

Heaven's Password

A biblical study of salvation's critical word

Nick Kalivoda

Heaven's Password

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Radio Bible Course

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HEAVEN'S PASSWORD

by Nick Kalivoda

Introduction

On the large island of Crete in the deep blue Mediterranean Sea a young man excitedly opened a newly-delivered letter. It was the Apostle Paul's epistle to Titus. He read this arresting statement: **"in hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began. . ."** (Titus 1:2)

We might wonder why the Apostle Paul deemed it necessary in that first century letter to describe God as one "who cannot lie," for most people are convinced that God would not lie. Men, however, do lie, especially those who lived on that large island with Titus and of whom it was written **"Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons. . ."** (Titus 1:12) These words were not a Christian judgment of the character of those ancient people. Paul was merely quoting the famous poet Epimenides, a sixth-century B.C. native of Crete, in order to contrast the character of unreliable men with that of the completely trustworthy God.

Americans, who early in the 20th century considered lying as wrong, have become like those ancient Cretans. An extensive opinion survey published in the book, "The Day America Told the Truth," (1991) reveals that 91 percent of us lie regularly at work and at home. A Wall Street Journal story in October, 1998, called attention to the fact that "lying in court is getting common," as is concealing the truth. Texas attorney Mark Perlmutter, who wrote a book on "Why Lawyers (and the Rest of Us) Lie and Engage in Other Repugnant Behavior," said lying has become so generally accepted in court proceedings that perjury prosecutions are seldom undertaken. Taking an oath to tell the whole truth "so help me God" has become a formality. It no longer has significance. Even the defenders of President William J. Clinton admitted that he lied repeatedly after taking an oath to tell "the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

Paul's point in his letter to Titus is that God, unlike men, can be trusted. He has promised eternal life in the Scriptures, and since truth is the essence of His divine character, there should be no reluctance to believe Him even when His promise seems incredulous.

So, What is the Password?

The Lord Jesus and the Apostles used the word “believe” almost exclusively as the means of obtaining eternal life. This makes it a critical word! Although evangelists seem to avoid the word “believe,” it is the predominant word in the New Testament in regard to the means of obtaining eternal life. The Gospel of John, written for the stated purpose of bringing its readers to salvation, uses this word 99 times, many of which are directly related to promises of eternal life. “Believe” is the only verb specifying the response which God awaits from man to His gracious offer of eternal life.

We learn from the Bible that the Old Testament people of God hesitated to trust God. This lack of faith is said to have kept all but a few of those who participated in the exodus out of Egypt from entering the promised land **“So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief”(Hebrews 3:19).**

Although the children of Israel did not question the divine origin of their Scriptures, they failed to comprehend the faith principle which God established with their famous forefather Abraham, who is best known for his faith. God said to him:

“Look up at the heavens and count the stars--if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” Abram (Abraham) believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:5-6 NIV)

Abraham believed what God told him, and by this faith he honored the Creator of the universe as credible. He also became the example for all mankind of how to obtain righteousness through faith. He believed that God would do what He promised, which is the essence of faith! While the Jews took pride in their forefather Abraham, tragically their respect for his faith toward God diminished as the centuries fled into history.

The word “faith,” which is the noun form of the verb “believe,” gradually took on another meaning prior to New Testament times. It acquired the meaning of obedience and faithfulness to the Law, instead of a trust in the promises of God. As a consequence, at the time of Jesus the Jews were attempting to gain righteousness by the law instead of following Abraham’s example in their Scriptures. Jesus pointed out that they further abandoned the Word of God by giving preference to the traditions of Judaism. This was an affront to God, who committed these holy writings to the care of these people, and of whom the Psalmist wrote:

He declares His word to Jacob, His statutes and His judgments to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any nation. . .

(Psalm 147:19-20)

Among the nations of the world, only Israel was given a special revelation from heaven to inform these chosen people of God's desires and to give them hope in the coming Messiah to redeem them. The prophets reminded them of God's displeasure with their insincere religious activities, and the time came when they gave religious tradition more respect than the word from God, causing Jesus to declare:

"But you do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe. You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life." (John 5:38-40)

While the Scriptures declare that faith is the way to please God, the Apostle Paul observed that his fellow Jews were relying on works of the law for divine acceptance, as many persons do today. Although the Bible reveals a gift of righteousness offered by God, Paul noted that those who tried to earn righteousness did not get it, while others who did not try, did get it. Here is his explanation of this phenomenon:

That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. (Romans 9:30-32)

The Gentiles who had no hope and who were "without God in the world" received God's righteousness as a gift when they believed the good news that salvation is a gift of God received by faith in Christ. On the other hand, the people of the law missed it because they abandoned the way of faith established some 1900 years earlier when the Lord imputed righteousness to Abraham as he "believed the Lord." His justification through faith heralded the fact that God is looking for people who will believe Him! Jesus affirmed this when He declared:

"And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day." (John 6:40 NASB)

"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. . . ." (John 11:25-26)

The absence of any other condition for obtaining everlasting life in scores of similar texts is overwhelming evidence that Jesus Christ and the

Apostles consistently preached the only way to God as nothing more than believing in His unique Son. How can we be sure that faith alone in Christ alone will not fail us when we stand before God? The Apostle Peter speaks to this point:

Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, "Behold, I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious, and he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame." (I Peter 2:6)

Peter was quoting from Isaiah 28, where the prophet was urging the children of Israel to have complete confidence in God for their safety instead of depending upon alliances with strong nations (See Isaiah 31). Peter applies this Scripture to Christians, telling them that they will not be disappointed for trusting in the Savior.

Said another way, the one who believes in Christ, that chief cornerstone of our faith and the Savior sent by God, need not be concerned about his failures or whether he has done enough. Those relying upon Christ alone for deliverance will not be put to shame at a coming judgment, nor will they experience disappointment for having depended solely upon God's promise to save them through faith.

What Does The Bible Mean By "Believe?"

The word "believe" means to trust in, to depend upon, to rely on and to have absolute confidence in God. The basic meaning of the biblical words "believe" and "faith" seem to have escaped many of us as indicated by the statement, "I don't have enough faith to believe." We may have come to think of faith as a special endowment from heaven, which many want, but few possess. Faith is nothing other than believing God. It is so simple that its meaning is easily missed. When we read any of the Bible's promises of eternal life and forgiveness, and believe that God will keep these promises, we have faith. Anything less than this is doubting God. We should not ask how we can get faith. Instead ask why we are reluctant to believe the words upon which God stakes His reputation--the Bible! Are you struggling to determine if your faith is real? Ask yourself instead if God will do what He promised as a result of your faith in His Son. It is impossible to believe God apart from His inspired word, the Bible, for it is the unique record of what God has said and done through the centuries. As a result it is our only reliable source of information concerning Him and what He expects of us. It would seem that the Creator, described as "the judge of all the earth," was

duty-bound to give a special revelation to mankind. The upshot of this revelation is that God wants His creatures to believe what He has said, and anything less than this insults his character and invites divine wrath.

A case in point is God's warning of the judgment of death to Adam and Eve if they did not heed His voice concerning one tree in the garden. The Bible tells us that Eve listened to another voice, and she was deceived. They ate what was forbidden, and sin entered the world! Behind this disobedience lay the sin of doubting God, which resulted in separation from the Creator. Since that dark day, others have likewise been tempted to doubt God's word. Doubt may cause a person to ask if God meant what He said and said what He meant. Doubt questions the integrity of God.

God's word is truth. No other reliable record of the Creator or His Son exists, and His communication to mankind is under divine preservation for **“the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel.” (Romans 2:16)** This suggests that the gospel will be the standard by which mankind will be judged. The failure of a mere mortal to believe the immortal Creator is incomprehensible!

The person who believes submits to God's revelation. It brings him to his knees in humility, respect, and awe of the eternal God and Creator. The word “believe” as well as its noun form “faith” are used interchangeably in the Bible to emphasize complete trust in God as a means of obtaining His approval. This faith-alone-way to God was resisted by some in the first century, prompting Paul to write this surprising concept:

And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness... (Romans 4:5 RSV)

The above statement enlarges our definition of the word “believe”(trust). Believe means to depend upon another (Christ) for righteousness instead of working for it! A person who does good works in order to be righteous before God is attempting to win divine acceptance by either effort or merit. This passage, however, declares that such a person must stop work, implying that God has a plan for our righteousness which is contrary to the world's merit approach. Salvation is promised to the one who ceases to work for God's approval and instead “believes Him who justifies the ungodly.” The ungodly? Amazing! Faith, therefore, is a willingness to lose everything that might be gained by trying, so that one may receive God's righteousness as a gift.

God places the highest value on a person's willingness to trust in Him for righteousness. Although none of us are made righteous when we believe, God nevertheless *declares* us righteous, even though we are not!

Such an act of God may be difficult to understand, yet this is the meaning of the word “justify” in the Bible. To be justified by the Father through faith alone is an astounding fact of Scripture.

The Bible declares that Abraham believed God, in contrast to doing work for God. He believed God’s incredible promise that this aged man and his barren wife would be given descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven. The result of Abraham’s faith was the divine declaration that his faith was counted as righteousness. This faith was nothing other than believing that God would do what He promised to do for him. This is the essence of faith, and its meaning is supported by the following:

And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore "it was accounted to him for righteousness." (Romans 4:19-22)

This passage enhances the meaning of the word "believe." To believe is to rely upon God to do what He promised to do. Faith, as used in the Bible, does not ask anyone to try to believe, nor is it a matter of convincing one's self that something is true. The faith of which the Bible speaks is believing the record that God has given concerning His Son.

