

Are you a believer?

Do you know how to avoid death and live for ever?

These two questions are linked one to the other.

Acts 16:31 [NIV] *“Believe in the Lord Jesus and you shall be saved [from death]”.*

What are we to believe about the Lord Jesus Christ?

Romans 10:9 [NIV] *“That 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.”*

Confess Jesus Christ is Lord ! What does this involve ?

The Greek word translated “Lord” is “*kurios*” meaning supreme in authority – a controller or master.

If we confess this it makes Jesus Christ our Master and we are His slave, and a slave obeys his master!

But more – believe that Jesus died [was crucified] and was then raised from the dead, so we have a living master to obey!

Jesus Christ added to how we should accept Him or believe Him to be.

John 13:13-15 [NIV] *“You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord’, and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.”*

Jesus said we are to look on Him as our Teacher and follow the example He gave us.

What does this mean?

It means we are to become His disciples, people who learn from their teacher but also follow the example of their teacher in their own lives.

The men and women who did this when Jesus Christ was on earth were so like their teacher Jesus the Christ that people began to call them “*little Christs*” Christians.

Acts 11:26 [NIV] *“The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.”*

Now we know how to avoid death and live for ever – be saved – but the question remains!

How do we become a Christian ?

The simple answer to this is found in Romans Chapter Six. We die ! !

But before we have the chance to do this, something else has to happen.

John 6:44 [NIV] *“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.”*

We cannot start the process of becoming a Christian until God the Father takes the initiative.

John 15:16 [NIV] *“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.”*

We cannot choose to become a Christian, the initiative is with Christ. He chooses us.

How do we know if and when we are chosen by Christ [God] to become like Him?

An example of this happening is recorded in **Acts 2:36** [NIV] *“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”*

This crowd of people who had been attracted at this time by a spectacular first giving of the Holy Spirit, with power, to the New Testament Church.

Acts 2:1-3 [NIV] *“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.”*

They were then confronted with the fact they had crucified their looked for Saviour [Messiah or Christ]. Their reaction was anguish.

Acts 2:37-38 [NIV] *“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 for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’”*

They were to repent [change direction] and be baptised into name of Christ to be forgiven for what had caused Christ to die, their sins.

God’s first act, his initiative, is to confront us with our sins and their consequences.

Romans 3:23 [NIV] *“...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...”*

All of us have sinned.

Romans 6:23 [NIV] *“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

And have earned death.

What is this sin which has earned us all death?

1 John 3:4 [NIV] *“Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness.”*

Sin is lawlessness – being without law – disobedient to or uncontrolled by law – where law is non-existent or inoperative.

What law in particular was John referring to?

Matthew 22:35-40 [NIV] *“One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law? Jesus replied: **Love the Lord your God** with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: **Love your neighbour as yourself.** All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”*

If we are without love for God or love for our neighbour then we are lawless, we have sinned and can only look forward to earning death, eternal death.

We can now see how true it is that we have all sinned.

No-one can ever honestly say that we have loved God [who perhaps we don't even know anything about] or our neighbour perfectly.

Luke 10:29-37 [NIV] *“But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, And who is my neighbour? In reply Jesus said: A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. Look after him, he said, and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have. Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers? The expert in the law replied, The one who had mercy on him. Jesus told him, Go and do likewise.”*

This tells us that anyone who we meet that is in need of help is our neighbour.

Where are we now?

We acknowledge we are sinners. We realise that we ourselves can only earn death.

How then can we be saved from this death?

Romans 3:23 [NIV] *“...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ...”*

All have sinned but let us read on for the solution to this, for this is the Good News that God's Word talks about.

Romans 3:24-26 [NIV] *“...and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished — he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”*

Here are some words that need explaining for us to appreciate the solution to our death penalty that is stated in this scripture.

“Justified” – I like the simple way of saying this that explains its meaning, *“Just-as-if”* we had never sinned.

“Freely” – without cost to us.

“Grace” – God's gracious nature offers Jesus Christ His Son as a *“love gift”* to us, an expression of His Love for us.

“Redemption” – a word that means we have had the cost of our guilty crime paid for by another.

“Atonement” – when we accept this sacrificial gift of Christ this will make us *“at-one-ment”* – at one with God.

“Demonstrate His Justice” – God from the very beginning knew how He was going to solve the future problem of man’s sinful nature, so to be seen as a just being did not apply the eternal death penalty on all who sinned without the knowledge of the salvation available through Jesus Christ.

This shows God’s part of the covenant [agreement] He wants to make with us so that we can be *“at-one”* with Him.

What is our part in this covenant?

Romans 6:1 [NIV] *“What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?”*

Do we just go on with our way of life of lawlessness?

Romans 6:2 [NIV] *“By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?”*

No! We die to sin.

How do we do this?

We die symbolically by being baptised.

Romans 6:3-5 [NIV] *“Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.”*

Baptism is likened here to being buried in a grave, and if we were held under the water of baptism long enough it would become our grave!

