

“The God who showed us the way back to Him”. (5)

A 98-year-old man and a 95 year old woman went to a lawyer to talk about a legal separation. ‘How long have you been married?’ he asked. ‘75 rough and rocky years,’ they said. ‘Then, why have you waited so long to file for a separation?’ They replied, ‘We had to wait for the kids to die!’

We all know when a couple decide to separate it will have an impact on so many other people around them. And as Christians we also know that when it comes to sin, our sin will separate us from God and have a devastating effect on our own lives. And we’ve all seen those diagrams where man is on one side and God is on the other and in-between there is this great gulf.

We read about it in the story Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man says to Abraham in **Luke 16:26** “between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.”

And so, there is this great gulf between mankind and God, but we need to understand that this gulf between mankind and God wasn’t God’s idea. **Isaiah 59:2** “Your iniquities have separated you from your God”. This whole gulf between mankind and God is mankind’s own doing because remember God created us out of a heart of love.

Psalm 136:5-9 “Who by his understanding made the heavens, His love endures forever. Who spread out the earth upon the waters, His love endures forever. Who made the great lights—His love endures forever. The sun to govern the day, His love endures forever. The moon and stars to govern the night; His love endures forever.”

You see loved ones, God loves us and He didn’t create anyone for the purpose of torturing them, either in this life or the afterlife. The awful mess the world is in is mankind’s own fault, it’s not God’s. And when we rejected His will for our and betrayed the trust He placed in us, God didn’t wash His hands with us. He pursued us throughout the ages, teaching us, pleading with us, working with us in people like Noah, Abraham, and the nation of Israel.

And finally, like we saw in our last lesson, God came to planet Earth and showed Himself in the One we know as Jesus of Nazareth. The life He lived and the death He died, for all of us, tells us once and for all time how God feels about us. **So just exactly what do we turn to when we turn to God?**

Well first and foremost, we turn to a personal God. We don’t turn to a force or a power, we turn to a Person. We turn to someone who fulfills our need for friendship and companionship. The apostle Paul when he was writing to the Christians in Rome, said this about God in **Romans 1:8** “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you.” **Do you see the kind of relationship Paul had with God?** He is ‘my God’ Paul says.

There is a group of people who worship the Earth, they worship nature and the resources of the Earth from what they call, ‘Mother Nature.’ Now loved ones, ‘Mother Nature’ can’t fill our emptiness and a force or a power just leaves us lonely and longing. Yes, in our better moments we may look for a quiet life and things going our way, but ultimately, we are looking for a Friend and Someone to trust.

That is the kind of personal relationship everyone can have with God. We find these things and more in a personal God, the Father of Jesus Christ. **John 17:3** “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”

Genesis 2:18 “The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” And so, we turn to God who is the Creator of relationships, who created us for relationships because He wants to be our Friend and He wants to be that Person we can trust.

But what else to we turn to when we turn to God? We turn to forgiveness which we have to remember is a gift. It’s a gift that persons give to each other and a personal God gives the gift of forgiveness to personal sinners. Now let’s be honest we sin, even as Christians we sin, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally. **1 John 1:8** “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”

So, we all sin but the good news is that forgiveness is also an ongoing thing. **1 John 1:9** “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”. You see loved ones, forgiveness all depends on our living in a relationship with Christ because it’s there, and only there, can forgiveness be found in Christ.

Paul says in Ephesians 1:7 “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.”

As John Wesley rode across Hounslow Heath late one night, singing a favourite hymn, he was startled by a fierce voice shouting, ‘Halt,’ while a firm hand seized the horse’s bridle. Then the man demanded, ‘Your money or your life.’ Wesley obediently emptied his pockets of the few coins they contained and invited the robber to examine his saddlebags which were filled with books. Disappointed at the result, the robber was turning away when evangelist cried, ‘Stop! I have something more to give you.’ The robber, wondering at this strange call, turned back. Then Wesley, bending down toward him, said in solemn tones, ‘My friend, you may live to regret this sort of a life in which you are engaged. If you ever do, I beseech you to remember this, ‘The blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, cleanseth us from all sin.’”

