



WordPoints

Challenging Every Person to Take God More Seriously

People of God

A Study of the Church

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People of God: A Study of the Church

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Lesson 1

Introduction: People of God

Made “In the Image of God,” All Are “People of God” in the Most General Sense

“THEN GOD SAID, ‘LET US MAKE MAN IN OUR IMAGE, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful, and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth’” (**Genesis 1:26-28**).

In one sense, all people are the “people of God” and we believe they were created with a high and noble purpose indeed. The Psalmist marveled at this culminating work of the Creator, saying, “When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained; what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him? For You have made him a little lower than the angels [elohim, objects of worship], and You have crowned him with glory and honor” (**Psalm 8:3-9**).

We are well aware that such a concept is denied by many of today’s people. Those who reject the Divine Creator accept a world that exists by unprovable and incomprehensible chance — something from nothing. It follows that man is evolved from simple inorganic substance, and has a brief and purposeless life. He dies without hope, and his biodegradable remains reenter the cycle that goes nowhere. The futility of it all is enough to commend a search for something better — but often pride and an unwillingness to acknowledge anything higher than himself leaves man groping in darkness, refusing the light that is available. And this is the man who charges us with “blindly” trusting in an “unproven” God.

Obviously the true God, by His very nature, would not be subject to man’s test tubes. He would have to be self-revealed. But God is more than an hypothesis. The clinching “Way, Truth, and Life” is a historic figure, Jesus of Nazareth, the culmination of Divine revelation. This study is prepared by one who believes in God, His Holy Spirit, and Emmanuel or “God with us,” as seen in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Believing in an eternal, intelligent Creator, we believe that Creator acted with purpose. He must have had reason for creation — something more than a sudden whim or impulse. There are likely unrevealed purposes of God we cannot pursue. However, the revelation available relates Divine purpose directly to man, and this becomes our chief concern. All who believe that the Creator revealed Himself to His creatures

confidently look to that revelation for His purpose. Whatever His purpose may be, we believe man's greatest good can be realized in achieving that end. In God's Word and in this study those who through God's grace seek to satisfy His divine purpose are called the "*people of God*" in a very special sense (**1 Peter 2:9,10**).

God Has a Purpose for Us

The Athenians in **Acts 17** were great God-servers, or so they thought. They built beautiful temples, dedicated finely wrought statuary, and gave their gods lavish gifts. But they failed to understand *what the Creator wanted of His creatures*. When Paul described to them the true God he said, "God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things" (**Acts 17:24,25**). How absurd to think the Creator could be appeased with any material thing! Instead, God has a desire for certain *responses* on the part of His creatures. Paul also said, God "made from one blood every nation of men . . . so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us" (**vv.26,27**). God's inherent sufficiency does not negate His reason for making man, and requiring certain attitudes and conduct. For His purpose, and our good, *He wants us to "seek after Him, and find Him."*

In **Romans 1** as the sinfulness of man is described and we are shown that God is just in condemning all mankind, we again get a glimpse of *God's desire for His creatures*. Paul says men could perceive God's eternal power and deity by observing the product of His creation, and are "without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful" (**v.21**). The flip side of these negatives is, God wants us to "glorify" and "give thanks" to Him. *He wants a people who worship their Creator, and recognize their dependence upon Him.*

In the Genesis record God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness . . ." (**Genesis 1:26**). Certainly this is not a reference to man's physical appearance. God is Spirit (**John 4:24**), and is without "form" (**Deuteronomy 4:12-19**). "In the image of God" must refer to man's spiritual nature, intellect, and free agency — having a self-conscious personality that sets him above other animal life (**Psalms 8:5-8**). We are bold to suggest that since "God is love" (**1 John 4:7,8**), we who are made in His image have the ethical capacity to manifest this God-like characteristic. We believe God intended that the objects of His love be capable of returning love to the Creator, a love that manifests itself in submission to God (**1 John 2:3-5**). Jesus said the first and great commandment of God was "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart . . . soul . . . mind" (**Matthew 22:36-40**). God wanted His creatures to "seek after Him and find Him" — to look up to Him, to feel deep dependence upon Him, and *to reciprocate His love.*

God's Purpose Determines Our Nature

God's stipulated requirements of man demanded creatures "in the image of God" who could will and act upon a *self-determined basis*. But theologians tell us free will on the part of man would compromise the sovereignty of God — man could say "No" to his Maker. They would have us believe that God arbitrarily selected those whom He would save, and our actions have nothing to do with the decision. Of course the sovereignty of God is vindicated in final and irrevocable judgment (**2 Corinthians 5:10**), for none can reject

God with impunity. On the other hand, the very nature of God demands nothing less than *a moral response* to His will. This means a people who of their own will say “Yes” to their Maker. Unless we are free to say either “Yes” or “No,” our love and praise become the words and actions of mere puppets, having no moral value.