Writing about 1900 years after Abraham's time, the Apostle Paul declares that we also can be justified by the same means as Abraham:

Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification. (Romans 4:23-25)

This text concerns the assignment (imputation) of divine righteousness to the believer, just as God credited Abraham with righteousness. The same is promised to each person who does nothing other than believe the good news concerning the resurrected Savior. The basis for this remarkable declaration of God is said to be what Jesus accomplished for us when He offered Himself as a sacrifice for sin.

God has promised eternal life to all who believe in His Son, the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus confirmed this and gave emphasis to the trustworthiness of God’s word by the opening two words:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come

into judgment, but has passed out of death into life." (John 5:24 NASB)

Jesus declares that a person who hears and believes God's word would not only have eternal life, but would also escape the greatly-feared judgment for sin. This staggering proclamation does not imply that God is lenient toward sin, for the divine judgment for sin was exercised earlier at the cross of Christ. The judgment which we deserve fell on the crucified Christ instead. Divine law asks for only one death for sin and the gospel tells men that Christ paid that sin debt for them. God now considers the debt paid in full. Christ's cross-death was a single sacrifice for all time. Man need never again offer any additional sacrifice for sin. Any attempt to do so insults the gracious God who sacrificed "the Lamb of God" to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

This and other promises from God reveal that faith is the threshold of our eternal destiny. We may have failed to recognize that many of our Lord's teachings and miracles were for the purpose of motivating people to believe in Him for eternal life. Years ago a member of the Gideon organization, the businessmen who are best known for placing Bibles in hotel rooms, gave the author his business card, on the back of which was the

I have believed in Jesus Christ and have eternal life.

following:

() I have not believed in Christ and am lost forever.

Name _____

Check one of the above and sign your name. Give this card to your minister so that he will not have to lie about you at your funeral.

Your Name _____

This card reflects what the Bible repeatedly declares--that one's destiny is determined by whether or not he or she believes. For example:

“He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” (John 3:18)

It is irrefutable that salvation is directly related to the word "believe." The Bible implies that God sees only two kinds of people in the world in regard to salvation--believers and unbelievers. The former get life; the others are condemned and face eternal separation from God.

Believing is a willing response of trust in the divine offer of deliverance from sin and its consequences. Those who believe it are immediately given eternal life. By this response to God's promise the person who believes honors the One whose integrity cannot be questioned.

Since the Scriptures tell us that Jesus was sent to earth with the words of the Father and that Jesus proclaimed nothing except His words (John 12:49), we can conclude that the Father insists that we hear and

believe Him. The Father specifically stated this at the transfiguration of Jesus:

And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!" (Luke 9:35)

Failure to hear Christ is a rejection of the Father. Jesus did not promise eternal life to those who merely believe *in* God, which may mean nothing more than admitting His existence. Salvation is always related to His promises. The difference between believing *in* God and *believing* God is that the latter implies that divine communication has been received and that a person is depending on God to keep His word. This is what it means to "believe God."

The New Testament points us to Abraham as the prime example of a man who believed God. He heard what God told him, and he believed God.

Just as Abraham "believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed." So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham. (Galatians 3:6-9)

Although the above unconditional promise given in Genesis 15 surpassed his understanding, Abraham believed that God would fulfill what He promised. As a result, God declared him righteous forever! Yet the record shows that he had lapses of faith and even engaged in deception (Genesis 20). Nevertheless, human failure did not nullify his justification by God, nor can it affect others who believe. Since it came apart from works, the gift of righteousness cannot be jeopardized by the lack of works. Abraham was declared righteous through faith because God delights in the person who believes Him.

A confirmation that the problem of sin was settled by Christ's death comes from Jesus' final words on the cross: **"It is finished,"** which, translated from a single Greek word "tetelestai" (John 19:30), suggests both achievement and completion. Ancient papyri reveal that this same Greek word was used in the commercial world to declare a debt paid in full. Its perfect tense conveys the idea that a completed action in the past has continuing results. In using the word "finished," He could not have been referring to prophecies about Himself, for His resurrection and future reign awaited fulfillment. What He finished was the full payment for all sin for all

men for all time. God's law which demanded the death of the sinner and summarized by Ezekiel 18:4, "**The soul that sins must die!**" was fulfilled by Christ. He paid that requirement and secured redemption for us.

The writer of the book of Hebrews captured the essence of those final words of Jesus as he wrote:

But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God. . . (Hebrews 10:12)

The fact that Jesus sat implies that everything necessary for the remission of sins was completed, and just as He now rests, so the believer is to join Him in resting by faith.

Is It Presumptuous To Claim To Be Sure?

The biblical doctrine that declares a person completely acceptable to his Maker through faith alone seems outlandish even to religious people. Those who have been reared under a system which insists that a just God must reward men on the basis of merit may reject the biblical concept of salvation through faith as presumption. Presumption is a sin of arrogance, a boldness which assumes something that is not true. A Christian's personal assurance of eternal life, however, has its basis in scores of God's promises to those who believe in Jesus Christ.

No one who dares to believe God for eternal life can be guilty of presumption, for believing is agreement with God's expressed will; God is pleased by such confidence in Him. The apostle John said that he wrote his first epistle so that believers "**may know that you have eternal life.**" Some mainline religious groups deny the possibility of such certainty, although the Scriptures reveal that God wants us to know this fact.

Faith is not trying to believe something that is untrue. Nor is faith a strong belief in something we desire. This is not what the Bible means by faith. Faith is not hoping; it is believing that God will keep His promise to us! The result is that all spiritual blessings become the inheritance of those who dare to believe God. There are no promises of blessings to doubters, instead they have God's wrath resting on them (John 3:36).

Some persons speak of "trying to have faith." Don't try! Faith is not attainable by trying. Faith is directly related to what God has spoken, and it is generated within the person who listens to that word from heaven. If God had not spoken and preserved His words in the Scriptures, there could be no faith. Although God's glory is also revealed in creation (Psalm

19), the heavens do not tell us of the Savior, His grace, forgiveness of sins, or the way to heaven. The Scriptures alone do this; they are His special revelation that convey His promises.

It is astounding that the Bible gives about 115 promises of salvation to those who believe, and an additional 35 promises of salvation to those who have faith. Yet these 150 divine promises, which tell us to do nothing more than "believe" or to have "faith" (its noun form), are discounted by rejecters of the faith way to God. They appeal to a handful of passages which are misinterpreted to mean that salvation requires good works in addition to faith in Christ's work on the cross. One such example is the frequently-quoted passage by James, where this question is asked:

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? (James 2:14)

The key that unlocks this troublesome passage is the correct answer to a single question: What kind of works? The assumption that James meant "good works" is erroneous, for the context of James 2:14-26 refers to a different kind of work, the kind done by the prostitute Rahab when she betrayed her city by helping Hebrew spies to escape, and also to Abraham's work of sacrificing his son Isaac, neither of which was a *good* work. James does not refer to their actions as "*good* works," but he does illustrate by their actions how they were "justified by works." James is not unlike current writers and speakers who commonly employ illustrations in order to clarify statements which may be novel, or which employ words apart from their normal meaning. His two illustrations help define his intended meaning. Since the "works" of both Abraham and Rahab were a positive response to what God desired, they may be defined as "faith works." These were actions which, while not generally considered good, did demonstrate unquestioning faith in God. (See the Appendix for a more complete explanation of James 2.)

Persons who promote the faith-way to God are often challenged and wrongly charged with ignoring the need for good works. This can hardly be the case, for the Bible insists on good works from those who believe Him. The Bible states **"that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works."(Titus 3:8)** Every epistle in some manner calls on believers to modify or correct any behavior which is below the holy standard expected of God's children. In addition, they are told to **"put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other. . ."** (Colossians

3:12-13 NASB)

Such pleas, however, are addressed to believers only. Similar appeals in the New Testament always rest on a relationship established by one's implicit trust in what God has declared, along with the resulting spiritual birth into the family of God which accompanies it. The appeals for good works are only to those who have submitted to the principle of faith to please God. They are never addressed to unbelievers, for "**without faith it is impossible to please Him.**" (Hebrews 11:6)

The failure to believe the God "**who cannot lie**" is an insult comparable to one's charge that God makes promises which He does not intend to keep. Since Jesus declared that "**the work of God**" is performed when a person believes in the One sent by Him (John 6:29) our assurance of salvation cannot rightly be labeled as presumption. Such persons are merely complying with the divine command to believe in His Son.

Can I Ever Be Righteous In God's Sight?

Since God is perfectly righteous, a standard to which man cannot attain, God's issue with man is a matter of righteousness. It is His requirement for acceptance into heaven. Although this perfect standard dooms the human race, the Bible asserts that our loving God graciously solved the problem. Since all of us lack personal righteousness, He arranged to give us what is needed to meet His standard, as Scripture declares:

"But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus..."
(Romans 3:21-24)

Several points in the above deserve special attention. The first is "the righteousness of God" ("*from God*" in some translations). There is a righteousness that God offers as a gift, seeing that we cannot achieve it. Because of its source, it is a perfect righteousness. This is nothing other than the righteousness of God given in exchange for faith in the Son of God, who was perfectly righteous. Jesus lived a perfect life and was completely obedient to the Father, fulfilling all that the law of God demanded. Notice also that the above passage states *how* this gift is obtained: "...the

righteousness of God which is **through faith** in Christ Jesus."

