

Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

Orcutt Christian Church

A Grace Driven Church for Grace Needing People!

"Come As You Are ... Leave Changed!"

Burning Questions 04

How Does One Become A Christian?

Acts 2:36-41

Jan 29, 2017

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Care Calling: The Decker's

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Saturday 1/28 Clean Up: Yessica Felix

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Acts 2:36-41 (NASB)

36 "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified." **37** Now when they heard *this*, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" **38** Peter *said* to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. **39** "For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself." **40** And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "Be

saved from this perverse generation!" 41 So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.

I was surprised that this question was requested in the survey. However, since there is so much confusion on **How One Becomes a Christian**, I shall attempt to give a reasonable, Biblical, answer.

Now, in all honesty, the Biblical answer may make some of you uncomfortable, but, please recognized I am being consistent with the teaching of God's word, as I understand it.

Now, think about this -- If you needed to change the filter on your refrigerator, where would you go for instructions?

I think you would read the manufacturers user's manual.

If your physician gave you a new prescription, I suspect you would follow your doctors useage instructions.

So, my take on the question today is to see what God has said about how to be a Christian.

It's my belief that God gave us His Divine Manual on how to become a Christian, and He had Dr. Luke write one book of the Bible to give us numerous cases that we can use as examples.

In those examples I think we can gain an understanding of what God wants us to do.

Would you agree with that premise?

If you do agree with me that God gives us His answer in the Bible, then together, let's analysis

I. What Is The Problem Humanity Faces?

Peter says emphatically

Be saved

One commentary said:

"Society is absolutely insane. We have gone whacko. We are living in loonyville today on planet earth. This world has deteriorated into one giant insane asylum. Someone please open the lion's and tiger's cage at the zoo so I can live with them and be safe from people."

Ane, when I read that I started laughing.

But, it's sobering to ponder.

People are just as insane today as when Cain murdered his brother Able.

And, by definition, insane means not healthy, in a state of mind that prevents normal behavior or social interaction.

So, Peter correctly describes *his* generation as **perverse**.

We all know about a terrible spinal problem called Scoliosis. Scoliosis is a medical condition in which a person's spine has a sideways curve.

The word that Peter used to describe his generation is **skolios**. The basic meaning of the Greek word [σκολιός] is crooked, not straight.

Figuratively it refers to something different from what it ought to be.

It describes behavior that is depraved, degenerate and immoral.

Is *our* generation depraved, degenerate and immoral, different from what it ought to be?

1 John 5:19 (TLB)

19 We know that we are children of God and that all the rest of the world around us is under Satan's power and control.

Are we part of *this* crooked generation?

Peter's appeal is certainly still applicable: **Be saved from this perverse generation**

None of us are what we ought to be.

Romans 3:23 (TLB)

23 Yes, all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious ideal;

Isaiah 59:2 (HCSB)

2 But your iniquities have built barriers between you and your God

So, think about your life.

Do you have scoliosis of the heart?

And think about Peter's words

Be Saved

It sounds like it is something you can do to save yourself.

But, in fact, it's not something you can do for yourself.

So how should you picture this phrase?

Think about it this way.

You fall off a tour boat far out at sea.

It's night and you were standing at the rail entranced by the algae that glowed like little diamonds, and you lean too far over to watch this strange phenomenon, and fall overboard.

No one sees or hears you.

You've dogpaddle for hours and your strength is running out.

You start to sink, and with all your strength you force yourself back to the surface.

Then, it happens again, and again, and you are going down into death.

But, then your water logged mind senses that someone has grasped you and is dragging you back to the surface.

What happened?

The Coast Guard Pararescue team has spotted you, and dived into to save you.

God has made a way for you to be lifted up through the death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Luke tells us **those who had received his word**

Even though they could not save themselves, there was something they could do: they could **receive his word**

The New Testament presents conversion in terms that include regeneration and repentance and obedience as a process.

There is more to our salvation than just believing.

James 2:19 (NASB)

19 You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.

Our salvation is **NOT** by faith only, and it is **NOT** once saved always saved.

And, Luke tells us **that day there were added**

What were they added to?

The verb "**added**" means to "**gather together with...**"

What the Greek tells us is that the 3,000 were gathered into a community.

We call that community the church.

This is the birthday of the church.

This is the day the church of Christ began.

But, let's think through what did they do to be "**added**" to the church and how did they become Christians?

How shall we become Christians?

What shall we do to be saved, to become members of the church, to become Christians?

I think that you will agree with me in this, that becoming a Christian is essentially a personal matter?

We become Christians not through the force of circumstances or through the words or acts of others.

We can't become Christians by proxy.

Being sprinkled as a baby doesn't eliminate the need for an adult decision to proclaim Christ as Master of my life, and be obedient to His commands.

Each of us is responsible to God for our thinking, our choices, our behavior, and will be judged accordingly.

It is an individual matter, not to be determined by the state, not to be determined by one's fathers, not to be determined by society.

It is an individual and personal matter.

Further, I think you will agree with me, will you not, that the matter of becoming a Christian is the most important matter in the world.

The matter of health and body-strength is important.

But, body-health, body-vigor, body-strength, is not the most important concern of life.

