

Repent!

It's time to turn to God



The Christadelphians

A Driving Force

He was out shopping with his Mum when the young boy saw something puzzling that he would think about for years. A man was standing in the market square holding up a placard which said, in bold letters, “*Repent, the End is Nigh*”, and the youngster asked his Mum what it meant.

That was a long time ago, for the youngster is now in his 60s; but he has never forgotten the warning or his mother’s explanation. In a way the message became a driving force in his life because it encouraged him to find out about such matters and to take some action. That sort of thing can happen to a lot of people, but not always to such good effect.

Driven by...

Many people are driven by one desire or another to direct their lives in a certain direction. Some decide they would like to be rich and do their best to achieve that ambition, either by working hard, finding something at which they are good and developing that talent, or even making themselves rich by unlawful actions.

Others might be ambitious to make the most of their lives by getting qualifications, learning a trade or following a vocation – there are all sorts of things that people do when they are driven by desire. Like the current of a fast flowing river, that ambition or passion can sweep them along and release a great deal of energy and activity in the process.

Given the choice, we would all prefer to be energetic and active in life, rather than being listless and indifferent about everything. Life is the most wonderful opportunity, and it is given us freely. So we should all want to make the most of it; to find what is best in life. But how can we be sure that the things which drive us along are forcing us in the right direction?

What is the best that this life has to offer? This booklet examines that very issue and explains that we have to make a choice, if we want to find the only way that leads to a fuller and better life – one that will last forever.

Stopped in his tracks

A very able man, who had excellent religious qualifications, was striding out one day to fulfil his lifetime ambition. He was determined to stamp out the followers of a new teacher, who had made substantial inroads into his denomination. He had a warrant for the arrest of any he could track down and he was so driven by conviction and passion that he wouldn’t even stop for a midday break, even though it was hot. Then something happened that made him stop dead in his tracks.

Saul the Pharisee had a vision of the risen and glorious Lord Jesus Christ – the very teacher whose followers he was intent upon destroying. Jesus declared that he was alive and in heaven and that declaration totally changed the course of Saul’s life. It



turned his world upside down. What he had thought to be wrong he now knew to be right; what he had thought to be right was wrong!

Paul the Apostle

This determined man had been so intent upon destroying Christianity that he later described himself in these terms:

"I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it" (Galatians 1:13), and

"I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief" (1 Timothy 1:13).

He had been determined to destroy but now he became even more determined to share with others the truth he had been forced to acknowledge – that Jesus was alive because he has conquered death and that the Saviour of mankind can help us find that which is the best that life can offer. As Paul the apostle, his new-found ambition in life was to spread abroad the message of salvation. His key theme was that we can be put right with God, just as he was, if we have faith and live accordingly. And his new driving force was that he wanted to live with Christ and for Christ. He once said:

"For to me, to live is Christ" (Philippians 1:21).

Driven to Destruction

From the moment we are born we are

subject to pressure from within; for everyone is born with a natural inclination to please himself or herself. Everyone is born with that tendency and if it is left unchecked, that attitude of mind will be the driving force in life until we die. Long ago a wise man summed up the situation like this:



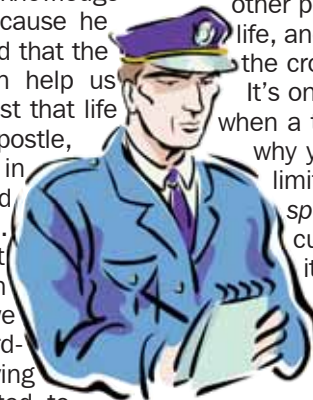
"There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death" (Proverbs 14:12).

It's not our fault that we are born like that; it's just the way things are. Ever since mankind chose to disobey God

and make their own way in the world instead, we have all inherited the same attitude of mind. Life is rather like paddling a canoe through white water: we can easily get carried away by the force of human thinking and human desires, especially as most other people want the same things in life, and you can get swept along with the crowd.

It's one of the commonest excuses when a traffic cop stops you and asks why you were exceeding the speed limit – *"I was just going the same speed as everybody else!"* That cuts no ice with traffic cops and it's no excuse either for not thinking about a different way of living and a better and more fulfilling outcome.

God is offering us the chance to live in harmony with Him and at peace with our fellow men. He has made a way of escape possible from the rat race of life and wants us to think seriously about what is on offer. It could make all the difference to the way you live, both now and for evermore.



