

Greatest Questions



Steve Flatt

Introduction

There are countless questions asked in the Bible. Some were:

- a. Rhetorical—God asked Adam “Where are you?”
- b. Condemning— God asked Adam “Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”
- c. Informational—“How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!”
- d. Eternal—“What must we do to be saved?”

The questions selected for The Greatest Questions Ever Asked series have an eternal significance.

Lessons:

- Is Anything Too Difficult For Me?
- If A Man Dies Will He Live Again?
- Who Is My Neighbor?
- What Shall I Do With Christ?
- Where Did The Ax Head Fall?
- Where Is The Lamb?
- What Must I Do To Be Saved?

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Is Anything Too Difficult For Me?

God asked Jeremiah, the prophet, "Is anything too difficult for me?" (Jeremiah 32:26) What a question! Is anything too difficult for me? Let me tell you the context of that question. Babylon is about to conquer Judah, the southern kingdom. Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, has been prophesying about that for a long time. Babylon is right at the door. Jeremiah said, "They built the siege ramps and they're putting them up against the wall of Jerusalem." God requested a most unusual thing of Jeremiah. He said, "Jeremiah, what I want you to do is go buy a field." Now folks, when an invading force is about to conquer your land, real estate investment is not a real good idea. Jeremiah said, "Lord, the siege ramps are right there, you don't understand." He said, "You don't understand, this is a symbol. I want witnesses to see the transaction so that they will know that this land is still yours. Though I am going to use Babylon to conquer Judah, I'm going to bring you back home. Then God asked the question: "Is there anything too difficult for me?"

Scripture is filled with instances of "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" God came to Abraham and Sarah after they waited a quarter of a century for a child. (Genesis 18:14) Job said, "I know that you can do all things." (Job 42:2) The prophet Isaiah said "The Lord is the everlasting Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary." (Isaiah 40:28) Our Lord Jesus said "What is impossible with men is possible with God." (Luke 18:27) That's our God. He's all powerful, he's Almighty and he has unlimited power. He never gets tired or frustrated. Everything he does, he does effortlessly, whether it's creating a universe or answering a prayer.

Examine his power based upon those promises.

1. His power in Creation.

"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies declare the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge." (Psalm 19:1-2) Every one of us has stood and gazed over a mountain range or looked out over the ocean. Perhaps you've flown on an airplane and stared at the horizon and marveled at God's awesome power and design. Every moment creation is a witness of the reality that our God is all powerful.

I read not long ago that each second, our sun emits more energy and raw power than has been used on the face of the earth throughout history—each second. Scientists say that if nothing were to happen to interrupt it our sun will burn for thirty billion more years. Our sun is one of one hundred billion stars in the Milky Way Galaxy which is one of one trillion galaxies. Our God spoke those things into existence. He just said, "Let there be light and there was light. He said, "Stars," and stars were everywhere. That's what I call power. Surely, David knew exactly what he was talking about when he said, "Only a fool says in his heart there is no God." (Psalms 14:1)

2. His power found in the miracles

But it's not just Creation that proclaims it. The tremendous power found in the miracles in Scripture proclaims His mighty power. The parting of the Red Sea, the fall of the wall of Jericho, the day the sun stood still, the dead raised to life and then the miracles culminated in the life of Jesus. Jesus is the supreme example of God's great power. Nobody ever did and nobody ever claimed to do all that our Lord did. He demonstrated power over nature. He walked on water, he calmed the storms and he spoke to a tree and it withered. He had power over illness, healing the blind, the lame, the deaf and the lepers. Jesus raised the dead on three occasions. He broke the shackles of the grave himself. Jesus even demonstrated power over Satan and all of his evil forces. On one occasion, he commanded a whole legion of demons to come out of a man and go into a bunch of pigs. That's just the hem of the garment. But we've touched enough for jaws to drop, knees to shake and voices to tremble. God's power is awesome.

3. God wants to share his power with you.

The truly amazing thing is that God wants to share his power with you. "And his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 1:19-20) Now I hope you understood what was being said. That's incredible. God wants to share his limitless power with you, the same power that fuels the sun, the same power that spoke the ocean into existence, the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead. He wants to channel that power through you and through me.

There are people everywhere who go through life, powerless. They just walk along as victims. They see themselves as victims of their circumstances, victims of society, victims of other people and victims of unfair treatment. They go through life weak, miserable and getting by. God says, "I want to give you power. I want to give you power to do some incredible things." What incredible things?

- a. *The power to conquer sin in your life* "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death." (Romans 8:1-2) "Those who walk by the sinful nature they do the things of the sinful nature, but those who walk by the Spirit, they don't do the things of the sinful nature, they find themselves walking by the Spirit's life." (v. 5)

Is anybody here a slave to sin? Do you keep falling to the same temptation over and over and over again? Every time you say "I'm sorry, I'm never going to do that again," and lo and behold, you do it again, and again, and again. If the truth be told, that sin is your master. But do you know that God didn't design it to work that way, and that he will give you the power to break that cycle? He will.

- b. *Power for peace in your life.* "The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace." (Romans 8:6) Maybe you can't readily think of one sin that is controlling you, you're just sitting there saying, "I'm just kind of blah, I don't know what life is all about. I don't have a peace of my existence. I don't understand." God is giving you the power to have that peace.
- c. *Empower your prayer life through his Spirit living in you.* "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express." (Romans 8:26)
- d. *Power to overcome circumstances.* "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28) God wants to empower you to live above your circumstances.

Have you ever asked anybody, "How are you doing?" They say, "I guess I'm doing all right under the circumstances." I always want to ask them, "Well, what are you doing under your circumstances? You've got no business being under them. Get on top of them. God doesn't want you under the circumstances. He doesn't want you going through life as a victim. He will give you the power to climb out from under those things that would devastate you and show you something positive you could never have seen or known otherwise." That's the promise of Romans 8:28.

- e. *Empower you to be more Christ-like.* "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son." (Romans 8:29) That is what God wants for you more than anything else. He wants you to be free from sin, to know peace and to have a great prayer life. He wants you on top of your circumstances, but more than anything else, our God wants you to be like Jesus Christ.

Let me summarize the way God would channel power through your life. He wants to enable you to live the richest, fullest, happiest and most productive life possible. No doubt some of you are thinking, "That works for you but it doesn't work for me. O, I'm a Christian, I've obeyed the gospel and I'm going to go to heaven, I guess. But I've never felt God's power in my life. I hear those things preached, but I don't know if it really works." That thinking leads to the fourth and most important.

4. Does it really have application in your life?

You better believe it does. Let's look at the process of applying his power. Most Christians don't think God's power is in their lives to any significant degree. I base that upon observation. I don't think most Christians sense God's power to any significant degree. It's not automatic. There are some things you must do to key into it. Unless you follow God's counsel for receiving his power, you'll live your life just as powerless and just as defeated as an unbeliever.

So how do I apply His power on a consistent basis?

- a. **I admit to a lack of power in my life.** Most of us think we're omnipotent. We think we're God. We don't say it out loud, but deep in our hearts we think: Is there anything too difficult for me? I can do anything and everything. If you don't believe that, look at your schedule, you are trying to do absolutely anything and everything. You think it's all up to you. Somebody says, "If you burn the candle at both ends, you're not as bright as you think you are." A lot of us need to learn that. Sooner or later stress, tension and frustration mounts. Then, BOOM!

There's a lot of talk today about a mid-life crisis. A mid-life crisis really is simply waking up to your limitations. It's realizing that you're not God. It's realizing that you can't control everything, you're not going to reach every goal, you are a human being, you're weak and you're getting older. Your body is settling, and your hairline is receding.

What do you do when you realize that you're weak? Listen to God! Paul said, "But He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me." (2 Corinthians 12:9) If you will not admit your weakness, forget the power of God. As long as you pretend to be self-sufficient you short-circuit God's power in your life. As long as you feel I've got life by the tail, then God will step back and say, "Okay, take it. Let's see what it does to you."

- b. **Believe in faith.** This is the key—write it down and inscribe it on your heart. The key to God channeling power in our lives is faith. Jesus taught, "Everything is possible to him who believes" (Mark 9:23) and "According to your faith it will be done to you." (Matthew 9:29)

If that's true, and it is, then two critical questions naturally follow: 1) what are you expecting God to do in your life? and 2) what are you expecting God to do through your life? Because he works according to faith, God has unlimited power. Let's don't limit him by our expectation of him. Many times, we've talked about this, but remember God is the ultimate power source and faith is our connector. Faith is our conduit, and the amount of power that God channels into our lives directly correlates to the amount of faith that we are using to connect.

The other day my battery died, or something died, the car wouldn't start. I fellow pull over and said, "I've got some jumper cables." They were these little old bitty things just made out of tinfoil. He hooked them up to his battery and mine and it still wouldn't crank. I thought, we can't solve it at all. Then this other fellow came up. He had a pick-up truck. He had everything in there. He took out jumper cables that took two of us to carry. They were big cables, he said, "Let me hook them up for you, son." I said, "Okay." Sure enough, he hooked them up and VAROOOOM! What was the difference? The difference was neither in the recipient and the power source, it was in the connection. It was in the strength of that connection.

A lot of us have faith that is like a little electrical cord for a 110-outlet and God wants us to have cable so that we can really know the power. Vince Hefner once said, "God has given us an atomic bomb power and yet we live firecracker lives." There is not a problem too big for God. There is no request he cannot handle. Then the issue is my faith. What am I willing to believe? If you want to see God's power in your life, you must first believe in faith.

- c. **Speak in faith.** I find most preachers leave this out. Paul says, "It is written: (and he quotes Psalm 116) 'I believed; therefore I have spoken.' With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak." (2 Corinthians 4:13) Paul says, "After you believe, you also need to speak." You must verbalize your faith. There must be an announcement of what you're intending to see God do. You don't just think it; you announce it and speak it. Folks, that's what a goal is. A goal is a statement of faith. Now if you don't believe in God or if you're not following the prescription, then your goal is only a statement of faith in your own power. But a well-crafted goal can and should be a statement of faith in God's power. I believe God can and will bless my life this way.

Well-constructed goals are statements of faith. The size of your goals is determined by the size of your God. You show me the goals in your life and I'll show you what you really think in the power of God. How many

of you have a goal "I believe God will use me to bless hundreds of people." He can. The question is: Do you believe that and will you state that? If you've got a family that's fractured right now, do you believe that God can use you to be the spark of light and blessing in your family? He can. Do you believe that? Would you say it? Folks, it's very important that you announce your faith. James says, "The tongue is the rudder of your life. It sets the direction, it charts the course." It has the power of life and it has the power of death.

What are you saying about your marriage? What are you saying about your job? What are you saying about your finances? What are you saying about your children? What are you saying about your church? Many of you are sitting around waiting for God to do something in your lives, but you're short-circuiting it all by the way you talk. You say you believe it but then deny it by your complaints. How many times have I heard somebody say, "Well, I'm praying God will save my marriage, but it's the pits?" They say, "I'm praying my kids will make the right choices, oh, but sometimes I think they're hopeless." Or, "I believe that God has the power to allow me to break those bad habits, but that's just the way I am." Don't short-circuit God's power by your thoughts and utterances. God's power is not automatic. You must first admit you need His power, believe in faith that He can supply your need, and speak and act in faith.

- d. **Act in faith.** This point is vital and most people miss it. If you want God's power in your life, you step out in advance before the power is released. See, God wants you to take an action for him before you ever feel anything. Did you catch that? Somebody says, "Are you saying that I've got to act as if I have the power, even though I don't yet have the power, in order to get the power?" Yes. That's acting in faith. You go ahead and act in faith before you feel it and God rewards it. You don't wait for a feeling.

