



CHRISTIAN FAITH



The Reality
of God

The Bible

The Human
Condition

Jesus
Christ

Christian
Faith

BC booklets are a series of brief studies by Dr. Glenn Parkinson examining the essentials of Biblical Christianity. These pamphlets are a series, meaning that each one builds upon the content of earlier ones. They do not have to read as a series, however. The reader should feel free to dip into the progression of thought at any point of interest.

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Romans 5:1-2

Thus the Apostle Paul summarizes Christian faith. “Peace with God” describes a positive relationship of friendship and love with our Creator. “Justified” is a legal term indicating full forgiveness of all the sin that made us God’s enemy. “Grace” reminds us that friendship with God is a gift freely bought and paid for by God Himself, a gift we in no way deserve. “Through our Lord Jesus Christ” declares the means by which God paid for this grace (Christ’s cross) and that receiving divine grace involves the recognition of the resurrected Jesus as one’s Lord. “The glory of God” in this instance refers to the eternal blessedness God has in store for His friends—blessing that expresses all the infinite goodness of His nature. “Rejoice,” therefore, describes the way that true Christian faith is felt or experienced.¹

But how does one get started with the Christian faith?

In one sense, getting started is as simple as just believing the gospel message outlined above. Heartfelt faith that trusts in Christ for forgiveness and practical leadership is itself evidence that the Spirit of God is at work in the heart. Anyone who truly believes in Christ has become God’s friend, even if he has not had the benefit of any religious rituals (such as baptism, the Lord’s Supper, walking down an aisle after a service, etc.).

However, since faith implies a new relationship with the Lord, it is most appropriate to enter into it with a conscious personal decision. This helps to prevent us from being deceived about the nature of real faith. Faith in Christ is more than just sincerely affirming the facts of who He is and what He accomplished. The Apostle James pointed this out:

You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. James 2:19

Obviously, confidence in the facts concerning Christ is necessary for faith. But even the Devil himself believes all the facts about Jesus. Such “faith,” however, does not redeem him. Entering into a saving relationship with God involves personal commitment to Jesus Christ, an appropriate response based to who He is and what He did.

GOD’S PROPOSAL

The biblical model of salvation is the covenant, a relationship between two parties in which each binds himself to be faithful in a mutually agreed upon manner. A marriage is the most common example of a covenant.² In fact, the Bible understands the very concept of love as faithfulness to one’s covenant relationships.³

When God created our first parents, the covenant of love He established with them and their children was simple: God would pour out His love by giving us unending blessedness in His presence. We were to return our love through heartfelt, total obedience. Tragically, our first parents rejected that covenant, thereby forfeiting our blessedness and twisting the human spirit into something incapable of willing obedience to God.

In order to reestablish His covenant with sinful humanity, God came to us in Christ to bear the penalty of our sin (death) and begin to untwist our spirit into willing, trusting obedience once more. Christ’s death on the cross covers the offense of rejecting God, and His resurrection enables Him to utilize God’s Spirit to renew our spirit.

Because of Christ’s death on behalf of sinners, we can reenter the covenant as if there had never been any sin separating us from God. All sin—past, present and future—was vicariously punished on the cross, just as if sinners had hung there in agony instead of Jesus. More than that, when Christ assumed our place on the cross, He enabled us to assume His place in God’s heart. This means that the original covenant offered at creation has been significantly amended; it has become a covenant of grace. Our sin need no longer prevent us from receiving

His perfect blessing; His blessing is available to anyone who trusts in the cross of Christ.

The cross makes the covenant love of God available to sinners, but we still must decide to accept God's proposal and enter into the covenant by our own choice. Entering the covenant requires an unreserved commitment to trust and obey God in all things. While the death of Christ already covers the ongoing failures of our still-imperfect spirit, the sincere desire to obey is necessary evidence that our faith is saving faith.⁴ Alas, even our sincerity is imperfect, struggling inside with a lifetime of accumulated habits. But God knows the heart, and sees the earnest desire to trust Him again.

Confidence in the work of Jesus the Savior and an earnest desire to follow Him as Lord are the marks of the Holy Spirit of God at work in our heart.⁵ This combination of Christ-centered confidence and commitment is what the Bible knows as saving faith.

So, in light of all this, what must we actually do in order to enter into God's covenant of love—a covenant that will make God our friend, remold our lives and secure us eternal blessedness?

“I DO”

What we must do is exercise faith⁶—believe in God's gracious offer of a restored relationship, want it, and embrace it. Responding by faith to God's proposal is the equivalent of saying, “I do” in a marriage covenant—a simple act with large consequences!

Indeed, exercising faith seems an awfully simple requirement for so great a thing. But remember that the benefits of salvation do not come from changes we make in ourselves; they come from a restored relationship with God. To use the analogy of marriage, the union of commoners with royalty benefits the commoners immensely, not because of what they bring to the marriage, but because of all that royalty is willing to share.