Turning Things Around

Fast-flowing water gives a skilled canoeist the chance to use that skill. If you have ever watched such an athlete manoeuvring the fragile craft in raging water, and triumphing, you will realise that it is also possible to get through the choppy waters of life and emerge safely. That is what all of us have to do if we want to turn to God.

Time to Repent

The man with the placard in that shopping centre had a timeless message – one that has been given to countless generations for thousands of years. He was urging people to “Repent” because, he said, “*The End Is Near*”.

That was the very message of John the Baptist, whose appearance marked the end of 400 years of silence. In all that time God had not communicated with His people – that’s the time lapse between the end of the Old Testament and the start of the New. It was a new experience for the nation of Israel because, throughout their history up until then, God had been in constant touch.

Through prophets, leaders, judges, kings and priests, God had communicated and told the people what they must do if they wanted to continue their special relationship. Then all that ended and people must have wondered if they would ever hear from God again. When they did, the message came from a most unusual source.

John the Baptist was born into a priestly family and could have had a

good life in a society where priests were well cared for. But he gave all that up when God asked him to do something even more challenging. He was to live in the wilderness, wear rough clothes and, from there, challenge the people to change their ways.

By living like that he was showing that God was not in agreement with the religious establishment and everything they stood for. He was calling them, and everybody else, to change their ways; because something amazing was about to happen.

The Kingdom of God

The New Testament starts by telling us that John came to tell Israel that they must turn to God. Here’s the account as Mark tells it:

“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the Prophets: ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’ The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” (Mark 1:1-4).

There you have it – probably the first written record of the news that was about to break (for Mark is usually considered the first gospel to be written and published). John the Baptist appeared, just as the Old Testament had promised, to herald the coming of Jesus and to call people to repentance. Matthew’s



gospel records his precise words:

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matthew 3:2).

Even more significantly, when Jesus began his public teaching, these were his first words too:

“From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’.” (4:17).

Both the Herald and the King had the same warning. People must change their ways because a new order was at hand. The kingdom, or rulership, of heaven was about to begin and people who wanted to come under that jurisdiction had to make a choice: – they must change direction, and walk in God’s Way.

What Repentance Means

Religious language has gone out of fashion, at least in some parts of the world. Once terms like “reconciliation” and “atonement” were commonplace. Now they are less well known. John’s call – to Repent – would have needed an explanation if he had stood on the bank of the Thames in the 21st century and summoned Londoners to repent and be baptized. People might have thought he meant *“Be Sorry for what you have done”* or even *“Be Very Sorry”*.

But John’s first century audience was Jewish and they were steeped in the language of the Old Testament; it was their religious and cultural heritage. They would have known without a moment’s hesitation that John was asking them to change their ways, to turn around, and head back to God.

For that call had been a regular refrain in Old Testament times as, over and over, God called His people to reform their ways and change their lifestyle:

Jeremiah

‘Repent now everyone of his evil way and his evil doings, and dwell in the land that the LORD has given to you and your fathers forever and ever. Do not go after other gods to serve them and worship them, and do not provoke me to anger with the works of your hands’ (25:5);

Ezekiel

“Thus says the Lord God: ‘Repent, turn away from your idols, and turn your faces away from all your abominations’” (14:6);

Hosea

“O Israel, return to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity; Take words with you, and return to the LORD. Say to Him, ‘Take away all iniquity; receive us graciously, for we will offer the sacrifices of our lips’” (14:1,2);

Joel

“Now, therefore,’ says the LORD, ‘Turn to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.’ So rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and he relents from doing harm’” (2:12,13).

Zechariah

“Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets preached, saying, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘Turn now from your evil ways and your evil deeds.’ ‘ But they did not hear nor heed me,’ says the LORD” (1:4).

That's what repentance means – to turn away from things that are wrong and to turn towards God – and that's what both John and the Lord Jesus were now requiring Israel to do once again. Repentance means changing the direction of one's life.

From Bad to Good

Nobody will bother to do that, of course, if there is no obvious need. Why should you? If you are content with the way your life is going, and don't feel that there could be anything better, you will 'go with the flow'. It was a bit like that with the nation of Israel in Bible times. When things were good, especially when the nation was prosperous and at peace, few people bothered about God and His laws. They 'did their own thing' instead.