One may not have a vigorous body, and yet walk into the presence of the Father in Heaven.

My Daddy used to tell me the three "R's" were the most important thing in life to know: to **Read**, to **Rite**, and do "**Rithmetic**."

It is a good thing to know the three "**R's**."

In property law, a title is a bundle of rights in a piece of property in which you may own either a legal interest or equitable interest.

Isaac Watts wrote a hymn, which we never see anymore, about a title you really want to read:

**When I can read my title clear
To mansions in the skies,
I bid farewell to every fear,
And wipe my weeping eyes.**

**Should earth against my soul engage,
And hellish darts be hurled,
Then I can smile at Satan's rage,
And face a frowning world**

**Let cares, like a wild deluge come,
And storms of sorrow fall!
May I but safely reach my home,
My God, my heav'n, my All.**

**There shall I bathe my weary soul
In seas of heav'nly rest,
And not a wave of trouble roll
Across my peaceful breast.**

Above all things else in all the world, the one question that is imperative and important is how should I become and stay a Christian. How?

The 3,000 in Jerusalem gathered together and became the first Christian church and simultaneously became the model for all congregations which followed.

And to understand what God requires of us to be Christians, we have to look at the first gospel sermon God had preached.

The question was asked "**what shall we do,**" and that question was answered.

Our text today tells us plainly that the 3,000 were most concerned with the question "**What Must I do to please God?**"
And, I hope this is something you take seriously, and not put off responding to the question.

I can recall more than one occasion when someone I was sharing with kept putting off making a decision until it was too late.

I recall spending a lot of time with a gentleman who was Vice-President of the Glidden Paint Company.

We had a delightful relationship, and he would agree that he needed to make a profession of faith and be immersed, but he kept putting it off.

Then he died of a heart attack.

But that definitely wasn't the case with the 3,000 on the day of Pentecost.

II. How Do We Make The Decision to be Saved?

Let's approach the problem from a psychological and logical viewpoint.

There are only four ways in which the soul can express itself:
through thinking,
through feeling,
through willing and
through doing.

You can express yourself through you intellect;
you can express yourself through your emotions;
you can express yourself through some act of the will;
you can express yourself through your actions.
Those are the only four avenues over which you can go forward.
You have to take one of those four paths, or follow all of those paths in order to lead to any goal whatsoever.

So...let's see how these four ways of expression may be applied to the consideration of becoming a Christian.

A. Your Thinking

Romans 10:17 (NASB)

17 So faith *comes* from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.

If you are to be a Christian, if you are to become a Christian, you must express your self through your thoughts.

There is something for you limitedly and definitely to believe.

What?

So far as the Gospel is concerned, hearing is first.

Then when one hears, one thinks.

When one thinks, then one reasons.

When one reasons in a consistent way, then one understands.

So, I think we can see that to become a Christian, the first thing of importance is that we must believe.

1. What you believe is called your creed.

A person simply can't do anything without a creed.

Your creed is the basis of your life, and how you live out your life.

No one gets very far in life unless he or she is urged on by some mighty belief which has become a conviction that grips his or her heart, shapes their life, and determines their destiny.

Did you ever stop to think about your creed?

What must a man believe to become a Christian?

There are some essential requisites of a creed, for a person must have a creed of some sort.

a) Your creed needs to be simple.

There are not many of us who can think our way through many of the great problems of life.

We cannot think our way through the mazes of intricate things.

Jaroslav Pelikan has chronicled the history of Christian doctrine in a five-volume work on a scale no one has attempted in the twentieth century.

I'm wading myself through those five volumes.

But if I had to find my way through those five volumes before I

could become a Christian, I am afraid I would give up in despair and not even try.

Your creed needs to be something very plain and simple.

It should be available to all people, high and low, rich and poor, illiterate and intellectual.

b) Your creed needs to grow with you.

Do you not anticipate growing intellectually and spiritually?

You need to have a creed that can grow with you.

You need to have a creed that you can't outgrow.

And, to grow with you, Your creed needs to be flexible.

c) Your creed needs to have scriptural authorization.

When Handel was an old man of eighty-three, he witnessed one time in Moscow the rendition of his world-famous "Messiah" and after the rendition he was called to the platform and greeted with such applause that came from an audience stirred to its depths by that tremendous miracle of composition.

But he could not make the speech that they wanted him to make; indeed he could say nothing, so shaken was he by his sobbing, until at last he gathered himself together and, pointing upward, said, "It came from yonder."

Every good thing comes from the hand of God, and a Christian's creed must, like Christianity itself, have been given by God.

Your creed must have direct scriptural authorization.

It must be found in the New Testament

There are examples in the New Testament of people who became Christians.

They believed a certain thing, and acting on their belief, complied with the gospel, obeyed its commands, and the Lord added them to His church.

I don't want anything in my faith and worship that is not as old as the New Testament.

Therefore my creed needs to be revealed in the New Testament.

Any creed that commands your assent must have that mark.
It must have scriptural authorization.

Now, I think if you were to try to apply these tests to the formulated creeds of Christendom, that you would not find a single one that would answer a single one of your requirements.