Of course, as with human marriage, our commitment must be in good faith, including an honest commitment to give ourselves totally

to the relationship. But unlike any merely human covenant, Christian faith does not initiate a relationship based upon our virtue and strength, but rather accepts a relationship based upon God's.

In other words, the value of Christian faith is not what it says about our heart—the quality of our godly emotion or righteous desire (if we had those things already, we wouldn't need salvation anyway). The value of faith is what our heart has chosen to say about Jesus Christ. Such faith has recognized the rightness of God's claims, the depth of our sin, and the greatness of His restoring love.

The Lord requires nothing less from us, but nothing more. Nothing more is necessary, since faith like that will spend the rest of eternity pleasing God out of sheer joy in the opportunity to do so. Former commoners will naturally adopt royal manners in time.

Whenever you are prepared to accept Christ's death as a gracious substitute for your own, and want to devote the rest of your life to honoring God to the best of your ability, the covenant between you and the Lord is established. You have said by your faith, "I do." God sees your heart and at that point declares you to be His friend and child forever⁷

Of course, as with a marriage or any other covenant, it is appropriate to mark your new relationship with special ceremony. Public ceremonies help us proclaim our commitment and share our joy.

Christ gave us two ceremonies to publicly celebrate our relationship with Him. Both have their roots in the Old Testament, and were chosen by Jesus to illustrate how He is the fulfillment of the covenant first offered so long ago. The first is Baptism, a symbolic washing that accompanies the entrance into discipleship.⁸ The second is The Lord's Supper (also called Communion or the Eucharist), a symbolic meal at which our faith is repeatedly nurtured and renewed.⁹ Various branches of Christ's Church celebrate these ceremonies (called sacraments) in different ways, but all acknowledge their importance.

Since the sacraments were designed by Christ to help us exercise and share our faith, and since both are administered by the Church, it is clear that faith in Christ quickly involves us in His Church. Christ's Church comes in all sorts of flavors. A good Church is one that clearly

puts Christ first and strives to be faithful to the Bible. It is important to choose a Church fellowship wisely. Ask advice from people who love Christ and try to live according to His Word.

Before anything else, however, I encourage you to offer up to God a personal prayer of faith. Such prayers do not bring salvation, but they help us express the faith which does. If you would like to offer to God a prayer to accept His offer of covenant love, I recommend the following:

- Plan a time and place where you can be alone with God.
- Read a passage or two of the Bible, such as John 1:1-18; Titus 3:3-8; Romans 5:1-2; 10:9-13 or Hebrews 10:15-17.
- Tell the Lord of your desire to be His friend and a part of His family forever.
- Acknowledge that you cannot claim His love on your own merits; that sin has rendered you incapable of giving Him the love and obedience you owe Him.
- Express to God your confidence in His Son Jesus Christ and what He did on the cross to cover your sin.
- Explain to God your commitment to relearn how to love Him by treating Christ Jesus as the unquestioned Lord of your life.
- Ask God to help you find a Church that honors Him well, where you can confess and celebrate your faith.

If such a prayer is a genuine expression of your faith, the covenant between you and God is sealed! The Lord's love for you is undiminished by your failures—you belong to Him and He belongs to you. This world is still dying, but you have come alive. Death will merely mark the end of this world's claims upon your body, and its scars upon your soul. You will be resurrected one day as Jesus was, to pursue life as it was meant to be lived.

Faith shows itself to be genuine by its endurance and growth over time. Since this world is in general rebellion against its Creator, expect your faith to be seriously tested more than once.¹⁰ Circumstances and sometimes other people will challenge God's goodness and His power.

Use the Bible, prayer and the fellowship of other believers to keep your confidence and your commitment strong.

If you have just begun a life of faith, make it a priority to learn all you can about the Living God and the life you share with Him.

If you have not yet begun a life of faith, I urge you to consider these matters in depth and then make a decision about your response to Jesus Christ.

This is the most important thing you will ever do.

Endnotes

- 1 This booklet assumes familiarity with the biblical notion of sin and its consequences, as well as an understanding of who Christ is and what He accomplished. These matters are treated in earlier pamphlets in this series.
- 2 The Bible actually likens the relationship of God to His people as that of a husband to his wife. See Ephesians 5:21-32; 2 Corinthians 11:2 and Revelation 19:9.
- 3 Deuteronomy 10:12-13; Romans 13:8-10.
- 4 Romans 7:14-8:17; John 14:22-24; 1 John 2:1-6.
- 5 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:16; 1 Corinthians 12:3.
- 6 John 6:28-29.
- 7 John 1:12-13.
- 8 Matthew 18:18-20. A “disciple” is a trainee, someone who is being taught by a Master — in this case, by Jesus Christ. You may already have been initiated by your parents as a disciple when you were a child. If so, then the next step is to enter into the Lord’s Supper with full understanding and commitment.
- 9 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.
- 10 John 15:18-21; Romans 8:18-25, 35-39; 1 Peter 4:12-14.



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