

WHY THE CHRISTIAN LIFE?

Why doesn't a Christian inherit his eternal reward immediately upon repentance? Why must he remain in this life, often to face trials and tests?

What exactly is the purpose of the Christian life?

Why does God leave His people in "this present evil age" (Gal. 1:4) after their repentance and baptism?

Why must we endure strains, tests, trials and even setbacks, all the while very much aware that we can stumble and fall and end up castaways (I Cor. 9:27)?

Few questions are more important!

They touch on vital issues for the true Christian: What is his code of conduct? How much does God expect of him? Why do some—even some who really repent and receive God's Spirit—ultimately abandon the Christian life? How may we guard against the same tragedy?

God's law in force

God communicates unmistakably to us how we must live—by His every word. Christ put it clearly in Matthew 4:4.

"But doesn't the New Testament totally supersede the Old?" some ask. "Didn't Paul say that grace abrogates the Ten Commandments? Aren't we only supposed to live by love?"

People have many different ideas about the Christian life. Speculation abounds. But people—fallible, fragile, erring mortals like ourselves—have no power in the face of death. People cannot impart eternal life to us (Matt. 10:28). Only God's opinions count on these vital questions. And there are some real shocks some startling opposites to what people suppose—in the Scriptures:

"For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and

comfort of the Scriptures might have hope" (Rom. 15:4).

"But this I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets" (Acts 24:14).

"So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God" (Rom. 7:25).

These are direct quotes from the apostle Paul, who purportedly taught against God's law. Jesus Christ Himself stated, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets" (Matt. 5:17). Yet millions mistakenly think He did.

Furthermore, the New Testament defines the new covenant relationship thus: "'Behold, the days are coming,' says the Lord, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah . . . For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel: After those days,' says the Lord, 'I will put my laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people'" (Heb. 8:8, 10).

At almost every turn, it seems, the Bible teaches the diametric opposite of what people commonly assume.

A real Christian lives by every word of God.

God's Church exists today

At the time we repent we awake to the mind-jarring fact that this is Satan's world (II Cor. 4:4) and that we have all been willing accomplices of Satan, deceived by our own drives and desires as unwitting agents in his diabolical system of sin, hopelessness and death (Eph. 2:1-3).

Real repentance is responding to God's call with conviction and urgency, answering God's divine summons to flee spiritual Babylon (Rev. 18:4).

God's representatives help bring us to real repentance. "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). Indeed, Christ's ministry can discern serious repentance (John 20:23).

Here is where some people stumble!

A world suspicious of all authority is bothered by the fact that God uses human instruments to help reconcile the world to Himself (II Cor. 5:18). God uses human agents (I Cor. 12:27-30).

God insists that He has elected to save humanity through the "foolishness of the message preached" (I Cor. 1:21). Christ conferred authority upon His true ministers (Mark 16:15-16, Matt. 28:18-20).

God's true Church is indeed a spiritual organism, but a definite, literal, physical organization as well (Acts 8:3).

Do you know—and know that you know—where God's Church is today?

Christ said it would exist at the end time (Matt. 16:18). One must exercise prudence and caution in this era of religious confusion (II Tim. 3:13), but sincere seekers of truth would also do well to emulate Ethiopia's capable first-century finance minister.

Notice: "Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, 'Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' This is desert. So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet.

"Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go

near and overtake this chariot.' So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' And he said, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' " (Acts 8:26-31).

What is the point for us today? Just this: The well educated, intelligent Ethiopian eunuch needed human teachers. Though he was a studious, diligent man, he was willing to submit to God's human representatives (John 13:20). He didn't know it all. He needed trained and accredited representatives of the living Christ to instruct him.

"So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. Now when they came up out of the water"—notice that baptism means complete immersion in water (Acts 8:38-39).

And we cannot baptize ourselves! We need the Church of God and the balanced, concerned teaching of God's ministers. This should be obvious, but some forget it after baptism (Acts 5:3-4). The priceless Holy Spirit that begets us as God's children comes through the laying on of hands by Christ's ministers—and only through them (Acts 8:14-17).

Steps to salvation

The watery grave of baptism, symbolizing the death of the old self, and the laying-on-of-hands ceremony, which gives us access to the life-giving, energizing, Holy Spirit of power—these are fundamental steps to becoming a real Christian (Heb. 6:1-2). Yet God makes both ceremonies possible only through His Church, specifically through the ministry He has chosen (Eph. 4:11-12). (Write for a free copy of the articles "What Is the True Church?" and "Why the Church?")

