

Basics of Christianity

a study on the central concepts of the Christian faith

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Part 1

The Message

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The Good News

adapted from Four Spiritual Laws © 1965

1. God loves us, and created us to be in a personal relationship with Him.

God loves us: John 3.16 – For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Life is found in knowing God: John 17.3 – Now this is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent.

2. People are sinful, and because of this sin, we are separated from God and cannot know Him personally or experience His love.

We've all sinned: Romans 3.23 – For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

The punishment for sin is death: Romans 6.23 – For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God wants to be in a relationship with us, but our sin, which can be anything from active rebellion against God to passive indifference towards God, makes it impossible for us to have fellowship with God. Our own efforts to reach God, like trying to live a good life or pursuing philosophy/religion, will always fail. Like the diagram to the right, even the best of us can't bridge the gap between us and God through our own efforts.



What's more, our sin deserves death; we are guilty of a crime and have been sentenced to eternal punishment.

3. Jesus Christ paid the penalty for our sin on the cross, so that we can be reconciled to God. Through Him alone, we can enter into a personal relationship with God.

Jesus died in our place: Romans 5.8 – But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Jesus rose from the dead: 1 Corinthians 15.3-6 – ...Christ died for our sins...He was buried,...He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,...He appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, He appeared to more than five hundred....

Jesus is the only way to God: John 14.6 – Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Our crime (our sin) sentenced us to death and separation from God. But Jesus came and took the punishment for us on the cross so we wouldn't have to. He then rose from the dead to show His power over death. Because Jesus died in our place, our sin can be forgiven – the punishment that we were supposed to receive because of our sin was cancelled. Like the diagram to the right shows, Jesus bridged the gulf between us and God when He died in our place to pay the penalty for our sin. He is the only way to God.



4. We must respond to what Christ did for us by repenting of our sin, and believing what God has done for us.

We respond with faith, not by trying to live a good life: Ephesians 2.8-9 – For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.

We respond by believing and acknowledging Jesus as Lord of our life: Romans 10.9-10 – That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.

In responding to what Christ did for us we need to trust God to forgive us completely of our sin, and allow Him to make us what He wants us to be. Just intellectually believing what the Bible says, or having an emotional experience is not enough: we must choose to follow Christ and accept His forgiveness for our sin. When we do this, we are made alive in Christ and are no longer spiritually dead and separated from God.

⌋ What is sin? Sin is self-centered living, as opposed to God-centered living. Sin isn't limited to things we do intentionally – like choosing to harm someone or refusing to do what we know He wants us to do. It is also unintentionally leaving God out of the things we do.

⌋ What does it mean to repent? Repenting means that we agree with God that our sin and self-centered living is wrong.

⌋ What does it mean to make Jesus "Lord of our life"? Allowing Jesus to be our Lord, means that we let Him be the boss. All areas of our life, from career decisions to how we treat to people, are under His control and influenced by His place in our life.

⌋ What does it mean to respond to what Christ did for us? We respond by doing something as a result of believing these truths. We can do this any number of ways, but commonly our response begins with a prayer. Just talk to God and in your own words, acknowledge your need for Him and thank Him for paying the penalty for your sin and forgiving you. Tell Him that you now want Him to control your life.

Basically, there are two ways we can live life: with us in charge or with God in charge. When we're living life our way, Christ is either completely not a part or just a small "part" of our life – either way, He's not directing our life. This usually results in emptiness and frustration. Becoming a Christian means choosing the later option; when Christ is in charge, we yield to His directing in our life. As a result, life is fulfilling and purposeful because we're living how God intended for us to be living.

Clarifying the Concepts

What are we saved from?

Our sins: Matthew 1.21 – She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will *save his people from their sins*.

Hell/Eternal Punishment: Matthew 25.46 – “Then they [the unrighteous] will go away to *eternal punishment*, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Purposeless living/Empty way of life: 1 Peter 1.18-19 – For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were *redeemed from the empty way of life* handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

Separation from God: 1 Peter 3.18 – For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, *to bring you to God*.

Who can be saved?