These creeds are not simple, but complex, filled with all sorts of philosophy, filled with all sorts of doctrine that have no place whatever in a practical creed.

They are not growing creeds, for we know that we must needs come every now and then to make additions, subtractions and alterations.

They come from the minds of philosophers who attempt to standardize our thinking.

So, just what was the creed of these 3,000 who were added to the church by the Lord.

John 20:30-31 (CEV)

30 Jesus worked many other miracles for his disciples, and not all of them are written in this book. **31** But these are written so that you will put your faith in Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God. If you have faith in him, you will have true life.

Matthew 16:16 (CEV)

16 You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

Acts 16:31 (CEV)

31 Have faith in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved!

Romans 10:9-10 (CEV)

9 So you will be saved, if you honestly say, "Jesus is Lord," and if you believe with all your heart that God raised him from death. **10** God will accept you and save you, if you truly believe this and tell it to others.

The creed is of the living church of the living God is the living, the ever living Christ.

Christ is our creed.

The New Testament is our book of discipline.

Our creed is simple.

It only has one article of faith.

It is flexible.

It is heaven sent.

Matthew 16:17 (CEV)

17 Jesus told him: Simon, son of Jonah, ...You didn't discover this on your own. It was shown to you by my Father in heaven.

I think that is clear, is it not, that our creed has the authority of the New Testament behind it?

This creed, this divinely given creed is easily and simply stated as Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

It is the only universal creed, and the only creed upon which the unity of God's people can possibly be achieved.

As we find the story illuminated here in this book of Acts, men who became Christians confessed their faith in the living Christ.

What you think is vitally important.

But, then there is

B. Your Feeling

But man expresses himself also through his emotions as well as through his intellect.

One's emotions are infinitely more complex than one's thinking.

Emotions range so much more widely than the intellect.

What, then, should one feel?

I confess that I feel distressed when someone tells me they feel they are unworthy to be a Christian.

They feel so burdened down by what they thought and how they behaved in their past, that they now feel there is no hope.

But please hear this:

1 Timothy 1:15 (NASB)

15 It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost *of all*.

We must recognize the reality of sin, for sure.

And, as we stand before a holy and pure God, we need to be repulsed by sin.

Sin means disharmony, it means hurt, it means ruin, it nailed Jesus Christ to a tree of wood.

Sin is hateful, and to be abhorred.

We need to shudder at the power of sin, for behind sin is one who is determined to cause you to denounce your God.

Abhorre sin, and love righteousness.

Feel the love of God, that is reaching down to you.

Focus on singing

**My Jesus, I love Thee, I know Thou art mine;
For Thee all the follies of sin I resign;
My gracious Redeemer, my Savior art Thou;
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.**

**I love Thee because Thou hast first loved me,
And purchased my pardon on Calvary's tree;
I love Thee for wearing the thorns on Thy brow;
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.**

If you hate sin and love Jesus Christ, then you feel what we should feel in order to become Christians.

C. Your Decisions

If you would be a Christian, then you must express yourself in

decisions.

Decisions are matters of your will.

I admit I was highly influenced by Bill Glasser back in the 60's when I attended his seminars on "Reality Therapy."

The reality therapy approach to counseling and problem-solving focuses on the here-and-now actions of the client and the ability to create and choose a better future.

When he repackaged Reality Therapy as Choice Therapy, I immediately latched on to his new book.

Take an honest look at your life, and you will see no evidence that your children will have happier marriages; that you and they will get along better; or that they will do better in school or at work than you, your parents or your grandparents.

Dr. Glasser claims that, lacking good relationships, more and more people choose mental illness, psychosomatic disease, drug abuse, senseless violence and sex without any thought of a deep relationship.

If you would be a Christian, then you must express yourself in decisions.

We come to our greatness, not on the heights of intellect, nor on the heights of emotion, but on the mountain summits of will.

Shakespeare demonstrates Choice Therapy in **Julius Caesar**, Act 2, Scene 2:

Caesar knows the Senate is ready to assassinate him.

And, when Brutus greets him, he says:

Caesar, all hail! Good morrow, worthy Caesar.

I come to fetch you to the senate house

But when Caesar's friends try to dissuade him from going to the place where death awaited him, he asks,

"What shall I say; what reason shall I give if I go not?"

"Tell them that you cannot come," says one.

"Tell them that you dare not come," says another.

And, Caesar, says:

"To say I cannot come were false,
To say 'I dare' not, falser still.
Go tell them Caesar will not come."

"Will not come!"

We men and women fail, not because we do not see the right way, nor even in futile way aspire to walk therein; we fail because we do not will.

Will what?

Remember the story of the **Prodigal Son**.

It is the old, old story of those who leave "the Father's house."

Luke gives the parable in **Lk. 15:11-32**.

You know the story, for you have walked it step by step.

First sin, then the deepening plunge, **then the sorrow**, the disillusionment, the heart ache, the despair **and then — ah, wonderful, then — "I will arise and go to my Father, and I will say to Him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son; make me as one of thy hired servants.' "**

The hinge on which his life-door hung was the **"I will."**

"I will arise and go to my father!"

That is repentance.

