



FAITH



BC is a series of five studies that parallel a faith journey toward Jesus Christ. Each builds on the one before, and interested readers will find themselves somewhere on the path.

This last study brings us to the end of a journey to Christ, to begin a new life, and new journey, with him.

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I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in lovingkindness and in compassion, and I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the Lord. *Hosea 2:19-20*

This verse address is engraved on the inside of my wedding ring because it summarizes what marriage is meant to be. It is the marriage vow the Lord took with his people of the Old Testament. It teaches that the faith that connects us to God has the characteristics of a good marriage.

We find here all the themes we have encountered on our journey toward Christ. There is God's righteousness, his holy character that originally created mankind with the noble and delicious charge to rule the earth in his name. There is justice, the good and proper judgment of a holy God in response to what we have actually done with our lives and with this planet. There is compassion, the desire of God's heart to forgive sin and restore a people to himself. There is lovingkindness, the biblical word describing faithfulness to a promise—in this case, God's promise to personally pay the price required by justice in order to forgive. There is knowing God, a reconciled relationship with him that lasts forever, which is the whole point and goal of biblical faith.¹

Knowing all this information is one thing. But how does one actually become one of God's people, a follower of Jesus?

The answer is not difficult. If belonging to God through Jesus is like a marriage, then beginning that relationship is like getting married.

When we think of getting married, we think of weddings. Our culture has exalted the wedding to a gala affair, often requiring

considerably more preparation than is given to prepare for the responsibilities of marriage.

The Bible recognizes the joy of weddings, but leaves such matters to the culture and individuals involved. All that is required for marriage is a conscious personal decision and public commitment to enter into a specific life-long relationship.

Christian faith takes the shape of an ongoing relationship with Jesus as one's Lord and Savior. But such a relationship has to begin somewhere, with a conscious personal decision. This prevents us from being deceived about the nature of real faith. Faith in Christ is more than just sincerely affirming the facts of who he is and what he accomplished. Faith is more than simply believing true things about Christ. The Apostle James pointed this out:

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

Obviously, confidence in the facts concerning Christ is necessary for faith. But if even the Devil believes all the facts about Jesus, the faith that makes me one of God's people must be something more. Being personally reconciled to God involves the decision to enter into a mutual personal commitment with Christ, something akin to a marriage without the sexual overtones. We enter into similar marriage-like commitments when joining the army or entering into any legal contract. However much we approve of a contract, it is not in force until I sign on the dotted line.

That may make faith sound too business like, though. The biblical model is more like a marriage of love. The Lord has done all the pursuing out of love for me. But he does not force himself on anyone. We must be captivated by him and want the love he offers.

God's Proposal

The biblical model of salvation is the *covenant*, an ancient word describing a binding relationship between two parties. In a covenant, each party commits himself or herself in a specific, mutually agreed upon manner. Marriage is the most common example of a covenant.² In fact, the Bible understands the concept of love in terms of faithfulness to one's covenant relationships.³

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

In order to reestablish his covenant with sinful humanity, God came to us in Christ to bear the penalty of our sin (death) and begin to untwist our spirit so as to freely offer joyful obedience once more. Christ's death on the cross covers the offense of rejecting God, and his resurrection enables him to bring God's Spirit to renew our spirit.

Because of Christ's death on behalf of sinners, we can enter into a new covenant as if there had never been any sin separating us from God. For those in this new covenant, all sin—past, present and future—was vicariously punished on the cross, just as if sinners had hung there in agony instead of Jesus, fully paying for their own sins. More than that, when Christ assumed our place on the cross, he enabled us to assume his place in God's heart. This means that the original covenant offered at creation has been significantly amended; it has become a covenant of amazing grace. Our sin need no longer prevent us from receiving God's perfect blessing. That blessing becomes partially accessible throughout this life, and will become available without measure when the Church is complete and Christ returns.

Jesus makes a new relationship with God available to sinners, but we still must personally accept God's proposal and enter into that new covenant by our own choice. Entering into the covenant requires confidence in what Jesus did, is doing and shall do, along with an unreserved commitment to trust and obey God in all things. While Christ's completed work covers the ongoing failure of still-imperfect believers, the sincere desire to obey is necessary evidence that our faith is saving faith.⁴ True faith wants to rediscover God's design. While it's true that even our sincerity is imperfect, God knows the heart and sees the earnest desire to trust and obey him again.

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

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

"I Do"

What we must do is recognize the faith in Christ which God has created within us⁶—faith in God's gracious offer to restore our relationship with him—and offer to him our promise of joyful obedience.

It is important to realize that God's promise in no way depends upon our obedience, since Christ has both obeyed God on our behalf and accepted the punishment for disobedience that we deserve. But if Christ has earned my trust in God, then a genuine desire to obey is the natural and inevitable result, however imperfectly I live that out.

