



FAITH



BC is a series of five studies that parallel a faith journey toward Jesus Christ. Each builds on the one before, and interested readers will find themselves somewhere on the path.

This last study brings us to the end of a journey to Christ, exploring a new life and new journey with him.

Faith

And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD.
(Hosea 2:19-20)

This verse address is engraved on the inside of my wedding ring because it summarizes what marriage is meant to be. It is the marriage vow the Lord took with his people of the Old Testament. It teaches that the faith which connects us to God has the characteristics of a good marriage.

We find here all the themes we have encountered on our journey toward Christ. There is God's righteousness, his holy character that originally created mankind with the noble and joyous charge to develop the earth in his name. There is justice, the good and proper judgment of a holy God in response to what we have actually done with our lives and with this planet. There is mercy, the desire of God's heart to forgive sin and restore a people to himself. There is steadfast love, the biblical term for faithfulness to a promise (in this case, God's promise to personally pay the price required by justice in order to forgive). There is knowing God, a reconciled relationship with him that lasts forever, which is the whole point and goal of biblical faith.¹

Knowing all this information is vital. But how does one actually become one of God's people, a follower of Jesus? The answer is not difficult. If belonging to God through Jesus is like a marriage, then beginning that relationship is like a wedding. The Bible leaves the details of wedding ceremonies to the couple and culture involved.

What is required is a free personal and public commitment of both parties to enter into a life-long union.

Christian faith takes the shape of an ongoing union with Jesus as one's Lord and Savior. Any such relationship begins with a conscious interpersonal commitment. Obviously, confidence in the facts concerning Christ is necessary for faith. But if even the Devil believes the facts about Jesus,² the faith that makes me one of God's people must be something more. Being personally reconciled to God involves the decision to enter into a mutual personal commitment with Christ, something akin to a marriage. We enter into similar commitments when joining the army or entering into any legal contract. However much I approve of a contract, it is not in force until I sign on the dotted line.

That may make faith sound too business like, though. The biblical model is more like a marriage of love. The Lord has done all the pursuing out of love alone. But he does not force himself on anyone. We must be captivated by him and want the love he offers.

God's Proposal

The biblical model of salvation is the *covenant*, an ancient word describing a binding relationship between two parties. In a covenant, each party commits himself or herself in a specific, mutually agreed upon manner. Marriage is the most common existing example of a covenant.³ In fact, the Bible understands the concept of love as faithfulness to one's covenant commitments.⁴

When God created our first parents, the covenant he established with them and their children was simple: God would pour out his love by giving us unending blessedness in his presence. We were to return our love through joyful and trusting obedience. Tragically, our first parents rejected that covenant, thereby forfeiting our blessedness and twisting the human spirit into something incapable of enjoying obedience to God.

In order to reestablish his covenant with sinful humanity, God came to us in Christ to bear the penalty of our sin (death) and begin to untwist our spirit so as to freely offer joyful obedience once more. Christ's death on the cross covers the offense of rejecting God, and his resurrection enables him to send God's Spirit to renew our spirit.

Because of Christ's death and resurrection, we can enter into a new covenant in which sin does not, and cannot, separate us from God. For those in this new covenant, all sin—past, present and future—was vicariously punished on the cross, just as if sinners had hung there in agony instead of Jesus. Through his wounds, we are healed; through the price he paid, we are forgiven. The result is that when Christ assumed our place on the cross, he enabled us to assume his place in God's heart. This means that the original covenant offered at creation has been replaced by one of amazing grace. Our sin need no longer prevent us from receiving God's perfect blessing. That blessing has become partially accessible throughout this life, and will become available without measure when the Church is complete and Christ returns.

Jesus shared his commitment on the cross, but we still must personally accept God's proposal and enter into that relationship by our own choice. Entering into the covenant requires confidence in what Jesus did, is doing and shall do, along with an unreserved commitment to trust and obey God in all things. While Christ's completed work covers the ongoing failure of still-imperfect believers, the sincere desire to obey is part of our new relationship.⁵ True faith wants to recapture God's design.