We ordinarily talk about repentance as if it were embraced in the terms of emotion, but psychologically we are wholly mistaken.

Repentance is to be expressed only in the terms of will.

It is the mental soul-life turning from sin.

I read about a somewhat eccentric old preacher, who had listened to a big city preacher talk for an hour on "repentance," and he had

with his liberal theology rambled on and nobody in the audience knew what he was talking about.

When the old preacher finally was unwilling to restrain himself, he spoke out, "Sir, may I have two minutes, please?"

The big city preacher was so stunned that someone had interrupted him that he said "Yes."

The old man got out of his pew and came running down the aisle, saying, "I am going to hell, I am going to hell!"

When he got to the front pew he turned slowly around and walked back up the aisle triumphantly saying, "I am going to heaven, I am going to heaven."

Then he said, "That is repentance."

That is all there is to it.

When a person "turns," a person repents.

Repentance is not in being sorry about something; it is in the turning and in the **determined resolve** to say to him or herself: "I will be a slave of sin no longer."

D. Your Actions

The New Testament often uses the word "**repent.**"

And, we have just seen the biblical idea is seen easily in the word "**turning.**"

Now, I like the way the **God's Word** Translation consistently speaks of repentance.

For example, Jesus said

Luke 13:3 (GW)

³ But if you don't turn to God and change the way you think and act, then you, too, will all die.

"Think and act!"

We have talked about expressing ourselves through our thoughts, our feelings, and our decisions.

There is only one other way by which you may express yourself.
If you want to be a Christian, you must show your decision by your action.

In Jesus' parable about the Prodigal Son, the son made a decision.
"I will get up and go to my father"

He then acted upon that decision,
"So he got up and came to his father."

How may a person express him or herself in action?
What shall that person do to become a Christian?

There **is something you must do to** become a Christian.

First, you must declare yourself publicly for Jesus Christ.
Listen to our Lord:

Matthew 10:32-33 (NASB)

32 "Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. 33 "But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven.

He must confess the faith of his heart in his unseen Lord.
He must take his place with the ranks of those who battle for the Lord.

Listen to Paul!

Romans 10:9 (NASB)

9 if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved;

There is the deed to be done — the public proclamation of the private faith, the outer registration of one's inner love.

You believe in Jesus Christ?
Then openly declare that belief.

In the Christian life, there is no such thing as "Secret discipleship."
You have to come out of the closet.
Shame on him who is ashamed!
Condemnation is for him who by silence condemns himself.

**"Once to every man and nation,
comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood,
for the good or evil side."**

We must make "the good confession!"
That we must "do."

The Master has left another command which we must not neglect
or minimize:

Mark 16:15-16 (NASB)

15 And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the
gospel to all creation. **16** "He who has believed and has been
baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be
condemned.

Matthew 28:19-20 (NASB)

19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the
Holy Spirit, **20** teaching them to observe all that I commanded
you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

A great preacher, speaking to the multitude:

Acts 2:38 (NASB)

38 Peter *said* to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in
the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and
you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 6:2-4 (NASB)

2 How shall we who died to sin still live in it? **3** Or do you not
know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus

have been baptized into His death? ⁴ Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

Even Jesus of Nazareth, Himself, who knew no sin, who was tempted in all points as we are, and yet without sin, **YES**, our Lord Jesus, Himself, made a journey of more than 70 miles, from Nazareth of Galiles to the Jordan River, to be baptized by John in the Jordan.

Why?

When John protested,
Matthew 3:15 (NASB)

15 Jesus answering said to him, "Permit *it* at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."

And the Jordan was made sacred by the baptism of the Son of Man.

Now, I know that some folk have preconceptions about faith and baptism.

Perhaps they were sprinkled as a baby.

Perhaps they think all that is necessary is to have faith in Christ.

But, let me try to illustrate this.

Both faith and baptism are conditions for salvation, but faith is the means and baptism is the time.

Please take care: do not equate condition with means, and do not confuse means and time.

There are several illustrations that help us understand that the **MEANS** of bringing something about is not the same as the **TIME** when it happens.

Think about the simple process of getting light out of a lamp.

Here we can distinguish three things, all of which are "conditions."

First, the SOURCE of the light is the electric power that comes through the wiring of the house.

Second, the MEANS of transferring this power to the lamp is the insertion of the lamp's plug into a socket.

Third, the TIME when the light actually comes on is when you flip the switch on the wall (or on the lamp).

As applied to salvation, the SOURCE is grace; the MEANS is faith; and the TIME is baptism.

Another illustration is the happy occasion of eating lunch in a nearby restaurant.

The SOURCE of the food is the Cielto Linda down in the Albertson's Center.

The MEANS of transferring the food from the Cielto Linda to your stomach is the *gift card* some kind friend gave you for Christmas.

The TIME when the food fills your tummy is when you visit the restaurant and eat the meal.

It is quite obvious that you do not receive the food just because you have the gift card in your possession.

You have to take your gift card to the place where the food is served.

A similar illustration is actually seeing the Super Bowl live in Houston, TX, next Sunday!

You may have a ticket to the game in your hand.

The ticket is your MEANS for seeing the game, but you do not see it AS SOON AS you have the ticket.