The essence of the Christian faith is that God is offering eternal life as a gift to the unrighteous, a word descriptive of all persons. The Bible refers to this as God's "grace." Contrary to some of our opinions gained in childhood, religion, or culture, this gift of God is not based on a person's dedicated efforts to become worthy. Its basis is the righteousness of the Son of God, which the gracious Father gives to us, the ungodly, who believe. While all of the world's religions insist that men strive to attain divine acceptance by meritorious deeds, the Christian faith announces that God will accept us on the basis of *another's* righteousness. This person, Jesus Christ, is the righteous One. As the sinless Son of God, He is uniquely qualified to save sinners. This righteousness of God is given "**to all who believe**" (vs 22). It is within the spirit of the New Testament for us to say that "it is to all who do nothing more than believe!" This incredible revelation from God caused the Apostle Paul to write:

Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. (Romans 3:28)

The conclusion is inescapable: our attempts to obey the Law of Moses contribute nothing to our acceptance by God.

Isn't Belief In "Something" Enough?

The word "believe" occurs more than 200 times in the New Testament and is given as the means of man's salvation 115 times in the Bible. The Word of God does not tell us merely to believe, it directs us to believe in the One sent by God!

It is often said, "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere; have faith in something. God will honor this."

This statement is nonsense! Neither Jesus nor His apostles encouraged such folly. In Jesus' day there were both religious Jews and Samaritans who had firm belief in something other than God's promises, but Jesus commanded the apostles to preach the gospel to them (Acts 1:8). Such persons were believing in something that could not save them and were in need of the good news that could save.

Faith must have an object in order to be valid as biblical faith, and the Bible places value only on faith which is directed toward God. Faith

without an object is fantasy; it cannot save. It has no basis. The Bible directs all faith toward the Son of God, not to religious practices such as rituals and sacraments or to saints in heaven. Jesus presented the way to the Father as narrow. Since He alone was sent from heaven to redeem the lost, Jesus exposed all other ways to God as invalid when He declared:

"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." (John 14:6)

This dogmatic statement is not widely received because it implies that various religions are misguided attempts to reach the Father. The way to God is narrow, which is not a disadvantage, for truth likewise is narrow. The New Testament identifies the way as faith in the crucified and resurrected Son of God, Christ our Lord. Although faith that saves us from our sins must have the right object, the Bible does not tell us to rely on the strength of our faith, but rather on the power of the One in whom we trust! If a person declares that he expects to get to heaven *because* he has "much faith," he may be depending upon his faith instead of a promise from God's word.

Will The Real Jesus Stand Up?

This title implies that there is more than one Jesus. Unfortunately, there is. He is a caricature of the Jesus of the Bible, one invented by the minds of desperate and unbelieving men and women who do not accept the testimony of the Word of God about Him. They have created their own Jesus as a support figure, and they preach him when needed to champion a social cause, support a political endeavor, promote the spiritual fatherhood of God, endorse all religions as good, and a host of other meritorious efforts with which the Jesus of the Bible did not ally Himself.

Even the major monotheistic religions of the world--Islam and Judaism--along with Buddhists, Unitarians, and a variety of cults, give him high marks. They approve of him as a prophet and a good teacher, and frequently cite selected teachings from this "master" to give authority to their agendas. While few, if any, hate this "Jesus" today, the Jesus of the Bible was hated in the first century because of whom He claimed to be. Many people today tolerate the biblical Jesus, but those in the first century who heard Jesus teach in Jerusalem were not so passive. The Apostle John described their reaction:

Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him,

because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God. (John 5:18)

Was their charge that Jesus claimed equality with the Father valid? It was. Jesus confirmed it when He made no attempt to claim that He had been misunderstood. Furthermore, He reinforced His claim of equality with God when He asserted in the following passages that whatever the Father did, the Son also did. Additionally, He insisted that as the Father raises the dead, so does the Son, and He declared that the Father had designated Him to have all authority over men:

"For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him." (John 5:22-23)

The Bible presents Jesus as God in human flesh. Additionally, everything the Father wanted to say, to be, and to do on earth, He accomplished through Jesus. Jesus is the image of the invisible Father. He is further described as:

. . . His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power. . . (Hebrews 1:2-3)

The true identity of the New Testament Jesus is not a matter of human opinion; it is derived from His own claim of being the Son of God sent from heaven to speak for the Father, along with the bold proclamations of His apostles and the prophecies of the equally-inspired Old Testament prophets. The Scriptures teach that His blood is redemptive and that His cross work was divinely predestined. This cannot be honestly contested.

While many persons claim to believe in Jesus, there is no salvation promised to those who believe in a fictitious "Jesus" who is the result of a perverse imagination. The Father knows His Son and has given us a validating record of Him. He does not know the one whose credentials men have altered because of their unbelief and perversion of truth. There is no benefit in believing in a Jesus who is not from heaven, or virgin-born, sinless, redemptive and resurrected deity. Such a man cannot save, for he himself would need a savior.

Salvation is not a result of believing historic facts about Jesus, such as His crucifixion. Agreement with the historical record is not faith, and it cannot save a person from his sins. However, belief in the Jesus described in the divine record and what that record claims He accomplished by His

vicarious sacrifice is redemptive! Faith is a conviction that the divine record about Jesus is trustworthy and that God can be trusted to do what He promised to do for those who believe in His Son.

It is important to understand that the Son of God existed with the Father before creation. He was the "Word" through whom the Father created the heavens and the earth, as John wrote:

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. (John 1:1-3)

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

The Apostle John boldly claims that Jesus is God and is eternal, since He existed in the beginning. The Bible reveals that Jesus was not reluctant to proclaim His identity as deity, and when asked to show the Father to His disciples, He answered:

"He who has seen Me has seen the Father. . ." (John 14:9)

The Jesus of the Bible came as the promised redeemer. Having been rejected by His own people, He was resurrected, and returned to heaven where He waits in the place of honor until the Father makes all His enemies a stool for His feet. Then He will return to fulfill all that the prophets foretold. His appearing will be triumphant in power and glory to receive those who believe in Him, and to judge the world.

The genuine Jesus accepted the entire Old Testament of the Jews as divinely-inspired Scripture. He believed that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, that God provided manna from heaven for the Israelites in the wilderness, that there was a single author of the book of Isaiah, that a fish swallowed Jonah, that Cain killed his brother Abel, that Noah built an ark which saved him and his family from a universal flood, and that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by God because of sexual perversion.

The Jesus of the Bible believed in life after death, heaven for believers and hell (separation from God) for those refusing the gift of life. He offered no leniency for those who offend children, saying it would be better for them that a millstone be tied to their necks and that such persons be thrown into the sea. As for religious leaders who made void the Scriptures, perverting them and replacing them by teaching the traditions of men, Jesus repeatedly pronounced judgment with the phrase, "Woe to you. . ."

The Jesus of the New Testament foretold of terrifying days of tribulation on the earth, so terrible in scope that they will exceed all previous suffering and horror. He also warned His disciples about impostors who would attempt to impersonate Him:

"For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive. . ." (Matthew 24:24)

The Apostle Paul hints that already in his day a different Jesus was being preached, and he had fears for the gullible Christians in Corinth as indicated below:

For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted--you may well put up with it! (II Corinthians 11:4)

Can We Trust the Bible?

Regardless of what the Bible tells us about Jesus, its claims concerning Him are valid only if the biblical record is reliable. Can the New Testament be trusted? Is it accurate? What evidence is there that it is divine revelation?

Although there exists an undeniable record of fulfilled prophecy along with strong testimony from archaeology, the foremost evidence that the Bible came from God is the testimony of Jesus, the one who arose from the dead and appeared to more than 500 disciples thereafter. Jesus repeatedly endorsed the Old Testament Scriptures as "inspired by the Spirit," as coming "out of the mouth of God," and as words which "God said."

There is no reasonable explanation apart from divine revelation for the ability of the prophets to predict the capture of great ancient cities such as Babylon, Samaria, Nineveh, Memphis (Egypt), Tyre and Jerusalem, and to do so with precision. Nor can one dismiss the biblical prophecies about a coming Messiah which were fulfilled literally in the life of Jesus.

The prophet Malachi (3:1) foretold the unique role of John the Baptist, who would live more than 400 years later, as the one who would announce the Son of God to the world. Additionally, the prophet Micah, who lived some 700 years before Jesus, foretold that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem, and he identified which of the two cities by that name it would be--Bethlehem of Judea. While this was the city of David, his prophecy is amazing because neither Joseph nor Mary lived there. The hand of God,

however, so controlled Caesar Augustus that he issued a taxation decree to move them from Nazareth, some 70 miles north, to the birthplace prophesied.

The prophets also foretold many of the events in the life of Jesus, including His rejection by His own people, His Roman crucifixion (Psalm 22:16), where he was offered vinegar to drink (Psalm 69:21) and where his clothing would be parted (Psalm 22:18), the place of His burial (Isaiah 53:9), His lamb-like attitude (Isaiah 53:7), and His resurrection (Psalm 16:10) three days later. That these could be fulfilled in the life of a single person is incredible, and the odds that the prophecies could be fulfilled by chance are astronomical!

Is Belief In Christ Enough?

An important aspect of the New Testament's use of "believe" includes the idea of exclusive trust. When the Bible urges us to believe in Christ, it never means for us to do so along with trust in anything or anyone else. Faith in Christ means to have trust in Him alone to such a degree that a person seeks no other security. It rules out everything that a person might depend upon in addition to faith in Christ for eternal life.