But in the same way as we believe Christ was resurrected from the grave we also are resurrected from our watery grave.

We are following the example, as a disciple, of our teacher Jesus Christ.

Where are we now?

We acknowledge we are sinners.

We accepted Christ’s death in our stead, not being able to atone for our own sins,

We symbolically died in the water of baptism and were resurrected like Christ to a new life.

How do we continue to live in this new life, this Christian [little Christs] life?

We continue to disciple Christ, listen to and respond to Christ’s Words and example.

Through living such a life we become believers, those who live by faith [belief in God].

2 Peter 3:18 [NIV] *“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.”*

A command to focus on Christ in our life in order to mature.

1 Peter 2:21 [NIV] *“To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.”*

Following our Master Jesus Christ will involve suffering and trials, tests of our faith [belief].

2 Timothy 3:12 [NIV] *“In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ...”*

The Christian life will not be a “*bed of roses*”.

John 16:1-24 [NIV] *“All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. They will **put you out of the synagogue**; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who **kills you** will think he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you. I did not tell you this at first because I was with you. Now I am going to him who sent me, yet none of you asks me, Where are you going? Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief. But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgement: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgement, because the prince of this world now stands condemned. I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you. In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me. Some of his disciples said to one another, What does he mean by saying, In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me, and Because I am going to the Father? They kept asking, What does he mean by ‘a little while’? We don’t understand what he is saying. Jesus saw that they wanted to ask him about this, so he said to them, Are you asking one another what I meant when I said, ‘In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me’? I tell you the truth, **you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices**. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.”*

Christ himself warned us that following Him, becoming His disciple would attract hatred, ridicule and persecution, as His lifestyle did on earth.

I once heard of a cartoon strip in a magazine that in the first frame showed a minister looking up to heaven and praying to God, “*God, I don’t ask for much, but would you grant me just one thing: dignity – just dignity, God.*” The next frame showed a lightning bolt from heaven enveloping the minister. The final frame showed the minister standing still, looking up to heaven with his trousers around his ankles, exposing his underwear decorated with red hearts. The minister is saying to God, “*This is a test, isn’t it God ! !*”

How many of us have felt this way at times? “*This is a test, isn’t it God ! !*”

Life is a series of tests.

James 1:2-3, 12 [NIV] *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.” ... “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”*

The problems that come to us in life are tests that God allows us, in order for us to mature and be prepared to receive the great reward He wants to give us in the future, as disciples of Christ and believers in Christ.

In the life of Abraham we can see four tests that everyone who is a disciple of Christ will face at some time in their “*new life*”.

After 10 years of formal education, I realised that it is wise to prepare for tests. The sort of test I liked best was when the teacher gave you the questions in advance so you could look up the reference books to find the answers. I learnt far more in that type of test.

But some teachers were “*sneaky*” and we entered the examination room with no idea of what we were going to be tested on.

God is **not** the “*sneaky*” type of teacher. He tells us exactly what the tests will be, but He doesn’t tell us when we are going to face that test. God specialises in “*pop quizzes*”, the test that comes when we least expect it, in fact sometimes we may not realise we are being tested.

First test: A major change in our lives

Hebrews 11:8 [NIV] *“By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though **he did not know where he was going.**”*

God told Abraham to pick up everything he owned and move and Abraham naturally asked “*where?*”

God replied, “*I will tell you later.*”

Abraham asked, “*How long is it going to take to get there?*”

God replied, “*I’ll let you know.*”

Abraham asked, “*How do I know when I get there?*”

God replied, “*I’ll let you know.*”

Would you follow God under such circumstances?

This was no easy task for Abraham. He was 75 years old. He was ready to sit back and take it easy, but God said be ready for the biggest adventure of your life.

Abraham was wealthy so it was a major task to get all the flocks and servants on the road.

Abraham was a “*fat cat*” in the wealthy city of Ur.

Have you ever considered what it was like to live in Ur?

“*Where do you come from?*” “*Ur*” sounds as if you are suffering from indigestion.

“*Where do you come from?*” “*Well Ur.*” As if you are not sure where you live.

A true believer will follow God’s lead without knowing where.

Some of us are asking the “*where*” question now.

God, where should I work?

God, where should I be to serve you best?

God, where do you want me to retire?

God, where do you want me to go to school or college?

It's a major change we face and this is a test.

God says *"start moving and I will tell you where."*

If our faith hasn't taught us to take risks it isn't faith !!

Second test: The delayed promise

This test causes us to ask *"when?"*.

Hebrews 11:9 [NIV] *"By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise."*

Promise is a very important word in the understanding of faith, and the question with a promise is *"When?"*

God wants us to base our lives on promises, **not** explanations.

There was a delay of three generations before this promise to Abraham was fulfilled, and they were still living in tents.

How would you like to live in a tent for three generations?

Can you imagine Sarah's reaction to this? *"Abraham, when are we going to get a real house?"* said Sarah in-tent-ly !

I can handle a test in life if I know there is going to be an end to it.