Confidence in the work of Jesus the Savior and an earnest desire to follow him as Lord are the marks of the Holy Spirit of God already at work in us.⁶ Saving faith is this combination of Christ-centered confidence and Christ-centered commitment.

So, in light of all this, what must I actually do in order to enter into God's covenant of loving grace—a covenant that will make God my friend, remold my life and secure for me eternal blessedness? If this is like a marriage, how does it begin?

"I Do"

What I must do is 1) decide to trust in God's promise to love me, seen in Christ's cross and resurrection. This is called "faith." 2) decide to commit myself to love God in return, seen in following Jesus as the Lord of my life. This is called "repentance." Repentance is like a promise to be faithful. The promise is made once, but the promise commits from then on.

It is important to realize that, while we are required to honestly commit ourselves to love God, the quality of his love for us does not depend on the quality of our love for him. God is perfect; we are far from it. In fact, there is a whole book of the Bible (Hosea) that likens God's love to that of a spouse who is often betrayed, but remains faithful, anyway. Besides, Christ has already fully obeyed God on our behalf and fully accepted the punishment for all our disobedience. Fortunately, real faith in Christ naturally generates a sincere desire to obey, however imperfectly I live that out.

Accepting God's promise to love me in Christ, and promising to love him in return is the equivalent of saying, "I do." Like a wedding, it can happen in church, but the vows can be exchanged anywhere as long as I make my relationship with Christ public.⁷

It's such a simple act, but with such large consequences! I become one of God's people, his family, part of a new humanity that will one day cherish and develop the earth as he originally intended.

Exercising faith seems an awfully simple requirement to affect such large changes. But remember that the astounding benefits of salvation do not come from what we bring to the relationship.

Consider the marriage of a commoner with royalty. The royal does not become common; the commoner becomes royal. The *former* commoner benefits immensely, not because of what they contribute to their new status, but because of all that royalty is willing to share. Christian faith does not initiate a relationship based upon our resources, but rather accepts a relationship based upon God's.

Similarly, the value of Christian faith is not what it says about our heart—the quality of our godly emotions or spiritual strength of will. The value of our faith is what our heart has chosen to say about God. Faith believes that God is, that God is good, that our suffering is our fault, not his, and he has wonderfully provided amazing grace to bring us back to his original design.

The Lord requires nothing less from us, but nothing more. Nothing more is necessary. Faith believes that all our guilt—past, present and future—has been buried in Christ's tomb and left there when he rose. Faith believes we will gladly spend the rest of eternity pleasing God simply out of grateful joy. All God requires is honest faith and repentance, for he knows that former commoners will naturally adopt royal manners in time.

Whenever you accept Christ's death as a gracious substitute for your own, see his resurrection as the beginning of a new life for you, and want to devote the rest of your life to honoring God to the best of your ability, the covenant between you and the Lord is established. You have said by your faith, "I do." God sees your heart, and at that point you and God belong to each other, forever.⁸

Of course, as with a marriage or any other covenant, it is fitting and helpful to mark our new relationship with special ceremony. Public commitments ground our emotions in reality and enable us to share our joy with others.

Christ gave us two ceremonies (called *sacraments*) to publicly celebrate and share our partnership with him. Jesus adapted them from the Old Testament to illustrate how he is the fulfillment of

everything God promised. The first is Baptism, a one-time, symbolic washing that accompanies the beginning of our new relationship.⁹ The second is The Lord's Supper (also called the Lord's Table, or Communion or the Eucharist), a symbolic meal where we reaffirm our relationship with the risen Christ over and over.¹⁰

The sacraments were designed by Christ to be shared by all believers, a group the Bible calls his Church (the word means a congregating of people). Christ's Church comes in all sorts of flavors. A good Church is one that happily trusts Jesus and strives to be faithful to his Bible. It is important to choose a Church fellowship wisely. Ask advice from Christians who obviously enjoy their faith, and try to live according to God's Word.

