

# Why Follow Jesus? What Makes Him Special?

## Basic Christianity: Why Follow Jesus?

Today the word "Christianity" is ambiguous. It conjures up in our minds a variety of thoughts and memories, different for each person. For some, it brings to mind certain historical events, such as the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, or the Salem Witch trials. Others may think of church, worshiping God, or going to Heaven. For still others, it may be a reminder of the recent scandals among television evangelists. However it is that we perceive Christianity, our perceptions are based on our experience and knowledge of it. For many people, this experience may include hearing about it through the media (e.g., TV, newspapers), attending church, talking with friends and relatives, or observing people who call themselves "Christians". Many people do not have any knowledge about Christianity from reading the Bible. Since this is considered by most everyone to be important to Christianity, gaining an understanding of what it says is helpful in forming a more complete view of Christianity. It is therefore my intention to present and discuss various topics that may not be known other than through the Bible.

I want to emphasize that for someone to better understand Christianity through a knowledge of the Bible, it does not matter whether or not that person considers the Bible to be true. Indeed, just as in gaining an understanding of any religion, it is only important to understand that its followers take their holy books to be true, so in looking at Christianity, its followers believe the Bible to be the inspired message of God to mankind. Thus, the topics presented are meant to be informative, and not persuasive, in nature. That is, they only discuss what the Bible says, without attempting to persuade one to believe that the Bible is true.

## The Basic Message of the Bible

"Many people visualize a God who sits comfortably on a distant throne, remote, aloof, uninterested, and indifferent to the needs of mortals, until, it may be they can badger him into taking action on their behalf."<sup>1</sup>

This is certainly not the God that the Bible portrays. This section will discuss the basic message of the Bible, and obviously God is a part of this basic message. Man is the other essential element that the Bible continually mentions. (Note that man here is the mankind, including both men and women). However, the Bible is not simply about man and God, but it is about the relationship between man and God. Presented very simply is the Bible's story about this relationship.

### In the Beginning ...

In the beginning, the Bible speaks of a perfect God creating everything. He created man, and man was created in God's own image (Gen. 1:27). Man was like God in that he was created free from defect. Thus, man and God enjoyed perfect relationship.

## **All Have Turned Away**

Because man was in the image of God, he had a will, and thus the freedom to choose. Man, in his free will, has chosen to go his own way, as opposed to God's way. The Bible says that every person has done this. "We all like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way," (Isaiah 53:6). This is similar to a child running away from home, an analogy made in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). Imagine a three-year-old child telling his parents that he's decided to leave home and find his own way in life. Although powerless to survive without his parents, he still chooses to leave. Similarly, the Bible says that man cannot really do anything without God, yet he has chosen to go his own way instead of God's.

## **Sin**

The term the Bible uses for choosing one's own way over God's is sin. This is what separates man from God; "your sins have hidden his face from you so that he will not hear" (Isaiah 59:2). Romans 6:23 says that "the wages of sin is death." Man is spiritually separated from God and receives death as a result of his sin.

Like a branch separated from the vine (John 15:5), man may appear alive for a while, but in the real, meaningful sense, he is dead because he has separated himself from the life source.

## **What Can Man Do to Get Back to God?**

Because man has broken the perfect relationship with his perfect God, he is spiritually dead and separated from God. How can man save himself from this grave situation? Many people who feel separated from God try to restore this relationship by doing things, such as participating in religious activities, living a good life, giving to charity or living by certain moral standards. However, the Bible says that it is impossible for man to save himself (Matthew 19:25-26). There are no good things that man can do that can restore his relationship with God (Ephesians 2:8,9, Titus 3:5). Left up to himself, man is eternally separated from God.

## **What Does God Do?**

God however, wants to restore man's perfect relationship to Him. According to 1 Timothy 2:4, God wants all men to be saved and Ezekiel 33:11 says that God has no pleasure in the death of those who turn from Him. So what does God do?

In order to enjoy a perfect relationship with God, man must first be made perfect, because God is perfect (Matthew 5:48). But man has already been soiled by imperfection because of his decision to separate himself from God. God needs to rid man of his sin before the relationship can be restored.

The Bible says that God became man (John 1:14) and lived a life without sin, although he was tempted in every way like man is (Hebrews 4:15). His name was Jesus. Although Jesus was the only man to never sin and separate himself from God, he nonetheless voluntarily gave up his life:

"The reason Father loves me is that I lay down my life only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again." (John 10:17-18).

He allowed himself to be crucified and even took on the sins of all the world so that the relationship between God and man could be restored:

"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

"For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God." (1 Peter 3:18)

So God made a way for men to be perfect before Him. Jesus paid sin's penalty of death and separation for men so that men would not have to.

### **Receiving God's Gift**

So does the Bible say that all men have been restored to God because of what Jesus has done? No. Romans 6:23 says that "the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." It is as if a man on a street corner was offering ten dollar bills. In order to become ten dollars richer, a person must take the money. There is an act of receiving the gift involved. In the same way, the Bible speaks of receiving God's gift of eternal life (i.e., eternity with God). The following verses explain how this is done:

"Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God - children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." (John 1:12-13)

"... if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved." (Romans 10:9-10)

Obviously, believing in Jesus is essential to receive God's gift. But believing here means more than just intellectually forming a belief system. When the Bible says "believe in your heart", it suggests a deeper kind of belief, the kind that would affect the way someone lives. It is an act of trusting Jesus to do what he said he would do. Jesus says,

"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." (Revelation 3:20)

Thus, all man has to do is ask, and Christ will come into his life.

Note

*John R.W. Stott, Basic Christianity, Inter-Varsity Press, Illinois, 1971, p. 11*