You have to go the place where the game is played, at the TIME when it is played.

In these illustrations, the “**means**” transfers the desired effect (light, food, visual experience) into your life, but not AS SOON AS the means alone is present.

Even if the lamp is plugged in, the light does not come on until the switch is flipped.

Even if you have the gift card in your hand (free food!), you do not actually *have* the food until you go to the place where it is served.

The same is true of the Super Bowl ticket.

These are simply examples of our common distinction between a “necessary” condition and a “sufficient” condition.

Something can be the former without being the latter.

As applied to salvation, the point is that the phrase “**BY faith**” is simply NOT the same thing as “**AS SOON AS faith appears.**” The means and the time are not the same thing, and they do not necessarily occur simultaneously.

This is clearly seen in **Colossians 2**, where Paul says:

Colossians 2:12-13 (KJV)

¹² Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. ¹³ And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses;

In verse 13, Paul says the sinner is “**raised up,**” i.e., regenerated (see v. 13), “**through faith in the working of God**”; but this happens specifically “**in baptism.**”

This is what the text says!

Both faith and baptism are conditions for salvation, but not the same kind of condition.

Faith is the ***means by which*** we receive saving grace (“**by faith**”), while baptism is the ***time during which*** we receive it (“**in baptism**”).

The true follower of Christ will neither neglect nor minimize the sacred teaching of the Master.

I say to you men and women, you ought to confess your faith in Jesus Christ and you ought to be baptized into his name.

I ask you simply to put the emphasis where Jesus did.

And, did not God have Dr. Luke provide us the inspired Book of Acts that shows us over and over what we must do to be Christians?

God gives us eight examples of becoming Christians:

The 3,000 - Acts 2:47

The Samaritans - Acts 8:12

The Ethiopian Treasurer - Acts 8:38

Saul of Tarsus - Acts 9:1

Cornelius - Acts 10:41

Lydia - Acts 16:15

The Philippian Jailer Acts 16:33

The Corinthians - Acts 19:3

Every case of conversion, of someone becoming a Christian in the Book of Acts, shows they were immersed into Christ.

I am not interested in debating baptism.

I am not concerned with your philosophy or theology of the act of baptism.

But I am concerned that you follow the command of Jesus.

If you really want to be a Christian, you will not start an argument with Jesus over this most crucial matter.

Jesus couldn't make it any plainer:

John 14:15 (NASB)

15 "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.

What, then, is my conclusion?

I ask of you four things:

I ask you to believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God

I ask you to make a decision to forsake your sins and love your Saviour

I ask you to publicly confess with your lips the faith in your heart.

I ask you to submit to him and be buried with Christ in Baptism.

What's in it for you if you do these four things?

In reward for your faith, your change of thinking and behaving, your obedience, you have the assurance of God's Word that you will be granted remission of sins and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2:38 (GW)

38 Peter answered them, “All of you must turn to God and change the way you think and act, and each of you must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins will be forgiven. Then you will receive the Holy Spirit as a gift.

Prayer and Invitation

January 29 Lesson 9 Praise God with All Creation

Devotional Reading: Psalm 150

Background Scripture: Psalm 148

PSALM 148

1 Praise the LORD. Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights above. **2** Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his heavenly hosts. **3** Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars. **4** Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the skies. **5** Let them praise the name of the LORD, for at his command they were created, **6** and he established them for ever and ever—he issued a decree that will never pass away. **7** Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths, **8** lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding, **9** you mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars, **10** wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds, **11** kings of the earth and all nations, you princes and all rulers on earth, **12** young men and women, old men and children. **13** Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and the heavens. **14** And he has raised up for his people a horn, the praise of all his faithful servants, of Israel, the people close to his heart. Praise the LORD.

KEY VERSE

Let them praise the name of the LORD, for at his command they were created.—Psalm 148:5

Introduction

A. Compliments That Complement

How can we ensure that a compliment is well received? We do so (or at least have more of a chance of doing so) by offering the type of compliment the receiver appreciates most.

Social observers tell us that women and men are not the same in this regard. Women generally like compliments about *who they are*—words that affirm their personality, etc. Therefore, a compliment such as “You are so easy to talk to” is usually appreciated.

Men, on the other hand, prefer to be complimented for *what they do*—words that affirm their skills and accomplishments. A

compliment such as “You are so handy” can be counted on to stroke the male ego.

The psalms offer both kinds of praise to God, but he is not praised because of any ego need on his part. Praise of God is mainly for our benefit, since lifting our praise to him reminds us that we are not God. Our praise also reminds us of our dependence on him, that we are not self-sufficient. For these reasons and others, Psalm 148 invites us to join the rest of creation in praising God.

B. Lesson Background

The Lesson Background for lesson 6 introduced the psalms as a whole to be a collection of five books. When examining these five, one notices the predominance of lament in Books I and II. David wrote about three-quarters of their 72 psalms, and he had much to reflect on regarding the conduct of his life.

Moving beyond the problem of exile in Book III, we begin to notice more expressions of praise in Books IV and V. No matter what the problem, God is king (Psalms 96-99, in Book IV), and he will one day make all things right (Psalm 145, in Book V). These facts called for praise on the part of the psalmists.