Some of you right now are waiting for a feeling. You're waiting for God to move you. "I'm waiting for a feeling in order to get involved in a ministry." "I'm waiting for that one sermon to suddenly just move me and I'll plug right in." Some are saying "I'm waiting for God to move me to give generously." "I'm waiting for God to move me to share my faith at work." "I'm waiting for God to give me the feeling to get my marriage in order." If the only time that you do things is when you feel like it, rest assured, the devil will make sure you never feel like it. He has tremendous influence over our emotions. You've got to act in faith. Take the step before you feel like it, whether you ever feel like it or not. Immaturity is living by your feelings, and maturity is living by faith, your commitments. So act now.

Many people miss God's blessing because they've never tried. If you don't try, you don't receive the power.

Do you remember when Peter had fished all night without catching anything? Jesus said, "Peter, I want you to go out, launch out into the deep, (and remember those great words) and cast your nets." (Luke 5:6) Peter said "Lord, we've fished all night. They're not biting." He said, "I didn't ask if they were biting, I didn't ask if you felt like going, I said launch out into the deep." What did Peter do? He launched out into the deep and the nets began to break and the boats began to sink. You act in faith.

The children of Israel were finally going to cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land under Joshua. They put the Ark of the Covenant on the shoulders of the priests carrying it by the poles and Joshua said, "Walk, walk right into the water and as you walk into the water don't worry, it's going to subside." I've often wondered what they thought as they got close to the edge and they felt the water hit their toes, then their ankles and maybe mid-calf. Were they wondering, "What are we doing here?" But all of a sudden the water just backed up and they walked across on dry ground.

Peter in Matthew 14 saw the Lord walking on the water. He stepped out and he acted in faith receiving the power to walk on that water. Many of you are waiting thinking you are waiting on God. But, God is waiting on you. The power is there to heal whatever is really injurious in your life. He just wants you to admit you need it, believe in faith, speak in faith, then step out and act in faith. "Is anything too difficult for me?" No, nothing is too difficult for God. Amazing Grace #1272 Steve Flatt July 14, 1996

If A Man Dies, Will He Live Again?

"If a man dies, will he live again?" (Job 14:14) is a question that has haunted the mind of every man and woman who has ever lived. From the dawn of creation it has been an enigma to the mind of man. Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes something like his journal. He was perplexed; he had more questions than answers. "All go to the same place, all come from dust and to dust all return. Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward?" (Ecclesiastes 3:20) Though Job offered no answer to his question and though Solomon went through a period where he had more questions than answers, the Scripture gives an emphatically clear answer to the question if a man dies, will he live again? YES! YES! A hundred times YES!

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth on him would not perish, but have" (What?) "Everlasting life." (John 3:16) Jesus told Martha, the sister of Lazarus who had just died, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." (John 11:25) He said to his disciples, I am about to leave you but "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." (John 14:2-3)

1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4 are great chapters about the return of Jesus. Finally, the aged Apostle John is given the opportunity in a vision to see heaven itself. He gives it a magnificent description; I guess the best you can do in human language. My favorite part is his description of Jesus' Church as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. (Revelation 20:1-7) If a man dies, will he live again? Oh, yes he will.

But we know much of our world doesn't believe that, not even much of the religious world believes it. A Gallup poll that looked at our religious beliefs as a country indicated that 94 percent of all Americans believe in God. That's encouraging, isn't it? I was surprised that 84 percent of America believes that Jesus is the Son of God, not just a great man. But less than 70 percent of America believe that there will be a heaven and significantly less than half believe that there is a literal hell.

Our religious culture has no room today for eternity. We have stripped faith of its eternal dimensions. Heaven has become just learning how to live the good life. Hell has just become the self-induced trauma that we have when we don't. We, who don't believe that sometimes, maybe even oft-times, act like we believe it. We become so absorbed with the propaganda of our culture, so absorbed in the quest for things and status, and so caught up with what I call the "Gospel of NOW," we tend to lose sight of eternity, don't we?

Have any of you ever seen that movie *Heaven Can Wait*? The plot of the movie was a professional football quarterback who was called home to heaven early in an accident. When he gets there in heaven, the angel talks to him and says, "Oh no, we've made a mistake." The whole plot of the movie is how can we get him back down on earth so he can play in the Super Bowl. I mean after all, who would want to go to heaven when you can play in the Super Bowl? Do you see how insidious it is? We Christians watching the movie were sitting there going, "Yes, Yes, get him back, get him back, get him back."

I think if the truth be told, we're a lot like little Tommy in the Sunday School class. The teacher asked "How many of you want to go to heaven?" Everybody raised their hand except little Tommy. The teacher looked at Tommy and said, "Tommy, don't you want to go to heaven one day?" He said, "Oh, one day. I thought you meant right now."

Oh yes, I want to go to heaven ONE day, like that one day I'm going on that African safari, one day I'll try sky diving, one day I'll really climb up and clean out the attic and that one day that down in our hearts we think will never really come.

We've lost sight of eternity. We've lost the depth of the meaning of Hebrews 9:27, "It is appointed unto man once to die and after that the judgment." We've lost the meaning of Acts 17:31, "Because he has fixed the day upon which he will judge the world with righteousness by a man whom he has appointed and of this he has given assurance by raising him from the dead." The resurrection of the dead means a lot of things, but here's one thing it means: The God who is able to raise Jesus up from the dead is able to judge the entire world based upon what they do with Jesus, The Christ.

When I was a boy growing up, I heard a lot of sermons about eternity, heaven and hell. It seemed like I heard more on hell. Maybe I just remembered those longer. I thought, if I ever get a chance to preach, I don't think I'm going to preach like that, I think I'm going to preach like Jesus preached. Then I grew up and I read the Bible. I found out that nobody preached more about heaven and hell than the man, Jesus of Nazareth.

If you don't believe it, read his statements in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Nobody was calling his listeners more often to weigh temporal gain against eternal consequences than Jesus of Nazareth. Re-read the parables and the Sermon on the Mount. "What would it profit a man if he were to gain the whole world, but lose his own soul?" "What will a man give in exchange for his soul?" Jesus didn't come preaching about how to change the government and he lived in a corrupt one. He didn't come preaching about how to be healthy and wealthy. He didn't come to try and tell men how to talk in tongues. He came to teach about eternity and he did it with force. This might surprise you, but nobody taught more about hell than Jesus the Christ.

Who was it that said, "Why do you fear the one who can destroy the body when you ought to fear the one who can destroy both the body and soul in hell?" See the former is "NOW" thinking; the other is "ETERNITY" thinking. We do a grave injustice to ourselves and to this world if we don't answer Job's question: "If a man dies, will he live again?" The answer is: Yes, he will. But where? See the question isn't whether eternity or not, the question is what kind of eternity, Heaven or Hell.

There is one key passage about life after our time here on earth. "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. 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. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.' But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.' He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'" (Luke 16:19-31)

Five elementary truths about eternity can be found in the above text.

1. Death will not end your existence.

If a man dies, will he live again? You can be sure of it. You know death is the earth's great equalizer. I don't care who you are or what you have, you won't escape it. When we hear of a poor person dying, somebody who lives in the slums, some beggar or homeless person, it doesn't seem to register. But when we hear that a rich person died overnight of a heart attack, we are aghast. That is because we tend to associate people with what they have. Since a rich person has a lot it's going to last for a long time. Let me tell you something, you're not going to die a rich man. You're not going to die a poor man. You're just going to die a man. What you have won't make one shred of difference. You leave all your earthly wealth, fame, honor and position behind at death. Death is earth's great equalizer.

Death doesn't end your existence. When you die you will have consciousness. If I read this correctly, Abraham, the rich man and Lazarus, they knew who they were and they knew where they were. You will have identity. The rich man was the rich man, Lazarus was Lazarus, Abraham was Abraham and Isaac was Isaac. In fact you will still be you. Apparently, there will be some degree of memory. Did you notice how Abraham said to the rich man, "Remember when you lived, you had your fine things." Death doesn't end your existence.

The Sadducees were a sect of the Jews who did not believe in the resurrection. They were always trying to trip Jesus up. So they asked him "Lord, teacher, tell us this. If a man had a wife and he dies, and then she marries his

brother, then he dies, and then she marries another brother. Well let's just say that goes on 10 times, then in the resurrection, whose wife will she be?" When they finished the question, Jesus looked at them and said, "You've got two problems. You don't really believe in the power of God and you don't even know the Scripture." He said, "Haven't you read how the Almighty said, "I AM the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." And he said that long after they died. He didn't say I WAS the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I'm not the God of the dead, I'm the God of the living." Death does not end your existence.

2. There will be an immediate separation.

There will be an immediate separation. I gather that not only from the rich man and Lazarus but also from Matthew 25 where Jesus talks about separating the sheep and the goats into two separate groups, those who will come in and receive the blessings and those who will be outcast. Now I know some people can't believe that our loving Almighty God would send people to hell.

I've searched my Bible through and through. I find no place in Scripture where the Bible says God sends anybody to hell. I find the exact opposite. "God is patient, not wanting anybody to perish." (2 Peter 3:9) The only reason this old world is still standing today is because God knows that somebody is going to come to Jesus today, and he wants them as part of the kingdom. God says, "...I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked..." (Ezekiel 33:11) I confess that is one way I'm far short of God. There are times when I read of somebody getting on an airplane as a terrorist with guns and bomb traps and maybe they kill a couple of hostages and are holding the rest. Every now and then a SWAT team will come and they'll shoot them, just shoot them right there. There is a part of me when I hear that, I say, "YES. Good. Get the rest of them." Because I fear they won't come to justice, otherwise. But not God, my God has no joy in the death of a wicked person. Do you know why? Because when that wicked person dies, he or she is lost. God doesn't send anyone to hell. When someone rejects Jesus Christ and Heaven, they condemn themselves and choose Hell.

"For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes on him will not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16) The next verse says, "For he didn't come to condemn the world, but he came to save the world through himself." Folks, get this idea out of your mind. It is not that at your death God will choose to send you to some realm of death, you have chosen the death lifestyle for yourself right now. All God is going to do on that great judgment day is to declare the choices that men and women have been making for themselves all along. That's the reality. If you think God wants to send anybody to hell, re-look at the cross. If there is ever proof that our God will go out of his way to make sure anybody and hopefully everybody will be saved, it's at the cross of Jesus Christ. But for those who are not washed by the blood that's offered there, they will be on the wrong end of an immediate separation.

3. Every man's eternal destiny is unchangeable.

If heaven and hell, if paradise and torment have anything in common, it is their unalterable fixedness, mercy comes before the grave. I've searched my Bible and found absolutely no validity that you could pay or pray yourselves or anyone else into heaven after death. In fact in the story about the rich man and Lazarus, Abraham looked at that rich man and in a Greek tense says, "There has been and remains yet fixed a gulf between us that no man can span." In a sense God didn't dig that chasm the rich man did. He did it during his life. He lived his life separate from people like Lazarus, didn't he? His whole life, he said, "Lazarus, I'm over here and you're over there, don't you bother me and I won't bother you. I don't want to have anything to do with a poor old wretch like you." Really all God did when the rich man died is to keep what he had chosen in tact.

I've already alluded to in some sense and in many ways the future life is just the present life identified continued. What's interesting to me is that even in torment, even in hell, the rich man still saw Lazarus as a beggar and servant. He looked over at Abraham and said, "Abraham, tell Lazarus to go down there, get me some water and bring that water back here." He still saw him as a servant. Every man's eternal destiny is unchangeable after death.

4. The righteous will receive comfort.

I suspect it is more than coincidental that we don't know the name of the rich man, but we know the name of Lazarus even before he died. That kind of indicates to me that God knew all along who the important one was, didn't he? Now I suspect that when the rich man died he had one elaborate funeral. There were flowers everywhere

and memorials given to charities in his name, they probably lined the synagogue; the mayor was there and maybe even the procurator of Jerusalem. I imagine everybody was there for his funeral. But all it says about Lazarus is he died. It doesn't even say he is buried. I suspect they threw him out in old Potter's field. But I know for a fact Lazarus had one thing at his funeral that the rich man didn't have. He had angels. Angels carried him to Abraham's bosom. Suddenly, he is the affluent one. Death was the best thing that ever happened to Lazarus.