This power of choice also accords with a characteristic of God that is frequently stressed in His Scriptures. God is no respecter of persons — He treats fairly all those made in His image — in the Old Testament (**Deuteronomy 10:17; Ezekiel 18:19-24**), and in the New (**Romans 2:11; Ephesians 6:9**). Peter said, “In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation he who fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him” (**Acts 10:34,35**). With free will, and fairly treated without respect of persons, man becomes one of **God’s people** (in the true, moral sense of the terms) when he fulfills a chief purpose God had in making man in the first place. Paul wrote, “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (**1 Corinthians 10:31**).

We propose a simple thesis: *God gave each of us a free moral “self” and then asks that we give it back to Him.* Jesus put it this way: “If any one desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (**Matthew 16:24**). We believe God’s search for a “people for His own possession” in this moral sense has been clearly indicated from the beginning of the revelation of His will. His “people” are not racially determined, are not simply “card-carrying” members of some party or church, but are a kind or quality of people. They certainly are not gods, but they have “escaped the corruption that is in the world” through provisions God made for true believers to “partake of the divine nature” (**2 Peter 1:1-4**).

The writer of this study sees the Bible as the inspired literature of the unfolding of God’s plans for His creatures. His eternal Purpose, Promise, and Prophecies are found in the Old Testament; and the Preparation and Perfection of the Christian dispensation are revealed in the New Testament.

In this study we will seek to trace the unfolding of His purpose and plan for the development of His people. Treating man as a free moral agent, hence responsible and accountable for his actions, man’s transgression of God’s will is sin (**1 John 3:1-6**). But man also has the capacity and is held accountable for a trusting faith in the Divine power. God does for man what man cannot do for himself. On the condition of obedient, wholehearted faith, God provides the means of escape from sin. *In Jesus Christ sins are forgiven, we can become one of God’s people, and have the great promise of an eternal home in heaven.*

Study Questions

1. If revealed at all, why must God be self-revealed?
2. Is there evidence man was created with a divine purpose?
3. What are some responses God expects of mankind?
4. How does such expectation affect the nature God gave man?
5. Why was free will necessary to fulfill God’s purpose in creating man?

Lesson 2

God's Chosen, the Israelites

IT WOULD SEEM THAT FREE WILL AND “NO RESPECT OF PERSONS WITH GOD” are contradicted by the heading of this lesson. But there is no denying that the Scriptures clearly speak of certain descendants of Abraham as “*people of God.*” We read, “For you are a holy people to the Lord your God: the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth” (**Deuteronomy 7:6**). These people were a “holy nation” (**Exodus 19:6**), “chosen” by God.

Such statements are repeated so often in the Scriptures it seems redundant to offer further proofs here. However, we should note that the fundamental idea of the Hebrew *kadesh* (Greek *hagios* — “holy”) is “separation,” with no moral or ethical connotation. These people were *physically* “set apart” by Divine fiat; but *moral* “holiness” (as the term later came to be used) was a different matter, not related to ancestry, as we shall see. For now, however, we must give careful attention to how the Israelites came to occupy such a favored physical position, and why such a choosing was made. We cannot properly appraise later connotations for “*people of God*” without this historic background.

Historical Background

Abraham, a man of faith (**Hebrews 11:8-10**), was not a Jew. The Genesis record tells us the “land of his nativity” was Ur of the Chaldees (**Genesis 11:26-28**), and he was classified with the “uncircumcision” (Gentiles) for a time (**Romans 4:10-12**). But God made a promise to Abraham, which was later repeated to his descendants, saying, “I will make you a great nation” (**Genesis 12:1,2**). Note, I will “make you” (KJV says “make of thee”). Abraham was the “breed stock” (excuse the Texas expression) out of whom God built a special race and nation of people. He was separated from his own country (**v.1**); he and all males of his household were given the special covenant of circumcision (**Genesis 17:1-14**); and his previously barren wife, Sarah, bore him a son (“of promise”) when he was “one hundred years old” (**Genesis 21:1-7**). Later, that son, Isaac, took a wife from among his father’s people (**Genesis 24**); and Jacob, the “chosen” son of Isaac, took a wife from his mother’s people (**Genesis 28:1-4**). Both men were warned to take no wives of the Canaanites, nor of other nations where they dwelt, a warning extended throughout the generations yet to come. Clearly, this was a breeding process — the “building” of a race of people, who were to serve God’s purposes in a special way.

Jacob had twelve sons, and their families were the foundation of the twelve tribes of Israel, a name given Jacob when he wrestled with an angel (**Genesis 32:24-28**). Joseph, a son of Jacob, was sold by his envious brothers and taken into Egypt where he eventually became a prominent civil official (**Genesis 41:37-43**). The other sons and their families came to Egypt to buy grain, were persuaded to remain there, and, following Joseph’s death and a change of government, were made slaves of the Egyptians (**Genesis 42; Exodus 1**). Multiple generations of hardship welded them together as a people — becoming the “Israelites” Moses led through the wilderness to the promised land.