But when trouble came, He was their first thought and they expected Him to do something, even though they had ignored Him for years. People are still like that today; they give God no thought until they need Him and then often they blame Him for what has gone wrong. There is a better way.

By nature we have this desire inside ourselves to serve self. That's why it is easy for us to develop selfish attitudes, and to care for ourselves more than we care about anybody else. It's how we all are. Left to ourselves, without any restraints or controls, we might do anything and the likelihood is that it would be bad rather than good. Doing good and being good doesn't come naturally to anyone. The man with the great-

est insight ever into the human condition, the Lord Jesus Christ, once gave this diagnosis of what we are like inside:

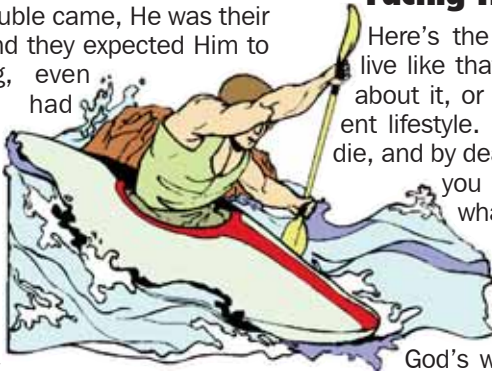
"What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man" (Mark 7:20-23).

There are several such lists in the New Testament where our natural condition is described and this behaviour is called "the works of the flesh" (see, for example, Galatians 5:19-21 and Romans 1:28-32).

Facing Hard Choices

Here's the choice for us. We can live like that and never do anything about it, or we can choose a different lifestyle. Do nothing and you will die, and by death the Bible means that you will cease to exist – whatever people might say it means. Change your ways and you can live a different type of life: one that puts you on God's wavelength and one that will result in happiness, fulfilment and finally everlasting life in the Kingdom of God on earth. That's what's on offer.

Nobody finds it easy to turn right round and go in the opposite direction, especially when the crowd is surging along, travelling further and further away from God. It takes some effort, which is why the Bible contains such good examples to help us re-orientate our thinking. And it gives us practical pointers about the things we should do and how we can do them.



Help from the Past

It's one thing talking in general terms about having to change the direction of our lives, but what does it mean in practice? The Bible is largely a book about people and their encounters and experiences with God. So let's look at some people who were challenged, to change their ways and learn from them.

Into the Unknown

At a time when city life was developing quite nicely in Mesopotamia, as archaeologists have since discovered, a man named Abraham was living in Ur. One day God appeared to him and asked him to leave the city and to go into the unknown, to a land that He would show him and Abraham did just that. He swapped his settled city existence for that of a nomad, choosing to live in a tent for the rest of his life and moving on whenever God told him to. Thousands of years later, this was written about that choice:

"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would afterward receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise" (Hebrews 11:8-10).

Father of the Faithful

Another inspired writer called Abraham

the father of the faithful (Romans 4:16), because he set such a powerful example of faithful obedience. God called and he responded, not counting the cost. And all through Abraham's life he believed the great promises God made, even though none of them were fulfilled during his lifetime.

For example, he was promised an earthly inheritance but never received one, having to purchase a plot of land in which to bury his wife, when Sarah died.

That's not a problem for us, because we are told that his inheritance still awaits him when he is raised from the dead (Hebrews 11:13,39-40). But it could have been a difficulty to a lesser man than Abraham.

As it was, he remained fully persuaded that God would keep His Word, right up to the time of his death. Now he sleeps in death – waiting for God to raise him from the dead and fulfil His promises, in the coming Kingdom. We know that for certain, for Jesus himself said:

"There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out." (Luke 13:28).

Abraham gave up one style of life – which was comfortable but godless – and followed a quite different path, one in which he was dependent upon God and in line with His will and purpose. If repentance involves turning towards God, Abraham is an excellent example of someone who made that change of



direction when he left Ur, and who shows that it is a lifelong pursuit.

Prince in Egypt

The same New Testament writer who testifies to Abraham's faithfulness also singles out another man in comfortable circumstances. In fact this man had a huge opportunity in life, in Egypt. Favoured by an accidental encounter with an Egyptian princess, Moses had been rescued from the bulrushes of the River Nile and was brought up in Pharaoh's palace, where he had every opportunity to learn about life Egyptian-style! Then, one day, he was forced to face an issue that would change his life.