Everyone!: Romans 10.13 – ...*Everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Christianity is not just for people with certain interests or behavior, or from certain social classes or ethnic backgrounds. It's important to know that God wants everyone to be saved (2 Peter 3.9 says “He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”). Even if we have done terrible things and rebelled against God, He still extends His offer of forgiveness and salvation.

How are we saved? What do we do? What does God do?

To receive salvation, we respond to the gospel by repenting, believing, and allowing Christ to be Lord of our life, but it is ultimately God's grace that saves us. He is the one that redeems us, or saves us from our sin and its consequences. He also does the work of atonement (being reconciled to God), sanctification (the process of being made holy), and justification (being pronounced as righteous or blameless before God), which are all part of the process of salvation.

We believe:

John 3.1-21 – “...that everyone who *believes in Him* may have eternal life...For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever *believes in Him* shall not perish but have eternal life...Whoever *believes in Him* is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.”

John 6.29 – Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to *believe* in the one He has sent.”

John 11.25 – Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who *believes in me* will live, even though he dies.”

Acts 16.31 – They replied, “*Believe* in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved...”

We respond (belief, repentance, baptism):

Mark 16.16 – “Whoever *believes and is baptized* will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”

Acts 2.38 – Peter replied, “*Repent and be baptized*, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

Romans 10.9-10 – That if you *confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart* that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.

We follow/obey Jesus:

John 8.12 – When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. *Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness*, but will have the light of life.”

John 8.31-32 – To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “*If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples*. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

u What does it mean to “be saved”? A person is saved when they respond to the gospel, or good news of God's offer of salvation.

u How does Christianity give someone purpose in life? Here's a short answer to a really complex question: Christianity answers the two questions necessary to have a sense of purpose in life: What am I here for? and Why do I matter?

The Bible teaches in Genesis 1-2 that God created us to be in a relationship with Him and to “fill the earth and subdue it” (build cultures by participating in our role in society). Sin greatly hinders our ability to do these things as God wants. Through Jesus we can enjoy the relationship with God that we were designed for and contribute to society using the truths taught in God's Word.

The Bible also teaches in Genesis 1-2 that we matter because we were created in God's image. We have worth and value because God created us. We didn't just accidentally come along, instead, God is intimately involved in each person's creation and existence (Matthew 10:30, Psalm 139). Because we have this intrinsic worth, we have significance and know that we matter because we are created and loved by God.

We deny self/make Jesus Lord:

Matthew 16.24-25 – Then Jesus said to his disciples, "*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.* For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."

Matthew 19.16-30, Luke 18.18-30 – Story of the Rich Young Ruler

What God does for us:

Galatians 3.13 – Christ *redeemed* us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us...

Colossians 2.13-14 – He *forgave us all our sins*, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.

Colossians 1.21-22 – Once you were alienated from God, and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has *reconciled you* by Christ's physical body through death to *present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.*

What is the evidence of salvation in our lives?

We can see the Holy Spirit in our life:

John 7.38-39 – "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, *streams of living water will flow from within him.*" By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

We bear "good fruit" (live a life that is pleasing to God):

Matthew 3.8 – "*Produce fruit*" in keeping with repentance."

Matthew 12.33 – "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for *a tree is recognized by its fruit.*"

John 12.46 – "I have come into the world as a light, so that *no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.*"

1 Corinthians 5:17 – Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, *he is a new creation*, the old has gone, the new has come!

We obey Jesus:

John 10.27 – "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and *they follow me.*"

John 14.15 – "If you love me, *you will obey what I command.*"

What saves us: faith or works?

Because some religious groups place such an emphasis on works, many people are misled to believe that the good things they do will save them. However, the Bible teaches that we are saved by grace through faith – it also teaches that the evidence of our faith is good works. Therefore, good works DO NOT save us (God's grace does), but they result from genuine faith in God. A lack of good works, MAY be indicative of a lack of sincere faith.

Faith/belief that results in repentance saves us:

John 5.24 – "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and *believes* Him who sent me *has eternal life and will not be condemned*, he has crossed over from death to life."

Luke 13.3 – "...But *unless you repent*, you too will all perish."