I've said this many times at funerals, but I want you to hear it while you're alive, okay? I'm convinced that when you are baptized into Christ, you have already experienced the only death of any significance you ever need to experience. "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? (Romans 6:3) That's the saving power of this universe. Galatians 3 states that when we are baptized into Christ, we are clothed in him. 1 Thessalonians 4:14 says, for since "We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him." Did you notice those two little words, "IN HIM?" The question is not: Are you going to fall asleep? Are you going to die? If the Lord tarries long enough, everybody is going to die. The question is: Are you going to fall asleep IN HIM? When we die with Christ in immersion, baptism, and are raised to walk in a newness of life, we become IN, HIM, CHRIST. We've died the only death of any significance. We have the promise of Scripture that when we sleep, we will be raised to experience comfort and peace.

5. The unrighteous will experience agony.

In torment, it was the rich man who became the beggar to the point that even one drop of cold water was worth begging for. I'm not attempting to graphically or physically describe hell. I know that from what we've just read, the rich man was in pain. He had the pain of remembering opportunity that he had ignored. He had the pain of knowing the fate of others who were destined to his same fate, his brothers.

I can't with a finite mind describe exactly what hell will be like. But there were three things that Jesus constantly associates with hell throughout his teachings. He talks about fire, weeping and gnashing of teeth. How utterly presumptuous is that any one of us to act like that wouldn't matter or that it doesn't exist.

All of us need to ask some serious questions about who we are and where we're going.

Consider the future. Get away from the "Gospel of NOW" and think in light of eternity. The devil's oldest tool is to get man to think about right now. Remember when Esau came in after a three-day hunt and Jacob was cooking up some stew, he said, "Let me have some stew, Jacob." Jacob said, "Okay, but I want your birthright." Do you think Esau thought that through? He wasn't thinking about forever. He thought, I'm hungry and I want it right now. What was David thinking when he stood on his roof and looked down and saw Bathsheba? Do you think he was thinking about the long term? Do you think he thought about any consequences, especially any eternal consequences? All he thought about was I want that woman and I want her right now. All Judas was thinking about when he betrayed the Son of God was not the fact that there would never be another family to name a male child, Judas, again. He was thinking about 30 pieces of silver would spend real good right now.

Paul has one of the greatest and most simple statements I've ever heard, "'So we look not to the things which are seen, but the things which are unseen. For the things which are seen are temporary. And the things which are not seen are eternal.'" (2 Corinthians 4:18) If you could come back 100 years from today and stand in the very spot where you are standing, I doubt that you would see anything you can see right now. If you can see it, it's temporary. If you can't see it, it's eternal. Those invisible things are things like God's love. That's why nothing can separate us from God's love. (Romans 8:35) Or like the church, nobody can lay their eyes on the whole church, except God. The gates of Hades, the grave, will not prevail against the church. Your soul is invisible, too. We see the body is going to return to the dust from whence it came, but not the soul that animates, gives life to every one of our bodies. The real you, is going to live forever somewhere. **Think in light of the future.**

Walk in light of Scripture. The rich man made two mistakes, he was selfish, most of us tend to be, and he minimized the power of the written Word of God. If he hadn't done that, the Word of God would have changed him. Do you remember when he said, "Look, if you can't help me, send somebody to my brothers?" Abraham replied "Let them listen to Moses and the prophets." He said, "Oh, they won't listen to Moses and the prophets, but if someone came back from the dead, they'd listen." It closes with some of the most chilling words I've ever

heard, "If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not listen to someone who has come back from the dead."

Jesus has "come back from the dead." How are you responding to the Word of God and to the Jesus it presents? Is your heart or mind opened or closed? Have you obeyed His gospel? Do you have your eyes set on eternity? If you've been living in the "Gospel of NOW," it's only temporary, focus on the eternity. Today is the day of salvation. Change from the ways of the world by putting your faith and trust in Him now. Call upon Him to forgive, confess your belief that He is God who came to earth in the flesh, die to your sins and be buried. Be buried in water baptism so He can raise you to a new life of righteousness and be added to His church. *Amazing Grace*
#1278 Steve Flatt September 1, 1996

Who is My Neighbor?

"On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' 'What is written in the Law?' he replied. 'How do you read it?' He answered: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind' and 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Luke 10:25-29)

Jesus was pleased. He affirmed that response saying, "You've answered correctly. Do this and you will live." But this lawyer wasn't through. "But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" There's our question, just who is my neighbor?

The response Jesus gave is well known to almost all of us. It's so rich and beautiful. "In reply Jesus said: 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

"The expert in the law replied, 'The one who had mercy on him.' Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise.'"

What a wonderful story Jesus tells in response to this man's question about who might be his neighbor. It starts with a problem. A man was traveling along a steep and most dangerous road, the one between Jericho and Jerusalem. He is waylaid, robbed, stripped of his clothes and beaten. The Bible said he's left half-dead. Along came a priest and a Levite. Now both of those are religious officials, they're preacher types. They see this poor victim and the Bible said, "They pass by on the other side." Finally, Jesus says, "A Samaritan comes along."

Now we can't adequately understand how the expert in the law responded as Jesus was telling this story. When Jesus said, "And a Samaritan came along," it was like taking his fingers and raking them across a blackboard. We call this the *Parable of the Good Samaritan*. To a Jew, that was not only an oxymoron, it was a fantasy. There was no such thing as a Good Samaritan. "This Samaritan did all these things, he picked him up, he poured oil and wine on him, he bandaged him, he took him to the hotel and he left money for his care." The Jews hated the Samaritans so badly that even as Jesus told the story and he asked "Now you tell me, which of those was a neighbor to that victim?" The lawyer couldn't even bring himself to say the word Samaritan. He ended up having to say, "Well, I guess it was the one who had mercy on him."

I want you to see in this magnificent story, first of all, the three potential perspectives we have on life.

1. What's yours is mine and I'm going to get it.

Now who had that perspective in the parable? The robbers. They saw this guy coming along he had money and clothes. They wanted them so they beat him over the head and they took them. What's yours is mine and I'm going to get it.

Our world is filled with this kind of life perspective. I'm not going to dwell on it long because as a child of God it's an anathema to you. I know a few Christians who profess otherwise who act that way, but not many. That's not a right way to live. It's like the story that Aesop told of the dog who stole the piece of meat from the butcher shop. He went through the woods happy that he had his meat. He came to a stream where he saw his reflection. He thought he was seeing another dog with another piece of meat. Even though he had more than he could ever eat, he was jealous. He dropped his piece of meat to snatch the other piece and ended up losing both.

There is a prevalent life perspective in this world that says, "What is yours is mine and I'm going to get it." But the second perspective I particularly want you to see because it's more insidious and more dangerous.

2. *What's mine is mine and I'm going to keep it.*

This was the perspective of the priest and of the Levite. It's also the perspective of most of the people we know. The attitude that the robbers had was condemnable. The attitude that the priest and Levite had was not commendable, but it was understandable. Wasn't it? It's interesting to me that Jesus talks about a priest and a Levite, both religious men. They were going from Jerusalem to Jericho to do service in the temple. The priest and the Levites one week out of every year had to perform temple service. They had to do all the duties and prepare the sacrifices. To go along this route was not an unusual thing as Jericho is not very far from the Jerusalem, and many priests lived there. They saw this man beaten, bleeding, and robbed, but they chose to pass by on the other side.

Now there could have been one other thing at work here. You see if a priest or Levite was heading toward the temple to perform a service, the last thing that individual would want to do would be to become unclean. According to the Jewish law, if you were to touch a corpse, it would make you ceremonially unclean. They may have been in a hurry with important work to do. They could have even thought about the risk of becoming ceremonially unclean. This man may either be dead or he may die in my hands. So, rather than risking becoming unclean they went on their way. "What's mine is mine and I'm going to keep it."

Now folks, let's get off our little pedestals. I want to tell you that every one of those reasons makes sense to me unless I'm the guy in the ditch. Then none of them makes sense at all. But if we're bluntly honest, this attitude about what's mine is mine and I'm going to keep it describes most of us, most of the time.

3. *What's mine is yours and I'm going to give it.*

The Samaritan stopped, he felt compassion, he helped, he went the extra mile and he followed through. The latter is the attitude and the perspective that we're called to have. "Love your neighbor as yourself." What's mine is yours, and I'm going to give it.

But now wait a minute, the expert in the law says, "Where do you draw the line? I mean you just can't love everybody, everywhere to the full extent of your love. How far do you have to go in this neighbor business? Seeking to justify himself he asked "Who is my neighbor?" You see the only way he could justify himself was to somehow limit this law. Just who is the neighbor I'm supposed to love? Then Jesus set forth the premise for the whole parable. I know you love and appreciate the story, but I really want to make sure you see the gist of it. The man asked a question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus responded by asking him another question. He said the question is not who is your neighbor; the question is who is your neighbor's neighbor? Jesus said the question I'm asking you is, "Are you willing to be a neighbor to your neighbor?" Are you willing to love even the most unlovable of people? Like a Samaritan loving a Jew or vice versa. Or, maybe loving the drug addict who has lied to you and stolen from you or maybe loving the guy who pulls up in the beat-up car that's full of trash and he's looking for a hand-out. In the pit of your stomach, you've got this feeling that he's really trying to take advantage of you.

Are you willing to love the person with the different skin color? Are you willing to love the person with a belief different from your own? Are you really willing to love a person who has strong opinions that differ with yours? Are you willing to love the fellow with AIDS? Are you willing to love a thief? Like that Samaritan, are you willing

to love somebody who hates you? Those are pretty hard questions. See, I don't think it was just the lawyer who needed to justify himself, was it? The truth be told, if we examine most of our daily walks, we might want to ask the question, "Who is my neighbor?"

In fact, maybe you're asking right now, "How on earth do you do that?" Is that just some crazy ideal? Is that one of those moral platitudes that nobody really does but sounds good being preached? Is it like a mirage? I don't think so. I believe it's real, and I believe it's possible and I believe that every day that we grow in Christ we can love our neighbor as ourselves. But in order to do that, we've got to see this parable for all that's in it. This parable is more than a story. It's a picture. I think it's a picture of us. Remember behind every parable is a hidden spiritual meaning for those who are willing to receive it. I think Jesus wanted his lawyer to see this parable as a picture of him before God and he wants us to see the same thing.

Who are you in the story? Who are you? Are you the robber? I hope not. Are you the priest? Are you the Levite? Tell the truth. Do you really think you're the Good Samaritan? Does that characterize your life as you drive down the road every day? Do you know who you are? You're the mugged guy in the ditch. You're the one beside the road having been attacked by Satan. He has beaten you with sin and you're going to die there unless someone comes along and rescues you. All the things that we think will pull us up out of the ditch like our money, our smarts, our good looks and our achievements will pass us by and leave us right there in the ditch. Do you know what we need? We need a Samaritan. By the way, do you know who the Samaritan in the parable really is? Just think a minute. Who is the one despised, rejected and hated who still reaches down to save dying humanity? That's right, it's Jesus.

The key to becoming more like that Good Samaritan and to unlocking a whole new attitude of compassion in our hearts: It's seeing yourself in the ditch dying or dead if God hadn't rescued you. Now that Jewish lawyer couldn't see himself there. He looked at people the way most of us do. He broke them into two lists, a) those I am better than and b) those better than I am. The list of those better than I am is pretty short. Almost every Gallup poll shows that most all Americas believe they are going to heaven. When asked why the number one answer by far is "Well, I'm a pretty good person." See, in America we don't think we need a Savior, we don't think we need a cross or the atoning blood of Christ. I just need to know that I'm better than most people and I've pretty well assured myself that I am. That's right at the core of our gut.