Psalm 148, today’s text, is one of the five chapters known collectively as “the praise conclusion” to the book of Psalms as a whole. Each of the five (that is, Psalms 146-150) begins and ends with the phrase “Praise the Lord,” translated from the Hebrew word *hallelujah*. The five chapters of Psalms 146-150 offer different emphases in regard to praise that should be offered.

I. Praise from the Heavens

(Psalm 148:1-6)

A. Sources (vv. 1-4)

1. Praise the LORD. Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights above.

In a doubled expression, the psalmist makes clear who is to be praised: it is *the Lord*. He is the one who revealed himself to Moses as Yahweh, the great “I am” (Exodus 3:13-16).

Thinking back to discussions of parallelism in previous lessons, we see that feature here as well: the praise that is to come *from the*

heavens will be occurring *in the heights* as well. The nouns *heavens* and *heights* in this context both refer to God's dwelling place (see also Psalm 102:19). Thus, the psalm establishes the very presence of God as the appropriate place where praise is to begin. On the Hebrew word *hallelujah* that stands behind the opening phrases, see the Lesson Background. This word is found also in Revelation 19:1, 3, 4, 6. There it is transliterated (not translated) twice in moving from Hebrew to Greek to English.

2. Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his heavenly hosts.

The first heavenly entities that are commanded to praise the Lord are the supernatural beings known as *angels*. We may wonder if the word *angels* stands parallel with the word *hosts*, since the latter can refer to stars (example: 2 Kings 17:16) as well to angels (example: Psalm 103:20, 21).

Since (1) parallelism seems intended, given its use in this psalm's opening verse and (2) a distinct word for stars occurs within its own parallel in verse 3 (next), then (3) we conclude that the words *angels* and *hosts* are parallel here in verse 2 in expressing the same idea. Both words refer to the heavenly servants who are "ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation" (Hebrews 1:13, 14).

3. Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars.

Genesis 1:14-19 describes God's intent for *sun and moon* as he established on the fourth day of creation: they are "signs to mark sacred times, and days and years," "to give light on the earth," "to govern the day," and "to govern the night" (see also Jeremiah 31:35).

Genesis 1:16 further says, "He also made the stars," but does not state a specific function for them. But the fact that God knows all their names indicates their importance to him (Psalm 147:4; Isaiah 40:26).

As the revelation of Scripture progresses, we see developed the idea that the heavenly bodies serve as witnesses to the Creator (compare Psalm 19:1-6; etc.), and that is what we see in the verse before us. The fact that they continue functioning daily without fail

speaks to the faithfulness of the Creator (compare Psalm 89:36, 37; Jeremiah 33:20, 21). That's praise!

Sadly, we see the opposite in ancient and modern cultures where the heavenly bodies are themselves deemed worthy of receiving worship rather than obligated to give it. The Israelites were strictly forbidden from worshipping elements of creation (Deuteronomy 5:8, 9), with sun, moon, and stars receiving specific mention (4:15-19; 17:2-5). Israel's history is one of failure in this regard (see 2 Kings 17:16; 21:3; Jeremiah 8:2; Ezekiel 8:16; compare Jeremiah 7:18; 44:16-26; Zephaniah 1:4, 5; Acts 7:42).

4. Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the skies.

How to Say It

Deuteronomy Due-ter-ahn-uh-me.

Ezekiel Ee-zeek-ee-ul or Ee-zeek-yul.

hallelujah ha-leh-**loo**-yuh (*a* as in *map*).

Isaiah Eye-zay-uh.

Jeremiah Jair-uh-my-uh.

Yahweh (*Hebrew*) Yah-weh.

Zephaniah Zef-uh-nye-uh.

Ancient cultures are aware that that which is above the earth has a vertical aspect (compare Romans 10:6; Ephesians 4:8-10). Thus they speculate about the various levels regarding the dwelling places of their gods and deceased loved ones. The superlative *highest heavens* indicates the psalmist's desire for praise of God to emanate from the highest possible location! This exhortation therefore parallels that of Psalm 148:1, above.

What Do You Think?

How can appreciation of the various senses of the word heavens (2 Corinthians 12:2) deepen our reverence for God?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Concerning the abode of God

Concerning the solar system, galaxy, etc.

Concerning the earth's atmosphere

The psalmist's concept of *waters above the skies* seems to come from Genesis 1:6-8. There "a vault" is positioned in such a way as to divide "the water under vault from the water above it." If the latter refers to the rain that God sends upon the earth as called for (see Genesis 7:11; Deuteronomy 28:12; Isaiah 55:10; Jeremiah 14:22), then we have another location that is spatially "above" humanity that must praise the Lord.

B. Reasons (vv. 5, 6)

5. Let them praise the name of the LORD, for at his command they were created,

The small word *for* reveals the first of two reasons to *praise the name of the Lord*: it is because that which is to offer the praise has been *created* by the one who is to receive the praise.

In contrast with complicated pagan myths of creation, the presentation of the biblical account of creation in Genesis 1 is marvelously straightforward: God merely spoke the word and the universe came into being (compare Psalms 33:9, lesson 5). The simple phrase "God said," used numerous times in Genesis 1, indicates that the speaking was complete, perfect, and effective.