Genuine repentance and faith result in good works:

James 2.14-26 – What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, *faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead...* As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Philippians 2.12-13 – Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to *work out your salvation* with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

u What does it mean to "bear good fruit"? Jesus uses this analogy to show that in the same way a tree bears fruit based on the type and quality of tree it is, people behave in a way that shows who they really are. Galatians 5.22-23 says that the fruit, or evidence of God in us is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control". These character qualities are just a few examples of "fruit" that people can "bear".

u What if we don't see the evidence of salvation in our lives? Does that mean we're not really saved? If we cannot see fruit in our life, it MAY be indicative of a lack of sincere faith. If you feel this might be the case, talk to a spiritual friend or leader. Sometimes we are tricked into thinking we don't have fruit so we'll doubt our faith, when in fact, there is fruit in our life. A mature Christian friend can help us see the fruit we feel might be missing. Or, if we really aren't exhibiting fruit, they can help direct us to do what needs to be done.

Good works DO NOT save us:

Ephesians 2.8-9 – For it is *by grace you have been saved, through faith*– and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – *not by works*, so that no one can boast.

Titus 3.5 – He saved us, *not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy*. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit..

The thief on the cross next to Jesus believed and repented of his sin. He was saved even though the didn't have opportunity to "prove" his faith through his actions:

Luke 23.40-43 – But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, *today you will be with me in paradise*."

What happens to those who are not saved?

Hell exists...it's not an imaginary place that serves to "scare" people into becoming Christians:

Luke 16.22-23 – "...The rich man also died and was buried. In *hell* where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side..."

Matthew 10.28 – "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in *hell*"

Eternal punishment (hell) awaits those who have rejected Jesus offer of salvation:

John 3.36 – "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son *will not see life*, for God's wrath remains on him."

Romans 6.23 – For the wages of sin is *death*, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

2 Peter 2.4-9 – For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them into gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment; ...then the Lord knows how to...hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment.

Matthew 25.46 – "Then they will go away to *eternal punishment*, but the righteous to eternal life."

u Can someone can get saved just before they die and still go to heaven? If so, why not live life my way and then "repent" right before I die? Jesus tells a parable (Matthew 20.1-15) that illustrates how God treats everyone who responds to the gospel the same: whether they have been Christians for many years, or just a few minutes they are given eternal life.

However, from a logical standpoint, you're taking quite a gamble by waiting until right before you die to respond to God's love; you don't know if how you die will allow for time to do this. Once we reject what God has offered us (which we do by choosing to live our own way), we are condemned until we accept it. And from a spiritual standpoint, this attitude shows a lack of understanding of what is offered by salvation. (The next section addresses this topic further.)

u Is there such thing as purgatory (a place for people who were good people, but weren't saved)? The Bible doesn't make any mention of a "neutral" place for good-but-not-saved people, so while it's a nice idea, we can't count on its existence.

A Few Misconceptions

"If I'm good I'll go to heaven."

Review concept #3 in the Good News section.

Ephesians 2.8-9 – For it is *by grace you have been saved, through faith*– and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – *not by works*, so that no one can boast.

Titus 3.5 – He saved us, *not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy*. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit..

The Reality: The Bible makes it clear that we are not saved because of anything we do – otherwise, as Paul says in the verse above, we could boast that we got to heaven on our own, without God's grace. Good behavior is a result of salvation, not the cause of it – unfortunately too many people get this confused!

"Going to heaven is the point of getting saved." or
"Becoming a Christian is a 'free ticket' to heaven."

Review concept #1 in the Good News section and "What are we saved from?" in the Clarifying the Concepts section.

The Reality: If you think that heaven is the ultimate goal of salvation, you're completely missing out on what God has for you NOW! When we repent of our sin, we are saved from hell, but more importantly, we are saved from the power of sin in our life – that means salvation causes a change in the way we live and gives us a purpose in life. Besides being saved from these things, salvation entitles us to a wonderful, personal relationship with God because of what Christ did for us on the cross.

In addition to all that is gained in this life from living God's way, the Bible teaches that believers will be rewarded in heaven for the things they do on earth. This fact may not directly motivate us to obey God and pursue a relationship with Him, but knowing that we are still accountable for what we do on earth even after we become a Christian will impact our decisions and actions. When we are saved, we're given eternal life (heaven), but what we do with our life after salvation is rewarded (but not punished) by God. These two verses discuss this "judgement" for Christians:

1 Corinthians 3.11-15 – For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work.

If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

1 Corinthians 5.10 – For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

"If I was baptized/prayed to receive Christ/responded to an altar call at church then I don't have anything to worry about – I'm saved."