The Abrahamic Promise

God promised them certain lands (**Genesis 15:18-21**), but careful Bible study refutes any future land claims of present day premillennialists as well as those of the Anglo-Israel movement. Joshua, the military leader who led them into the land, said “So the Lord gave to Israel all the land of which he had sworn to give their fathers, and they took possession of it and dwelt in it . . . Not a word failed of any good thing which the Lord had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass” (**Joshua 21:43-45**). And this same Joshua said more. “[When you transgress the covenant of Jehovah your God] . . . you [will] perish from this good land which the Lord your God has given you” (**Joshua 23:11-16**). The prophets of Israel documented her transgressions, and recognized the penalty. “Alas, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity . . . Unless the Lord of hosts had left to us a very small remnant, we should have become like Sodom, we would have been made like Gomorrah” (i.e., utterly destroyed, **Isaiah 1:4-9**). Through Jeremiah, God told the elders of the priests, “Because they have forsaken me . . . I will make void the counsel of Judah and Jerusalem . . .” God told him to break an earthen bottle in their presence and say, “Even so will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter’s vessel, which cannot be made whole again . . .” (**Jeremiah 19:1-11**).

This is not “anti-Semitic” as some charge. It is a recognition of events pictured by Jewish prophets; and more important, an acknowledgment that the building of this “*people*” and the giving of special blessings were not without *purpose* and *conditions*. Even their being “chosen” was conditional (**Exodus 19:5,6**). God is not now, nor has He ever been a respecter of persons (**Deuteronomy 10:17; Acts 10:34**). His desires and ultimate goals for all His creatures have never changed. We must see the original *choosing of Israel* in the light of God’s *eternal purpose for mankind* — **the incarnation and sacrifice of His Son, so that “all nations” may be blessed**. What Israel may or may not accomplish today has the same relation to God’s purposes as that of any other nation.

Look again at the original promise God made to Abraham in **Genesis 12:2,3**. “*I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*” A repetition of the promise in **Genesis 22:18** reads, “in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.” We are not left to guess the meaning. Paul writes, “Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as of many, but as of one, ‘And to your Seed,’ who is Christ” (**Galatians 3:16**). Paul’s grammatical emphasis makes it clear that the blessings for “all nations” did not depend upon Israel as a nation, nor upon Jews as a people, but upon one of Abraham’s descendants, Jesus Christ.

Physical Israel, Spiritual Israel

Furthermore, the “blessings” for all nations in Christ are *spiritual*. The Messianic prophecies of Isaiah so testified (**Isaiah 4:2-4; 10:20-23**; etc.), and promised these blessings for Gentiles as well as Jews (**Isaiah 49:5,6**). Peter spoke of “the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ To you first, God, having raised up his Servant Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities” (**Acts 3:25,26**). In proclaiming Christ as the “sure mercies of David,” Paul said, “Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins” (**Acts 13:34-38**). The *physical* aspects of God’s promise to Abraham

were but a means to the far more important and eternal end of *salvation from sins* for all mankind. “There is neither Jew nor Greek . . . you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (**Galatians 3:26-29**).

My first three years of schooling were in a log cabin (indubitably qualifying me as presidential material). At the close of a week the teacher, Miss Lulu, often gave her students a treat. One child would be chosen, given a basket of apples and the great honor of passing out the blessings. For a time the chosen child seemed to have all the apples, but in the end he got only one apple, and the basket was returned to the teacher. He had been chosen, not as a favorite forever, but as the vehicle for bearing blessings to all the students. Try this as an illustration for God’s “choosing” of Israel.

God’s scheme of redemption for mankind necessitated *the incarnation of deity*. There were highly developed races and cultures on earth at the time of Abraham, but God chose to develop His own people, *a special race through whom His Son would put on flesh*. To this end, He selected Abraham and his descendants to be the people through whom Christ would come (**Hebrews 2:1-16**). He also used them as a demonstration of His dealing with mankind, and through them He unveiled Himself. It is understandable, from a human viewpoint, that they made more of this than was promised or intended, and that it would be difficult for them to accept what seemed a lesser role when Christianity was offered for “all nations.” It is less understandable how today’s Bible readers, with the full account before them, can maintain the same materialistic and racial outlook of the early Jews.

The apostle Paul recognized certain advantages of the Jews: “Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God” (**Romans 3:1,2**). But such advantages increased rather than lessened moral obligations (**Romans 3:21-25**). Despite God’s love for and assistance to these special people, He sought among them, as among all people, something more than physical or ceremonial characteristics. The externals were never enough. Paul wrote, “He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, not in the letter . . .” (**Romans 2:29**, see also **Deuteronomy 10:16**). As our study proceeds we shall see that it was necessary for God to search for a *spiritual “people”* even among the Jews.