Biblical faith is not dependent upon New Testament rituals or the God-given Law of Moses. That law was a temporary administration of God over the children of Israel, in order to control their sin-prone behavior, but only **"until the promised seed (Christ) should come."** (Galatians 3:19) Although the commandments were given to Israel alone, their desired result is accomplished in Christ's *new* commandment (John 13:34-35) which called on His disciples to love one another as He loved them. Evidence that this is the case is seen in the following:

For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," " You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (Romans 13:9-10)

The exclusivity of belief is a genuine test of biblical faith, for it separates those who rest solely on Christ's finished work from those who sense a need for religious performance as insurance in the event that faith is

not enough. Trust in Christ alone is the remedy for those who claim to be Christians, but who continue to lack the assurance of forgiveness of their sins, and do not have peace with God. Such persons may have failed to renounce what they formerly depended upon for salvation, and have merely added Jesus to other objects of their trust. Their belief may not be exclusive, meaning that they view Jesus as helping them to be saved instead of being their Savior. Although they acknowledge His importance, they may have been taught that other activities are also necessary (sacraments, good deeds, commitment, piety, prayers, etc.) *in addition* to faith in the Son of God to be saved for eternity.

This point is illustrated by the story of a man from India, who after his baptism was asked to give his testimony at a Christian meeting. He stood and said, "I was reared a Buddhist, then I became a follower of Mohammed and became a Muslim. Now I believe in Jesus and I feel complete since I have added Jesus to what I already had."

He viewed Jesus as a helper, but the Bible calls Him "Savior." It is a false gospel that fails to proclaim Christ as the exclusive and only Savior. The preaching of the good news of salvation through faith in the resurrected Christ anticipates that when one believes in Christ to save him he will abandon that in which he had previously placed his hope.

Faith in the Savior also means that a person will be content to rest on the promise of God and not strive to make himself *more* acceptable to God. It is a biblical truth that God is completely satisfied that His Son has accomplished everything necessary to save the greatest of sinners, and that the believer is completely acceptable in Christ. One reason why God can offer salvation to the ungodly is that He is satisfied with Christ's payment in full for their sins.

Who will believe in Christ to save him? Only those who are satisfied that the Son of God has done everything necessary to save them from all sins, including the sins of tomorrow. This is where an adequate preaching of the gospel is critical. Any evangelism which suggests or implies that a person must do more than believe is not good news. Faith in Christ implies that we, like the Father, are satisfied that Christ resolved our personal problem of sin and that nothing more is needed.

Don't I Need To Repent and Confess?

In recent centuries evangelists have urged people to repent and

confess their sins in order to be saved. The Bible uses these two words, but not as separate conditions for salvation. Both confession and repentance come into play at the time of one's salvation, but not with the meanings currently assigned to these words, for both are accomplished when a person believes the gospel. Observe the clarity with which the Word of God announces the single required response to the gospel. John the apostle declares that he wrote his gospel for the specific objective of informing his readers of how to get eternal life, yet he makes no mention of either repentance or confession:

And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name. (John 20:30-31)

Although Jesus performed many miraculous signs, John states that he selected a limited number for this writing, eight to be exact (see appendix) to demonstrate that Jesus is the promised Messiah. John implies that he recognized a need to present evidence of Jesus' deity before one could or would believe in Him for eternal life, and it is significant that he gives only one requirement to get this gift of life--to believe! The fact that the word "repent" is not found in the Gospel of John, which concentrates on the promise of eternal life, is convincing!

Does Repent Mean Being Sorry?

The word "repent" means to have a change of mind, or an afterthought, the Greek word consisting of "after" and "mind." It is impossible for a person to believe in Christ for salvation by grace apart from a change of mind because grace is a foreign concept. The gospel declares that heaven is free, a gift, and that man's acceptance by God is based on the effort and goodness of Christ, not his own. This being the case, a change of mind is required. The good news (gospel) calls for men to change their minds about how God saves and to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the only way to God. Those who become convinced of this and respond accordingly by believing, have repented. Repentance, therefore, is an integral part of believing in Christ.

The gospel of grace is astounding news which most people have not heard or understood. Many of us either assumed or were taught that heaven awaits only those who are worthy, and that Jesus might help us if our efforts fall short of making us acceptable to God. Grace, however, prohibits any effort on our part.

What Must I Confess?

The basic meaning of the word "confess" is "to agree with another."¹

For example, God has declared that all of us have sinned. When we agree with His assessment of our condition, we have made a confession, that is, we agree with God. God has declared that His Son purchased salvation for us by giving His life so that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life. When we agree that this is true, we have confessed to this declaration of God.

Many of us, however, have been led to understand that God requires the confession of our sins before He will give us eternal life. If this be the case, one has a right to ask, "All of them?" If salvation depended upon one confessing all of his sins it would be impossible for anyone to be saved, for no one has either kept a record of every offense against God nor can he remember even a fraction of his sins, many of which he may not have been aware. The Word of God gives no indication that confession of sins for salvation is a concern of God. Believing, however, is the concern! It is God's remedy for sin; it is paramount and critical. Unfortunately, we have misinterpreted the "sinner's prayer" in Luke 18:13 (God be merciful to me a sinner) as a means of salvation. It was spoken by a Jew who went to the temple and asked for mercy, presumably on the basis of the sacrifice he offered (Luke 18:13). To urge such a prayer today is misleading and implies that the sacrifice of God's Son for sin has not satisfied the Father. The word "mercy" is better translated "propitiated," and the Bible declares

1 The Greek word "homolegeo" is the union of two words: "same" and "speak," meaning "to say the same as another." To confess, therefore, implies agreement with the declaration by God in regard to the Savior, sin and salvation.

that Christ "is the propitiation for our sins..." (I John 2:2), so we should direct a person to faith in the Savior, who has satisfied the Father.

There may be cases where new believers are so burdened with guilt over their sinful past that they are overcome with the need to confess their sins to God in order to lift that burden. While such an action may be therapeutic, it neither adds to their salvation, nor is it a substitute for believing God's promise of forgiveness to all who believe in the Lord Jesus.

It should be noted that the biblical record of the preaching of the apostles does not contain even a hint that listeners were expected to confess sins, to ask God to forgive their sins, or to ask God to save them. Quite the contrary, such actions might imply a person's failure to believe heaven's promise that whoever believes in Jesus Christ "will receive remission of sins" and be saved. The sin problem of man is remedied by nothing other than believing God's promise of eternal life by faith in Christ.

We confess when we agree with the divine promise that eternal life is a gift of God to ungodly people. It is not a reward for one's sorrow for sin nor for one's dedication to improved behavior. The need to agree with the divine proclamation was expressed uniquely, but effectively, by John the Baptist in this statement about Jesus:

"He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. And what He has seen and heard, that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. He who has received His testimony has certified that God is true. For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God. . ."
(John 3:31-34)

Attention is called to the statement "he who has received His testimony has certified (sets his seal) that God is true." This certification is a confession indicating one's agreement with the words of God. It is not possible to believe without agreeing with the Scriptures, for they alone convey the divine promises to man.

``Doesn't Romans 10:9-10 teach otherwise?``

That if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

This passage is not concerned with confession of sins, but rather with agreement (confession) with the gospel message regarding Jesus as Lord, who was raised from the dead, a message that is described in the Greek text (vs 8) as *in* their mouth and *in* their heart. This may be a reference to people who heard the message and were considering it, but did not believe it. Not until they agreed with it would salvation come to them. (See Appendix for further discussion.)

Is There a ``Free Lunch`` After All?

It is frequently said that "nothing in this world is free," but God has declared that eternal life is free. The Bible declares that salvation is a gift of God. It is not surprising then to learn that the word "gospel" means good news. The following, written to those in Ephesus who believed, points out both how, and how not, to get salvation:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

"Grace" means God's undeserved favor. It conveys blessings which cannot be earned. It is contrary to the widely accepted merit system which rewards children, students and employees on the basis of commendable behavior and effort. Repeatedly the New Testament declares salvation to be a gracious blessing, obtainable only through faith, that is, by believing God. Salvation is further declared in the above passage to be a gift, meaning that it comes without cost to the recipient. The cost was high to the Giver, however.

It cost Him the life of His Son. The Bible declares:

He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? (Romans 8:32)

Knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. (I Peter 1:18-19)

As a grace gift, eternal life cannot be earned or even deserved, otherwise grace would cease to be grace. The above Ephesian passage tells men not only how to get this gift of salvation (through faith), it also instructs them how they *cannot* get it (''not of works''). The meaning of the word "grace," has been altered in some circles to the extent that it has lost its biblical meaning. Fortunately the Bible gives us sufficient information to enable us to define grace accurately:

And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work. (Romans 11:6)

The above passage explains that grace is always, and of necessity, exclusive of works, and visa versa. The two cannot co-exist! God's justification of the sinner, therefore, can never be a result of a combination of grace and works. Salvation is always 100 percent grace! Since the word of God declares that it is by the grace of God, it cannot be enhanced by human works, not even one percent! The only work that saves is that which Christ did in giving His life on the cross.

