

**The Main Thing**  
About Becoming a Christian

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## Session One

### **The Main Thing: Introducing the Heart of the Matter**

Studies show that over eighty percent of us want to grow spiritually. We're interested in a relationship with God. We're seeking spiritual experiences and paths. Yet those same studies show that many of us are confused when it comes to one of the most ancient and well-known spiritual paths—Christianity. You might know more about Islam or Buddhism than you do about Christianity. Chances are that you've read as much Oprah as you have the Bible, Christianity's sacred guidebook.

And to complicate things, the Bible is such a large book. With sixty-six books written by forty authors over a period of fifteen hundred years, the Bible can be a pretty intimidating document. Is there some way to cut through all its information and get to the heart of its message? What's the most important thing the Bible says about connecting with God by becoming a Christian? What is the Bible's core message about the spiritual path one can live by being a Christian?

You'll be grateful to know that these questions are answered by two simple texts in the Bible. These two texts summarize the main thing about becoming a Christian and the main thing about being a Christian. One is written by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:1-8. Turn to this passage and read it. Here, Paul mentions the "gospel." This word may be new to you. Perhaps you've heard someone say "It's the gospel truth." But Paul carefully spells out what he means by "gospel." The gospel, according to Paul, is "first importance" or "the main thing" about becoming a Christian. He summarizes the gospel in three parts:

- Jesus died for our sins—a fact verified by his burial,
- Jesus was raised on the third day—a fact verified by his appearances,
- and all of this occurred as the fulfillment of Scripture.

These three statements are the gospel. The first part of this Bible study series—The Main Thing About Becoming a Christian—will help you understand how this text and its description of the gospel summarize the heart of the Bible's message about becoming a Christian and how you can become a Christian. In each lesson, a specific part of this gospel will be explained. The lessons will show the five messages communicated by the gospel. The gospel, the record of how Jesus died for our sins and was raised on the third day, shows that:

- God loves us
- God forgives us
- God guides us
- God empowers us
- God raises us.

A second text in the Bible summarizes the spiritual path you can walk upon by being a Christian. Once you become a Christian, what does the Bible teach about being a Christian? The answer to this question is captured by the writer Luke in Acts 2:42-47. Turn to this passage and read it. This is the earliest and most succinct description in the Bible of the first Christians and their lifestyle. In many ways, therefore, it is “of first importance” or “the main thing” about being a Christian. Luke’s description shows that these ancient Christians were involved in five activities which can be summarized by the word CROSS:

- focusing on Christ
- forming Relationships
- pursuing Outreach to the lost
- committing to Service
- engaging in Study of the Bible

The second part of this Bible study series—The Main Thing About Being a Christian—will help you understand how this text summarizes the heart of the Bible’s message about living as a Christian and how you can live as a Christian. In each lesson, one of these five activities will be fleshed out.

## Session Two

### **The Main Thing: "According to the Scriptures"**

You already believe something about God and how to find a relationship with God. Where did those beliefs come from? Are they what you picked up from your parents? Did a music group or television show influence them? Do they come from some books you've read? It is important to note that our spiritual beliefs are only as good as their source. If you want to connect with God and walk upon a reliable spiritual path, it is crucial that your beliefs about these things come from credible sources. Christianity says that the Bible is the best source of spiritual beliefs.

This study will explore what the Bible says about itself. Specifically, it will set forth three claims of Scripture (another word for the Bible): (1) it reveals the facts and implications of the primary event in history (the gospel), (2) it is inspired by God, (3) it is the best source for informing our spiritual beliefs.

#### *Introduction*

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-8.

What does it mean for something to be "of first importance," or "the main thing?"

What does this verse describe as of "first importance?"

Paul claims that his message about the gospel is authoritative. It is something that we can stand on and hold on to. He claims that his message about the gospel can save us.