The only true *“people of God”* in a moral sense — now or ever, Old Testament or New, regardless of race or dispensation — have always been those who freely gave themselves in wholehearted submission to the will of God. No blood line or church roster can ever take the place of this characteristic.

Study Questions

1. What were the two parts of the Abrahamic promise?
2. Why were his descendants forbidden to marry one of another tribe?
3. Why were his descendants called “holy” and “people of God”?
4. Did his descendants receive the land they were promised?
5. What was the condition demanded in order that they keep the land?
6. What was meant by “in your seed” all nations will be blessed?
7. What was the nature of the above “blessing”?

Lesson 3

God Seeks a People in Israel

WHEN GOD CALLED ABRAHAM and began building a race through whom Christ would come, He greatly blessed those people. Israel was “chosen,” and would play an important role in God’s scheme of redemption. However, the choosing was not motivated by merit or worldly greatness, “but because the Lord loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers . . .” “The statement continues: “God . . . keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments . . . and He repays those who hate Him to their face, to destroy them” (**Deuteronomy 7:6-11**). **Chapters 7 and 8** are filled with warnings, should they turn from God. Clearly, God sought *a special kind of people*, even among the nation that was “chosen” to clothe His Son in flesh. Their blood relationship with Abraham was never enough. God sought a people who would love Him from the heart. He wanted them to be *His people* in a special way, a “kingdom of priests” submitting to Him and serving Him (**Exodus 19:5,6**).

What God Was Looking for in Israel

Moses taught the people, “*What does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul*” (**Deuteronomy 10:12**). God’s search for *a truly dedicated people* is further emphasized (**Deuteronomy 10:16,17**) when He calls upon the people to figuratively circumcise the heart (meaning *genuine* dedication). Anticipating the people’s desire for a king, Moses was directed to write God’s rules for a king, that he might serve Jehovah, and “that his heart be not lifted up” (**Deuteronomy 17:14-20**). Saul was rejected as king because he failed to put God first, for “the Lord sought for Himself a man after his own heart” (**1 Samuel 13:13,14**). At David’s anointing, God told Samuel He “does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (**1 Samuel 16:7**). God had not attained His real goal when He built the Jewish nation, or established the Jewish system of religion. These were but *means to the greater end of preparing the way for Christ* and a *people* of all nations who would *freely serve* Him.

The *moral responsibility* of each individual was *not satisfied by one’s place in the physical lineage of Christ*. To Jews He said, “I have set before you today life and good, death and evil . . .” “But if your heart turns away so that you do not hear . . . you shall surely perish.” “Therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants shall live” (**Deuteronomy 30:15-20**). *Individual responsibility* is also stressed. “The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son . . .” (**Ezekiel 18:20**). Isaiah told the descendants of Abraham, “Your iniquities have separated you from your God” (**Isaiah 59:2**), and promised mercy only to those who forsook their wicked ways. In restoration prophecy it was this penitent “remnant” that would be spared (**Isaiah 1:4-9; 10:20-23**). Although a literal “remnant” was necessary to fulfill prophecies concerning Jesus’ ancestry, yet God was seeking a “*people*” on a different and much more demanding basis than that (**Isaiah 49:5,6**).

Even the God-ordained *ceremonies* and *sacrifices* of Judaism were *not an end in themselves*. Isaiah condemned mere formalism, saying, “‘To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?’ says the

Lord.” He called them “futile sacrifices” or “vain oblations,” (**Isaiah 1:10-20 KJV**). God spoke through Hosea, “For I desire mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings” (**Hosea 6:6**); and through Micah, “He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (**Micah 6:8**). It seems the Jews came to think their lineage and perfunctory keeping of ordinances would satisfy God, but such was never the case. Notice then that **God sought a people**, among Israel and under Judaism, who would be His in *a much more genuine and personal way*.

The Coming of Christ

John the Baptist, preparing the way for Christ, gave a summary of the **kind of people** the Lord sought among the Jews. He told them to bring forth fruit worthy of repentance, and chided them for placing their trust in lineage: “. . . for I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones” (**Matthew 3:8,9**). Jesus began His personal ministry by calling upon His Jewish brethren to repent (**Matthew 4:17**). The exposure of hypocrisy and traditions was typical of the Lord’s work (**Matthew 15:3-9**), and often included parables that warned the kingdom would be taken from the religious elite and given to those who brought forth fruit unto God (**Matthew 21:33-46**). As stated earlier, the first and great commandment was, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (**Matthew 22:35-40**).