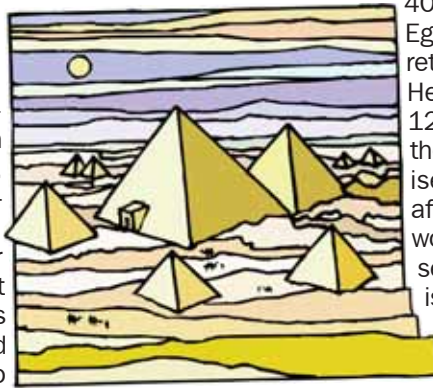
He intervened in a dispute between Hebrew slaves (his fellow countrymen) and Egyptian slave drivers (his adopted nationality). It made him question where he stood:

- ❖ Would he throw in his lot with the Egyptians and enjoy their luxurious lifestyle, so that he could be buried in style in a pyramid of his own?, or
- ❖ Would he side with an enslaved people who had nothing much going for them, except some promises that God had made to their ancestors?

Here's what his testimonial says:

"By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ

greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing him who is invisible" (Hebrews 11:24-27).



He chose the hard option. He was 40 when he fled from Egypt; 80 when he returned to rescue the Hebrews from slavery; 120 when he died on the edge of the Promised Land that, soon afterwards, the nation would enter and possess, as God had promised. His long life was full of challenge and spiritual adventure. Moses journeyed

with God and had a remarkably close relationship with his Maker. It is said of his relationship with God that they spoke face-to-face, "as a man speaks to his friend" (Exodus 33:11). Could he ever have regretted the choice he made to walk with God? Hardly!

King in Jerusalem

Some 400 years later there was another man who enjoyed a close relationship with God and, once again, he was a very gifted man. King David was good at almost everything he tried, even slinging stones.

The lad who slew Goliath the Philistine with a stone from his sling was already a competent shepherd and a talented musician. In later life he became a popular courtier, an excellent leader of men, an able fighter, and a successful king who reigned for many years in Israel. Under his rulership the nation expanded its territory and prospered greatly.

Then it all went wrong; for David

sinned grievously. He was attracted to the wife of one of his foremost soldiers and had an affair with her before arranging her husband's death: so he was both an adulterer and a murderer, two offences that under God's law carried the death penalty. But David was the head of the judiciary, so there was nobody to make him face up to his crimes – nobody except God!

Exposed

When God's prophet charged David with the offences, the King was beside himself. He was, God had said, "a man after my own heart, who will do all my will" (Acts 13:22); and now he was declared a sinner, and was therefore separated from God, who is holy and righteous in all His ways.

If you want to know what repentance really is, read two of the prayers David made at this time – prayers, or psalms, of true penitence (Psalms 32 and 51). In them he shows a full recognition of what human nature is like when it is allowed to have full expression in a person's life. And he is not just talking about himself: he is describing what we are all like at heart. Here's an extract:

"Have mercy upon me, O God, According to your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of your tender mercies, Blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done this evil in your sight - that you may be found just when you speak, and blameless when you judge. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin

my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:1-5).

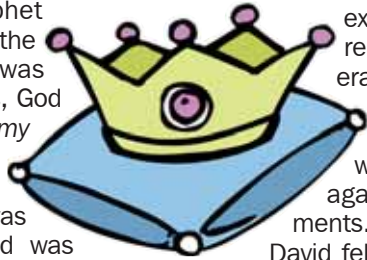
Sin Laid Bare

Notice that when David talks to God about his sinfulness he describes it in three different ways – as "transgression", "iniquity" and "sin". He's not choosing different words just to make better poetry; Scripture doesn't do that sort of thing. He is reminding himself that sinfulness finds many different expressions in life. It can be rebellion against God, deliberate ignorance of His will, perversion of His ways, or a series of thoughts, words or deeds which are against God's commandments.

David felt himself to be guilty of all those things and was aware that the problem was deep-seated in his very nature. He had, he said, been born like that – with that sort of disposition. He was "brought forth in iniquity" and conceived with that sort of sinful tendency.

The Old Testament serves a really helpful purpose when we are looking for examples of people who have realised their need of forgiveness and salvation because, at that time, God's saving work was not fully revealed. In later times, after Jesus had lived and died, a sinner had a clearer view of how he or she could be put right with God. So their sense of sinfulness gives way to their appreciation of what God has done to make it possible for them to be forgiven.