6. and he established them for ever and ever— he issued a decree that will never pass away.

The psalmist now offers the second reason to praise the Creator. This reason speaks to the enduring nature of the cosmos. We see parallelism once again, with *established them for ever and ever* as saying about the same thing as *issued a decree that will never pass away*. Since those last three words sound a bit strange to modern ears, we can note that other occurrences of the underlying Hebrew refer to something that is not violated or transgressed (examples: Numbers 20:17-20; Job 14:5).

What we see here is the utter sovereignty of God. What God has put into motion by fiat in speaking commands will continue to be sustained by him the same way. When someone asks why, a common response is that it simply was and is God's will. That's

true enough, of course, but not as helpful as it could be. Better is to view God's will manifested in three ways.

First is God's *purposive will*, referring to actions he takes by his own decision and initiative; these are things he causes. The second is God's *prescriptive will*, referring to things that he desires to happen, but grants human freedom to do otherwise. An example is to say that God's will is for everyone to be saved, even though not all shall be. The third is God's *permissive will*, referring to things he does not want to happen, but grants human freedom otherwise. The premier example here is, of course, sin.

To create and sustain are actions of God's purposive will. His purpose in creation is that humans may glorify him and enjoy his goodness. The praise called for in this psalm comes under the umbrella of God's prescriptive will. A thunderous chorus of praise for the Creator should be offered in the heavenly realm. The same should come from the earth, but it is our choice to offer it or not.

II. Praise from the Earth

(Psalm 148:7-12)

A. Nonhuman Elements (vv. 7-10)

7. Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths,

The "them" of the previous verse refers only to entities in and of the heavens mentioned to that point in this psalm. The author is not about to stop there!

The praise to come "from the heavens" (v. 1) moved from high to low in a spatial sense. The psalmist now starts from the opposite direction as he begins to urge praise *from the earth*, starting with the depths of the sea.

The *great sea creatures* are those who live in the *ocean depths*. These images in the verse before us seem to refer to "the deep" of Genesis 1:2 and to its residents of "great creatures" as recorded in Genesis 1:20, 21. Indeed, the word translated *great sea creatures* in the verse before us is the same word translated "monster" in Job 7:12 and Ezekiel 32:2. Another translation is "snake" in Exodus 7:9, 10, 12. The same word is found in Isaiah 27:1, translated "gliding serpent," where parallelism may indicate its identity as

that of Leviathan (see discussion in lesson 8). The very existence of such creatures and their abode testifies to their Creator!

8. lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding,

Meteorological phenomena is next (compare Psalm 147:16-18).

Lightning and hail go together, both in experience and Scripture (Exodus 9:24; Psalm 105:32; Isaiah 30:30).

Snow is not common in Israel except at higher elevations. The Hebrew behind *clouds* is rendered “smoke” in Genesis 19:28 and Psalm 119:83, but in this context it may refer to a thick fog or mist. The latter seems to be better for understanding its relationship with snow. The *stormy winds* will *do his bidding*, as the others do, in their function as a general force of nature. But God also reserves his right to use such forces to intervene personally at times; Job 38:22-30 is particularly insightful in this regard.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways to counsel a person who blames “the randomness of the world” for his or her own problems?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

If the person accepts the authority of the Bible

If the person does not accept the authority of the Bible

ULTIMATE CLIMATE CHANGE

Debates about climate change (“global warming”) just don’t seem to get resolved! Discussions go on for years as one side blames humans for climate changes, while the other either denies human culpability or denies that change is even occurring. The talk itself can cause the climate in a room to become quite “heated” at times! Regardless of which side is right, Christians know that the ultimate change in climate will happen when “the elements” are “destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it ... be laid bare” (2 Peter 3:10). Now *that’s* global warming!

God granted humans dominion over the earth he created (Genesis 1:28), so we should sense a responsibility to not defile it.

Honorable, sincere people may disagree on the extent to which our

actions affect our planet’s physical environment, if at all, but the effects of our actions and inactions on the world’s spiritual environment should never be in doubt. Some are headed to a place where the “warming” never ceases (Revelation 20:15). We must warn them now!—C. R. B.

9. you mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars,

Given the parallelism seen so far, one might expect “mountains and valleys” instead of the text’s *mountains and all hills*. But in order to have mountains and hills, there must be valleys and lowlands presupposed.

A literary device known as *merism* is seen in the phrasing *fruit trees and all cedars*. Merism involves two extremes that indicate inclusion of everything in between. The two extremes here are those of cultivated and uncultivated trees. This indicates that the psalmist intends the reader to think not only of the specific trees mentioned, but also of all other trees. The natural beauty of majestic mountains, rolling hills, and trees of every kind serves to praise their Creator by being what they are.

What Do You Think?

What is your reaction to the claim “The more you learn about creation, the more you learn about the Creator”?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Why you agree with it

Why you disagree with it

Why you are uncertain about it

10. wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds,

Signifying untamed and domesticated animals respectively, the phrases *wild animals* and *all cattle* form another merism. The same goes for *small creatures* and *flying birds*. These praise their Creator by performing all kinds of activities that add beauty, wonder, and variety to the land and sky.