Jesus worked with and kept the principles of the religious system under which He was born. He told His disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do.” But He added, “Do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not” (**Matthew 23:1-3**). Jesus knew that *the institution* and *the system* were but *means* to a greater *end*. As Jesus prepared the way for that “greater end” (a true “**people of God**”), He stressed the deeper meaning in laws given the Jews. God did not need a card-bearing society. He wanted **a special people** who partook of His nature: humble, meek, merciful, pure in heart (**Matthew 5:3-12**). The gift on God’s altar was unacceptable if it came from unclean hands (**Matthew 5:23,24**). A prayer prayed to be heard of men was not heard in heaven (**Matthew 6:5,6**). They could not expect forgiveness from God if they did not forgive others (**Matthew 6:15**). Crying “Lord, Lord,” was not enough. They must do the will of the heavenly Father (**Matthew 7:21**). Judaism was indeed “established” by God, but one cannot honestly look at the teachings of Jesus and conclude that “membership” in the Jewish system satisfied God’s search for a true “**people of God.**” And the apostle Paul wrote, “He is not a Jew who is one *outwardly*, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one *inwardly*; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not from men, but from God” (**Romans 2:28,29**).

The Error of “Institutional” Religion

The Jews had an “institutional” concept of God-service. They seemed to think since God established Judaism, they satisfied God’s desire if they functioned within and were accepted by the establishment. But establishing Judaism — even setting up the Levitical priesthood — did not mean God had abdicated His throne. The conduct and proclamations of the priests themselves were acceptable only when they conformed to the instructions from God. Malachi puts it this way: “And now, O priests, this commandment is for you. If you

will not hear, and if you will not take it to heart . . . then I will curse your blessings . . . “ (Malachi 2:1,2). God had appointed the priests to “keep knowledge, and people should seek the law from his mouth,” that is, as God spoke. “But you have departed from the way; you have caused many to stumble at the law. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi,’ says the Lord of hosts” (Malachi 2:7,8).

God used men to *set forth* His laws, but these men were not the *source* of those laws (this will be discussed later). They were *subject to God’s Word*, even as others (cf. 2 Peter 1:15,16). While God was slowly revealing Himself in types and shadows (Hebrews 9), preparing for the coming of Christ, the Jewish priests were selected to stand between the people and God, and emphasize His sacredness. But they were *never excused from personal obligations*. God selected from among the priests those who “feared Jehovah and thought upon His name” to be “mine own possession” (Malachi 3:16-18 ASV). The “institution,” and what some may call their “clergy” status, were never enough.

We have shown that Israel, the race, was merely developed as *the physical ancestry* of Christ. When these people were being welded into a nation they were given laws and regulations that could, if followed, draw them closer to God and prepare them to receive the Christ. The first tabernacle was “symbolic for the present time” or “a figure for the time then present,” (Hebrews 9:9 KJV), and the “first testament” instituted Judaism; but underlying both tabernacle (later, temple) and Judaism was the Word of God with its *application to individuals*. Certainly such institutions promoted an important external recognition of God, but *approval by those in the institution* is one step (and often a very large step) removed from God-approval. It is very possible that today’s “Christians” have accepted *an institutional concept of Christianity*, and have lost sight of the qualifications set forth in God’s Word for being the true *“people of God.”*

Study Questions

1. Did kinship with Abraham satisfy God’s desire for the Israelites?
2. What is meant by “circumcise the heart”?
3. Why were commanded sacrifices called “futile sacrifices” or “vain oblations”?
4. What did John the Baptist say about “stones” and Abraham’s children?
5. Explain Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount treatment of the various Ten Commandments.
6. Why did John and Jesus call upon Israel to “repent”?
7. What did Paul mean by “a Jew inwardly” (Romans 2:29)?

Lesson 4

Christ — Key to People of God

GOD'S PURPOSE IN CREATING MAN demanded free moral agency on man's part; and knowing all, God knew man would sin. But God had an "eternal purpose" (**Ephesians 3:11**), "given to us in Christ Jesus before time began" (**2 Timothy 1:9,10**), whereby the grace and mercy of God would make remission of sins possible. The Son of God would sacrifice Himself on behalf of mankind: the sinless dying for the sinner. Paul put it this way: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed" (**Romans 3:23-25**).

Christ, the Key

From the days of Cain and Abel we find a *shadow* or *type* of God's plan, in that "faith" required the sacrifice of animal life (**Genesis 4:4; Hebrews 11:4**). Later, Noah was told to take extra of the "clean" beasts and birds into the ark (**Genesis 7:2,3**), of which he offered sacrifice to God following the flood (**Genesis 8:20**). Abraham built altars and "called on the name of the Lord" (**Genesis 12:8**), as did other "fathers" of Israel. Then, when Judaism was established as the religion of the Israelites, God gave them many specific commands regarding blood offerings. "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul" (**Leviticus 17:11**). The ASV says "to make atonement *by reason of the life*." It was not the blood *per se* that foretold God's plan, but the sacrifice of *life*. John the Baptist said of Jesus, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (**John 1:29**). Christ would give His life so that sinners might live eternally. The Hebrew writer emphasized that "without shedding of blood there is no remission. Therefore it was necessary that the *copies* [*patterns* - ASV] of the things in the heavens should be purified with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us" (**Hebrews 9:22-24**). Further, he says, "now, once, at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (**Hebrews 9:26**).