Paul also says that these things happened "according to the Scriptures." They found their validation in the Bible

People today have a lot of questions about God and spirituality. Where do people go for answers to these kinds of questions? What things do people use as their authority in terms of forming religious beliefs? Paul mentions that an important part of this primary message is "Scripture," or the Bible. Let's look at what the Bible says about itself and the role it plays in this matter of "first importance."

#### *The Old Testament Views Itself*

Read Exodus 4:11-12.

According to this, where did Moses' words come from? From God himself. God would teach him what to say.

Read Exodus 34:27.

Where did Moses get the words he wrote down? They came from God. Moses was the author of the first five books of the Old Testament. His words came from God.

Read Jeremiah 1:9

Where did Jeremiah get the words he wrote down? They came from God. Like the other prophets in the Old Testament, Jeremiah claims his words are from God.

*The New Testament Views the Old Testament*

Read Matthew 5:17-18; 22:31-32; John 10:35.

What was Jesus' attitude toward the Old Testament? He affirmed it as authoritative and held it to be the word of God.

Read Romans 1:1-6.

What does this verse say about the "gospel?"

It was planned by God, promised by God, and recorded in Scripture (here, the Old Testament) by the prophets, who wrote some of the Old Testament.

Read 2 Peter 1:19-21.

What is "the word of the prophets?" It refers to the prophecies in the Old Testament written by the prophets.

Why are we to pay attention to this Old Testament word of the prophets? It is like a light in a dark place—it gives direction. It sheds light on God and the path upon which he calls us to walk.

What is the source of this word of the prophets? It is not from humans, but from God, through the Holy Spirit. Thus the Old Testament was written by these men, through the inspiration of Holy Spirit. These Old Testament authors did not simply come up with their teaching by themselves. God gave the teaching to them through his Spirit.

*The New Testament Views Itself*

Read 2 Peter 1:16-18.

Where does Peter say his message came from? It was an eyewitness account. Peter was an eyewitness of the ministry of Jesus, the gospel, which he then wrote about in the New Testament.

Read 2 Peter 3:15-16.

Peter calls Paul's letters Scriptures. Paul wrote much of the New Testament, including much about the gospel. The passage in 1 Cor. 15:1-8 comes from Paul.

Read 1 John 1:1-4.

What is John saying about his message? He also was an eyewitness who recorded/wrote what he saw, touched, and heard. John was an eyewitness of the ministry of Jesus, the gospel, and he wrote about it in the New Testament.

Read John 20:30-31; 21:25.

This is the same John as the author in the previous passage.

Why did John write these things about Jesus and the gospel? He recorded them so that we might believe, so that we might have life. He also tells us that he was a selective writer. He wrote only the most important things down about Jesus and the gospel.

Read Matthew 10:19-20; John 14:23-26

Jesus is talking to the eyewitnesses/apostles like Peter and John.

What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of these eyewitnesses? It guided these men who were among those who wrote the New Testament.

Read 2 Timothy 3:16-17, 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 3:14.

What does it mean that Scripture is “God-breathed.” It means that it comes from God. God is its source.

These verses reveal that Scripture (Old and New Testaments) is authoritative. It is to be obeyed and followed.

### *Conclusions*

1. Scripture reveals the most important event in God's dealing with humanity—Jesus and the gospel. The Old Testament points forward to it, the New Testament reflects back on it.
2. Scripture claims to be the words of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit.
3. Scripture is to be considered authoritative for those who are seeking God. While you may have gathered your spiritual beliefs from music, television, friends, or parents, the Bible asks you to let it be the sole source of those beliefs. When your beliefs contradict the Bible's, the Bible asks you to jettison your beliefs and hold to the Bible's teaching. How willing are you to let the Bible be the sole guide for your spiritual beliefs?

### Session Three

#### **The Main Thing: "Our Sins"**

By investigating your own life and the world around you, you could easily conclude, "This is not the way it's supposed to be." Why is there so much suffering in the world? Why is there so much violence? Why do you often do the very things you know you shouldn't do? Why do you often struggle to do the things you know you should do? The Bible agrees with you: this is not the way it's supposed to be. Something has tainted this world and our lives. The Bible calls that something "sin."