Any effort to win God's favor by good deeds is a subtle attempt to make God a debtor, that is, to owe blessings because of deserving effort. A person should not be told even to turn from sin to be saved, lest this advice be construed as making him worthy of it. These are nothing other than merit approaches to God which attempt to override the Creator's established system of grace. God, however, cannot be a debtor to any person because such a relationship would honor man while robbing

God of His deserved glory. Grace gives God glory, for it displays His mercy, forgiveness, generosity and kindness which He freely lavishes upon those who have earned death:

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

There is no need to labor the difference between wages and a gift, other than to observe that in the above passage death is earned and deserved, while eternal life is not. This passage declares that eternal life is obtained "through Jesus Christ our Lord." He made the gift possible, and faith in Him makes it a personal possession.

Is Forgiveness Possible?

Many persons struggle to obtain forgiveness. Some never seem to find it although it is readily available. Our problem regarding the forgiveness of sins is the result of not knowing what God has said about the matter. God is waiting for all who desire life to believe in His Son so He can forgive us. As the judge of all the earth, God is able to forgive us without compromising His justice or righteousness because Jesus Christ paid our sin debt on the cross. Many of us are reluctant to accept what may seem like such an easy solution to the problem of sin, but God is unlike us in this matter. He does not insist on making the offender grovel, pledge or make a personal sacrifice. Christ made the sacrifice for us, and God is satisfied.

When the Lord directed Peter to preach the gospel to Gentiles in the city of Caesarea, he concluded his sermon with this relevant statement:

"To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins." (Acts 10:43)

Peter's message awaited a response to believe, in contrast to some present-day evangelists who fail to give the lost a promise from God to believe. The gospel is good news about what God has already done, and only those who give people something to believe can rightfully say that they

have preached the gospel. Peter gave them something to believe. He asked for no other response, including a need to repent, confess sins, pray or to "come forward" in that meeting. Their belief in the Lord Jesus brought forgiveness and was the eternal solution to the problem of their sin because Christ died in the sinner's place, satisfying the demands of God's holy law that **"the soul that sins must die."** (Ezekiel 18:4) His life was given as a ransom to set free those held in sin's bondage. (See I Timothy 2:5-6.)

Peter's good news of forgiveness by belief in Christ does not contradict I John 1:9, which calls for confession of sins for forgiveness. The latter was written to Christians as a means of walking in the light, but Peter had preached to men who had not yet believed in the "Light of the world."

Once when talking with the Pharisees, Jesus presented Himself as the remedy for their sin problem, which implies forgiveness, and warned that death faced those who failed to do one thing--believe!

**"Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins."
(John 8:24)**

Forgiveness is the only negative aspect of eternal salvation, the taking away of something that dooms us--sin! Think of it as essential spiritual surgery. The teaching of the New Testament regarding sin is its need to be removed, not to be covered as under the sacrificial system in the Law of Moses. John the Baptist earlier foretold of Christ's future sin-removing sacrifice when he proclaimed, **"Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"** (John 1:29)

The blood of a sacrificed animal in the Old Testament merely covered a person's sins, which is the meaning of the word "atonement." The New Testament does not use "atonement" (except in a mistranslation in Romans 5:11 of the Authorized Version), for the blood of Christ does far more than cover sins; it "takes away" or "cleanses" sins. The blood of animals could not take away those transgressions. This contrast is the point of the teaching in the book of Hebrews about

Christ's sacrifice as a complete remedy for all sin for all time. Listen to its writer:

And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God. . . For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified. (Hebrews 10:11-14)

In the early 1950's when the author was a graduate student at LSU, he conducted an informal oral survey which asked three questions in sequence to some 70 male students in a university dormitory:

- 1. Why did Jesus come into this world?**
- 2. Did He succeed or fail?**
- 3. Have you been saved from your sins?**

All of them, both Roman Catholics and Protestants, answered correctly that Jesus came to save us from our sins. In regard to His success or failure, all conceded success, albeit reluctantly in some cases. But they were baffled by the third question. The logic of what Jesus came to do and what He accomplished had escaped them. Of course Jesus succeeded in His mission to earth; His resurrection is evidence of that. Through the centuries untold multitudes of people heard that Jesus died for their sins but they were not taught that faith in Him would bring personal forgiveness.

The Word of God promises that those who believe never face judgment for sin because Christ was judged in their place. Peter explained Christ's mission to earth:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit. . . (I Peter 3:18)

How the single death of one Man could pay for the sins of many is staggering to the human mind, but the Word of God affirms this to be the case. The fact that Christ suffered once for sins, and that this was enough to "bring us to God," lies in the efficacy of the "precious blood of Christ."

None, however, are saved by merely believing that Jesus died any more than one can be saved by believing that a thief died on either side of Him.

The purpose of the gospel has a far greater goal than to declare the historic fact of His death. It asserts that He died *for our sins*, which transforms the bad news of His death into good news of life for us, the unjust. The logical implication of this biblical fact is that we need not die for our sins since another has already done it for us.

The consequence of this awesome undertaking by Christ means that the debt for all the sins of all men for all time has been paid, although they are not yet forgiven. Forgiveness comes through personal trust in the Redeemer.

Forgiveness in the Bible is never said to come by faith in a church, a religion, a ritual, or in a priest or minister on earth. Nor can any ecclesiastical authority annul sins, a power reserved for God alone. Faith, however, results in an incredible release from sin, as David declared:

"Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin." (Romans 4:8)

This is a quotation from Psalm 32 and it describes the man whose faith is counted as righteousness, thus releasing him from any future charge for his sins. Such a release by God is tantamount to being set free forever without the possibility of ever being charged again. (The reading of Romans 4:1-8 is recommended.)

Did Paul Agree With Peter?

The Apostle Paul agreed with Peter's declaration concerning forgiveness by belief in the Son of God. Preaching in a synagogue, Paul declared:

"Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses." (Acts 13:38-39 NASB)

To be forgiven of our sins and to be freed

from everything that could alienate us from God is awesome! Yet Paul assured his audience, which included God-fearing Gentiles, that the problem of sin had been solved by Jesus Christ in His crucifixion, burial and resurrection. He declared the good news that forgiveness of sins is available by a single response, and is for "everyone who believes." In addition to this freedom from sins, he expands the benefits of the good news to include freedom from everything from which the law could not free them. Again there is no mention of confession of sins and repentance, nor was there any need to call for such actions, for biblical belief involves both repentance and confession. These actions mean changing one's mind and agreeing with God. (See page 19)

A word of caution regarding this promised new life is in order. Eternal life should not be considered a reward for believing, as though one's faith "earned" it. The Bible does not declare anyone saved "because" of his faith! Faith is merely the channel by which one receives this gift from heaven, just as a plastic tube serves as a channel for life-saving blood during a transfusion. Don't trust in your faith; trust in Christ!

Ask your minister or priest what is required for a person to be saved. Compare it with the answer given to a man who asked this of Paul and his companion:

"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" So they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household." (Acts 16:30-31)

The word "saved" means to be rescued from the certain wrath of God forever, and here the remedy is a single response of faith in God's Son. These messengers of Christ assured the man that the promise was not to him alone. All his family who believed (as he did) would also be saved from their sins forever.

Forgiveness is indeed a blessing of immense magnitude in that it conquers the fear of death. If there is anything greater than to have a promise of forgiveness from God it is His additional guarantee:

In Him (Christ) you also trusted, after

you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance. . . (Ephesians 1:13-14)

In what sense is the Spirit of God a guarantee that the believer will get what has been promised?

The answer lies in the fact that the Spirit has been sent from heaven to indwell each believer and to be with him forever. The Bible teaches that even after the death of the Christian, the Holy Spirit will claim that body and resurrect it as He did the body of Jesus. (Romans 8:11) The believer therefore has both the immutable promise of God, who cannot lie, and the indwelling Holy Spirit, who will not forsake him.

Is Believing Enough to Save?

We dare not misunderstand what the Bible means by the word "believe." Biblical belief is not merely an intellectual acceptance of facts or respect for a historical record about Jesus. Such was the case apparently with a young woman encountered by the author. She could not understand how Christians could express confidence that they had eternal life as a gift from God. She insisted that she also believed in Christ, yet lacked such assurance. I asked, "You believe in George Washington also, don't you?"

"Yes, of course," she replied. "What is the difference in your belief in our first president and your belief in Christ?" Her answer: "None."

With that admission it was not difficult to make her aware that while she believed in Washington as a historical person she was not *depending* upon him for anything, and that the same was true concerning her belief in Christ. She placed little value on His substitutionary cross death for her, although the Word of God declares that He died on her behalf. Belief that saves is a dependence on Jesus, the One whom the tomb could not hold. Whereas Washington is dead and can help no one, the Son of God conquered death and is alive to save all who would place their unreserved trust

in Him. The incorporation of the ideas of dependence and reliance in the word "believe" may be the key to clarifying widespread confusion, and we need to add that God's offer of eternal life is personal not communal.

Throughout the New Testament men are told to believe in God's Son in order to obtain the gift offered by God. It consists of forgiveness of sins, eternal life, a spiritual birth, the indwelling Holy Spirit, an eternal inheritance and membership in the family of God, to mention only some.

Jesus implied that the human race is perishing, and that all need to be rescued. When God sent His Son from heaven, it was a divine rescue operation which called on men to welcome this Deliverer. It was an astonishing undertaking!

Contrary to the ways of men, this rescue did not depend upon a person's good deeds or prayers, the keeping of promises made to God, or any other human effort. God instead offers to rescue from fearful judgment those who believe in His Son as their Savior! If there were any other way to God, there would have been no need for Jesus to give His life as a ransom.