Prior to His coming, faithful offerings of the types and shadows of Christ were the ancient Jews' only hope for becoming one of **God's people** in the true moral sense. Sacrifice pertained directly to the atonement for sin, and sin is what separates man from God (**Isaiah 59:2**). Isaiah clearly prophesied of Christ's sacrifice (**Isaiah 53:1-12**), saying, "He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities" (**Isaiah 53:5**). Then **Hebrews 10** makes it clear that the *types* of Christ needed *His actual sacrifice* to give them substance. Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected, is the key — the only means — by which sinful people may become **the people of God**.

The Priesthood

There were, of course, many other foreshadows of Christ. In Judaism the priesthood stood between God and man, in that they served at the altar and in the Holy Place on behalf of the people. The High Priest alone

could enter the Most Holy Place, approach the mercy seat, and offer blood (life) for the sins of the people. But this sacerdotal (pertaining to priests) system was never intended for all time. In Christianity Jesus Christ is our High Priest “after the order of Melchizedek” (**Hebrews 7**). He has entered into heaven, “to appear in the presence of God for us” (**Hebrews 9:24**). The apostle Paul wrote, “For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time” (**1 Timothy 2:5,6**).

The “clergy-laity” distinction which is so common in our day was denied long ago when Christ spoke of religious hierarchy and said, “But you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you all are brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven” (**Matthew 23:8-10**). He was speaking to the multitude “and to His disciples” (who later became apostles) when He said these things. There is *only one step* in the true “hierarchy” — Christ is at the top, and “you all are brethren” (apostles, prophets, elders, deacons, preachers, members), all on the same level below Christ. These have different functions, but none are like Christ — a sacrifice on our behalf and able to forgive our sins.

Respecting a priesthood, the New Testament *people of God* are called a *holy* priesthood, and a *royal* priesthood (**1 Peter 2:5,9**); conforming to their High Priest, Jesus Christ, who is both Priest and King. As priests they are to present their bodies “a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God” (**Romans 12:1**), and “continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of [their] lips, giving thanks to His name” (**Hebrews 13:15**). Each individual Christian has *direct access* through Christ to the throne of God and His mercies, and is urged to “come boldly to the throne of grace” (**Hebrews 4:14-16**). Saints should confess sins and pray for one another (**James 5:16**) — for mutual encouragement. But Peter told Simon, who sinned following His baptism, to “repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you” (**Acts 8:22**). He could go directly to God (through Jesus Christ) for the remission of his sin. It is rank irreverence for any man on earth to claim to be the “vicar” of (or in the place of) Jesus Christ, putting himself between man and God.

The Error of “Sacerdotalism”

Let us look at some Scriptures used by those who make such claims. Following Jesus’ resurrection, He appeared to His disciples (soon apostles) and said, “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you. And when He said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (**John 20:21-23**). This is coupled with **Matthew 16:19** where Jesus told Peter, “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven”; and to **Matthew 18:18** where He told all the disciples (soon apostles) the same thing. Wilber Thomas Dayton’s doctoral dissertation on the Greek perfect tense in the **John 20** passages translates the expression “they are forgiven” as “*have been* forgiven”; and “they are retained” as “*have been* retained.” Further, the “will be” of the Matthew passages is translated “shall have been” bound or loosed in heaven. Marshall’s translation of the Nestle text says “having been” bound or loosed. (See the NASV, Williams’ translation, and others.) These passages are saying that *by the time the apostles proclaim* remission of sins through Jesus Christ, God’s plan *will have been bound in heaven*. They would deliver a message *that originated with God*.

Look again at the passage in John. “Receive the Holy Spirit” cannot mean the apostles received *at that time* the measure of the Spirit that would guide them into all truth (**John 16:12,13**), nor were they *then* “sent.”

The Spirit was to come upon them *after Christ's ascension* and they were to “*tarry in Jerusalem*” until so ended (**Luke 24:47-49; Acts 1:8**). Both the grammatical construction (Greek tense of language discussed above) and conformity to New Testament teaching as a whole, forbid interpreting either John or Matthew to say that the message and/or its results (the forgiveness of sins) would *originate* with the apostles; and certainly not with their supposed successors (discussed further in Lesson 11). Inspired men were to set forth the *message* of salvation in Christ, and later those who came to Christ would further promulgate His glorious gospel. But neither the apostles nor converts to Christ have “power to forgive sins” (as one catechism puts it). This is a power reserved for God, and used by Christ to prove His deity while on earth (**Matthew 9:2-6**). Gospel truth originated in heaven, and the apostle Paul said, “even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed” (**Galatians 1:8**).