This study is designed to you understand what sin is and what sin does. This study defines sin and explores three aspects of sin: 1) the *guilt* of sin from our *past*, 2) the *power* of sin over our *present*, 3) the *consequences* of sin for our *future*.

#### *Scriptures*

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-8.

According to this text, why did Jesus die? Paul points to the reason—Jesus died “for our sins.” In order to understand the true significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and thus the gospel, we must understand the cause of his actions—“our sins.”

What are some common definitions of sin?

"Sin" is a rarely used word today, and it is usually reserved for only the worst of actions like murder or rape. In the Bible, however, sin is a very prominent concept and it covers a wide range of actions and thoughts.

Read 1 John 3:4.

How is sin defined here? John calls sin “lawlessness” or breaking the law.

These are often called sins of commission. Here, sins are defined as bad actions we actually commit which break God's standards. They are much like a law today which we might break (i.e. speeding).

What kind of things would this include? (Don't kill, etc.)

Read James 4:17.

How is sin defined here?

These are often called sins of omission. Here, sins are the result of good actions that we fail to carry out. They are the results of positive actions which we fail to perform.

What kind of things would this include? (Give money to the needy, etc.)

If sin is both breaking and failing to measure up to God's standard, just what is God's standard?

Read 1 Peter 1:15-16.

What does “holy” mean? It literally means to be “set apart.” We might think of it as being “set apart” for God’s use, “set apart” from the morality and lifestyle of the world around us.

What then is God’s standard which we sin against by breaking or failing to measure up to? The standard is actually to be like God himself. We are to be holy “just as he who called you is holy.”

Sin is basically an attempt to live life apart from God and his standards. God's standard is for us to have a heart and actions just like himself.

Read Romans 3:9-20.

How does this verse answer the question, "Who has sinned?"

According to this text, all people have sinned. Paul, the author, says that the church attenders of his day (Jews) as well as the people who didn't attend church (Gentiles) had all sinned.

### *Conclusion*

Sin has been called “debt” because it is our failure to give God the obedience he is due. Thus we can see that sin covers a wide range of actions and thoughts, and that all have sinned.

### *Scriptures*

Even if sin does include a lot of things, and a lot of people have sinned, what does that have to do with you? So what? Just what does sin do?

Read Isaiah 59:1-2.

According to this verse, what does sin do?

Our past sins separate us from God. Sin creates a "Grand Canyon" between us and God. No matter how good we "jump," we still can't make it across. Just as the best broad jumper can't cross the Grand Canyon, neither can the most moral person cross to God. Sin creates a gap that is just too big.

Why does sin separate us from God? A holy God cannot be in the presence of unholy people. It's like matter and anti-matter trying to occupy the same space. All God wants is to have a relationship with us. But he cannot have relationship with us if we are unholy. God calls for this high standard so that he can have relationship with us.

Read Romans 7:14-24; Galatians 5:16-17.

According to these texts, what affect does sin have?

Sin has a power which makes it hard for us to live and act the way we want in the present. Paul says that even though he knows the rules (i.e. Law), he still can't act right.

Have you ever felt like that? Paul then points to the reason for this in Romans 7:17,18,20—sin. Sin has such power over our lives that it keeps us from living the way we want to and know we should.

Read Romans 5:12; 6:23; Hebrews 2:14-15.

According to these texts, what does sin do? The consequence of sin is death.

What kind of death is being described in these passages? Two kinds: physical and spiritual. Physical death entered the world because of Adam's sin. As a result of his sin, we are "held in slavery" by our fear of death. In what ways are people held in slavery by their fear of death?

Spiritual death is a consequence of our own sin. Our sin "earns" death—a spiritual death which affects us now, and which will be eternal. This spiritual death implies eternal separation from God after death.