The reason we struggle being our neighbor's neighbor is because we don't see our likeness in that ditch. We can't fathom that God sees us as helpless, bleeding, dying, and needing rescued. We will never have hearts of compassion until we respond to the heart that stops beating for us.

Simon, the Pharisee, had Jesus over to dinner one night. Simon was a proper man, he held a proper party, he did all the proper things but a woman of the street walked in. When I say she was a woman of the street, I don't mean that's where she lived, I mean that's where she worked and you know what I mean. The first thing she did was break in to the party that was improper. Then she let down her hair, which was also improper. She made a spectacle of herself in front of Jesus, which was improper. Simon thought if this man were a prophet he wouldn't tolerate all this impropriety. (Luke 7)

Jesus knowing his heart said, "Simon, I want to tell you a story." Simon said, "Tell me teacher." He said, "There was once two men and they owed a certain money lender. One of them owed 500 denarii and one of them owed 50 denarii. The money lender forgave both. Jesus said, "Simon, let me ask you something, which one do you think was the one who loved the money lender the most?" Simon said, "Well, I guess it was the one who owed him the most." Jesus said, "That's right." He said, "When I came into your house, Simon, you didn't wash my feet. But she's been washing my feet with her tears. When I came into your house, you didn't give me a kiss (that was a sign of hospitality); she's not stopped kissing my feet. When I came to your house, you didn't put oil on my head. She's poured perfume all over my feet. He said, "Simon, she loves me much because she's been forgiven much." Then he hit Simon with a zinger. He said, "But he who has been forgiven little, loves little." That's it!

If I could translate that into our parable about the Good Samaritan, the one who thinks he has never been in the ditch gets very few others out of it. If we ever see ourselves as the guy in the ditch, then this becomes more than a nice little parable that will motivate us for an hour after church to go do something nice for somebody. If we

ever see ourselves in the ditch, this becomes a whole pattern for life.

There are three ways that changes your whole view.

1. No longer do you see enemies, you see victims of the enemy.
2. No problems, but people with problems.
3. No longer do you feel pity longer do you see, but you feel compassion. Pity is looking down at the guy in the ditch and saying, "I'm glad I'm not the one down in that ditch." But compassion is looking down in that ditch and saying, "I've been there and I could still be there right now except for the grace of God." See, only when we see ourselves as a guy beside the road, will we become ministers of mercy.

It's not enough to brow-beat people into saying, "Go out and help. Go out and help. Go out and help." You can do that, but only for a limited time. But when my heart is radically transformed, knowing that Jesus was the Samaritan who pulled me out of the ditch, I will live the rest of my life looking for hands that I can reach out to. Folks, you see I found that it is true that your hands can do some good things without the heart being converted, not many, but a few. But whenever the heart is genuinely converted the hands are always helping.

When Jesus closed this, story, he said, "Go out and ___ what, likewise?" Did he say, "Go out and preach, likewise?" "Go out and think, likewise?" "Go out and memorize, likewise?" He said, "Go out and DO, likewise."

I heard a story about an elderly lady who got caught under an underpass in a flash flood. The water had come up in the doors. She was old and she was too scared to get out into that water which would have been up to her thighs, it might have washed her away. She was trembling. A fellow was passing over the overpass in a big four-wheel drive and glancing down happened to see her. He did stop, put it in park, jumped out and looked over there. He could see she was just petrified. He said, "Maam, can I help you?" And I love her response. Shaking she said, "Not from up there." I want to tell you something. God doesn't want us to be helping people from up here. God wants us helping people in the ditch because we've been there.

One of the things that has stayed in my mind just about as long as I've lived is the judgment scene in Matthew 25. Do you remember the parable of the sheep and the goats? How the sheep go to the right and the goats to the left? He's going to say to the sheep, "I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and in prison and you came and visited me." He's going to say to the goats, "I was all these things and you didn't do anything." Then he's going to say to these on the right, "Come on in you blessed of the Father," but to those on the left, "Depart from me."

I'm intrigued by a lot of things that we deem to be particularly important that He did not even mention. He doesn't say one word about church attendance, does he? He doesn't say a word about doctrine. He doesn't say a single word about our dress. Don't misunderstand, I'm not saying all those things aren't important, particularly the first two. If you know me at all, you know that I think they are extremely important. The very first thing I see in Scripture that God wants to know about each one of us is "Were you your neighbor's neighbor?" Did you have a heart that was transformed that had you looking for people to pull out of the ditch?

I hope and pray that you see yourself where you really are. You're either in the ditch or you've been there. If you're not a Christian, you're in the ditch right now and you're going to die there unless you let Jesus pull you out. Come in obedience to the gospel, confess his name where all can hear and wash away your sins by the blood of Jesus being buried with Him through water baptism to be resurrected to a new life in Christ. Your sin will be completely forgiven. He has pulled you out of the ditch of sin. He has also commissioned you to go look for other ditch dwellers. As long as you remember where you were, you'll be pulling them out right and left. That, by the way, is how God's kingdom grows. Amazing Grace #1275 Steve Flatt August 4, 1996

What Shall I Do With Christ?

It's in the early hours of Friday morning. Jesus was led by rather a strange mixture of soldiers and priests from a garden called Gethsemane to the House of Caiaphas, the Roman appointed high priest. After a period of time there he was shuttled off to Annas, the real Jewish high priest, and then back to Caiaphas again. Those two high priests

have decided that this man must die, but they had no authority to do that, only the Roman procurator could condemn a man to death. So they brought him to Pontius Pilate. The world would have never remembered a petty Roman governor named Pilate except for his encounter with Jesus. Awakened at an early hour he realized this was just some kind of petty argument among the Jews. In the process of his conversation and deliberations with Jesus, Pilate quickly saw that this man had done nothing wrong, certainly nothing that deserved death, so he devises a plan.

It had been a Roman custom for some time to appease the Jews by releasing to them a particular prisoner during Passover time. "Now it was the governor's custom at the Feast to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, 'which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?' For he knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him." (Matthew 27:15-18)

We know precious little about Barabbas. Mark and Luke tell us that he had helped lead a failed insurrection against the Roman government and that he had been guilty of murder. Pilate thought that he was appealing to the Jews' sense of morality. He knew how badly they hated the Roman government, but surely, surely they wouldn't condone murder. Since Jesus had been guilty of no real crime and just a week earlier he had been quite popular when he came into the city with cries of 'Hosanna! Hosanna! Pilate thought that surely the crowd would request his release. But much to his surprise and dismay they cried, "Give us Barabbas, Give us Barabbas." It's Pilate's next question that's the focus of our study. In fear and anger and confusion, he asked "'What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?'"

Pilate didn't realize it, but he was asking a question marked much larger than himself, much larger than its time. As long as men live, Pilate will be remembered as the man through whom life's central question is asked. "What shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ?"

Notice the first person pronoun: What shall I do with Jesus? There are very few things in life that are inescapable. The old adage says, "Death and taxes are the only thing." No that's not right, there are precious few more and Jesus is one of those. For 2,000 years, he has been the central character of human history and because Jesus is at the heart of the universe, he is at the core of every human's agenda. The one truth about Jesus Christ that everyone agrees upon is this: He cannot be ignored. As the centuries have rolled by, men have answered him with love, some with contempt, some with scorn, others with disdain, some with astonishment, some with denial and some with affection, but all have answered. The biography of Jesus closes with these words, he says, "Lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the world."

Jesus Christ is still alive. He is not the figment of some imagination or the product of a fairy tale. He is not just a historical man. He is not the surprise founder of one of the world's great religions. He is alive. He is just at home here as he was in Capernaum. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. If you let that sink in, then the question that Pilate asked years ago is just as pertinent and just as important today as it was then.

The question of whether Jesus was to live or die was more than a matter of concern for a Jewish Sanhedrin or a Roman procurator. No, the question of whether Jesus must live or die is answered in the heart, mind, of every man and in every woman. What will you do with this Jesus who is called Christ? You can look at that Crucifixion scene and you can see the specific choices in the lives and on the faces of hosts of characters there. Let me share with you four of those choices.

1. ***Choose truth or tradition.***

Truth or tradition was the issue facing the chief priest and the Pharisees. In fact, this issue was the primary reason there was a cross. The Jews had been looking for a Messiah for centuries. It had been prophesied all the way through the Old Testament. Every day Jewish families by the thousands prayed for the coming of the Messiah but they supposed he would be some great military and governmental genius. They were looking for a new Moses or a Joshua or a David. They were looking for someone who was strong and a military genius on a white horse behind a chariot. He would lead the great forces to a conquest over the Romans. In other words, they were looking for what they wanted, not what God had proclaimed.

So in the fullness of time the Messiah came and he was hardly what they expected. Born in an animal stall there was no aroma of royalty, no political connections, no pedigree or no formal training. Why he wasn't even Judean, he was from Galilee. His closest friends smelled like fish and he kept the company of tax collectors and prostitutes. The masses loved him. They loved him because he loved them and because he spoke simple truths. He was truth but the "powers that be" expected tradition. To tamper with tradition is to always court the cross.

In Matthew 15 at the beginning of that chapter, Jesus condemned their little tradition that they had set up so Jewish people had neglect the care of their own parents by pledging their estates to the temple. Concluding in verse 6 some scathing remarks, "you have made void the word of God by your petty little traditions." In Matthew 23, he called the chief priests and Pharisees whited sepulchres "you're all painted on the outside, but inside you're full of dead men's bones."

Truth or tradition, it's a timeless issue, a timeless choice. The Pharisees were looking for what they wanted, not what God proclaimed and so do many of us. Over the centuries, denominations, sect, cults and groups and their leaders have painted pictures of Jesus that bear little resemblance to the real Son of God. During that same period individuals by the millions who never read a Bible, were telling you "Well my idea of God is..." or "I've always thought of Jesus as..." Just another way of choosing tradition over truth. Hear me. God does not honor perception. If he did, the Pharisees would have been fine. What God honors is truth.

What will you do with the real Jesus? Will you make him what you want him to be? Or, will you mold your life to who he is?

2. *The choice of Christ or the crowd?*

This was the choice that was specifically faced Peter. It's ironic that the crucifixion of Jesus was propelled by an angry crowd, a senseless mob. It's ironic because all throughout his ministry, Jesus was very popular with the crowds. The great Sermon on the Mount, the reason he was on a mountain is because he needed that amphitheater to be able to proclaim his message to such a huge host of people. (Matthew 5-7) Jesus took a handful of food and fed 5,000 men plus women and children. (Matthew 14) Zacchaeus climb up into a tree because he couldn't see, the crowd was too great. (Luke) Just seven days earlier when he came to Jerusalem they were putting palm leaves down in his path crying out "Hosanna to the Son of God." In fact it was because of the crowd that Jesus lived as long as he did.

About two-thirds of the way through his ministry "the Pharisees said to one another, 'See, this is getting us nowhere. Look the whole world has gone after him!'" (John 12:19) Many times in the gospels, the crowds were ready to crown him king. But Jesus will never be crowned by a crowd. He is either enthroned or dethroned in the heart of each individual.

Do you remember how Peter followed at a distance after Jesus' arrest? He stood by a campfire warming himself and three different times he denied knowing the Lord. Why was that? It's a silly question, isn't it? It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure it out. It was not the politically-correct position at that moment. There might have very well been a fourth cross on that hill called Calvary. At the very least it would have brought about surely a severe beating, Christ or the crowd? Peter took the crowd.

