

Becoming a Christian

by Andrew Lansdown

The Christian faith is based on a belief that there is a true and living God who is good and great. By his wisdom and power, God made everything, including human beings, whom he created in his own image. God loves human beings, and he communicates openly with them through his word, the Bible.

A Christian is a person who has a close, personal relationship with this God who created us and loves us. But how can someone enter into such a relationship? Or to put it another way, how can someone become a Christian?

Our dilemma

The Bible teaches that our relationship with God has been ruined because of our sins, our wrongdoings. “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you” (Isaiah 59:2).^{*} Because he is morally pure (holy), God cannot and will not tolerate wrong of any sort.

Sadly, all people are alienated from God, because “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Every one of us has said and done and thought things that are wrong, things that fall short of God’s perfect character and holy standards. Although we may be innocent of sins like murder, robbery and adultery, we are guilty of the sins (hatred, envy and lust) that give rise to them. In varying degrees, our attitudes and actions are spoiled by sins such as pride, resentment, selfishness, and dishonesty. “None is righteous”—that is, virtuous, morally right—“no, not one” (Romans 3:10).

We are wrongdoers. Worse still, even our attempts to do good have failed dismally. “All our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment” (Isaiah 64:6). Try as we might, we cannot free our lives from the taint of sin. So we cannot make amends to God and come back into a right relationship with him by our own efforts.

And as if our sinfulness and our helplessness were not bad enough, the Bible declares that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). The wage, the just payment, for our wrongdoing is to be condemned for eternity to a living death in hell. Jesus warns that nothing could be worse than “to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire” (Mark 9:43).

This, then, is our dilemma. We are sinful. God is holy. Because of what we are and what God is, we are separated from God. This separation means eternal punishment for us. And we can do nothing about it, because even our best efforts fall far short of God’s perfect standards.

God’s solution

But thankfully, this is not where the matter ends. For while God hates sin, he loves sinners. He is angry with us, yet he still loves us. So he implemented a plan to save us. He “sent the Son into the world ... that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17). And the Son whom he sent is Jesus.

The Lord Jesus Christ is God's only Son, and he "came into the world to save sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15). Jesus himself said that he "came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10).

To save us from God's anger, Jesus had to remove our sins. And to do this he had to forfeit his life, for the Bible says that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Hebrews 9:22). Sin must be punished, and the punishment is death. There is no way around this. If God simply let us off, it would make a mockery of his justice and his holiness. So to enable God to extend his love without offending his justice, Jesus willingly came to die for us.

Jesus became our substitute. He offered himself as a sacrifice to God for us. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross" (1 Peter 2:24). And along with our sins, Jesus bore our punishment. "He was wounded for our transgressions ... upon him was the chastisement that made us whole" (Isaiah 53:5).

On the cross at Calvary Jesus made an exchange. He died in our place and on our behalf. He bore our sins so that we might bear his righteousness and he suffered our punishment so that we might enjoy his reward.

The good news of the Christian faith is this: "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

Eternal life is a gift, God's gift to sinners. We do not deserve it. We cannot earn it. We can only receive it.

But how? How can we receive this gift of salvation?

Our response

We receive the gift of salvation by personally believing in Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. A man once asked Jesus' followers, "What must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:30-31). So then, "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9).

Jesus himself said, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (John 11:25). Again he said, "I have come as light into the world, that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness" (John 12:46).

The Bible commonly refers to Christians as "believers". This name defines not only what Christians are, but also how they came to be that way.

But what exactly does the Bible mean when it commands us to "believe" in Jesus?

Belief (or faith) in Jesus involves agreement. We must agree with what the Bible says about him. We must believe that he is the Son of God, that he was born of the virgin Mary, that he lived a sinless life, that he died on the cross for our sins, that he rose bodily from the dead, and that he lives and reigns forevermore.

Belief in Jesus also involves repentance. With deep sorrow and regret, we must own up to the fact that we are sinners. We must admit our wrongdoing to him and ask him for

forgiveness. Repentance also involves a change of attitude. It is not enough to confess our sins and to feel sorry about them. We must determine, with God's help, to abandon our sinful ways.

Belief in Jesus also involves submission. We cannot accept him as Saviour without also accepting him as Lord. This means that we must be prepared to give him control of our lives. We must be prepared to follow his lead and to yield to his will.

Belief in Jesus also involves love. We are not embracing an abstract philosophy but a living person. By faith, we are entering into a loving relationship with him.

When we believe in Jesus, we trust him to save us and rely on him to lead us in "the paths of righteousness" (Psalm 23:3). We commit ourselves to him and he becomes "the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls" (1 Peter 2:25). And then we find ourselves saying with humility and wonder, "I know Jesus loves me, and I love him back!"

It is difficult for us to accept that we do not have to earn our salvation in some way. The people of Jesus' time had the same difficulty. They asked him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" They were thinking of good deeds and religious rituals. But Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he sent" (John 6:28-29).