Sacerdotalism — authority in the priesthood, or in “the church” — *detracts from the sovereign rule of Christ and the importance of His word*. We are told that the church, “a visible, hierarchical society” made up of subjects and superiors who rightfully rule the subjects, is the “authority” for the Scriptures — not the child of the Bible, but its mother. But Christ, just before His ascension, said He had all *authority* (**Matthew 28:18**). Paul said Christ would reign until the end of time (**1 Corinthians 15:24-26**). The written records of inspired men, setting forth the King’s will for posterity, were obviously *gathered* after the Lord’s church came into existence; but those truths *originated* in heaven, then inspired men proclaimed them to the public as the means of bringing Christ’s church (His “called out” ones) into existence. Christ rules now, through His word; and respect for and obedience to His word is our way of allowing Him to rule in our lives. We now need to make a serious and objective examination of the Scriptures to determine just what was established on the first Pentecost after the resurrection of Christ.

Study Questions

1. What is signified by the “blood” of animal or Christ’s sacrifice?
2. What is meant by Christ, the “key” to people of God?
3. What is the “hierarchy” of Christianity?
4. Who is the High Priest of Christianity? The priests?
5. When did the apostles receive “power” with the Holy Spirit?
6. Was God’s plan “bound in heaven” before or after the apostles announced it?
7. How does sacerdotalism violate the authority of Christ?

Lesson 5

What Was “Established” on Pentecost?

JESUS SAID TO PETER, “I will build My church,” and “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (**Matthew 16:18,19**). Hence, “kingdom” and “church” have some things in common. Mark records Jesus as saying the kingdom would “come with power” within that generation (**Mark 9:1**), and “you [the apostles] shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (**Acts 1:8**). The Spirit came on the first Pentecost following the resurrection, as recorded in **Acts 2:1-4**, and that chapter also says, “the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (**Acts 2:47**). Clearly, “the church” and “the kingdom” existed then, but concepts of “church” and “kingdom” vary widely. “Kingdom” does not refer only to the church, even in the New Testament. The world realm of God’s rule is called His “kingdom” (**Matthew 13:38,41**), and the term is also applied to the eternal inheritance of the saints (**Ephesians 5:5; 2 Timothy 4:18**).

The Events in Acts 2

The word “established” is not found in **Acts 2**, but is freely used in prophecies concerning the coming “kingdom” (*basileia*) of Christ. W. E. Vine says “*basileia* . . . is primarily an abstract noun, denoting *sovereignty, royal power, dominion* . . . then, by metonymy, a concrete noun, denoting the territory or people over whom a king rules.” In **2 Samuel 7**, God (through the prophet Nathan) promised David that He would “establish forever” the kingdom of one of his descendants (**vv.12-16**; cf. **Psalm 89:3,4**), and Peter refers to such promises in his sermon on Pentecost (**Acts 2:30-36**). But more, **Daniel 2** records a dream of Nebuchadnezzar, which Daniel interpreted as follows. The king dreamed of an image that represented four world empires (dominions): the Babylonian, the Persian, the Greek, and the Roman. God caused a small stone to strike the image, to break it in pieces, and become a great mountain, superior to all others, that would stand forever. That is to say, divine authority would be established “for all nations” that would be superior to all human authority. It is no accident that Isaiah prophesied that “it shall come to pass in the latter days that the *mountain* of the Lord’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains . . . exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it” (**Isaiah 2:2,3**). Both passages refer to *the establishment of the superior authority of Christ on David’s throne*, to which “all nations” (Jews and Gentiles) must submit. In doing so, we become the “*house*” or *people of God*, the product of submission to His will (cf. **Micah 4:1,2 ASV**).

With this as our background, let us now make a study of Peter’s sermon in **Acts 2:14-36**. As an introduction, explaining the ability of the apostles to speak in the tongues of the many nations present, Peter cites the prophecies of **Joel 2:28-32**, concluding with the words, “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Then he gets into the main body of his sermon. Jesus of Nazareth, adequately approved of God (**v.22**), you have rejected and crucified (**v.23**). God resurrected Him (**v.24**), as prophesied by David (**vv.25-28**). David was not speaking of himself, for he is yet in the grave (**v.29**), but rather he was saying that one of his descendants would be the Christ, resurrected to sit on his throne (**vv.30,31**). We are witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection (**v.32**). *Therefore*, Jesus Christ (a) is exalted (**John 7:39** tells us the Holy Spirit would not be given until Jesus was glorified), (b) has received His throne which the Holy Spirit promised (**Mark 12:35,36**), and (c) has poured out this (Holy Spirit) which you now see and hear (**Acts 2:33-35**). *Therefore*, “God has

made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (v.36). *Peter’s sermon declared the establishment of Jesus Christ’s authority.*

When the listeners “were cut to the heart” and asked, “What shall we do?” Peter told them to “repent, and let every one of you be baptized *in the name of Jesus Christ* for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” We have put emphasis on the words “in the name of Jesus Christ” because this phrase correctly ties Peter’s reply to the sermon that fostered the question. He is saying, “*Listen to the King — submit to His authority.*” To “call on the name of the Lord,” one must heed the King’s command to “repent and be baptized,” etc.