Because he lived 1000 years before Jesus, David's heartfelt desire for God's forgiveness can help us realise what we too need, once we recognise that, like David, we are sinners in God's sight. We need His forgiveness,



just as much as David did. That's what repentance means: knowing that we have been going through life in a direction that takes us away from God and wanting to turn around and be reconciled with Him.

"Lord Have Mercy"

Notice what David requested in his prayers for forgiveness (Psalms 32 and 51). He wanted God to:

- ❖ *Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*
- ❖ *Make me to hear joy and gladness.*
- ❖ *Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.*
- ❖ *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*
- ❖ *Do not cast me away from your presence.*
- ❖ *Restore to me the joy of your salvation (Psalm 51:7-12).*

All those things would bring him back into a right relationship with God, and those were the things he most desired in life. He wanted to be God's friend once again and he wanted to be made clean after his fall from grace.

It's a measure of the love and mercy of God that He sent His prophet Nathan to say to the King: *"The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die"* (2 Samuel 12:13), and David's relief was huge.

He didn't escape the consequences of what he had done; he had to live with the after-effects for the rest of his life. But he was assured that God had forgiven him and restored him to favour: once again his life was right with God. All of which is written so that

we can appreciate that however we may feel about ourselves, God can forgive us and recover us, because He loves us too.

Joyful Reaction

If David's sorrow about his sin is instructive, his reaction to God's gracious forgiveness is equally helpful. When Nathan told him that he was forgiven, David said this:

"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile" (Psalm 32:1,2).

What a blessing it was, he felt, to be forgiven and to be covered after his spiritual nakedness had been so obviously exposed. That language looks right back to the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve had broken God's law and had felt naked and ashamed, so much so that they had made fig-leaf garments to try to cover themselves. God had made them a covering instead, following the sacrifice of a lamb, and now David felt that God was covering his sin once more.

That sense of joy awaits every forgiven sinner who comes to realise that God can and will cover their sin and make them clean. He wants to forgive us, when we confess our sins, and has gone to great lengths to make that forgiveness possible.

"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8,9).

God wants to forgive us and wonderfully He made that possible in a most remarkable way, by sending his Son to be the Saviour of the world.



Turning to God

In the streets of Jerusalem a fisherman named Peter was addressing the crowds.

He wasn't offering them fresh fish, recently caught in the Sea of Galilee; he was talking to them about Jesus of Nazareth, the man who had only recently been executed outside the city as a criminal. Six weeks before he had, said Peter, been falsely accused, wrongly convicted and cruelly crucified and he accused his listeners of having been involved in all that:

*"Him, being delivered by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God, **you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death**" (Acts 2:23).*

Two Great Truths

If you study that accusation carefully, you will notice two things. First, that they were considered partly responsible for what had happened: the crowd had called for his death and had screamed for the release of a murderer instead.

The second thing to note, however, is astonishing. The apostle explained that everything that happened was part of God's plan of salvation. It wasn't an accident or a mistake. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ was part of God's rescue plan, which involved His Son laying down his life as a sacrifice, to save God's people from sin. That didn't

lessen their responsibility – but it offered them some hope of forgiveness, even so.

That became apparent as Peter continued his explanation. He talked to the crowd about King David and his writings. In them, Peter said, the king had looked forward to the coming of a Saviour and Deliverer, someone who would die and then rise again. David had written about one of his descendants who was to be exalted to glory and honour; and it was Jesus who had fulfilled that prophecy:

"This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses ... Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:32,36).

"What shall we do?"

What an accusation that was, directed at those in Jerusalem who had been tricked, confused, or who were simply wrong about the true identity and origin of Jesus! They had taken him for an impostor, a teacher of wrong doctrine, an upstart who dared to challenge the religious authorities and now, Peter said, they had demanded the death of the Son of God. They had jeered when the Saviour of the world was being crucified. Now wonder they were cut to the heart and cried out:

"Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37).



From a human point of view the situation was hopeless. Consider what would have happened if a ruthless ruler had sent his son incognito, to discover what his subjects really thought of him, and they had deliberately murdered the lad. The father's reaction would be devastating; you would expect no mercy to be shown to those who were responsible.