After the Resurrection, after Jesus saw him face to face and told him how much he loved him, after Jesus forgave him, after the Pentecost seven weeks later, after the coming of the Holy Spirit and after the coming of his church, that same Peter is such a force for Christianity, he's called in before those same leaders. He's threatened with his very life and they say, "Peter, what are you going to do?" The bottom line is he's got the same question again. Christ or the crowd? To his credit, this time Peter looks them squarely in the eyes and if you'll allow the paraphrase, he said, "I'll take the Christ, thank you." (Acts 4-5)

Every day you face the same question and so do I. The crowd is very fickle. We say America is a Christian nation. That's not supposing that the majority of Americans ever were Christians, but the Judeo-Christian ethic was everything that this country stood for, admired and valued. Today, quite frankly, being a Christian is generally viewed as being uncool, ignorant and politically incorrect. About the only thing that our society is intolerant of is for somebody who believes there is such a thing as absolute truth. It is totally unacceptable for somebody to stand up and say "I agree with Jesus that he is the way, the truth and the life. No you don't get to heaven any other way,

only by him." How about you? Are you salt and light to a dying world? Or, do you choose like Peter to stand by your own little campfire, afraid and unnoticed?

3. Conscience or Caesar?

Pilate knew that this man was innocent, certainly innocent of any offense which would mandate execution. So when bombarded by accusations regarding this man as a traitor, Pilate called him inside and asked Jesus, "Are you a King?" Jesus looked calmly and said, "You've said it correctly, but my kingdom is not of this world." After their conversation, Pilate knew Jesus was no rebel. He was no insurrectionist or zealot. He wondered why this man was even appearing before him in the first place.

Matthew gives us a parenthetical note by recording "while Pilate was sitting on his judge's seat, his wife sent him this message, 'don't have anything to do with that innocent man for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.'" (Matthew 26:19) So Pilate made the decision, the initial decision to release him. As the Jews saw that decision unfolding and their plot being foiled, John the apostle records their response. "From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, 'If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar's. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.'" (John 19:12) BAM! Do you know what that was? That was the sound of the door slamming on Jesus. That was the sound of the deciding blow.

For over a quarter of a century Judea had become a testing ground for future leadership in Rome. Like the old song says, "If you could make it there, you could make it anywhere." If a Roman procurator could stay there three or four years and appease the Jews and keep all things quiet, he would head back to Rome for a political promotion. If he couldn't make it there, he just kind of wandered off into obscurity. When Pilate heard those words, "If you are this man's friend, you are no friend of Caesar's." He could immediately picture word getting back to Caesar that here was a man, Pilate, who was opposing a group that was an offshoot of the Jews, somebody that was causing an insurrection; maybe it was going to be a lot of trouble. Pilate said, "What will it be, conscience or Caesar?" He chose Caesar.

We have the same choice. Our Caesar is that power, authority or influence, whose approval we think we need so desperately. Maybe it's your boss at work who holds the raise and promotion in one hand and a pink slip in the other asking you to compromise your integrity. It's the V.I.P. whose favor we think we must have and millions of times each day integrity is compromised, conviction is diluted and sometimes the pocketbook valued. Caesar is served, and Christ is crucified.

4. Submission or self.

Let's look at one more character in the crucifixion drama, a man by the name of Judas Iscariot. I believe in his heart we find the basic struggle and decision of life. I'm convinced that many people have a totally wrong impression of who Judas is. Most of us picture him totally and constantly as being some diabolical villain who wore a black hat, kept a cape over his face, hid in the shadows and was just the epitome of evil all of his life. I don't believe that's true. I believe that when Jesus went out to find 12 men, 12 apostles, he chose the best men that he could find and Judas was one of them. Educated and a Judean, he was probably the most qualified and best prepared of the 12. No, Judas' fate and his reputation came about as the result of a wrong decision in the ageless struggle, the choice of sovereignty, the choice over who rules. God or self.

As time passed, Judas became a shock witness of the outcome of his deeds. As he listens to the angry howls of this lynch mob, his heart begins to break. I don't think he bargained on the cross. So as Jesus is led up that hill; panic-stricken he sought to undo the deal by returning the blood money. He runs and throws it at the chief priests' feet. In their hypocrisy, those who paid it wouldn't take it back. Stricken by a wounded conscience, he mistakenly sought to undo the deed by turning to a hangman's noose.

Tell me, have you ever stopped to think if Judas could not live without the Christ, why didn't he choose to live for him? The answer is simple. He had no intention of living without Jesus. He wanted to take him, but not too seriously. He wanted to keep Jesus and lose nothing, in fact even gain 30 pieces of silver. He was willing to follow Jesus, but on his own terms, it was conditionally. He wanted that middle ground. Judas sought to cling to Christ in one hand and 30 pieces of silver in the other. That choice is still there. God or self? One of them has to be crucified.

Paul said what is at the very heart of the whole gospel message, "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me." (Galatians 2:20) You can confess and be baptized, but until you make the decision in your heart to crucify self and let Christ reign, you will not know the joy and the fruit of Christianity.

Do you know who the most miserable people in the world are? Growing up, I was always told it was the sinners, those who were out there living the lascivious life, partying and having a high time. But they are not the most miserable people in the world. Don't misunderstand. Eventually what they involve themselves in will catch up to them. It's a hollow life which leads to emptiness. It leads to total rejection and dejection. But they aren't the most miserable people in the world. The most miserable people in the world are the ones like Judas who stand on that middle ground and try to hold on to the cross in one hand and the world with the other. By straddling that divide, that nobody can straddle, they're constantly torn apart inside. Submission or self, that's what you've got to answer when you face the question, what shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ.

Isn't it amazing? Pilate asked that question almost 2,000 years ago and yet it still echoes through the years. The basic choices, truth or tradition, Christ or the crowd, conscience or Caesar and submission or self are all still there. What's your decision? What will you do with this Jesus who is called the Christ?

Sadly, when the crowd heard that question, they under the leadership of the chief priests and the Pharisees, started to chant "Crucify Him, crucify Him, crucify Him!" I hope your response is different. Jesus said in Matthew 10:32, "Whoever confesses me before men, the same will I confess before the Father." He said in Mark 16:16, "He that believes and is baptized will be saved, he that believes not will be condemned."

Today, that most important question is before you. "What will you do with Jesus who is called the Christ?" If you have never answered that in the larger sense, if you've never said, "I know he is the Son of God, I'll confess that, I'll confess it right now, then now is the time. I want to be baptized, symbolically burying my old sinful self into a watery grave to be raised to walk in a newness of life." I hope your answer will not be like the crowd by saying "crucify him again. Crucify him again."

Those of you who have committed your life to Christ, would you examine those four basic choices that are wrapped up within that question? Would you look deep within your heart and ask yourself am I painting a picture of a Jesus I want or am I following the truth? Am I really listening to the siren call of the crowd or am I standing firm in a dying world that needs someone who will stand? Ask yourself the question, is my conscience leading me or am I bowing before some Caesar somewhere? Finally, have I surrendered to him? Or, are you really calling your own shots. Were you once faithful in Christ but now need to recommit, to ask God to forgive you once again as he's willing to do and to receive the strength from that cross to get up and walk again with the true self. Then today is the day for that commitment. Don't delay. Today is the day for salvation. Amazing Grace #1277 Steve Flatt August 25, 1996

Where Did the Ax Head Fall

At first glance this question might not be considered one of the greatest questions ever asked or any significance or implications to your life. But by the time we're finished, perhaps, you will see some things that are extremely important in your walk with God.

Elisha is the great prophet in Israel, the successor to his mentor, Elijah. Elisha has begun a school for future prophets. It has grown to the point that their present facility was too small. So they've gone to a new site and begun clearing land for the new facility.

"The company of the prophets said to Elisha, 'Look, the place where we meet with you is too small for us. Let us go to the Jordan, where each of us can get a pole; and let us build a place there for us to live.' And he said, 'Go.' Then one of them said, 'Won't you please come with your servants?' 'I will,' Elisha replied. And he went with them. They went to the Jordan and began to cut down trees. As one of them was cutting down a tree, the iron ax head fell into the water, 'Oh, my lord,' he cried out, 'it was borrowed!' The man of God asked, 'Where did it fall?' When he showed him the place, Elisha cut a stick and threw it there, and made the iron float. 'Lift it out,' he said. Then the man reached out his hand and took it." (2 Kings 6:1-6)

Most of us haven't spent a lot of time as lumberjacks, but you can picture the scene. Most of the men have handled an ax at one time or another and you know that the centripetal force from swinging that ax over and over again eventually loosens the ax head. So as this young seminarian lumberjack began to swing away, on one swing, the ax head loosened to the point that it flew off the handle and into the river. It's a simple story, and in it the prophet asked a very simple question. In verse six, he inquires, "Where did the ax head fall?"

From that question, I want to make a spiritual application. Much more can be learned than the fact that one day a long time ago, he made a piece of iron float. The God who created a trillion galaxies and who put everything on the face of this earth, who came to this earth in the form of His Son, who healed the sick and cured the lepers, who made the lame to walk, the God who is going to come back again and melt all of creation in a fervent fire, didn't need to go out of his way to show me that a five-pound piece of iron could float. No, I think this ax head stands for something.

The ax head represents the **POWER GOD WANTS TO CHANNEL THROUGH YOUR LIFE**. In other words, the ax head represents the tools that God places in your hands to effectively do his work. This young seminarian lumberjack, like the Christian today, was applying his presence and his effort to do something worthwhile for God. But he found out that without an ax head, the presence and the effort weren't enough. You don't cut down trees without the ax head being in place and being sharp. I think this lesson is going to hit home with lots of folks today.

The very fact that you are reading this lesson indicates where your interest and your efforts are. But how many trees are you felling for God? How productive are you in your Christian life? How satisfied are you right now with the fruit of your labor? See many Christians just like this young student. They've lost their ax head. They're not what they could be. They're not what they should be. In many cases, they're not even what they used to be. There's a lot of effort expended, but such little fruit received. Oh, they still go through the motions, still swing and swing and swing and rub elbows with real lumberjacks. They talk about the days when the trees used to fall. That was something, but not many trees are falling for them now. No fruit, no power, no joy, they've lost the ax head.

It reminds me of a story I heard about a young lumberjack who went into a camp as a rookie. The first day, he was prepared, ready and gung ho when he went out. All day long he worked up in the great northwest and by the end of the day he had felled 20 huge trees. When he got back in camp around that campfire, he was bragging about how well he did. One of the veteran lumberjacks put his arm around him and said, "You know I believe 20 might be a first day record for a rookie." He continued "Top men around here do 30 trees a day. You keep it up, I believe in a short period of time, you'll be right there." The next day that rookie lumberjack eager to impress, got up 15 minutes earlier, he cut 15 minutes off his lunch hour, he pounded and hammered and sawed away. Finally, when he finished at the end of the day, only 18 trees had been felled. He was rather depressed. He said, "I'll get up 30 minutes earlier tomorrow, I'll work all the way through my lunch hour." The third day, only 16 trees had fallen. By the end of the week, he was down to about a dozen. Swallowing his pride, he kind of moped his way into camp and he talked to that veteran lumberjack and said, "I don't understand." He said, "The harder I try, the behinder I get." The veteran lumberjack asked, "Have you taken the time to sharpen your ax head?" The young man looked up, rolled his eyes, sighed and said, "No. I didn't take time to sharpen the ax head because I had so much to do."

Folks, I believe if God were to lean over right now and whisper something in many of our ears, something he would whisper in the ears of preachers, elders, deacons, Bible school teachers, counselors and ministry workers, he would whisper, "Have you taken the time to sharpen your ax head?" He might even ask, "Have you taken time to see if it's still in place?" Have we just keep swinging and swinging and swinging and wondering why we're not getting anywhere.

See if we've lost the ax head or if the ax has become dull, our work becomes very difficult because it's not designed to be that way. If you've lost the ax head, the joy of fruitfulness for God is ebbled. Your prayer life becomes stagnant. The zealotness, the earnestness is gone. The joy of being in Christ, which is supposed to be like a fountain welling up inside of us, just dries up. We don't see any fruit.