He who left heaven's glory to take on human form out of His love for mankind offered Himself as a sacrifice for our redemption. The substitution of Himself as the payment for our sins was the only acceptable means by which divine justice could be satisfied. Jesus Christ, therefore, **"is the propitiation (satisfaction) for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world."** (I John 2:2)

How Did Jesus Explain Faith?

Jesus used a remarkable event in the Old Testament to illustrate that faith alone apart from human effort is sufficient to receive life from God. The purpose of an illustration, of course, is to bring clarity out of what may seem either complex or incredible.

The event occurred some 1400 years earlier and is recorded in Numbers 21, where poisonous snakes

appeared as a divine judgment on the complaining children of Israel in the Sinai wilderness. They had murmured against God and His appointed leader, Moses, as they disparaged the miraculous divine provisions which sustained them in their lengthy wanderings. The snakes bit many, and many people died. In fear, the people requested that Moses ask God to remove the serpents. Moses prayed, but God did not take away the serpents. God did, however, give them a remedy for snakebite so that they would trust Him. Here is that remedy:

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live." (Numbers 21:8)

This divine life-saving remedy in the form of a bronze serpent was so effective that 700 years later, when Hezekiah became king, he discovered the people burning incense to this bronze idol and he destroyed it. (II Kings 18:4)

Significant in the story is that only a single response was expected from those who were perishing; they were told to "look!" God asked none to kneel before the pole or promise to behave. No appeal was made to conform to the Ten Commandments for healing, nor were the dying persons told to offer a sacrifice or pray. The afflicted Israelites were told only to look at the powerless bronze snake on a pole for physical healing from the deadly venom.

Easily missed is the fact that their look at the serpent was not a trust in a special power of bronze. Their response was a look of faith as they remembered the promise of God, who told the perishing to "look and live." They looked, believing God! Jesus likened this event to our salvation:

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:14-15)

Jesus made this statement to illustrate the necessity of belief in Him alone, apart from works or pious activity. Just as the children of Israel responded to God's promise with the look of faith

to save them from losing their physical lives, so we by similar trust in His "cross pole" death are told to believe for eternal life. The remedy in both cases is nothing other than believing God. In both cases, Jesus sees men perishing, as confirmed in the popular passage which immediately follows His illustration:

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16)

The magnitude of God's love for the world is assured in this passage, which has been described as "the gospel in a nutshell," but apart from Jesus' preceding illustration of the bronze serpent, it does not contain the gospel preached by the Apostles. John 3:16 does not mention the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, all of which constitute the gospel, which the Apostle Paul defined in this statement:

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you. . .for I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. . . (I Corinthians 15:1-4)

As Jesus gave priority to believing, so did the writer of the book of Hebrews by his frequent use of the words "faith" and "believe."

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. (Hebrews 11:6)

Contemplate this: If you should volunteer to be a missionary in the most miserable place in the world, or sell all your possessions and give them to the poor, or perhaps give your life to save a child, these will not please God, unless such notable efforts are preceded by God-pleasing faith.

Since it is impossible to please God without faith, substitutes for faith do not please Him. We learn here that faith is a prerequisite for man's acceptable service for God.

Although our Christian culture has convinced men of the value of faith, some of its leaders have depreciated this priority of God in the process of promoting commendable "Christian activity." The result is the almost universally-accepted standard that we please God by doing things for Him. This misunderstanding of God's desire has its roots in antiquity. The Jews asked Jesus, "What must we do to be doing the works of God?" His indelible response is revolutionary to all religious thinking:

Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent." (John 6:29)

This statement is astounding! Our Master's use of "the work" instead of "a work" emphasized belief as the preeminent response required by the Father. Service can supplement belief, but not be a substitute for it. Contrary to what some of us might have learned about good works in Sunday school or church meetings, Jesus said that believing in God's Son is the "work" which the Father desires. It appears that many of us have inadvertently been misled concerning this critical priority of God. Failure to believe in the unique Son of God, Jesus the Christ, is tantamount to not believing the Father, for they are One!

Jesus claimed to have come from heaven, sent by the Father to seek and to save those who are lost. Man's response to this messenger of God determines his destiny! If we reject Him, we also reject the One who sent Him, and there can be no hope. On the other hand, when we believe in the One sent, we obviously please God by respecting His gracious purpose in sending His only Son. This honors God! It gives Him glory in that we acknowledge that our salvation depends entirely on the one He sent, confirming that "salvation is of the Lord."

One might properly inquire that since the Bible says so much about believing, why is it that so many sermons have failed to give parishioners this emphasis? One reason is that many favorite sermon topics come from the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). These inspired books, while presenting Jesus' teachings to the "lost

sheep of the house of Israel" and the promised kingdom, only obliquely mention the gospel of salvation. These writers did not have the same objective as the Apostle John. For example, Matthew employs the word "believe" only 11 times, none of which are related directly to obtaining eternal life, compared to John's 99 uses of the word. Matthew did not write to tell men how to get eternal life or to be "born again." We all have heard sermons, however, which implied that Matthew's record of the Sermon on the Mount lists prerequisites for obtaining eternal life. The context, however, implies that Jesus was presenting the divine standard for His future Messianic kingdom reign on the earth. One should expect that a king would set forth some laws for His coming reign. That He came to be the King of the Jews and to reign is established by the Scriptures (See Appendix on Kingdom).

Many of us began our spiritual journey by reading the New Testament. We, of course, began with its first book, Matthew, and may have assumed that since it followed a publisher's page announcing "The New Testament," it would define the Christian faith. Unfortunately most Bible readers have paid little attention to the context of Matthew's gospel, which presents Jesus as the King of the Jews, teaching in the context of Judaism.

John's Gospel, on the other hand, presents Jesus as the Son of God sent to save the world and tells the reader how to get eternal life.

It has been called "The Gospel of Belief." John's Gospel was written to motivate belief, not a change in the behavior of lost men and women.

What About the Ten Commandments?

It is safe to say that everyone concerned with knowing God wants to obey Him. Convinced that a holy God demands obedience, many mistakenly have concluded that in order to gain eternal life they must obey something, such as the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, and the teachings of Jesus in regard to ethics, morality, good works, the poor, etc. God does desire obedience, holy behavior, and generosity toward those who suffer.

The Scriptures urge such behavior from those who believe in the Savior, but the Bible informs us of another kind of obedience which has top priority with God. It is called the "obedience of faith." The Apostle Paul referred to it in both the opening and close of his epistle to the Romans:

...through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles, for his name's sake...(Romans 1:5 NASB)

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith... (Romans 16:25-26 NASB)

What is meant by the "obedience of faith?" Some have proposed that it refers to the obedience which is expected from those who have faith. The context in which these expressions are used, however, does not favor this interpretation, for Paul was referring to lost people whom God wanted brought under obedience to the gospel.

The "obedience of faith" means to believe the good news of salvation by grace through faith which God offers as a gift. Believing is obedience in the sense that faith in the Son of God who was sent to save us from our sins is the incomparable form of submission to the Father. Jesus said believing in the One sent by God is "the work of God," referring to the single necessary work which a person must do to satisfy our heavenly Father.

Can we be certain that "the obedience of faith" means to believe in the Son of God for salvation? Absolutely! Confirmation of this meaning comes from other biblical passages. Below is an example:

Then the word of God spread and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:7)

The context concerns evangelism among Jews,

and the meaning here is that the priests were obedient when they believed the gospel which the Apostles preached. The gospel is the Creator's offer of salvation through faith in His Son. This divine message awaits only one response--to believe--and this response is the most grateful kind of obedience! We are obedient to the faith when we willingly trust in the One whose death for sinners is the basis for the Christian faith.

A comparable passage, which emphasizes the judgment that awaits those who are disobedient for failing to believe, also confirms that the obedience of the priests was their willingness to believe the gospel.

...when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. (II Thessalonians 1:7-8)

This passage declares that those who will face the wrath of God are those who have chosen to not obey the gospel. Since the gospel of grace is a divine offer of forgiveness and eternal life, the certainty of divine vengeance is implied for all who dare to snub this good news.

This concept of faith as obedience is expressed again in a passage where the context concerns the subject of salvation:

He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." (John 3:36 NASB)

The meaning of "not obey" can only mean failure to believe in Jesus Christ. The parallel clauses here require this meaning, and to believe in the Son means that one does obey Him. It is the obedience that saves, and it cannot mean the keeping of commandments or other meritorious behavior without violating the law of context.

The Apostle Peter adds to the above arguments that one's belief in Christ is obedience to God. He does it as he demonstrates from Scripture that Jesus is the "living stone" who was chosen by God:

Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient,

"The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." (I Peter 2:7)

The above passage indicates that belief is the opposite of disobedience, and disobedience is unbelief. When understood from a divine perspective, belief will be seen and valued far more than men comprehend it in cultures which give priority to the performance of deeds for God. Finally, it is written in Romans 10:16:

But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our report?"

This passage, quoted from Isaiah 53:1, refers to Israel. Paul applies it to the unbelieving Jews of the first century as he equates believing with obedience. In summary, we see that the Apostle Paul in particular viewed believing the good news about redemption through Jesus Christ as a critical obedience to the faith. God is honored when His creatures believe Him and His character is maligned by their unbelief. It is ironic that God, the only One in the universe who can be trusted completely, and who also has amply demonstrated His integrity by the inspired record of Scripture, is not trusted by His creatures. There are reasons for this, one of which is that some persons have been led to doubt God's word as a result of listening to religious leaders who also doubt the Scriptures. Unfortunately, such persons believe men more than they believe God. This doubting attitude seems to have perplexed the Apostle John who wrote:

If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater; for this is the witness of God which He has testified of His Son. (I John 5:9)

Most of us do believe men, generally speaking.