Which part of Romans 6:23 describes you, the left side or the right side?

Wage	Gift
Sin	God
Death	Life

#### Conclusions

1. *Past* guilt: Sin is a problem because of the guilt of sins from our past. God has judged us "guilty" due to our past sins. This verdict of guilty separates us from God and makes impossible that which we truly need in life—a relationship with our Father.
2. *Present* power: Sin is a problem because of the power of sin over our present. Sin has such power over us that it makes it impossible for us to live the kind of lives we want to live in the present.
3. *Future* consequences: Sin is a problem because of the consequences it has for our future. Sin makes physical death a certainty, and spiritual death a probability—unless something changes. We all need to be able to have strong hope in something in the future, but sin makes that future uncertain due to its consequences.

## Session Four

### **The Main Thing: "That Christ Died For Our Sins"**

The previous session showed the adverse and irreversible affects that sin has on our lives. This study shows how the death of Jesus on the cross does three things for our past, present, and future problems with sin: 1) it says God *loves* you; 2) it says God *forgives* you; 3) it says God *guides* you and shows you how to live.

#### *Scriptures*

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-8. Part of this “main thing” is not only “our sins,” but the fact “that Christ died” for our sins.

Read John 19:16-42. It is clear that Jesus died a brutal and humiliating death on the cross. The question still remains, "What does the brutal death of a man 2,000 years ago have to do my sin problem?"

Read Romans 5:8; John 3:16; 1 John 3:16.

What do these verses say about the death of Jesus on the cross? Jesus' death was motivated by love and was the ultimate expression of God's love for us.

God loves all people unconditionally. We matter to God. In spite of our sin God loves us. He sent Jesus to die for all, regardless of race, status, or position in life. The cross is God's demonstration that he love us in spite of our failures.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:14-21; 1 Peter 2:23-24.

What do these verses say about Jesus' death? What did Jesus' death do to our separation from God?

Instead of being separated from God and being his enemies, we have now have peace with God. The biblical word for this is "reconciliation."

What does it mean to be reconciled? How did Jesus' death on the cross reconcile us? What does it mean that our sins are not counted against us and that Jesus became sin? Because Jesus took our punishment, God is able to receive us into his fellowship.

It's not that God lowered his standards so that we could finally meet them. It's not that God "made up" with Jesus what we had failed to do (i.e., we were 60% holy and God used Jesus to fill in the remaining 40%). God kept his standards. But Jesus took the punishment for failing those standards. He died our death. He paid our debt and gave us his righteousness. No matter the sin, on the cross God forgave that sin.

While we saw earlier that our sins created a “Grand Canyon” between us and God, the cross became a bridge over which we can find forgiveness and restoration of our relationship with him.

Read Mark 10:42-45; Ephesians 5:1-2, 22-33; Philippians 2:1-11.

What do these verses say about the cross? The cross is the supreme example of how we are to live. Just as Jesus denied himself and took up a cross, we are to deny our self and take up a cross. Just as Jesus died and served us, we are to serve others.

In what ways is the cross a good illustration of how to live?

#### Conclusions

1. The cross says God *loves* you and wants relationship with you. It is a demonstration of God's love for all people in spite of their sin. That love reassures us that in spite of the guilt for our past sins, God truly does care for us.
2. The cross says God *forgives* you. On the cross God wiped away every sin of ours. That forgiveness erases the guilt for our past sins. It also overcomes the consequences of sin for our future. Because our guilt has been cleaned away, we can live forever in the future with God and have intimacy with God in the present.
3. The cross says God *guides* you and shows you how to live. On the cross we find the clearest example of the kind of life we are to live. The cross thus helps with the power sin has over our present by shining a clear light on the path we are to walk.