I thought about another story I read about some time ago at a university in the northwest. It involved lumberjacks as well, it was a study on motivation. The psychology department took two groups of lumberjacks. They paid one

group of men the same price that they had been making, the same wage, to just go what they had always done—just chop down trees. The second group was told "We want you to use the flat edge, the blunt edge of the axe but we'll pay you twice your regular wage. We just want you to pound it against the tree, just keep going. Do it as long as you want; we'll pay you double wages." The test group using the blunt edge of the axe had all quit within half a day. As the last lumberjack from that test group was walking away, he was shaking his head. In his exit interview he said, "Money, or no money, this is no fun. When I swing the ax, I have to see the chips fly." A lot of us become worn and tired and weary and even bored because we're swinging the ax, but we're not seeing the chips fly. No fruit, no results, no joy.

Some simple observations from the story of the ax head

1. *The ax head was borrowed.*

It wasn't the property of the one who was using it. "As one of them was cutting down a tree, the iron ax head fell into the water 'Oh, my lord,' he cried out, 'it was borrowed!'" (2 Kings 6:5) What need to understand that our spiritual ax head, that cutting edge that God wants us to have, is the power we have to minister joyfully to others, the power that we are going to have to teach others to share our faith with Christ, the power that God is going to give us to overcome temptation and the power that we are going to have to lead our families in a righteous way. It's not a personal power. It is a God-given power. It is borrowed in a sense. You don't work up this power through psychology or build it up through your own willpower. It's a divine power that comes from Jesus Christ and his spirit living in you. It's a gift from God. It's not your power or my power, it's God's power.

Some Jews had returned home to Israel from Babylonian captivity eager to rebuild their temple. Just like a lot of us, they got started, laid the foundation and then they got tired. They lost their ax head. For 16 years, not one stone was turned as they left the foundation in place. Zechariah was a prophet sent back when the Jews had been released from Babylonian captivity. He said, "We can't just stop with the foundation, let's start building the temple." The people were all discouraged saying, "It was hard work just to do the foundation. We don't think we can ever build the whole temple." God told Zechariah "So God said to me ...'Not by might nor by power, but by my spirit,' says the Lord Almighty." (Zechariah 4:6) God told Zechariah, your arms aren't strong enough, your minds aren't smart enough, your hearts aren't courageous enough and your plans aren't good enough. If the temple is ever rebuilt, it will be because my Spirit causes it to happen.

The Spirit of God is the keen, sharp edge of the ax head. That's the difference. The power that you have to resist temptation, to share your faith or to influence your family for Christ, it's not a power created by your own energy, it is the gift you receive when you came to Christ. It's a borrowed power. Don't dare lose sight of it, ignore it or lose it. If we lose it trying to take on this world without God's power through his Holy Spirit, it's like trying to fell a great redwood by beating it with the ax handle. You get nowhere fast. It's a borrowed power.

2. *The ax head was lost.*

While he was working the ax head slipped off the handle and fell into the water. It was lost. Where do we lose our spiritual ax heads in our walk with God? Has anybody ever lost it in the waters of worldliness? Has anybody swung it in the rivers of ritual? Has anybody lost your ax head in the creek of criticism? Did it fly off into the pond of prayerlessness, or the stream of secularism? Is your ax head in the swamp of self-satisfaction? It can go any number of places. But if we have lost it, what are we going to do about it? There's nothing sadder than losing the power that God wants his servant to have. The ax head was lost.

3. *There was a concern over its lost.*

As soon as he realizes it was gone, Elisha's helper cried out, "'Oh, my lord.'" He was distressed. I venture to say that there's not a one of us whose walk with God hasn't had at one time or another to go look for their ax head. There are times that we've got to stop and re-check our priorities. When we realize something is missing we've got to repent and we've got to start again. If you've never done that, I suggest that you start looking for your ax head because you've lost it and don't know it. You see there's concern when it's lost. It thrills me that this fellow was greatly disturbed over losing it.

Too many times we go through religious rituals, go through the activities and say the right things, act the right way, we've got it so down pat and we don't even realize we've lost the ax head. We don't expect anything great

from God and we don't ask anything great from Him. If the biggest thing we ask from God is to bless our meals, then it's possible for us to go through life and to lose that power and not even know it.

It's not what is done for God that matters nearly as much as what is done by God through us. I think we miss that point a lot of times. We all want to do something for God, but that's not nearly as important as what's done by God. So many times we substitute activity for productivity. We say, "Well, I've done this for God, I've done that for God or I've gone over there for God." We need to stop and ask: "Have I done it in and with the power of God?"

Activity isn't always productivity. We stay busy doing things, things for the church and things for other people. But, we also need to stop and ask: "Am I doing things for God, or is God doing things through me?" The former is good, but the latter is much better. The former, doing things for God, creates activity. But the latter, lets God create productivity. Productivity occurs when the ax head is in place and sharp. I don't want to pray, "God, bless what I am doing." I want to pray, "God, show me what you're doing, and make sure I'm in that blessing."

4. The ax head was found where it was lost.

When the helper said, "My lord, I've lost the ax head and it's borrowed," the man of God (that's Elisha) asked, "Where did it fall?" When he showed him the place, Elisha cut a stick and threw it there and made the iron float." Now folks, I know it's simple, but look at this. The ax head was found right where it was lost. Spiritually, that's the same way it is with our walk with God. If you've lost your spiritual ax head this morning, you're going to find it in the same place you lost it.

Remember the parable of the Prodigal Son? Where did the boy go to find the ax head? He went right back where he left it. He left it at home when he walked out and went to a far country. When he came to himself, he went home and there it was. Do you know where some of you need to go to find your ax head? Some of you need to go get your dusty Bible off the shelf and read it. Some of you need to go to that quiet place you had one time. You need to get on your knees and pray again because it's been a long time. That's where you left your ax head. Some of you need to return to your spouse.

Matthew 18 says, "Sometimes, we left our ax head with another brother." It doesn't have to be in your immediate family. Reconcile with a brother before you worship. Why? Because until you do, you've lost your ax head. You've lost your source of spiritual power. Some of us just need to humble ourselves before God, the Father, because our stubborn pride has sapped away our spiritual power. "Where did you lose it?" That's where it's going to be found. I don't know where you've left your ax head, but you know where it was. Go there, that's where you will find it.

5. *The one who lost it had to be the one who retrieved it.*

After it was floating, Elisha looked at the man and said, "Lift it out." Then the man reached out his hand and took it." You say, "What's the significance of that?" You are responsible for you ax head. No one can relieve you of that.

You see the prophet said, "You go in the water and pick it up for yourself." The good news is, if you make that determination, that's exactly what you can do. To me one of the most amazing concepts in all Scripture is that God gives us the power to choose. God has chosen only to use human beings to accomplish his will for the most part. Incredibly, he gives us the power of choice to determine how much power from him is going to be channeled through us. Yet, by one thought, word or choice, we determine whether any power will go through us. As long as you choose to let the ax head stay in the water, that's where it will stay. If you choose to pick it up. God can bless your life in a mighty way. Amazing Grace #1274 Steve Flatt, July 28, 1996

Where is the Lamb?

We're going to travel to one of the most remarkable and emotional scenes in all of human history. God gives Abraham an incredibly bizarre command. "Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' 'Here I am,' he replied. Then God said, 'Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.'" (Genesis 22:1-2)

Now folks, that seems bizarre to us, but there is no way that we can begin to adequately appreciate how it impacted Abraham. We're going to study more about this in a moment, but remember Abraham and Sarah had been childless. He waited more than a quarter of a century for this child. It was a promised child. Another thing you may not appreciate is that when God called Abraham to go into this land of Canaan, all of the Canaanite people were child-sacrificing people. I've stood at Megiddo and saw the round altar where the Canaanites who lived at Megiddo sacrificed their little children. There's another altar outside the gates of Jericho, the same thing. Jehovah God was the only God of antiquity who said, "No! Human life is precious to me. Don't you dare shed man's blood." Now, God wants the wonder boy sacrificed!

But despite a lack of understanding, Abraham responded with obedient faith. Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He gathered the servants, took Isaac and left. When they came to the foot of Mount Moriah, Abraham told the servants to stay while he and Isaac ascended the mountain to worship. The question that we're going to consider came as the two of them started up that mountainside.

"Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, 'Father?' 'Yes, my son?' Abraham replied. 'The fire and wood are here,' Isaac said, 'but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?' (Genesis 22:6-7)

Can you imagine? If ever a question cut into a man's heart, this was it. That boy who had worshipped so many times with his father automatically knew what was missing. The boy who so loved and so trusted his dad that the last possibility to cross his mind was that his would be the throat that would be slit and his would be the blood to flow over the woods. That boy with innocent eyes looked into his father's and said, "Where is the lamb?" Obviously, Isaac was asking more than he knew. God was calling his father, Abraham, to sacrifice more than he ever had before.

I think Genesis 22:1 is one of the great understatements in the Bible. Do you see how it began? Some time later God tested Abraham. Test? Test? This is a final exam. This is the sounding out of the depths of a man's soul. Isaac was the most precious thing in Abraham's life. I've already told you that Abraham and Sarah had been childless through all their marriage and when God called him to make a covenant with him, Abraham was 75 years old and Sarah was 65. God says, "Don't worry, I'm going to make your descendants more numerous than the stars in the sky." The problem was, they didn't even have a child. So, what does God do? I'm sure Sarah, had they been available, would be taking a home pregnancy test every morning. God made them wait 25 more years! When they were old enough to be great, great, great grandparents, Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90, God fulfilled the promise and Isaac was born. The boy grew, his mother doted over him, and his father cherished every movement he made. They loved that promised child more than they loved life itself. Then out of the clear blue comes that vassalling, unbelievable, unthinkable command, to slay the wonder boy. Why? Why did God do that?

Most of us have never really come to grips with the bewilderment and the atrocity of this incomprehensible situation. Surely, God was asking too much of this man, Abraham. This is the key to unlocking the meaning of Genesis 22. It is the key to answering the question, "Where is the lamb?" It is the key to the question being put to you, where is your lamb? And here's that key: *Before God will use any one of us for a great purpose, he and we must be sure that we love him more than anything else.*

That's the lesson. *Before God will use any one of us for a great purpose, he and we must be sure that we love him more than we love anything else.* See, it wasn't for God's vanity that he put Abraham to the test. It was so Abraham, himself, could know that nothing, nothing was more important to him than Jehovah God. People, while Abraham and Isaac's story is unique in all history, the principle isn't. God still asks for lambs. He asks for our lambs, things precious to us and things that we love dearly, to be put on the altar of sacrifice so that He might do something great through our lives. He might ask you for your lamb to be your home and your immediate family, father and mother, brothers and sisters, as you feel a burning in your heart to be a missionary on a foreign soil.

Your lamb might be your money if God has blessed you with a great deal of affluence. Your calling to put that lamb on the altar might be a major gift to fund some great ministry or some great project for the Lord's work. Your lamb might be your time if you sense God calling you to a ministry that you used to occupy with a hobby.

Where is the lamb? I believe with all my heart God wants to do something great through every one of us, but only if we're willing to put our lamb on the altar. I want to share with you then seven quick principles of sacrifice. Obviously, we're going to cover these briefly.

Principles of Sacrifice

1. He prepares us for times of sacrifice.

It's obvious to me that God was preparing Abraham for this test. Look at verse 1 again, it begins this way, "Some time later God tested Abraham;" some time later than what? The answer to that is some time later than the experiences that Abraham had experienced. Up to this point, God was preparing Abraham. He had told him to move out of his homeland to Ur. He made him wait 25 years for a son. On the other hand, God had been giving him some blessings. Abraham had become prosperous financially; he was wealthy. When Isaac was finally born, the boy grew up healthy and strong. Abraham even signed a peace treaty with Abimelech. (Genesis 21)

So my point is God had been giving Abraham the right combination of challenges and blessings preparing him for the moment of sacrifice. He does the same thing for us. Look over your life; you know it's true. He fills our lives with challenges and blessings in just the right combination. As he does, he prepares us for those great moments when our faith will be put on the line.

Here's a great axiom worth writing down, it's worth remembering. I've seen it true in Scripture, I've seen it true in my life and you know it's true: "After the blessing comes the testing." Here in the story of Abraham, after the most peaceful moment of his life and after he made peace with Abimelech, God comes to him and calls him for a sacrifice.