God wants us to believe in Jesus—nothing more, nothing less. And when we do, he saves us and enters into a loving Father-child relationship with us.

The Bible emphasises that good deeds and religious rituals have no part to play in our salvation. Indeed, "a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Galatians 2:16). God does not say, "I will save you if you are good." He says, "I will save you if you trust in my Son—and then I will make you good!"

Stressing that salvation comes by the grace of God through faith in Christ and not by anything we can do, the Bible states: "if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose" (Galatians 2:21). If we could be saved by our own efforts to obey God's moral law, then Christ would not have needed to die for us. His sacrifice would have been pointless.

Our only way

Some people believe that there are many ways to approach God and so attain eternal life. But the Bible insists that there is only one way, and that way is Jesus. "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Jesus himself insists, "he who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (Luke 10:16).

Some people claim that it is arrogant to insist that Jesus is the only one who can save us. In fact, the reverse is true. The ultimate arrogance is to think that we know better than Jesus does. The ultimate humility is to agree with Jesus when he says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me" (John 14:6).

Other people claim that Christians are exclusivists because they insist that Jesus is the only one who can reconcile us to God and bring us to heaven. This, too, is untrue. For Christians invite all people to believe in Jesus and be saved. They say to all people, "God

loves you. Christ died for you. Believe in him and be saved with us!" This is not exclusive but inclusive, if only people are willing to be included.

While it is true that many people will be excluded from eternal life, this is by their own choice. As Jesus said to some of the religious leaders of his day, "you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:40).

Our heartfelt request

God "desires all men to be saved" (1 Timothy 2:4). Jesus "gave himself as a ransom for all" (1 Timothy 2:6). Consequently, "whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21).

We can call to Jesus in prayer. Whatever the time, wherever the place, Jesus hears us when we speak to him, and he graciously responds to our requests.

To become a Christian—to be reconciled to God, to receive the gift of salvation—a person must sincerely and humbly pray along these lines:

Jesus, I believe that you are the sinless Son of God, the Saviour of the world, the risen Lord. I believe that you died on the cross for me, and I thank you for it. I confess my sins to you with shame and sadness, and I renounce them. I ask you to forgive me. I ask you to come into my life to be my own Saviour and Lord. I trust you. Help me to love, worship and obey you.

This is the first prayer of every believer. An earnest desire to pray such a prayer is proof that God is working in a person's heart to bring that person into his eternal kingdom.

God's blessings

When we personally believe in Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, many wonderful things happen. Our sins are forgiven and we are made clean in the sight of God (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). We are saved from the punishment we deserve because of our sin (Romans 5:9; 8:1). We become the children of God (John 1:12). We receive eternal life (John 3:15; 5:24). We begin to understand the purpose of life (1 Peter 2:9). We begin to experience "the peace of God, which passes all understanding" (Philippians 4:7). These are some of the things that happen to and in and with us when we become Christians.

One other change deserves a special mention. When we believe in Jesus, the Spirit of God comes to live within us forever (John 14:16-17). It is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, who pours God's love into our hearts (Romans 5:5), seals us as God's possession (Ephesians 1:13-14; 4:30), assures us that we are God's children (Romans 8:14-17), and changes us day by day into the likeness of the Lord Jesus (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Our responsibilities

While God requires nothing of us except faith before our salvation, afterwards he requires a great deal. And it is the Holy Spirit who gives us both the desire and the power to meet these requirements.

As Christians, we should regularly read God's word, the Bible, asking God to help us to understand, believe and obey it. We might begin with the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, but we will not stop there. We will read every page of the Bible, meditating on what we read and memorising important passages.

As Christians, we should speak with God regularly in prayer. He is our Father, so we can approach him with familiarity and affection. He is also our Sovereign, so we should approach him with reverence and respect. In the name of Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we should talk to our Father often.

As Christians, we should worship together with other Christian people. We need to find a church where the Bible is fully believed and taught, then commit ourselves to attend the services each Sunday, making the church our spiritual home.

As Christians, we should be baptised. Jesus himself was baptised and we are commanded to follow his example. Baptism symbolises our union with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection. It is an outward expression of our inward conversion, and offers us the opportunity to publicly declare our allegiance to Jesus as Lord.

As Christians, we should strive to live lives that are holy and good. Now that we are saved, we want to live in a manner that is fitting to our salvation. If we heed them, the Bible, the Holy Spirit and our consciences will help us to live in a way that is clean towards God and kind towards others. The Lord Jesus summarised our spiritual and social responsibilities as Christians in this way: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39).

And finally, as Christians, we should share our faith with others so that they, too, might be saved. We want everyone to hear the good news that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

** The quotations are from the Bible (RSV). The name in brackets after each quotation refers to one of the sixty-six books that make up the Bible, while the numbers refer to the chapter and verse of that book.*

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First published as a pamphlet by Life Ministries in 1989. Second printing (with revisions) 2000. Third printing 2003. Fourth printing 2005. Fifth printing 2007. Sixth printing 2016.