In the same way, the Jewish nation might expect some punishment for the crime they had committed against God and His Son, wilfully and deliberately. Surely, there could be no forgiveness for such an atrocity – something which has been described as the greatest crime ever committed by mankind. So what did Peter say when asked “*What shall we do?*” His answer demonstrates the amazing forgiveness of God and the wonderful opportunity that is still available to every one of us.

*“Peter said to them, ‘**Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins;** and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.’ And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, ‘Be saved from this perverse generation’” (Acts 2:38-40).*

Repent and Be Saved

We have already worked out what *repentance* means – it means being deeply sorry about our sin, confessing our failures to God and humbly asking for His forgiveness. That was what King David did when he had grievously sinned, and God graciously and mercifully forgave him. No wonder he was joyful and grateful as a consequence. Who wouldn't be in those circum-

stances? Now Peter was saying that if those responsible for the death of Jesus *repented* and *were baptized*, they would receive a gift from God: first described as “*the gift of the Holy Spirit*” and then explained as meaning salvation – “*Be saved...*”

It is an astounding and marvellous truth that Peter declared to those anxious men and women of long ago. God wants to save from sin all those who want to be saved. In a letter the apostle wrote years later, he said that very thing:

“The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

To Save Sinners

It's a truth repeated many times in the New Testament, and always with a sense of wonder and appreciation, that God holds no grudges and has no limits to the extent to which He will go to rescue and redeem people. Take the apostle Paul – the man who had gone with murder in his heart to capture the believers in Damascus. Thirty years later he was still marvelling at God's wonderful forgiveness, when he wrote:

“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief” (1 Timothy 1:12-

15).

Like David before him, Paul knew that he had broken God's law and was a sinner; indeed he classed himself a supreme sinner. So the fact that God had forgiven him and entrusted to his care the gospel of salvation made it all the more special. That made him even more aware of the grace and goodness of God. He responded to God's favour by dedicating his life in the service of his new-found Lord. He was a saved sinner and henceforth he tried to live in a way that expressed his life-long appreciation of what had been done for him. Listen to these words:



"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

Conversion

It will have become apparent by now that the call to *repent and be baptized* is a marvellous invitation and yet a huge challenge. On the one hand, it offered the people of Jerusalem full and free forgiveness. Nothing they had done, or had been involved in, would be held against them. God would forgive and forget. His forgiveness is like that; as one writer expressed it:

"As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12).

That means that there is no end to God's forgiveness: it is not limited or

restrained in any way. On the other hand, what was on offer was frightening in the sheer scale of what it might do in the lives of ordinary men and women who might go on to live a completely different life, because of their new sense of appreciation and thankfulness to God.

The apostle Peter expressed that very thought a few days later in Jerusalem when, this time in the Temple precinct, he addressed another crowd of impressed spectators. A lame man had just been healed and, when a different crowd gathered around, Peter told them too about God's gracious offer of salvation.

Jesus, he said, was the Son whom God had sent who had been cruelly treated by people who should have known better, yet who were ignorant of the true facts. It was all part of God's gracious purpose for, long before, He foretold the Coming of a Saviour and Redeemer. Then he made this appeal:

"Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before" (Acts 3:19,20).

Step by step our understanding of what God wants is advancing. If we are to take advantage of God's offer of salvation, we need to:

- ✓ Repent
- ✓ Be Baptized, and
- ✓ Be Converted.

It's time to start working out exactly what that means and precisely how we should go about it, if we want to start a new life with God.

Christian Conversion

When we talk about converting something we usually mean that we will adapt or modify it in some way. A convertible car can either have its soft top open or closed. An electrical appliance can be converted, so that it will work on a different voltage.



But what does it mean for people to be converted, as Peter said we must be, if we want to be saved?

“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38);

“Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out” (3:19).

Vital Requirement

In our easy-going age it may come as a surprise to see that Christianity makes very exclusive claims. Challenged by the religious authorities, and told to stop preaching in Jerusalem, the apostle said that he couldn't comply because: *“There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved”* (Acts 4:12).

Peter was not making a new claim but was explaining what Jesus had often said – that he alone could lead people to salvation. He made it clear that we need to change the way we think and the way we act, if we are to become members of God's family and

Jesus to the People

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

Jesus to Nicodemus

“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God ... unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:3-5).