If, right now, you desire to belong to Christ, I encourage you to offer up to God a personal prayer to tell him so. Please understand that such prayers are not magical words that bring us to God. We are saved by faith, not by prayer. It certainly doesn't matter how fancy our prayers sound. But prayer is how we talk to God. We don't say "I do" to the Church, and we don't say "I do" to ourselves. We say it to the God who wants us to belong to him, and who wants to belong to us.

I recommend that you plan a time and place where you can be alone with God. Read a passage or two of the Bible.¹¹ The simplest thing to do would be to find the New Testament, go to the fourth book (The Gospel of John), and read the first 18 verses.

Then, in your own words,

- Tell God that you have heard of his desire to bring you back into his family through Jesus Christ.
- Confess to God that you cannot claim his love based on how you have lived, and can't give him what he deserves.

- Thank God that Jesus accomplished everything necessary for God to welcome you just as you are
- Thank God that Jesus also shows you how to be the person you were meant to be.
- Promise God that you will faithfully love him forever, to the best of your ability.
- Tell God that you trust his promise to faithfully love you forever, perfectly.

If such a prayer reflects the desires of your heart, then God will send his Spirit to live in you.¹² This is not something you need to feel. It is something God does, moving into your life and taking up permanent residence with you as his home on earth. He will never leave.

Jesus would like to openly seal his new relationship with you—make it ceremonially “official” and open for all the world to see! His official seal is baptism. If you were already baptized as a child, then confessing your faith in a Christian church will affirm and complete the promises announced at that time. If you have never been baptized, it will become part of your welcome into God’s family. Your church will guide you in this.

Always remember that the Lord’s love for you can never be diminished by your failures—you belong to him now, and he belongs to you. He patiently will work year after year to help you grow in spiritual wisdom and integrity.

Faith endures and grows over time. Since this world is in general rebellion against its Creator, expect your faith to be seriously tested over and over.¹³ That’s why you constantly need the Bible, prayer and fellowship with other believers to maintain spiritual confidence and stay close to Christ.

This world is still dying, and much suffering will continue until Jesus returns. But you have come alive. Death will merely mark the

end of this broken world's ability to wound your body and scar your soul. You will be resurrected as Jesus was, to pursue life forever with the one who designed it.

When faith begins, life is never the same. Jesus' love, integrity, kindness and hope begin to shine through you. You will become the person you were meant to be. You will become the light of the world.¹⁴

Thank you for allowing me to accompany you on this journey of faith. I do urge you to consider these matters in depth and make a decision about your response to Jesus Christ. This is the most important thing you will ever do.

You will never regret it.

¹ This booklet assumes familiarity with the biblical notion of sin and its consequences, as well as an understanding of who Christ is and what he accomplished. These matters are treated in earlier pamphlets in this series.

² James 2:19.

³ The Bible likens the relationship of God to his people as that of a husband to his wife. See Ephesians 5:21-32; 2 Corinthians 11:2 and Revelation 19:9.

⁴ Deuteronomy 10:12-13; Romans 13:8-10.

⁵ Romans 7:14-8:17; John 14:22-24; 1 John 2:1-6.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:16; 1 Corinthians 12:3.

⁷ Matthew 10:32-33.

⁸ John 1:12-13.

⁹ Matthew 28:18-20. A "disciple" is a trainee, someone who is being taught by a Master — in this case, by Jesus. You may already have been initiated by your parents as a disciple when you were a child. If so, then the next step is to enter into the Lord's Supper with full understanding and personal commitment.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.

¹¹ Suggestions include: Titus 3:3-8; 2 Corinthians 5:14-15; 1 Peter 2:24-25 and Hebrews 10:15-17. If you don't have a Bible, ask a Christian you respect or the church you attend to give advice about getting one.

¹² Romans 8:15-17; Romans 5:1-5; Titus 3:3-7.

¹³ John 15:18-21; Romans 8:18-25, 35-39; 1 Peter 4:12-14.

¹⁴ Jesus actually said that! Matthew 5:14-16.