I think about how after Moses led the children of Israel through the parted Red Sea. After they are safe on the other side, God let them go without water for three days. He's testing them. When Jesus was baptized God said, "This is my Son in whom I'm well pleased," and the Spirit descended as a dove, he goes to the wilderness to be tested by Satan. After the blessing comes the testing. People, we will only bask in blessing so long until we're tested. That's true of the congregation and it's also true in our individual lives.

2. Our love for God needs to be proven.

We may not like that, but it's true. Our love for God needs to be proven. When the tests come, God is asking, "Where is your lamb?" He expects more than words. We sing a song frequently, "Take my life and let it be, consecrated Lord to thee." Aren't those good words? Heavy words, full of sacrifice, consecration and commitment, but do you know what God says about those words? He said, "I don't want you to just be hearers of the word, I want you to be speakers of the word. I want you to be doers of the word." The reason he said that is because God knows words are cheap. You can say a lot through words, but God says back it up with action, quit telling me how much you love me, show me your love and prove it.

God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love." (vs. 2) "Whoa, Whoa! There's an error in the Bible, there's a contradiction. Abraham had more than one son. We know he had another son by Hagar the handmaiden. That boy's name was Ishmael and Ishmael became the father of all the Arab nations. So, Isaac wasn't his only son. The Greek word "*monogeneē*" translated "only" came to us through the Septuagint. It's really hard to translate into English, it means, "most prized and cherished and wonderful possession." Let me give you another instance of its use. In the King James Version, John 3:16 states "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son." The New International Version says, "God so loved the world he gave his one and only Son." The Revised Standard Version states "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." The same word is in 1 John 4:9, "God sent His only, (monogeneses), Son into the world. What's being said here is that God was asking Abraham for the one that really was his one and only, the most prized possession in all his life. In other words, God says, "Abraham, don't tell me you love me. I'm going to really let you show me."

The same principle we see in John 21 when Jesus came to Peter, after the Resurrection, after Peter's denial. Jesus asked "Peter, do you love me?" Peter humbly said, "Lord, you know I love you." Jesus said, "Then feed my sheep. Show me." It's interesting to me that the book of Acts is not called the "words" of the apostles. It's called the "acts" of the apostles. That's what God wants from you and from me. God says, "I have blessed you, I love you, I

appreciate your attendance, I appreciate your praise and your songs, but put your sacrifice where your mouth is." Our Lord wants us to prove our love to him.

3. Sacrifice is giving up something precious in order to give to something that is more precious.

That's exactly what it is. Back to our story, how precious do you suppose Isaac was to Abraham? You know, don't you? But how much more precious and protected would your son be, fathers, if you waited and prayed for him every day for 25 years. Tell me, how precious would he be to you?

"Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey." (vs. 3) I think there's more said there than just that Abraham is an early riser. We're not told, but here's my supposition; I believe Abraham got up early the next morning because he didn't sleep a wink the whole night. I think he laid flat on his back gazing into the stars, thinking and praying, thinking and praying.

They get to the foot of Mount Moriah. How would you feel stacking wood on the shoulders of that unsuspecting boy, knowing that in a little while it would be the fuel for the blaze that would engulf his body? Then that question, "Father, where is the Lamb for the burnt offering?" (vs. 6)

"When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son." (Vs. 9-10) What on earth could make a man do such a thing? What on earth? The answer is only something or someone even more precious than that boy. God Almighty.

Do you love God that much? Huh? I'll be honest, I don't know either, because I've never been called to sacrifice that much. But what have you been called to sacrifice? Will you, have you given up something precious to you for something, someone, even more precious? Some of you are doing it for a ministry that's found your passion; you've helped not just one person, but person after person. But sacrifice is giving up something precious to you to give to something that's even more precious.

4. The sacrifice isn't always understood.

There are times when you walk with God and you have questions instead of answers and God just says to you, "It's all right. You don't understand, but hold my hand and obey me." That's what God was saying to Abraham. There's no way Abraham understood this request. The promise had come to him earlier that it would be through Isaac that his offspring would be blessed. Now God says, "Go kill Isaac." That doesn't make any sense. But sacrifice doesn't always make sense and that's where faith is magnified. Faith is being sure of what you hope for and certain of what you cannot see. It takes faith to make any sacrifice. Anytime you give up something precious to you to give to something more precious takes faith. But it takes greater faith when you can't understand it.

"He said to his servants when they got to the foot of Mount Moriah, 'Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there.'" (v. 5) Do you know why I'm convinced that he made the servants stay? I'm convinced it's because he knows that when he took up that knife and started to kill his son, the servants would have tried to stop him. Abraham by faith was not going to let anything interfere with God's command.

But then he told those servants, "'We will worship and then we will come back to you.'" (v. 5) What? "'We will worship and then WE will come back to you.'" People, that's not an accident, it's not a slip of the tongue. It's not a misprint in your Bible. I think I know what Abraham was thinking about all the night before, before they left that morning. Hebrews 11:19 gives us a little insight. He said as he was thinking about what would happen to Isaac, he reckoned that God would raise him from the dead. Then the Hebrew writer said, figuratively speaking, that's exactly what happened, he got him back from the dead.

I want to tell you about faith and not understanding. We have read so many stories in the Bible about men and women being raised from the dead by prophets, by Jesus or by apostles. We just think it's no big deal. Let me tell you something, Abraham believed that God would raise Isaac back from the dead before God raised anybody up from the dead. Sacrifice is not always understood.

5. Sacrifice must be voluntary.

God told Abraham to make the sacrifice, but he didn't force him to do it. This is a major misunderstanding even among good religious folks. There's no such thing as an involuntary sacrifice. We sometimes mistakenly refer to a loss as a sacrifice. To lose a job, an investment, your health, a mate or a child, is not a sacrifice. Now it may be painful, horrible, tragic or the most awful thing you've ever gone through, but biblically it's not a sacrifice. The reason is: a sacrifice must be given, it's by choice, it is not just something that happens. Jesus' cross was a sacrifice. Why? Because, he chose it. It didn't have to happen. When he calls you to take up the cross, he's calling you to choose the sacrifice.

6. The greater the sacrifice, the greater the sweetness and the greater the blessing.

I love this point. Let's talk about the sweetness, first. God stopped Abraham from the sacrifice; he provided a ram in the thicket. (v. 13) "The Angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, 'I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.'" (Genesis 22:15-18)

"Then Abraham returned to his servants, and they set off together for Beersheba." (v. 19) Have you ever thought about how Abraham felt coming down that mountain? How do you think he felt all the way to Beersheba? Have you ever felt so good about something you did, something you said, something that was right that when you were walking along you just couldn't keep the smile off your face. Sometimes you just walked on and said, "Yes!" I can see Abraham doing that and smiling as he recalled the speech from the Angel of the Lord. Now I know how much you fear me. Do you know what he was experiencing? He was experiencing the sweetness of the sacrifice.

Most of us have been so thrilled when we came out of the waters of baptism which may be the sweetest moment in all your memory. Do you know why? Because at that moment you were saying, "God, I sacrifice my life to you. I buried my old sinful self and I turned my new self over to you."

- a. The greater the sacrifice the greater the blessing. Abraham received the blessing of God's timing. Just as the hand is raised, just as the knife is about to come down, "Then God stopped him as the angel of the Lord called out and said, 'Do not lay a hand on the boy, do not do anything to him.'" (v. 10-11) Then he received the blessing of God's approval that we read about in verse 12.
- b. He received the blessing of God's provision. "Abraham looked up and there in the thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son." (v. 13) Did the ram just happen to get its horns caught? Or did God provide it?

7. God is the real provider of the lamb.

"So, Abraham called that place *The Lord Will Provide (Jehovah-Jireh)*. And to this day it is said, 'On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.'" (v. 14) When Abraham finished he didn't call the mountain, "The Agony of the Lord," "The Near Miss," or "The Almost Catastrophe." He called it, *Jehovah-Jireh. The Lord Will Provide.*

Any sacrifice God asks us to make, anything in your life, he provides the lamb. He was the one who had given Abraham all his lambs. He was the one who had given Isaac to Abraham. He was the one who initiated and empowered the covenant, not Abraham. Whatever sacrifice God may request of you, remember He has provided the lamb in your life. Whether it's your time, money, heart, home or a relationship, God gives you that lamb. When you're willing to offer it on the altar, he will make provisions for you a hundred times over.

I want to close with one little point here that's really an extension of principle number seven; God has of course provided the ultimate lamb, the Lamb of God. Here is a beautiful illustration of a type or foreshadowing in the Old Testament of the Christ. We've already looked at a couple of them. For example, Isaac was called the "monogeneses," the one and only, the best loved Son. Jesus, John 3:16. He was the monogeneses of the Father. They waited for years for Isaac to get there, the prophets waited for years and centuries for Jesus to come. Isaac was called upon to be the sacrifice. How about Jesus? When John the Baptizer first saw him in John 1:29, he looked at him and said, "Behold the Lamb."

Even the place, Mount Moriah, where Isaac was taken to be sacrificed, is right in the heart of the city of Jerusalem.

It is just a stones-throw away from the place of the skull, where the Lamb of God hung on the cross so that you and I could be freed from our sins.

Peter says, "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 and without spot." There are all kinds of parallels, but one big difference. God didn't make Abraham sacrifice his Son Isaac, and God wouldn't halt the sacrifice of his Son Jesus.

If you have not accepted the sacrifice, the Lamb of God, by obeying the gospel, by confessing the name of Jesus, by turning from sins, and laying your life upon the altar by dying to sin and being buried with Christ, NOW is the time. Amazing Grace # 1276, Steve Flatt, August 18, 1996

What Must I Do To Be Saved?

The most important question that I know is the one recorded in Acts 16:30. It came from the lips of a Philippian jailer who was contemplating suicide. But within a matter of moments he was wanting a life, not just a life, he wanted eternal life. He asked, "What must I do to be saved?"

The answer to that most critical of all human questions is the focus of this lesson. Obviously, I want to address this question and its answer to those who aren't Christians. There are many who honestly don't know the answer to the jailer's question: What must I do to be saved? More than anything else in the world, you need not only to know the answer, but to respond to it. Secondly, I want to address this question and answer to Christians who do understand the reasoning and the ramifications of your commitment. I hope this lesson will better equip you to share the answer to the question with those who desperately need it. I'm very concerned about how we effectively communicate. I'm concerned that we often don't do a very good job of expressing just how good the Good News of Jesus is and the beauty associated with the way that God wants us to accept it.

Often, we assume what we think people know. We assume what we think they understand. Many have a pat answer, but it doesn't answer the question. We just don't communicate. I love the story of the couple who had been married for 70 years and he was pretty hard of hearing. On their 70th anniversary the little old lady leaned over to him and said, "I'm so proud of you!" He looked around at her and said, "I'm tired of you, too!"

I don't know about you, but I think at times I've been guilty of spiritually speaking while being hard of hearing—not hearing what was being asked or sensing where they were. So helping those of us who are Christians to communicate the answer to that question may be the most important use of this lesson. Because folks, there is no question about the power of the gospel. It is the power of God to convict and to convert in any culture in any generation. If it's not doing that in abundance, it's not because of a lack of clarity of the signal; it would more be the way it's being transmitted.

What must I do to be saved? The entire New Testament, in one way or another, is focused on the answer to that question. Ephesians 2, the first ten verses give us a concise and powerful description about what one must do to be saved. Ephesians 2:1-10

1. *Recognize the need.*

"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath." Folks, if anyone is going to come to Christ, they must first see a need for that conversion. This is where, as ambassadors of Christ, Christians often fail. We leapfrog to an answer when we don't have a question.