Jesus to his Disciples

“Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3,4).

share in everything that will happen when he returns to rule over God's kingdom. Here are just three of those occasions:

This is the very same message we heard Peter deliver to the crowds in Jerusalem: that they needed to repent, be baptized and be converted. Jesus had taught that to his disciples, and now Peter was continuing the teaching. It is the only way that we can be saved from sin and death.

God is offering us a relationship with Himself, and a life that will last forever; but we have to do our part. If we take a few steps in His direction, like little

children learning to walk, He will be there ready to help and encourage us.

Coming Back Home

Jesus once told a parable about a man who had messed up his life. He demanded that his father give him his share in the family inheritance, there and then, after which he left home and spent it unwisely. Soon, far from home, he realised what a fool he was and what a mistake it had all been. He was friendless, hungry and in despair, thinking about eating pig's food to keep himself alive.

Then an idea occurred to him: he would return repentantly to his father and tell him how unworthy he was, so he went back home. Imagine how anxiously he would have been making that journey. Jesus said that he was preparing his opening speech in advance.

What of the father, who might have decided to write off his son and decide that he never wanted to see him again, for he had been badly treated by someone who should have known better? His attitude was amazing for, as Jesus tells it:

“When he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fat-



ted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (15:20-24).

Parables are stories which depict heavenly realities and this one is no exception. All men and women waste their opportunities in life until they decide to turn back to God. The Father in heaven is always awaiting that change, always hoping that it will happen. He is always ready to receive us and to celebrate with us. But we have to make the decision and acknowledge that we have been in the wrong.

Step by Step

Let's follow the route that leads us back to the Father's favour, by exploring the language Jesus used.

➤ Repent and Believe

When Jesus told the people that they must *“Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15)* he was asking them to do two things and was, at the same time, explaining how they could do it. Repentance is about turning away from sin, and that's not easy to do because of the way we are.

If you were out walking along a pleasant path, you might be persuaded to change direction if you saw an even better way along which to walk. That what happens when we believe in the gospel – the “good news” of what God has done, is doing, and will do to achieve our salvation.

There is nothing better in life than the news that God loves us so much that He wants the very best for us. To achieve that, He sent His only begotten Son to

die for us, and thus to save us from sin and death. Soon, God will send His Son to earth again to establish a worldwide Kingdom, and his rulership will transform the world and make the earth a beautiful place of truth, peace and harmony between man and God.

That's the way in which we are being asked to walk and that's the gospel truth we are being asked to understand and believe. Reading and understanding the Bible for ourselves can enrich our lives and give us hope, both in this life and for the life to come.

➤ **Be Born Again**

Nicodemus was a man with good religious qualifications in Israel and when he came to see Jesus he came at night. He was the learned man, yet he came to talk to a mere carpenter from Nazareth and that wouldn't have looked good in the eyes of the Jewish establishment. So he must have been taken aback when Jesus told him *"unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God"* (John 3:3).

You can tell from the record that Nicodemus was taken aback by the authority with which Jesus spoke, for he asked for clarification and Jesus told him what this rebirth involved. He had to be born again of both water and spirit (3:5).

Jesus himself had begun his ministry by being baptised in the river Jordan, by John the Baptist, and when doing so had said that this was what everyone must do (Matthew 3:15). Baptism is, the New Testament explains, a way of burying the past and symbolically washing ourselves clean in God's sight. For that reason it has to be an act of immersion, not just a splash of water on the

head, and it must be something that is done by repentant believers, not something that is done to infants, who don't understand what is going on. That's why Jesus said that it was to be accompanied by spiritual rebirth – birth of the spirit.

➤ **Growing Up**

Choosing to be baptised is the first step along a path of spiritual development which changes us from people who once lived to please ourselves, into people who grow up to be like the Lord Jesus Christ and who try to please him. That takes time, of course, and it's not always straightforward, which is why Jesus once called a little child to him and said to his disciples: *"unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven"* (Matthew 18:3).

Repentance, belief and baptism are all stages along the path of spiritual development and so, Jesus said, we need to humble ourselves and adopt a childlike attitude if we are to change our natural behaviour and develop spiritual characteristics.

The apostle Peter – the one who was addressing the crowds in Jerusalem and urging them to repent – said that we must be eager to read the Word of God (the Bible) so that we could grow as quickly as babies grow when they are feeding (1 Peter 2:1-3).