The hardest tests in life are those where we don't know if they are going to end before we die!

A real believer will wait for God's timing without knowing when.

Some of us are going through the *"when"* test now.

When are things going to get better in my marriage, God?

When am I going to get married?

When am I going to get a better job?

When am I going to get a job?

When will we be able to have children?

When will my health improve?

When will you heal me of this cancer?

When are you going to answer my prayers, God?

All God's promises have a built-in delay, and when we pass the test of faith the promise will be fulfilled.

Third test: An impossible problem

Hebrews 11:11 [NIV] *“By faith Abraham, even though he was past age – and Sarah herself was barren – was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise.”*

Abraham is 99 years old and still does not have the promised child by Sarah.

God has already changed Abraham's name to mean *“father of many nations”* – how embarrassing!

“What is your name?” “Father of many nations !”

“How many children do you have?” “None.”

“How old are you?” “99 years!”

It was physically impossible for him to be a *“father of many nations”*. Sarah had already gone through menopause!

The Bible tells us that when God told them they were going to have many children, they laughed.

Abraham laughed, Sarah laughed: they named their child Isaac, meaning *“laughter”*. This child is a joke !

But God had the last laugh!

An impossible problem is when you wonder *“How God ?”* The *“how's”* of life, not knowing how God will help us.

How am I going to make ends meet?

How am I going to be able to pay for my children's further education?

How are you going to heal me?

How am I going to find time for a ministry when I'm too busy with work and family already?

How are you going to change my husband?

How are you going to change my wife?

How are you going to save this marriage?

How are you going to reach my children with Your Word?

A real believer will expect a miracle without knowing how.

Fourth test: A senseless tragedy

The greatest test of all – the *“why”* question. Many things happening in the world do not make sense – it is not fair. But who said life was going to be fair?

God nowhere says that life will be fair. That is why there is a future judgement with just rewards.

One day God will “*settle the score*” and all those who have done good or evil in their lives will be justly rewarded. The seemingly senseless tragedy in Abraham’s life is what more people question about God, the Bible and His revealed nature.

Hebrews 11:17-19 [NIV] “*By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’ Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.*”

Why should a loving God want Abraham to sacrifice the “*miracle boy*” through whom God had promised Abraham would really be “*a father of many nations*”? The child that Abraham saw as the key to all his hopes and dreams.

That is what God asked Abraham to sacrifice. Why ?

What is this ? This doesn’t sound like Christianity and the demands of a loving God !

Note this was a **test**. Abraham was having a test and it was a test of his commitment to God.

Abraham didn’t know God as we do because of the life of Jesus. He didn’t know God as loving and compassionate. But Abraham reasoned that if God could give him a son at the age of 99 God could also raise this son from the dead. It was on that reasoning that Abraham committed his promised child to God.

What made Abraham great was that he acknowledged that God as Creator had the right to make any demand of his life that He chose to.

That fact is true for us also. God as god has the right to make any demand on our lives just because He wants to.

Our present lives are sustained only because God wills it.

Our future life is totally in His Hands.

A real believer will trust God’s Purpose without knowing why!

Some of us are going through the “*why*” test in life.

Why was my first grandchild born with brain damage, God?

Why have I lost my job, God?

Why did you not stop those people being killed, God?

Why did my child run away and get hooked on drugs, God?

Why did I have this miscarriage, God?

Why did my parents die so young, God?

There is nothing wrong with asking God questions. The “*where*”, “*how*” and “*why*” questions.

But the issue is ‘how do we respond when we don’t get an answer – when God is silent?’

That is the test of a real believer.

I ask the question:

“Do you believe in God ?” “Yes !”

“Are you a believer ?” “Yes !”

Don't be too quick to answer “yes”, for it takes more than belief in God to be a believer.

James 2:19 [NIV] *“You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.”*

The demons believe in God's existence but they won't be in the Kingdom of God but confined to hell and darkness.

2 Peter 2:4 [NIV] *“For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them into gloomy dungeons to be held for judgement;”*

A real believer will:-

Follow God's lead when he doesn't know where.

Wait on God's timing when he doesn't know when.

Expect a miracle when he doesn't know how.

Trust God's Love and faithfulness when he doesn't know why.

God never gave Abraham any explanation for his test.

The reason we remain spiritually immature is because we always expect an explanation from God to all that happens in our lives.

We want answers to our “where”, “when”, “how” and “why” questions instead of trusting God in faith.

If we had the answers to all the “where”, “when”, “how” and “why” questions we wouldn't need faith, or to live by faith.

Hebrews 11:6 [NIV] *“And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”*

We would not be able to please God who expects His Children to grow in faith by the trials and tests He allows us to go through.

The way to pass a human test is to know all the answers. We get top marks for that.

The way we pass God's Test is to keep on trusting Him when we don't have all the answers.

1 Peter 1:3-9 [NIV] *“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though **now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith, of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire, may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him***

now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

I ask the question again: Are you a believer?