The world functions on the basis of communication that assumes a reasonable degree of trust in others. We order merchandise, and enter into agreements, contracts, and marriage with full confidence in spite of evidence that we are dealing with frail humans who deceive, who change their minds, or who renege when it is to their advantage.

The Apostle John writes with astonishment that since we believe men, we certainly ought to believe God. Need it be said

that God is greater, or that His promises are more worthy of our unstinted trust?

When a man believes God, he honors and glorifies his Creator! This is an invisible form of worship, and God is pleased. As a result of this faith, the believer enters into a state of peace with God, which every person craves. Paul announced this reconciled condition of spiritual peace in this remarkable statement:

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

This peace with God is seen by Paul as an eternal state, since he declares that the result of faith enables the believer to rejoice in hope of the glory of God. This blessing of peace is the believer's possession, even though he may stumble or fail from time to time, which does not surprise God. The fact that one can have peace with God by faith is not universally accepted in spite of the above passage.

Beware of Insulting God!

The Bible's teaching of eternal judgment on moral and seemingly honest and upright unbelievers is widely rejected as being too harsh. Some argue that unbelief does not harm others, and although this may be true, we are informed by the Apostle John that failure to believe the gospel is not a neutral matter relegated to a "gray" area. Unbelief implies the outrageous attitude that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is guilty of fabricating a myth to deliberately deceive. Listen to the Apostle John's perception of unbelief:

. . . He who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son. And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who

does not have the Son of God does not have life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life . . . (I John 5:10-13)

Imagine calling the holy, just, and righteous Creator of the universe a "liar!" Men lie, but God is true! By doubting God's written record of Jesus Christ, men insult the God before whom they must someday stand. Obviously, God's great desire is that His creatures believe Him. Yet even when they do believe, some have been influenced to doubt that this faith alone is sufficient for eternal salvation. The Apostle John apparently intended to overcome such doubts by writing, "that you may know that you have eternal life."

Jesus presented the word "believe" as the key to obtaining all that man could desire in the following incredible promise:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life." (John 5:24 NASB)

This statement is especially interesting because it promises eternal life to the one who *believes* God, not one who merely believes *in* God.

A vast difference exists between "believe God" and "believe in God." Although some translators have given us "believes in Him who sent Me," the Greek text has no preposition after the word "believe," nor does the grammar require it to be supplied.

Jesus here is claiming that since He is the spokesman for the Father, men are obligated to hear His words and believe the One who gave this message to Him. Several times Jesus emphatically declared that He had no message of His own and said that he spoke only what the Father told Him to speak:

Jesus answered them and said, "My doctrine is not mine, but His who sent me." (John 7:16)

Then Jesus cried out and said, "He who believes in Me, believes not in Me but in Him who sent Me. And he who sees Me sees Him who sent Me. . . . He who rejects Me, and does

not receive My words, has that which judges him--the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day. For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak." (John 12:44-49)

These words of Christ should erase all doubt that (1) God sent Him, (2) Jesus' teachings were what the Father told Him to speak, (3) Believing Jesus' words is equivalent to believing God, and (4) God's word will condemn unbelievers at the coming judgment. More than one person has said, "But it is difficult to believe." We must ask, "Difficult to believe whom? The God who cannot lie?"

Perhaps God was aware of the human tendency to doubt when He not only made a promise to Abraham, but as further assurance to Abraham, He took an oath that He would perform it. Here is the account of God's oath:

For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, "Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you." And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute. Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. (Hebrews 6:13-18)

The above promise and oath was not for the benefit of Abraham alone, for the writer of the book of Hebrews applies it to believers in the first century. The Apostle Paul also makes application of that same promise to believers in Rome, in order to verify that God's promise is equivalent to a divine guarantee:

For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the

righteousness of faith. . . .Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all (as it is written, "I have made you a father of many nations") in the presence of Him whom he believed--God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did. . . (Romans 4:13-17)

The biblical writers equate the Christian's faith to that of Abraham. The above passage (vs.16) highlights both faith and grace, without which no one could be sure of the gift of righteousness.

Angels Are Watching

In Luke's account of the events surrounding the nativity story, God used angelic messengers to announce the birth of two notable persons. The first was John the Baptist, of whom Jesus said none born of women was greater. (Matthew 11:11) The other is Jesus, the eternal Christ who became flesh. The sacred text leaves no doubt that in announcing these births God desired to impress mankind with the prominence of the word "believe."

When the angel of the Lord announced to the priest Zacharias that his prayer had been heard and that his barren wife Elizabeth would give birth to a son (John), Zacharias doubted the divine messenger. The angel became indignant and apparently was insulted that a man would doubt God's message. So, in a stern response, Gabriel identifies himself to Zacharias in a manner to underscore the offense of this man who dares to question God's message, and he announces a resulting divine judgment.

"I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings. But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time." (Luke 1:19-20)

The angel, of course, was speaking for the Creator, who arranged the birth of the man who would introduce Jesus to Israel. John's mission was to exalt the Messiah so men would *believe* in Him (John 1:7).

The Bible gives a dramatic contrast to Zacharias in its account of Mary's response to the angel. When Gabriel informed this virgin that she was chosen to conceive Jesus, she said, "**Let it be to me according to your word!**" This young woman believed God's message, and her faith was confirmed later when Mary visited the home of Zacharias and Elizabeth. The latter was filled with the Spirit and said to Mary:

"Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord." (Luke 1:45)

Mary was blessed; Zacharias was rebuked. She believed God's word; he did not. These two persons exemplify the countless number of people who hear the message of God through the preaching of the gospel of grace. Some believe, many do not.

Satan-The Enemy of Belief

This book was written to convince readers of the critical importance of believing the Word of God. Jesus warned of the cunning enemy who does not want anyone to believe God. He expressed it through a parable.

"A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell by the wayside; and it was trampled down, and the birds of the air devoured it. . . . He who has ears to hear, let him hear." (Luke 8:5-8)

His disciples failed to comprehend it, so Jesus explained the parable, alerting them to the devil's effort among men:

"Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should *believe* and be saved." (Luke 8:11-12)

The passage is instructive. The devil wants to prevent belief. In order to believe, a person must hear the word of God, and of course the gospel is that word. Peter described it as "incorruptible seed" by which we are born again (I Peter 1:23).

Future Blessings-Can They Be Yours?

People who know that they have eternal life know it because God's Spirit bears witness that they are children of God (Romans 8:16). Those who say they are not sure that they have this life from God in all probability do not possess it, because Jesus said that the believer has eternal life.

Persons who have believed the promises transmitted by God's Son through His apostles, and later by other believers, are now on a peaceful journey which will end in the presence of Jesus Christ. Life for them has new meaning. A peace that is beyond understanding permeates their daily living and they are no longer terrified by death or haunted by a future judgment for sin.

Although evil surrounds them in the world, and although they may fall victim to suffering and losses on earth, nothing can be lost from their eternal inheritance, because the resurrected Jesus has been crowned with all authority and glory. He is now their Mediator and Priest in heaven, where He guards the soul they have entrusted to His keeping.

Epilogue

Have We Lost the Password?

There are people who go to church and pray, hoping to escape the horror of eternal separation from God. Others have turned to God with their focus on the comfort of heaven, where they could be with their loved ones and a loving Father. Regardless of one's motive, *how* to achieve salvation of which the Bible speaks is of primary concern.

Jesus spoke often of our eternal options--life or death. He repeatedly proclaimed that a single response would determine one's destiny, a response that gives credibility to what God had said. He and His apostles told men to believe!

This book is about that word "believe" and for a critical reason! As we have demonstrated, this seven-letter word is the lost key to heaven! Sadly, present day preachers give evidence of having deviated from the means of obtaining eternal life as preached by the first century proclaimers of salvation.

For example, when a prominent evangelist announced that he would speak on "How to Get to Heaven," he failed to use the word "believe" even once! Nor did he use synonyms such as "trust in," "depend upon," "have confidence in," or "rest on," all of which express well the biblical idea of the word "believe." How did we ever lose the word "believe" in evangelism?

Most of the vital biblical passages concerned with the forgiveness of sins and eternal life use the word "believe" as the means of obtaining these blessings. While its frequency of biblical use far surpasses any other word or expression on these topics, the word "believe" appears to be a theological fatality. Gospel preachers use it infrequently. Many have abandoned it for phrases that call for dedication or appear to have more depth of meaning, but which call for an action which may by-pass belief in Jesus Christ.

Some invitations appear to be a back door attempt to get people into the kingdom of God. These bring no glory to God and often result in complacent church members. Evangelists urge men to "confess your sins," "surrender to God," "make a commitment," "pray to receive Christ," "give your life to Christ," "follow Christ," "repent," "pray the sinner's prayer," "turn from your sins" and "invite Jesus into your heart," all to no avail.

This sample list of "invitations" must be shocking to the courts of heaven since each of the above may be obeyed apart from believing the gospel of grace. For example, a person might confess his sins without believing in the Savior for eternal life. The evangelist who tells a person to "turn

from his sins'' to be saved is preaching reformation, not the gospel, which announced Christ's payment of our sin debt. The same can be said about the necessity of sorrow and weeping over sins to get salvation. The 18th Century English-born George Whitefield insisted on the need to wail over one's transgressions of the law in order to be saved, but in his same sermon on "The Method of Grace," he concedes that such sins are the sins of one's nature, and the Spirit's work is to convince us of our unbelief.