Session Five**The Main Thing: "That He Was Raised"**

Not only is the death of Jesus important, the resurrection also has significance. This study shows two things the resurrection of Jesus does to resolve the past, present, and future problems sin brings. The resurrection says 1) God helps you, and 2) God raises you.

*Scriptures*

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-8.

Part of this "main thing" is that Jesus "was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared" to hundreds of people.

Read John 20:1-31.

Jesus' resurrection was an amazing thing to those who witnessed it, and it remains an amazing miracle today. Still, the question remains, "What does his resurrection have to do with my sin problem?"

Read John 14:15-26; 16:5-11.

(Note that here Jesus is only talking to his disciples).

As a result of his resurrection, what does Jesus say he is able to send to his disciples?  
The Holy Spirit.

But what does the Holy Spirit do?

Do you recall how Paul talked about the inability to live right as the result of the power of sin (Romans 7:7-24)?

Read Romans 8:1-17; Galatians 5:16-26.

According to these texts, what does Paul say the Holy Spirit does?

He helps us to live right. He strengthens us to live right. He bears certain "fruit" in our lives. He helps us overcome the power of sin.

Read Hebrews 2:9,14-15; 1 Corinthians 15:20-28; Ephesians 1:11-14.

As a result of Jesus' resurrection, what will happen to those who follow him? They will be resurrected also.

How does Jesus' resurrection free us from the fear of death? The resurrection of Jesus assures our own resurrection and shows us that there is life after death for those who follow Jesus. The Holy Spirit is a guarantee of our own resurrection.

*Conclusions*

1. The resurrection says that God *empowers* you. God empowers us through his Holy Spirit to live right, and God equips us with abilities through his Holy Spirit. This enables us to

overcome the power sin has in our present. It allows us to live lives of purpose and integrity.

2. The resurrection says that God *raises* you. Jesus' resurrection destroyed the power of death. The Holy Spirit is God's guarantee of our own resurrection. This makes our future certain.

Session Six**The Main Thing: "Which You Received"**

The most important thing about becoming a Christian is “the gospel,” the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. This gospel deals with our sin problem and makes a relationship with God possible. It shows us that God loves us, forgives us, guides us, empowers us, and raises us. But how do we appropriate these things into our lives? How do we connect with these things? This study shows how to receive the benefits of Jesus’ death and resurrection by doing three things: 1) having faith in the gospel; 2) repenting of sin; 3) being baptized.

*Scriptures*

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-8.

Paul says that this gospel saved them when they “received it.” How does one receive the gospel?

Read Ephesians 2:1-7.

According to these verses, how does God save us? God saves us by his grace. Nothing we do can earn it or make us worthy to receive it. It is God's free gift.

What is grace? It is receiving something you don't deserve and being pardoned from something you do deserve. We do deserve death for our sins, but do not receive it. We do not deserve life, but do receive it.

Read Ephesians 2:8-10.

God offers these blessings to us by his grace. We accept them by our faith. We are saved by grace through faith.

What is faith? Faith has three parts:

- (1) knowledge (knowing what the gospel is)
- (2) conviction (believing the gospel is true and believing you need it)
- (3) trust (trusting that God will give you the benefits of the gospel).

In order to receive the benefits of Jesus’ death and resurrection, we first have to have faith in that death and resurrection. We have to believe it was true. We have to be convicted that we need it. We have to trust that it can give us what we need.

Paul says we are saved by grace by faith, but not by works. In some religions you must first do certain things before something is done for you by the god of that religion. Many religions could thus be spelled D-O. But Christianity is spelled D-O-N-E: there is nothing we can do (not by works) to be saved because it's already been done by Jesus. This does not mean, however, that there is nothing for us to do in Christianity. Once we are saved by grace through faith based on what Jesus has done, Paul says that we are then created to do good works. We are not saved by good works, but we are saved to live a life of good works. We do those good works out of gratitude for what has already been done for us by Jesus.

We are saved by grace through faith, but this verse does not tell us much about faith.