The apostle Paul – the one who was converted on the road to Damascus – said that we had to grow up to be like Jesus, in: *"the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ"* (Ephesians 4:13).



Why Should I?

Nobody is going to try to force you to repent and turn to God. It doesn't work like that, for it has to be your decision and nobody else's. But here are some reasons why you should think seriously about changing the direction of your life.

① God has a Plan

The Bible is God's guidebook to a better life for the world He created and for all those men and women who want something better out of life. There is nothing better than what God has on offer, for he wants us together to live at peace in a perfect world, when everything will be put right and when God and man will be at harmony. Then all creation will give God praise and honour and things will be as they should always have been. Paradise will be restored on earth.

② God has made Promises

God's Plan is explained in the Bible in a way which gives us the opportunity to be part of what it is to happen. Great promises were made to Abraham, King David, the people of Israel and then to the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Abraham left home and ventured into the unknown because he believed what God said, and we can benefit from them too, if we have the same faith.

Those promises have the power to change the way we think and the things we do. For if we really want to be part of God's purpose, and members of His family, we will want to know

more about Bible teaching and will want to get to know God, and His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. As Jesus said, in prayer to his Father: *"This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent"* (John 17:3).

③ The Bible makes Sense

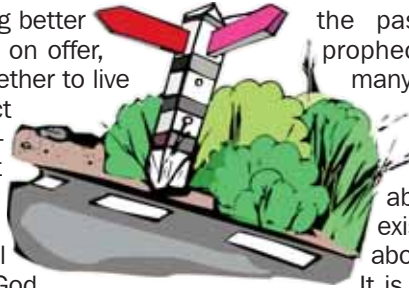
We are not asked to believe in something that you can't think through. Far from it! The Bible is a library of information about what has happened in the past to God's people, or prophecies and predictions – many of which have now been fulfilled, and others which are now coming to pass, and clear explanations about the problems that now exist and what we can do about them.

It is a book which needs to be read carefully and regularly, and it gives really good reasons why we should believe God's promises and do something about them.

④ God sent Jesus to save Us

Right at the heart of God's purpose is the remarkable truth that he loves us so much that he sent Jesus to save us from our sins. Throughout history there had never been anyone who was good enough to obey God's law: everybody failed, even someone as gifted and able as King David, as faithful as Abraham, or as committed as Moses.

So God caused a Son to be born to Mary – his "only begotten Son" (John 1:18), and Jesus lived in perfect obedience and then surrendered his life, by dying on a cross. It was the only way to rescue mankind from sin and death,



for it showed mankind how awful sin is and how wonderful God's love is.

Jesus voluntarily laid down his life for us and that gracious act of self-surrender has touched the hearts of men and women through the ages, who have reckoned that:

"The love of Christ constrains us, because we judge thus: that if one died for all, then all died; and he died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for him who died for them and rose again" (2 Corinthians 5:14,15).

5 The Life of Christ

Nobody ever lived as good a life as Jesus. He demonstrated just what life can be like when lived to the full. He was gracious, kind, compassionate, knowledgeable, able ... you are bound to run out of superlatives when describing his life. It is said of him that he: *"went about doing good" (Acts 10:38)* and that he was *"altogether lovely" (Song 5:16)*.

Jesus lived in a way that demonstrated the character of God Himself, for he was always in perfect accord with His Father (John 14:9-11). In that way Jesus set an example to all those who want to follow him, who would like to get the best from life (1 Peter 2:21), which is why the New Testament urges us to develop the *"mind of Christ"* – to be spiritually minded.

6 Being Baptized

When we have understood what God has to tell us and have decided that we want to be part of His gracious purpose, repentance has to be followed by baptism – immersion in water. It is the way God has provided for us to be identified with Christ. We are buried

with him so that, in figure, we can be raised with him to a new life; making a fresh start.

"Therefore we were buried with him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of his death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of his resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin" (Romans 6:4-6).

7 Following Christ

By repentance, belief and baptism we start that new life of discipleship, learning from and living with other believers and worshipping with them. The process of change and spiritual development takes time, but is destined with God's help to transform us into people who are Christ-like. When Jesus returns to establish God's kingdom on earth, he will make everything beautiful, including all those from all ages who have accepted God's invitation to walk with Him. That invitation now comes to us.

"Incline your ear, and come to me. Hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you the sure mercies of David ... Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon" (Isaiah 55:3,6-7).



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