The robber hurried silently away, and the man of God rode along, praying in his heart that the word spoken might be fixed in the robber’s conscience. Years later, at the close of a Sunday evening service, the people streamed from the large building with many lingering around the doors to see the aged preacher, who was John Wesley. A stranger stepped forward and earnestly begged to speak with Mr. Wesley. What a surprise to find that this was the robber of Hounslow Heath, now a well-to-do tradesman in the city, but better still, a child of God! The words spoken that night long ago had been used of God in his conversion. Raising the hand of John Wesley to his lips, he affectionately kissed it and said in tones of deep emotion, ‘To you, dear sir, I owe it all.’ Wesley replied softly, ‘Nay, nay, my friend, not to me, but to the precious blood of Christ which cleanseth us from all sin.’

And so, we turn to a personal God, we turn to forgiveness and we also turn to life. Jesus didn’t come just to convict us of our trespasses, He came to convict us of our possibilities. And He urges each of us to look less at what we’re running from and more at what we’re running to. Philippians 3:13+14 “Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

Do we understand what Paul is trying to say? He’s telling us that in Christ Jesus, the stress is not on what we have been and are at the moment but what we can be and will be with His help. And when we read our Bibles, over and over again, Christ doesn’t focus so much on the things we have to give up, He focuses on the things which we can gain.

Look at Abraham, God says in Him in Genesis 12:1 “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.” And what happened to Abraham? Genesis 12:2+3 “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” Abraham gives up his family and becomes father to millions.

Look at Moses, Hebrews 11:26 “He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.” Moses gives up the riches of Egypt and becomes one of the world’s greatest liberators.

We looked at Paul earlier, Philippians 3:4-7 “Though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.” Paul gives up his prized possessions and becomes Christ’s glorious ambassador.

Thinking of the fullness and duration of this wonderful life, W. B. Hinson, a great preacher of a past generation, spoke from his own experience just before he died. He said, ‘He remembers a year ago when a doctor told him, he had an illness from which he won’t recover.’ He walked out to where he lived 5 miles from Portland, Oregon, and he looked across at that mountain that he loved. He looked at the river in which he rejoiced, and he looked at the stately trees that are always God’s own poetry to his soul.

Then in the evening he looked up into the great sky where God was lighting His lamps, and he said, ‘I may not see you many more times, but Mountain, I shall be alive when you are gone; and River, I shall be alive when you cease running toward the sea; and Stars, I shall be alive when you have fallen from your sockets in the great down pulling of the material universe!’

Can't we see what God is trying to tell us over and over again? God is not a cheat, He doesn't cheat us but He gives us life, life to the full. **John 10:10** "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." All of the experiences of life become useful and touched with glory, even the suffering and defeats because God is with man.

Isaiah 43:1-3 "But now, this is what the LORD says—he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour".

Loved ones, there's a not a situation you have gone through or will go through where God can't be with you. Remember the passage we looked at last time, **Matthew 1:23** "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). You see loved ones, when mankind turns to God, they turn to hope in the face of hardship, peace in the face of turmoil, joy in the face of suffering and a deep sense of mission in the face of a sad world where millions waste their precious lives away. Jesus says, "I have not only come that they may have life, but I've come to they can experience life to the full."

Now how did people in the New Testament turn to God? Well, they came recognising their sinfulness, they came recognising they couldn't save themselves. And so, what they did was turned in trusting repentance and they were baptised into Christ. Now for the life of me I can't understand why anyone would have a problem simply doing what the Scriptures teach us to do throughout the New Testament.

On the Day of Pentecost after Peter preached the first Gospel message, some of those listening, realised their own sinfulness and realised they couldn't save themselves. **Acts 2:37+38** "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 baptised every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

And what did the people do in response? **Acts 2:41** "Those who accepted his message were baptised and about three thousand were added to their number that day".

A little later in the **Book of Acts** the Philippian jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked in, **Acts 16:29-33** "Men, 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 baptised."

The apostle Paul himself speaking about how he turned to God says in **Acts 22:7+8** "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." In **Acts 22:10** he asked the question, "what shall I do, Lord?" "Get up,' the Lord said, 'and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.'

And what happened when he reached Damascus? Ananias says to him in **Acts 22:16** "And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name."

You see loved ones, we don't come to God and tell God how things should be done in order for us to turn to Him. We should be coming to Him and asking, 'Lord, what do You want me to do, in order for me to turn to You.' Listen, the world teaches us that there are a hundred different ways to be saved and to receive forgiveness but God says there is only one way. And I pray that the religious world would stop playing games with God and with their souls.