The book of Acts records the preaching of good news of forgiveness, not the need to impress the gracious Father with one's sorrow for sins. Since men are born in sin and practice it, why suggest the need for the lost to grieve over what they could not otherwise do? The New Testament gives no promise of salvation conditioned on sorrow or tears for sins. Whitefield's unfortunate emphasis was an addition to the gospel.

The Bible does not ask anyone to make a "commitment." It tells men to believe! A commitment, which may imply the making of a pledge or a promise, actually reverses what God's Word declares; God is the promise maker and keeper, not man. God has made a commitment to save believers. Neither Jesus nor the apostles ever suggested that a person's promised devotion or dedication could result in salvation. Nor does the Word of God urge a man to "give his life to Christ." On the contrary, God desires to give the life of Christ to him! The best explanation of the failure of so many people to receive assurance of God's forgiveness after making "decisions" in gospel meetings is their failure to believe.

The danger in the use of these seemingly harmless phrases, all foreign to the Bible, is the risk of altering God's declared means of salvation.

The Bible tells the lost to believe, and nothing more, to be saved. There is no other means of salvation because only faith in the living Christ unites us to Him and gives us what He has--eternal life!

There is an apparent failure in preaching that has further contributed to the confusion about how a person can be saved. A dozen persons who

regularly attend church were asked by the author, "What did your church teach as a requirement for entrance into heaven?" The most frequent answer was "live by the Ten Commandments." Others said, "We must pray," and "Be good, and go to church." These answers are foreign to the gospel.

Although several persons were able to quote John 3:16, none gave belief in Christ's work on the cross as the way to heaven.

The widespread use of human invitations may imply some loss of respect for the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures, which Jesus confirmed to be the voice of God and reliable down to the smallest letter:

"For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled." (Matthew 5:18)

"It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4:4)

Since the Scriptures are inspired by God, we must consider if men have freedom to depart from, or to substitute words for, the sacred text which the Holy Spirit uses to generate faith in men and women for salvation (Romans 10:17).

The use of the biblical word "believe" in evangelism has been attacked as an "easy belief" that may be superficial, limited to mere intellectual acknowledgment rather than to a deep conviction which would produce a changed life. Some evangelists, in their well-meaning attempt to insure sincerity in those who hear the gospel, have proposed compliance words, such as "surrender," and "make Jesus your Lord" to enhance, or replace, the inspired word "believe." Yet, Jesus explained that when the Holy Spirit comes to convict the world of sin, the reason given is **"because they do not believe in Me." (John 16:9)**

It is also significant that John's Gospel, written for the stated purpose of bringing eternal life to mankind, does not set forth prayer, surrender, repentance, or confession of sins as conditions for eternal life. This fact is an indictment of those who insist on such additional requirements to the divinely-given instruction.

God's password for heaven is "believe," a response which regretfully appears to have been discarded in recent years.

People will believe (apart from duress or pleas) when the desire for eternal life becomes the most important thing in the world to them (and not until then!). Since the preaching of the Word of God generates this desire, their response of belief is adequate for the promised life.

Audiences respond readily to invitations which require a physical action such as raising a hand, repeating a suggested prayer, or walking forward in a meeting. Unfortunately, many have equated such induced actions with salvation. This misunderstanding might be largely eliminated if evangelists told people to believe the good news of grace salvation while remaining in their seats. Although faith is a matter between mortals and God, insistent evangelists have presented this delicate matter as requiring a response to human persuasion.

Although the apostles included no invitation in their preaching, some churches today apparently consider it either improbable or impossible for people to believe God's invitation alone to be saved unless they also respond to a human invitation.

A person may "pray to receive Christ," but there is no need for him to do even this, because Christ is received by believing the gospel. There is always the danger that such a prayer, which has no biblical precedent, may obscure the divine mandate to believe. While John the Apostle used the word "receive" one time as the means of salvation, he clarified what he meant in the same passage:

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name (John 1:12)

The final clause, set in apposition to the opening clause, is intended to explain the first. It is apparent that the means of "receiving" Jesus Christ as the light of the world is by believing in His name.

The focus of this book is to remind us of

God's desire that men believe Him. Multitudes fail to trust Him despite the astounding evidence of His integrity as verified in the Scriptures. He revealed His immutable character in sacred writings to win man's confidence by portraying His patient and loving care of His people, by His miraculous deeds, and by His righteous judgments.

Since the first century, however, God has not seen fit to offer any further evidence that He can be trusted to do what He has promised. We have no other verbal communication from Him.

There appears to be a worldwide deception causing men to be content to believe *in* God (which may imply only His existence) instead of *believing* God, referring to His promises in the Scriptures..

The Bible implies that the highest divine priority for each person is that he believe God. When he does, he has the passport to heaven, which means eternity with Christ!

APPENDIX

A. The miracles of Jesus in the Gospel of John:

1. Changing water into wine (2:1-11)
2. Healing of the official's son (4:46-54)
3. Healing the invalid at Bethesda (5:1-15)
4. Feeding of the 5000 (6:1-15)
5. Walking on the Sea of Galilee (6:16-21)
6. Healing the blind man (9:1-11)
7. Raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1-44)
8. The harvest of 153 large fish (21:1-14)

B. Comments on James 2

The two illustrations cited by James enable the reader to discover the key that unlocks his unusual use of the word "works," which in context is significantly different from its general use in the New Testament. Failure to observe this distinction has led some to conclude (including Martin Luther) that this chapter contradicts Paul's doctrine of salvation through faith, apart from works.

In vs. 15-17 James gives an opening illustration to correct a self deception among some

who considered that *saying* they had faith is the same as having faith. Note the word "says" in vs. 14. His illustration of a person speaking gracious words to the needy emphasizes that talk can be cheap and is no more beneficial than saying one has faith. God's promise of eternal life is never conditioned on a *claim* of faith, but on faith itself.

James next (vs. 18) emphasizes the need to "show" or give evidence of faith, explaining that even a claim to believe in one God (which the Jews did), also requires evidence to convince others of its validity. He declares that even the demons believe there is one God. From here James gives the first of two illustrations to emphasize that a person's faith is demonstrated by an action which serves to prove to observers that his faith is indeed real. James calls this a "work," or what may be labeled a "proof work." The context rules out any thought of good works.

In the case of Abraham, his proof of faith was his willingness to slay his son, Isaac, as God commanded. This action cannot be considered a "good work" in that Abraham would lose his heir, Sarah would suffer the loss of an only child, and Isaac would lose his life. If Abraham had refused to offer his son as a sacrifice, he would have illustrated well "that faith without works is dead." But he did comply, and the resulting conclusion is stated in vs. 24: "You see then that a man is justified by works (i.e. *proof works*, not *good works*), and not by faith only."

The second illustration also demonstrates "proof works." One would hardly expect good works from a prostitute. The evidence of her faith is the action of allying herself with God and His people by helping the spies. This involved a variety of dishonorable actions, according to Joshua 2. She was guilty of lying, deception, aiding and abetting the enemy of her city, disloyalty and selfishness. The latter is supported by her betrayal of all of Jericho's citizens to save her own family. While the actions listed here do not qualify as *good works*, they do give evidence of her faith in the God of Israel! She, like Abraham, was justified by her "proof

works."

C. Additional notes on Romans 10:9-10

It is unfortunate that the translators did not place higher value on the context of Romans 10 to guide them in the translation of its prepositions from the Greek text. In the passages prior to Romans 10:9, Paul is comparing the righteousness of the law with the righteousness of faith. In regard to the latter he writes:

But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach). (Romans 10:8)

The above quotation is from Deuteronomy 30:14. The statement employs the preposition "in" twice, but the same Greek word unfortunately is translated "with" in vs. 9, leading Bible readers to conclude that a public confession is mandated for salvation. The meaning of these passages might have been enhanced with consistent translation of this preposition, resulting in this suggested translation:

That if you confess (the word) *in* your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe *in* your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. (vs. 9)

The insertion of "the word" (above), which appears in the revised Greek text of Westcott and Hort, contributes to the intended meaning of the passage. The context suggests that those who heard the preaching of the word of faith and have that word in their mouths and in their hearts are being addressed. They are told to agree (confess) with the message that Jesus is Lord and was raised from the dead. The same reasoning applies to verse 10 where "in the heart belief is made to righteousness, and in the mouth confession (of the word) is made to salvation."

The context of Deuteronomy 30:14 suggests that the children of Israel had God's word; it was in their mouths and in their hearts. (See Prov. 3:3, Joshua 1:8) They needed no further revelation from heaven or from across the sea. Paul's concern

was for his unsaved Jewish countrymen (vs. 1) and he applies this passage to those in Rome who heard the gospel, but apparently failed to agree with it and believe it. In vs. 10 he explains that belief would lead to righteousness (as vs.11 affirms) and that agreement (confession) with the word preached (vs.8) would result in salvation.

D. Comments on Christ's Kingdom

The angel Gabriel, in the announcement of Jesus' birth, told Mary that **"He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end."** (Luke 1:32-33) Jesus has not yet received the promised throne of David (in Jerusalem) nor has He ruled over Israel. Gabriel's words reinforced Isaiah's prophecy of the Messiah's endless reign:

"For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this." (Isaiah 9:6-7)

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