We surrender to God at baptism. In effect we say, "God, through your Word and your Church, please teach me the right way to live!"

And what does God tell us to orient our lives around? What is our life's new direction after baptism and the laying on of hands?

"For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to

drink into one Spirit" (I Cor. 12:13). The "one body" spoken of here is the body of Christ, the Church, "which He purchased with His own blood" (Col. 1:18, Acts 20:28).

The Church's goals and purposes become our own. Only that one true Church possesses the keys to the kingdom of heaven the essential spiritual knowledge we will need to grow, to endure, to qualify for our ultimate destiny—membership in the universe-ruling, royal Family of God (Matt. 16:19, Rev. 21:7).

Some forget this. They foolishly imagine they can achieve salvation apart from God's Church. They forget where they learned the basic truths necessary to even comprehend the plan of salvation (II Tim. 3:14). Though we are called as individuals, we are at baptism plunged into a group, a small but highly motivated organization with an urgent task to accomplish in this world.

An individual Christian cannot accomplish the global work Christ commissioned to the Church. A group effort is needed under God's government, which is exercised in God's Church.

Growing Christians are zealous to attend Church services, Bible studies and, in the right measure, unifying and uplifting Church activities (Heb. 10:25). They are profitable servants, going above and beyond responsibility (Luke 17:10).

Others carelessly relax after baptism. They forget the urgency and commitment of real repentance. They settle into a comfortable rut. Few oversights are more deadly!

Yes, baptism symbolizes pardon of past sins. Yes, the laying on of hands gains us access to God's Holy Spirit. Yes, that is the right beginning.

But there is much more to real Christianity, even yet!

Stir up the Spirit

The plain truth is that a real Christian can quench the precious Holy Spirit of God (I Thess. 5:19). Even Timothy was admonished, by Paul, to "stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands" (II Tim. 1:6).

Some run out of steam. The urgency, the interest, the enthusiasm that produced real changes before baptism wanes. They are easy victims for dis-

couragement. Depression and despair are fertile ground for Satan (II Cor. 2:11). Discouragement is often triggered by the letdown we feel when we know we're not making the progress we should. Some, feeling condemned, go from this to the next step: slowly slipping away from Church activities, fellowship, Bible studies and even Church services (I John 2:19).

Others cover up their lack of progress by adopting a hostile, aggressive attitude. They resent the concerned correction of the ministry (Heb. 13:17). They turn bitter, resentful, critical (Heb. 12:15). Plagued with guilt and self-pity, they gradually feel awkward and uncomfortable around God's people. The all-out commitment of repentance and baptism gradually weakens under this slow, debilitating bombardment (verses 5-6).

God never forsakes us! We forsake Him. We can actually "neglect so great a salvation" (Heb. 2:3). It can happen to any of us.

Baptism only the beginning

Real overcomers know that baptism marks only the beginning of the Christian life. They deeply treasure the minute portion of the Holy Spirit imbued by the laying on of hands and proceed to diligently and single-mindedly ask God for more of it in fervent prayer, Bible study and fasting (Luke 11:13, Jas. 5:16).

Yes, sad to say, some people make only certain outer changes at baptism (I Cor. 3:3). Some merely switch days from Sunday to Saturday as their time of religious observances. Some smugly take pride in the fact that they generously boost their religious contributions to 10 percent. Not a few feel quite superior that they see through the foolish spectacles of Christmas and Easter. They are those who have trouble understanding why others miss the plain meaning of the Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles.

All of this—Sabbath keeping, tithing, Holy Day observance—all of these obvious fruits of the Christian life are absolutely necessary to please God (I John 3:22). But real Christianity goes beyond that. Remember the Pharisees? They punctiliously performed external shows of obedience to God but hadn't even begun

the tremendous task of changing their human nature (Matt. 7:21).

Christ offered this witness against them: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone" (Matt. 23:23).

A living sacrifice

Baptism only begins the Christian life—a "race," Paul calls it, something we should work at, get better at (II Tim. 4:7). The precious and exquisite gift of God's Holy Spirit gives us the power to make real progress on overcoming our problems. But the Holy Spirit must be continually stirred up, increased, used.

And how is that done? By prayer—much prayer. In deep, meaningful, personal Bible study. By regular fasting, searching our lives for the lacks and deficiencies.