There are people out there who try to argue that baptism isn't important for salvation. There are people out there who will argue that because they were sprinkled as a child then you're saved and God will always forgive you. Well loved ones, they can argue all day long, but they can't argue with God, because over and over again we see examples of people being saved and receiving the forgiveness of their sins at their baptism.

Matthew 28:19 "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

You see when a believing person is immersed **into** the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. They are actually being baptised **into** a relation with the Godhead. That personal relationship we spoke about earlier, that personal relationship with God, that relationship where we find life to the full, that relationship where forgiveness is found.

But why, in the New Testament, did God link forgiveness with baptism? Well simply because baptism was the sinner's confession of faith in Jesus Christ. Remember what Paul said was of first importance in 1 Corinthians 15? 1 Corinthians 15:3+4 "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."

What Paul preached as of 'first importance' was the saving work of God in Christ, the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. When people who knew themselves to be lost in sin wanted to turn to God on the basis of the redeeming work of Jesus Christ, they were called to confess their personal faith in the crucified and risen Lord.

And how did they confess their personal faith in Jesus? Romans 10:9+10 "If you declare 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 profess your faith and are saved."

Romans 6:3+4 "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."

Colossians 2:12 "Having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead."

People in the New Testament confessed their personal faith in Jesus by being buried with Him and being raised with Him. That's how people turned to God in the New Testament because that's what people in the New Testament were commanded to do. And so, if that is what the people of the New Testament were to do to demonstrate their turning to God, why should it be any different today? Acts 4:12 "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

In Alex Haley's book, *Roots*, he tells about the 'eight day' ceremony in which a West African baby is given its name. The name is both a gift and a challenge. It is hoped that the child will take into its own life the positive qualities that the name implies. The ceremony is carried out before all the village.

Haley writes, 'Omoró lifted up the infant and as all watched, whispered three times into his son's ear the name he had chosen for him. It was the first time the name had ever been spoken as this child's name, for Omoró's people felt that each human being should be the first to know who he was.'

Loved ones, this is exactly like baptism because it's at our baptism we get to truly know who we are, and Whose we are. When people are baptised, they take the Name of Jesus Christ on them. And as we have just read there is only one Name under heaven that can save and people who are baptised embrace that Name.

It's tempting in our day and age to dismiss baptism as of little importance or as something which 'should' be done but if it isn't, then it doesn't really matter much. But like I said earlier, people can argue all day long about the subject, but whatever else is true, the New Testament doesn't speak of it in that way. What people need to ask themselves is simply this question.

When the New Testament speaks of baptism, what does it say about baptism? Does the New Testament link it with sins being washed away? Does the New Testament associate it with forgiveness of sins? Does the New Testament associate it with receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit? Does the New Testament say we're baptised 'into Christ and put on Christ'? In the New Testament baptism was the way sinners placed their trust in the crucified and risen Lord and in doing that they received free and full forgiveness.

There was a minister who kept boring his congregation with sermon after sermon about baptism. Finally, church leaders told him to preach on another subject the following Sunday. They chose the subject of pills. Certainly, they felt, there could be no connection between pills and baptism.

So, the next Sunday the minister began, ‘There are big pills and little, also bitter pills and sweet pills, cheap pills and expensive pills. Another pill is the ‘gos-pill’ and that brings me to my real subject, which is baptism.’

You see loved ones we can’t proclaim the Gospel in its fullness if we leave out the topic of baptism. Jesus died, was buried and rose again and He simply commands that anyone who want to turn to Him do the same thing spiritually speaking. 1 Peter 3:20+21 “God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

Do you want to have a personal relationship with God so you can call Him, ‘your God’? Do you want to be forgiven for every sin you’ve ever committed against Him and your fellow man? Do you recognise your own sinfulness and understand you can’t save yourself? Peter says that baptism saves you and just like Jesus was raised from the dead, you can be raised from dead, spiritually speaking.

Let me finish by letting Lewis E Jones ask the questions.

‘Would you be free from the burden of sin? Would you o’er evil a victory win? Would you be free from your passion and pride? Would you be whiter, much whiter than snow? Would you do service for Jesus your King? Would you live daily His praises to sing?’

And in the chorus in-between all those questions lays the answer. There is pow’r, pow’r, wonder-working pow’r. In the blood of the Lamb. In the precious blood of the Lamb.’