Review the questions "What are we saved from?", "What is the evidence of our salvation?", and "How are we saved?" in the Clarifying the Concepts section.

The Reality: Many people assume that because they've done a religious thing at some point in their life, that's all they need to do. There are a few problems with this view:

First, they're missing out on all that God offers us in salvation – freedom from sin, and a relationship with Him, in addition to eternal life with Him in heaven. The Christian life is fulfilling and exciting, and just having a little religion "on the side" or as an "insurance voucher" against hell is like putting a very large chocolate bar down after taking just one bite!

Second, when we say "I'm saved because I did (some religious act)", it trivializes salvation, because it minimalizes God's grace in our life and maximizes the idea that it is something we do that gets us to heaven. The "religious" things we do are not what saves us, rather it is God's grace and our faith.

Third, God knows the condition of our hearts, both now and at the time we did whatever religious act that we're counting on getting us to heaven. We have to question the sincerity of our faith when we can't see evidence of salvation in our life. Ultimately, God decides who He will let into heaven – if we are truly His children, He'll welcome us right in!

"People are mostly good, certainly not bad enough to go to hell."

Review concept #2 in the Good News section and "What happens to those who are not saved?" in the Clarifying the Concepts section.

Romans 6.23 – For the wages of sin is *death*, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

James 2.10 – For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is *guilty* of breaking all of it

The Reality: No matter how good we are, we are all sinful and guilty of breaking God's laws. Because of that sin, the Bible says that we deserve the punishment of hell. The good news is that God wants all of us to be saved (1 Timothy 2:3-4 says "This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."), so if we repent of that sin, we WILL be forgiven!

"Most religions lead to salvation."

Review concept #3 in the Good News section.

John 14.6 – Jesus answered, "I am *the way* and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father *except through me*."

Acts 4.12 – Salvation is found in *no one else*, for there is *no other name* under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.

1 Timothy 2.5 – For there is one God and *one mediator between God and men*, the man Christ Jesus.

The Reality: Jesus claims that He is the only way to salvation. To believe there are other ways to heaven requires believing that Jesus was not truthful, making the whole foundation of Christianity false.

u I was baptized when I was a baby. Am I saved? The Bible teaches that it is our responsibility to respond to what God has done for us. Babies are not choosing to follow God by getting baptized; because their parents choose to baptize them, it is more of an act of dedicating a child to God rather than salvation. Those who have been baptized as children are still accountable to God to choose Him for themselves when they're old enough to make that decision.

u What happens to people who don't hear about Jesus and have the chance to reject Him? Mark 16.16 says that those who accept Jesus are saved and that those that reject Him are condemned, but the Bible doesn't say anything specific about what happens to those that don't have the opportunity to do either. Romans 1.19-20 says "...what may be known about God is plain to them [people], because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse." This indicates that everyone is accountable to respond to God to the extent they are able because of how He has revealed Himself in the universe, but it doesn't say exactly what this 'response' must look like. However, the Bible does teach that God is both merciful/loving and just. Because of this, we can trust that God will make a fair and just decision while still being merciful to those who didn't have the opportunity to accept His gift of Jesus.

Additional Resources

From the Bible:

The Parable of Sower – Matthew 13.1-23, (also in Mark 4.1-20, Luke 8.1-15)

The Parable of the Two Sons – Matthew 21.28-32

The Great Commission – Matthew 28.18-20

Jesus' Discussion with Nicodemus – John 3.1-21

The Goal of Our Faith – 1 Peter 1.8-9

Jesus Decides Who Comes into Heaven – John 5.21, Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43

Online:

More information about salvation and who Jesus is:

www.powertochange.com

www.thelife.com

www.whoisjesus-really.com

www.gospelcom.net/guidance/answer.htm

Answers common questions people ask about Christianity:

www.billygraham.org/SpiritualHelp_Index.asp

<http://www.greatcom.org/resources/toughquestions>