B. Human Spectrum (vv. 11, 12)

11. kings of the earth and all nations, you princes and all rulers

on earth,

In calling out praise “from the earth” (v. 7), the psalmist has moved from the deep oceans to forces of the atmosphere, to the land itself with its foliage, to all animal forms of land and sky, to those created in the image of God himself: human beings. Thus the psalm as a whole is coming full circle, from rational heavenly beings praising the Creator to rational earthly beings doing the same.

From those in highest positions to those in , both average citizen and those in authority over them must recognize the complete sovereignty of their Creator (see Psalm 2:1, 2, 10-12).

12. young men and women, old men and children.

Again we see merism, as extremes of age indicate that all humanity is in view. Mention of both sexes cements the all-inclusiveness the psalmist intends.

What Do You Think?

What are some appropriate ways for God’s image-bearers to witness to that fact in various settings?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In a secular work environment

While participating in sporting events

While watching sporting events

While in the company of other Christians

Other

NONES AND DONES

Western culture was once nominally Christian, but that is no longer the case. The majorities in Western countries who had at least a passing acquaintance with the church and the Christian faith are now the minority.

These days we are hearing about the *Nones*, the one-in-five Americans who have no religious affiliation of any kind. The figure is one-in-three among those under 30. If that weren’t sad enough, the latest grouping of the irreligious to emerge in survey is the *Dones*. These are people who were church members at one time, but have decided they want no more of organized religion.

The emergence of the *Nones* and *Dones* has some observers predicting the death of the church as we know it. Without doubt, Western culture as a whole is not praising God in numbers as great as in times past. Even so, God's creation continues to do so. How can the heavens not declare the glory of God? How can the skies not proclaim the work of his hands? (Psalm 19:1). The call of the Bible to us all—whether young, old, or anywhere in between—is to recognize God as God, thereby praising him with lips and lives. How can the church get this message to the world while it is not too late to do so?—C. R. B.

III. Praise from God's Chosen

(Psalm 148:13, 14)

A. Excellence of Name (v. 13)

13. Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and the heavens.

The phrase *let them praise the name of the Lord* as used in verse 5a summarizes the call for praise “from the heavens” (vv. 1-6). Now the phrase is repeated to summarize the call for praise “from the earth” (vv. 7-12).

All the praise in this psalm has been directed toward the Lord, *for his name alone is exalted*. When people try to make a name for themselves, they fail (see Genesis 11:1-9). When God makes a name for a person, it sticks (see 1 Chronicles 17:8). In both cases, the deciding factor is God, given the enduring excellence of his own name.

What Do You Think?

If an average Christian accepted the challenge to exhibit praise as a lifestyle, what should others see in him or her? Why?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In attitudes and behaviors adopted

In attitudes and behaviors abandoned

In attitudes and behaviors unchanged

B. People of Israel (v. 14)

14. And he has raised up for his people a horn, the praise of all his faithful servants, of Israel, the people close to his heart. Praise the LORD.

Horn refers to power (see 1 Samuel 2:1, 10; Psalms 18:2; 75:10; 112:9; 132:17; etc.). It is used here to indicate God's bestowal of dignity and strength to his people having returned from exile. The Creator of the universe is also the God *of Israel, the people close to his heart*.

What a powerful twist with which to end this psalm! When we ponder God's great creation, we naturally think of his transcendence, his "out there-ness." But after 13 verses of viewing God in such a way, the psalmist concludes by focusing on God's immanence, his "right here-ness"!

Conclusion

A. The Amazing Creator

How unbelievers can study the cosmos and not see the Creator behind it is amazing. The sad tendency instead is to rejoice and celebrate human achievement in unlocking the mysteries of the universe. That is otherwise known as human arrogance, or pride—a form of idolatry. The price of arrogance can be quite high, as at least one ancient king found out the hard way (Daniel 4).

Psalm 148 teaches a better way: there is a Creator of the universe, and he is worthy of praise by *all*, a word occurring 10 times in the psalm's 14 verses. The Creator has revealed himself in both creation (general revelation) and Scripture (special revelation).

Jesus Christ is God's ultimate revealing of himself (John 1:1-14; 14:9; Hebrews 1:1-4).

How sad when the only part of creation that does not acknowledge its Creator is the part created in the image of God! How startling to resist Jesus, the one who "chose us in him before the creation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4), the one by whom "all things were created; things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible" (Colossians 1:16)!

Before we begin an evangelistic task of Matthew 28:19, 20, we do well to ponder what unbelievers see in us. Do they see lives lived

“to the glory and praise of God” (Philippians 1:11)? Or do they see lives lived in praise of self? Only a people near to God can convince a fallen world that it needs to repent as it returns to its Creator, Jesus Christ. Our task to praise is also our witness.

B. Prayer

O God, Creator of Heaven and earth, we praise your name above all names. We worship not the sun but the Son, in whom all things were created and by whom we are new creations. May we by your strength live our very lives in praise of these facts. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

All creation praises its Creator.
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