Paul magnificently crystallized the Christian life in two powerful sentences: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Rom. 12:1-2).

Our part in God's Work

Can anything be plainer? Real Christianity is deep, inner change. It is a lifelong calling to renew the mind (Phil. 2:5), recast the thoughts (II Cor. 10:5), rework the personality (Acts 9:21), restructure the emotional responses (Acts 20:35).

The prophet Amos asked, "Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?" (Amos 3:3). You cannot agree with God until you find out what is uppermost on His mind. To walk with God, you must actively pursue His goals.

So what is No. 1 on God's mind right now? What is it that all of Scripture pivots around? Can we know? Yes, we can—definitely. The answer is in Acts 3:19-21:

"Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted

out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began."

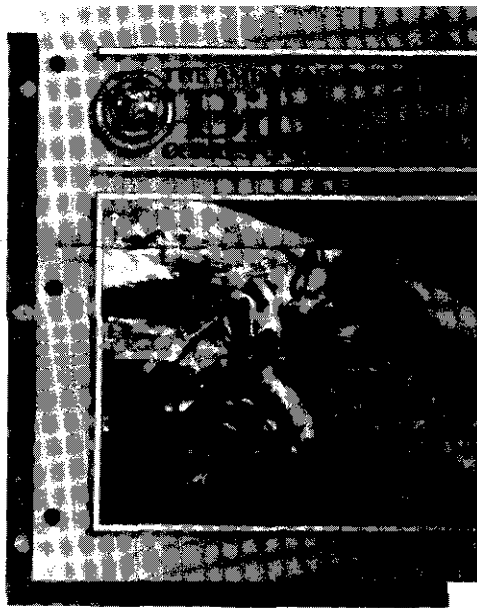
There it is! The No. 1 thing on God's mind right now is the imminent return of Jesus Christ to set up the Kingdom of God! The key, then, to thinking like God thinks and to

walking in harmony with Him is to do our part in helping establish the Kingdom of God on earth.

Do we have a part in that? Absolutely. Dozens of scriptures reveal that a real Christian is actually in training during this physical life for divine rulership in the Kingdom of God (Luke 22:29-30, Rev. 2:26, 3:21).

Right now, God wants the announcement of Christ's soon coming Kingdom trumpeted to the ends of this earth (Matt. 24:14). God will not pour out the awesome plagues of

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the book of Revelation unless humanity is warned first (Amos 3:7).

This enormous task can only be accomplished by a group, a small (Luke 12:32) but well organized and highly dedicated body of people, a group reaffirming their commitment to their calling every day through the power of God's Spirit (II Cor. 4:16). Just as the early apostles needed the backing and zealous support of a highly motivated Church of God, so does Christ's modern-day apostle (I Cor. 12:28).

This is the whole purpose of the Christian life!

Yet how few understand the awesome significance of this way of life! Listen: If there were not an elect, a group writing God's laws inside their hearts by the power of God's Spirit (II Cor. 3:3), a tiny nucleus of believers amidst a dying civilization who prove to God that, with His Spirit, overcoming is possible, interpersonal relationships can work (Mal. 4:5-6),

human nature can be changed and people can become pleasing to God—if there were not such an absolutely crucial project being accomplished—then, Scripture reveals, God would allow human life to be utterly obliterated (Matt. 24:22).

We are part of that monumental Work! Every growing Christian knows this! It is his motivation, his consuming interest in life, his real vocation (Eph. 4:1).

Living real Christianity

Without this energizing, clear-cut purpose, we can lack the zeal and enthusiasm necessary to constantly drive ourselves before God's throne in daily prayer, in regular fasting, in claiming the strength to defeat our frustrating, ensnaring problems.

Blinded to these awesome stakes, some begin to retrogress (Heb. 2:1). God doesn't forsake them. They, through neglect, discouragement, defeat, bitterness, have forsaken the

great God, the ever living, all powerful One who offers in His Word a hope stronger than the steady drip drop of petty annoyances and personal irritations, a hope even stronger than death (I Pet. 1:3).

How much better to continually reinforce in our minds what the baptism covenant was all about: only the first pioneering steps in a new way of life—a disciplined life wherein our allotted span is spent serving God's purposes, not our own—a life dedicated to furthering God's grand and global Work rather than spinning off into our own shortsighted, temporary pursuits.

Jesus Christ, our example, said, "I must be about My Father's business" (Luke 2:49)!

That is real Christianity!

"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (I Cor. 15:58). □