Let's look at some other verses which tell us what faith accomplishes.

Read Ephesians 1:13-14.

What are we to have faith in? The words “having believed” are literally “having had faith”—the same word Paul used earlier to say we are saved by faith. Here we are told to have faith in the “word of truth, the gospel of [our] salvation.”

What is the result of faith? Having had faith, the readers received the Holy Spirit.

What function does the Spirit play? Among other things, He guarantees our eternal life.

Read Romans 3:21-26.

What are we to have faith in? In Jesus Christ.

What is the result of faith? Righteousness (being made right with God) and justification (just-as-if-I've-never-sinned)

Read John 1:12.

What are we to have faith in? In the name of Jesus—“those who believed in his name.”

What is the result of faith? We become children of God.

Read John 3:16.

What are we to have faith in? In Jesus.

What is the result of faith? We receive eternal life.

According to the previous verses, we are saved by grace (we can never earn it) through a strong faith (belief/trust) in Jesus and his life, death, burial, and resurrection.

### *Conclusions*

1. First, we must believe in the gospel. We know from the above verses that faith initially starts with a simple belief and trust in who Jesus is and who we are in relation to him.
2. Second, we must repent of our sin.
  - a. Read Acts 2:36-41.
    - i. How does Peter tell these people to receive the salvation made possible by the gospel? First, they are to repent.
      1. What does it mean to repent? To turn around. To make a commitment to stop living a certain way.
      2. Read also Acts 17:30-31, 2 Cor. 7:8-10.

3. Repentance is more than being sorry, it is a godly sorrow that leads to action. We change our behavior 180 degrees. Faith leads us to change our heart and our life. Repentance is the emptying of self which is necessary before God can forgive us.
3. Third, we are to be baptized.
    - a. What is the result of baptism according to the verses we just read? Forgiveness of sins, and reception of the Holy Spirit. Note that these are the same things which the previous verses showed as the result of faith. Note that in Acts 2:41 that baptism is how one accepts the gospel.
    - b. Read Mark 16:15-16, 1 Peter 3:20-22, Colossians 2:11-12.
      - i. What do these verses show about baptism? Baptism is a very important act of faith. Baptism is an expression of faith. It is a pledge to God.
      - ii. What is the result of baptism? Salvation. Note that this is the same thing which the previous verses shows as the result of faith.
    - c. Read Acts 22:6-16, Galatians 3:26-27.
      - i. What is the result of baptism? Washing away of sins, being children of God, and being clothed with Christ. Note the combination of faith and baptism in Galatians 3.
      - ii. Spend a minute reviewing what you have gone over. All the results of faith we looked at above are also results of baptism. Thus baptism and faith are intertwined and cannot be separated.
    - d. Read Romans 6:1-7.
      - i. This verse tells us that baptism is more than an outward symbol, it is a participation in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Through baptism we die to our sins and ourselves and are raised to walk a new life. It is not an act that earns our salvation, but a step of faith that enacts God's grace in our lives. A thorough understanding of this passage clears up most misunderstandings of baptism. It is clear from the previous passages that baptism is only for those old enough to have faith. Rom. 6 shows us how essential baptism is to salvation. It is not merely an outward sign of an inward change. Rom. 6 also shows us why burial in water is the appropriate response, as opposed to sprinkling and pouring.

Four things become clear about infant baptism by sprinkling:

- 1) Faith precedes baptism. Thus baptism is for those old enough to have faith.
- 2) Baptism is a pledge and thus a profession of faith for only those old enough to have faith.

- 3) The purpose of baptism is forgiveness of sins and thus only for those old enough to have sins.
- 4) Baptism's physical form is immersion in water in the same spirit as Jesus burial in the tomb.

Do you have faith in the gospel?

Do you understand what the gospel is?

Are you convicted it is true and you need it?

Do you trust it?

If not, what is keeping you from having faith?

Are you ready to express your faith through confession, repentance and baptism?