There are two broad categories of people who don't come to Christ. The first category is those who think they are so bad that there is no chance in the world that God could ever reach them or save them. "You mean God could save me?" In my experience as a preacher and as an ambassador for Christ, I find that those people are usually easier to reach. Because once you break through their guilt and shame and pour the love and mercy of Christ in

that opening, they begin to loosen up.

But there's a second group that seldom comes to Christ and this is the vast majority. Those who think I'm a good person and I don't really need to be saved. I'm always intrigued by the Gallup Polls that indicate 90% of Americans say, "I'm a Christian." Yet, that percentage is nowhere close to the percentage of our population who assemble together, have their name on any church roll, who read the Bible at all, who pray or who give money to any congregation.

As you look closely at the questions they answer, you begin to understand why they think as they do. Most of America defines being a Christian as basically being a good person. They've made the two things synonymous. Believe it or not, there are tons of folks out there who think they are already Christians just because they perceive themselves as good.

I've learned one of the most insightful questions you can ask a person and obviously you do this tactfully as conversation goes along. Ask them if they're going to heaven. Usually that will startle them and they'll say, "Well, I guess I am." Then I like to ponder, "Well tell me, why do you think you will?" Over 90 percent of the time, the answer is "I do a pretty good job at work, I love my kids, I'm basically honest, I give to the United Way and I don't break any laws." In other words, what they're saying is: The good in my life outweighs the bad. I deserve to be saved." They don't understand the need. They don't understand the scope of sin. They're like Simon, the Pharisee who answered Jesus by saying "The one who has forgiven much, is the one who's going to love much." (Luke 7)

If I'm going to respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ or if I am going to effectively communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ, the first thing I've got to do is see the need. I've got to discover the reality of lostness. I've got to understand that life is not some great humanity test that's going to be graded on the curve about how good I am in relation to everybody else. If I'm going to respond to who Jesus is and what he has done, it will be because I've first realized the truth, that all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory (Romans 3:23) and that the wages of sin is death. (Romans 6:23)

Paul says, "you were dead in your transgressions and sins" (Ephesians 2:1) and "All of us also lived among them at one time." (Ephesians 2:1) Until someone sees and feels the need, he or she won't become a Christian. So step one is to recognize the need.

2. Realize the solution.

"But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in transgressions—It is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus." (Ephesians 2:4) There's the solution. Once the need is communicated, then and only then, can we talk about a solution.

The modern American mind is: "I can pull myself up by my bootstraps. I'm a self-made man. I don't need anybody else and I can take care of this problem. I'm independent." But the gospel message says. No, you can't take care of this problem. It's bigger than you. You don't have what it takes to solve it. The great news is God, who is rich in love and mercy, has already solved the problem. "But because of his great love for us. God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions."

The non-Christian who really has a curious mind will ask, "Now, I've heard about Jesus around Christmas and Easter but just how does Christ save me? How does Jesus Christ make me alive? Paul answered that question: "For God made him who had no sin (that's Jesus) to be sin for our sakes, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21) Do you know what that's called?

Theologians and scholars call it "Substitutionary Atonement." That sounds awfully scholarly but it's not hard to understand. Break it down. What does substitute mean? It means, "One who takes the place of another." Atonement means "One who pays a debt for another." Jesus took your place, he was the substitute and he atoned; he paid your sin debt to God that you could not pay. Therefore, you share in his righteousness. That is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the message of Christianity.

But often we discuss how without first discussing why and who made the how possible. The why and the who need to be understood first. People need to know the Christ. They need to fall in awe before the one who came from heaven's throne room, God come in the flesh, the one who never sinned, who hung on a dirty cross and who was treated like he was the world's only sinner. We need to fall on our knees when we understand who Jesus is. We don't need to walk away smugly with some formula for salvation. Our message, our hope and our ticket is the person of Jesus Christ.

Peter did this the first time the Gospel was preached. He talked about the need. He helped them realize there was a need. He showed them their sin. He told them "This Jesus, whom you crucified," now that's showing them their sin, isn't it? I mean he could have shown them a million more, but he said, let's just take the most dominate one, "You crucified the son of God." The second thing he did was to show them the solution "God has made Him both Lord and Christ." Then in the next verse, Peter's listeners asked in essence the same as that all important question asked by the Philippian jailer. "Brothers, what shall we do? We recognize our sin. We realize the solution is in Jesus, now. What do we do?" That leads to step three.

3. Respond in faith.

"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." (Ephesians 2:8-9) Folks, there it is. Scripture makes it clear that there has to be a response to this grace. Grace just means the gift offered by Jesus and in a word that response is a thing called "faith."

Again, there is a communication problem. Much of the world has defined the word "faith," in their own terms, "just believe." Just believe that Jesus is the Son of God with all your heart, that's faith. The Bible says faith is being sure of what you cannot see and what you may not understand. (Hebrews 11:1) The Bible says that faith is going where God says. (2 Corinthians 4:5)

Folks, just to ask Jesus to come into your heart as a personal Savior is not what Ephesians 2:8-9 is saying. Read it again. The passage says we are saved by grace through faith; not our works and not our own merits. The Ephesians statement is confirmed throughout the Bible, particularly the New Testament.

To properly understand Ephesians 2:8-9, let's allow God to define his desired faith response. There is no question that belief is at the core of faith. He has always dictated the faith response that he wanted. For example, when the Israelites were being bitten by poisonous snakes, what did God want as a faith response? Do you remember? He had Moses fashion a bronze serpent on top of a pole and he lifted that up. God said, "If you want to be healed from that, here's what you do. You look at that serpent. You'll be healed." (Numbers 21) That was the faith response. Who decided what that faith response would be? The people? No, God did.

Consider when the children of Israel were coming into the Promised Land and they were about to take on Jericho, that great walled and most fortified city. God wanted belief in his power but he also wanted a faith response. I want you to march around that city once a day for six days and on the seventh day I want you to march around it seven times, and then I want you to call out in a great shout.

What faith response did God ask of Naaman, the Syrian leper, in 2 Kings 5 when he came down to see the prophet Elisha? Elisha didn't even go down to see him. He just sent word down through a messenger. He said, you tell him to go dip seven times in the Jordan River. It was God's idea.

What faith response did God ask of Peter after he had fished all night and he came to the shore? Jesus said, Peter, I want you to go launch out into the deep one more time and let down your nets.

There are countless other examples. But the question is: Did any of those responses merit or supply the power for the miraculous event that followed? No. No. No. Do you understand that? The faith response didn't supply the power. The children of Israel could have marched around the wall of Jericho a thousand times and that wall wouldn't have budged an inch if it weren't for the power of God. Naaman could have dipped in the Jordan River from sun up to sun down and he would have still left there a leper, except for the power of God. But when they responded in faith as God had prescribed then His power was channeled to them. God always determines the faith

response. He always has. So, what faith response does God demand for accepting Christ? Let's allow the Bible answer rather than someone's opinion. The Book of Acts is the only inspired book of the Bible that gives us the pure history of the birth and the growth of the early church. In it and it alone are the only specific details of individual conversions of those first Christians. It's where to go to learn how they became a Christian. We should do no more or no less.

I want to show you concisely all of the accounts of conversions to Christianity found in the book of Acts. Now, we're not going to be able to take them in their entirety so I would encourage you in your private study to go back and look at them in their entire and the whole context. Look at the moments how they came to Christ and assimilate all that data we find.

1. The day the church began when those first 3,000 asked the question to Peter and the apostles. "When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?' 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.'" (Acts 2:37-38), "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day." (Acts 2:41)
2. "But many who heard the message believed and the number of men grew to about five thousand." (Acts 4:4)
3. The next reference is in the conversion of Simon, the Sorcerer. "But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized ... And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw." (Acts 8:12-13)
4. The Ethiopian eunuch. "Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?' And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing." (Acts 8:35-39)
5. Saul, who would become the great apostle Paul, gives his own testimony of what happened as he was on his way to Damascus. "As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you Lord?' Saul asked. 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' he replied." (Acts 9:3-5) After Saul gets to Damascus and talks with Ananias, "Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again. He got up and was baptized." (Acts 9:18)
6. The conversion of the first Gentile, Cornelius. "Then Peter said, 'Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.' So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ." (Acts 10:46)
7. "Some of the men from Cypress and Cyrene went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news of Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord." (Acts 11:20-21)
8. "There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed." (Acts 14:1)
9. Lydia came to Christ through the preaching and teaching of Paul, "One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members other household were baptized, she invited us to her home." (Acts 16:14)
10. The Philippian jailer said, "He (the jailer) then brought them out and asked, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They replied, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.' Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized." (Acts 16:30)

11. "Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men." (Acts 17:12)
12. "A few men became followers of Paul and believed." (Acts 17:34)
13. "Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized." (Acts 18:8)
14. Paul comes to Ephesus and stays there for two-and-a-half years. "And he asked them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' They answered, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.' So Paul asked, 'Then what baptism did you receive?' 'John's baptism,' they replied. Paul said, 'John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.' On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus." (Acts 19:2-5)
15. "I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus." (Acts 20:21)
16. And then finally the last one. Paul once again recounts his conversion experience and said, "I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' I asked. 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. 'What shall I do, Lord?' I asked. 'Get up,' the Lord said, 'and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.'" Ananias asked Saul, "And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name." (Acts 22:16)

That may have been a little lengthy, but I wanted you to see it for yourself. Nine different times in those conversion accounts, all that we find in the book of Acts, we're told that the people believed and obviously they did. Three different times we're told that they repented and the word, "repent," means "to turn," to turn away from the world and turn toward Jesus Christ. Ten different times, we're told they were baptized. The word, "baptized," means to be immersed, to be dunked or dipped, meaning the total body going beneath the water. When one is raised from the water, resurrected, he came out walking into a newness of life. By the way, each time they were baptized, it wasn't a week later and it wasn't a month later, it was immediately. Now, what faith response does God set forth for coming to Christ?

I realize that much of the world asked "Do you really believe God requires baptism as a part of faith response for accepting Christ?" They could also ask "Do you really believe that Moses and the Israelites were required a look at the bronze snake as their faith response?" "Do you really believe that God required the Israelites to march around that city like idiots once a day for six days and seven times on the seventh day?" "Do you really believe God expected Naaman to dip seven times in the Jordan?" "Do you really believe he wanted Peter to go out after fishing all night and cast those nets one more time?" Do you really believe God wants the response He requested from all those people for their physical healing or the response He demands of us for our spiritual healing, the forgiveness of our sins. Of course the answer is God expects man to obey Him based upon knowledgeable faith.

A few other verses should put everything in perspective about the way God desires us to respond to Him in faith. "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16:16) But, what is the purpose for baptism? "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection." (Romans 6:3-5:1)

Paul says, the reason God chose to incorporate it as part of the faith response, contingent upon belief, contingent upon repentance and a turning to God, is to re-enact the very death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Peter gave the same reason when he was talking about Noah and how he was saved because of his faith response, when God sent that great flood upon the earth. "And that water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God." (1 Peter 3:21) There's nothing magical about the water. It's not holy. It's not what it does physically by taking away anything dirty or unclean.

Its whole purpose is “The pledge of a good conscience toward God” Why? Because it's fulfilling, the faith response that God has asked for.

There are a lot of friends who very respectfully and honestly disagree with what I've shared with you, despite all that I've shared and the reasoning behind it. Going back to our passage in Ephesians 2:8-9, where it says, "For by grace are you saved through faith—and this not of yourselves, it is the gift of God—not of works, lest anyone should boast." They say, "But baptism is a work, it's a work."

Let me show you one last verse as we summarize everything up "He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy." (Titus 3:5) See it's not by what we do. It's not our power. It's his mercy. He is the power. "He saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal of the Holy Spirit." (Titus 3:6) Baptism has nothing to do with working; it has everything to do with submission. It has everything to do with faith. It means nothing apart from belief. It means nothing apart from Jesus Christ. Baptism is simply the faith response connecting us to the great power that saves us from our sins. *Amazing Grace #1273, Steve Flatt July 21, 1996*