Accepting God's promise to love me in Christ, and promising to love him in return is the equivalent of saying, "I do." It's such a simple act, but with such large consequences! In this case, we

become one of God's people, his family, in a new humanity that will one day rule the earth as he originally intended.

Exercising faith seems an awfully simple requirement to affect great changes. But remember that the benefits of salvation do not come from changes we make in ourselves; they come from a restored relationship with God. To again use the analogy of marriage, the union of commoners with royalty benefits the commoners immensely, not because of what they bring to the marriage, but because of all that royalty is willing to share. Christian faith does not initiate a relationship based upon our virtue and strength, but rather accepts a relationship based upon God's.

In other words, the value of Christian faith is not what it says about our heart—the quality of our godly emotions or spiritual strength of will. The value of faith is what our heart has chosen to say about God. Faith believes that God is, that God is good, that our suffering is our fault, not his, and he has wonderfully provided amazing grace to bring us back to his original design.

The Lord requires nothing less from us, but nothing more. Nothing more is necessary. Faith believes that all our guilt—past, present and future—has been buried in Christ's tomb and left there when he rose. Faith believes we will gladly spend the rest of eternity pleasing God out of grateful joy for the opportunity to do so. All God requires is faith, for he knows that former commoners will naturally adopt royal manners in time.

Whenever you are prepared to accept Christ's death as a gracious substitute for your own, and want to devote the rest of your life to honoring God to the best of your ability, the covenant between you and the Lord is established. You have said by your faith, "I do." God sees your heart and at that point considers you to be his friend and family forever.⁷

Of course, as with a marriage or any other covenant, it is fitting and helpful to mark our new relationship with special ceremony. Public commitments ground our emotions in reality and enable us to share our joy with others who have discovered Christ, too.

Christ gave us two ceremonies (called *sacraments*) to publicly celebrate and share our relationship with him. Jesus adapted them from the Old Testament to illustrate how he is the fulfillment of everything God promised. The first is Baptism, a symbolic washing that accompanies the entrance into discipleship.⁸ The second is The Lord's Supper (also called the Lord's Table, or Communion or the Eucharist), a symbolic meal where we share our fellowship with the risen Christ himself.⁹

The sacraments were designed by Christ to be shared by all his people, whom the Bible calls his Church (the word means a congregating of people). Christ's Church comes in all sorts of flavors. A good Church is one that clearly trusts Jesus and strives to be faithful to his Bible. It is important to choose a Church fellowship wisely. Ask advice from Christians who obviously enjoy their faith and try to live according to God's Word.

If you desire right now to belong to Christ, I encourage you to offer up to God a personal prayer of faith. Please understand that such prayers are not magical incantations that bring us to God. It certainly doesn't matter how fancy they sound (though when speaking to God, we should always do our best). Prayer is simply talking directly to God, and we need to talk to God in order to say "I do." I recommend the following:

- Plan a time and place where you can be alone with God.
- Read a passage or two of the Bible, such as John 1:1-18; Titus 3:3-8; Romans 5:1-2; 10:9-13 or Hebrews 10:15-17. If you do not have a Bible, or are unfamiliar with how to use one, ask a Christian you respect for help, or go to www.spepchurch.org and use the contact information there to request some assistance.
- Tell God of your desire to be his friend and a part of his family forever.
- Acknowledge that you cannot claim his love based on how you have lived, and that your sin has rendered you incapable of giving him the love and obedience he deserves.

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- Express to God your confidence in what he did through Jesus Christ to make reconciliation with him possible.
 - Explain to God your earnest commitment to relearn how to love him by treating Jesus as the Lord of your life.
 - Ask God to help you find a Church that honors him well, where you can learn to live out your faith with others who share it.

If such a prayer reflects the desires of your heart, then the Lord Jesus would like to openly seal his new relationship with you—make it “official” and open for all the world to see! His seal is baptism. If you were baptized as a child, then confessing your faith in a Christian church will affirm and complete the promises God made at that time. If you have never been baptized, the Church you join will make that a part of your welcome into God’s family.

Always remember that the Lord’s love for you can never again be diminished by your failures—you belong to him now, and he belongs to you. He will work with you year after year to grow in spiritual wisdom and integrity. This world is still dying, and much suffering will continue until Jesus returns. But though the world is still dying, you have come alive. Death will merely mark the end of this world’s claims upon your body, and its scars upon your soul. You will be resurrected as Jesus was, to pursue life forever as it was meant to be lived.

Faith endures and grows over time. Since this world is in general rebellion against its Creator, expect your faith to be seriously tested over and over.¹⁰ That’s why you constantly need the Bible, prayer and the fellowship of other believers to maintain spiritual confidence and communion with Christ.

But your life will never be the same. Jesus’ love, integrity, kindness and hope will shine through you. You will become the light of the world.¹¹

Thank you for allowing me to accompany you on this journey of faith. I do urge you to consider these matters in depth and make a decision about your response to Jesus Christ. This is the most important thing you will ever do.

And as I like to say ... you will never regret it.

(Endnotes)

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