"What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith." (Philippians 3:8-9)



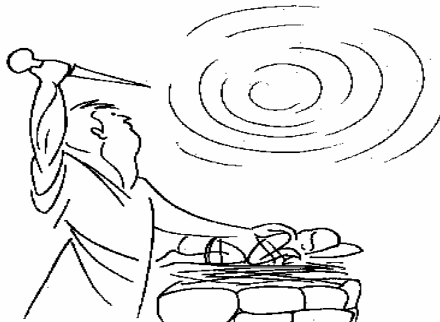
Faith Responds in Obedience

Faith is essential if we are to be right with God. **But what does faith mean?**

Faith means to trust, to believe. And in Abraham we have a model for that type of faith. His life is punctuated with demonstrations of faith, trust, belief in God.

He was told by God to leave his home and go to a foreign land:

"By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going." (Hebrews 11:8) That's faith.



"Now I know that you honor and obey God." (Genesis 22:12)

Faith Believes the Impossible

God promised Abraham a son. Time passed and the promise remained unfulfilled. Abraham was now 99 years old and his wife, Sarah, was 90. God spoke again to him again about the promise of a son.

Though surrounded by physical impossibilities, Abraham had faith that what God said would indeed come to pass:

"By faith Abraham, even though he was past age — and Sarah herself was barren — was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise." (Hebrews 11:11) That's faith!

And when Isaac was grown, Abraham was commanded to offer him as a sacrifice.

"By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice." (Hebrews 11:17)

God never allowed Abraham to take the young boy's life, though Abraham was prepared to do so, and for this reason Abraham is called **"God's friend"**. (James 2:23) That's faith!

The type of faith Abraham displayed is the kind of faith we are to have. It is a faith that trusts in God, a faith that believes God, a faith that obeys God.



Biblical Baptism

God has provided us a Saviour in Jesus Christ. In grace he offers us the pardon of our sins. And that gift of forgiveness cannot be earned by anything we do. Our faith must be in the perfect sacrifice which Jesus offered to the Father for our sins.

When Peter preached the gospel on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit convicted people of their sinful condition and their need for forgiveness. They cried out to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit ... Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day." (Acts 2:37,38,41)

Those who were baptised had their faith in the sacrifice of Jesus for their forgiveness. They did not trust in themselves or in what they were doing, but trusted in what Jesus had done on their behalf. Their faith was not in a sacrament, but in a Saviour.

From Pentecost onward, the church proclaimed forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus Christ. Those who believed that message were baptised in his name.

"But when they [the Samaritans] believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised, both men and women." (Acts 8:12)

"And many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptised." (Acts 18:8)

"And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptised and wash your sins away, calling on his name." (Acts 22:16)

In baptism, we are being identified through our faith with Jesus Christ in his death, burial and resurrection. In our baptism, we are making a distinctive break with the world and our former manner of life and committing ourselves unto the Lord.

Baptism is similar to marriage. A couple begin dating, fall in love and plan to marry. In their vows, they commit themselves to each other for life. God then joins them together in this new relationship of husband and wife. Likewise, baptism marks the beginning of a new relationship with the Lord.