What Went Forth From Jerusalem?

What was prophesied to “go forth”? Look again at **Isaiah 2:3**. “Come, and let us go up to the mountain [government, authority] of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths. *For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.*” There is nothing here about a validating and self-perpetuating “institution” called “church.” It is certainly true that those who submit to divine authority, obeying the commands of Jesus Christ, become God’s people and constitute His “church,” His “called out” ones in the universal sense (**Acts 2:47**). But the universal church is not a functional entity. There was no universal organization on earth established that day. Isaiah is saying that the *authority* of Christ and His *instructions* for salvation from sin would be declared on that wonderful day. Read it carefully. “He will teach us His *ways*, and we shall walk in His *paths*. For out of Zion shall go forth the *law*, and the *word* of the Lord from Jerusalem.” The three thousand souls had to *hear* the message, *believe* in the Christ, and *obey* Him in order to be saved and added unto them (**Acts 2:41,47**). The church — “called out [ones]” — flourished then because people, of their own free will, accepted the call. But what if none of the three thousand had obeyed the gospel on that day? Regardless of the response, would not the essentials for **God’s people** have been set forth? God “instituted” the church in somewhat the same way He instituted marriage. He gave the first man and woman regulations for this relationship, and a particular marriage today is representative of God’s institution, but only to the extent that the constituents are in submission to His rules.

The Church and the Kingdom

Shortly after World War II an evangelist from the United States taught and baptized several people in a foreign country, rented a hall where they could meet for worship, and put up a sign which read: “This church was established in Jerusalem, A.D. 30.” A native questioned the sign, saying that church had been there only three months. Upon reflection, the preacher acknowledged that it was only by way of submission to Bible teaching (the law and word of the Lord) that they could claim linkage with the church in ancient Jerusalem. The church does not validate the word, as Catholicism seems to teach, but must seek its own validation by the word, which is the seed that produces **the people of God** (**Luke 8:11-15**) and will judge them in the last day (**John 12:48**).

While endeavoring to correct erroneous impressions about “the church,” we certainly do not deny that the firstfruits or products of the gospel came into being on the Pentecost following Christ’s resurrection. At that

time they were individually called “believers” (**Acts 2:44**). Later they were called “disciples” and “saints,” and finally they were called “Christians” (**Acts 11:26**). But collectively these people were the *ekklesia* or “called out [ones].” This word, after translation through later Greek, Anglo-Saxon, and Middle English (Scottish “kirk”), comes to us as “church.” A large dictionary will show that currently the word is used for organizations, buildings, religious societies or services, clerical professions, etc. But the basic New Testament usage, as in “I will build My church” (**Matthew 16:18**), is that of a *collective noun, designating the people of God*. Generally speaking, when one sees “church” he can think “people of God” and not go far wrong; but **God’s people** remain the keepers of His word, not the validating authority of that word.

With careful study it also becomes apparent that “kingdom” is a *predominant figure* used to describe the spiritual dominion of the Messiah. When we see the word “kingdom” we should think “rule.” Then, after the idea of “rule” is firmly planted in our minds, we may examine the context to see if, in this case, the word is extended to designate the *realm* of that rule, the *people* ruled, the *nature* of that rule (physical or spiritual), or other extended use. Jesus flatly denied that His kingdom is “of this world” (**John 18:36,37**). Christ was resurrected to “sit on [David’s] throne” (**Acts 2:30**), but this was no literal throne nor physical kingdom. He reigns from heaven, through His word, over all who freely subject themselves to Him.

On Pentecost in **Acts 2**, God’s messengers declared *the establishment of Christ’s kingdom (rule)*, the *message* of the reigning King was heard, and the obedient became *citizens* in Christ’s kingdom. The law and word of the Lord (based upon His authority to speak) went forth from Jerusalem, and continues to this day. That word is “of God.” And the obedient are “children of God,” not children of the church, as Catholicism teaches. As saints and faithful brethren in Christ at Colossae were delivered from the power of darkness and “translated into the kingdom of the Son of His love” (**Colossians 1:12-14**), so the true **people of God** today are citizens in Christ’s kingdom and a manifestation that His power is yet very much alive. The proof is *in lives subject to instructions from God’s word*, not in their acceptance by or submission to the ruling of some institution or society that supposedly “went forth” from Jerusalem.

Study Questions

1. What did Isaiah say would be established on top of the mountains?
2. In this context, and in Daniel’s prophecy, what do “mountains” signify?
3. How did Peter associate Christ’s resurrection with His authority?
4. What did Isaiah say would “go forth” from Jerusalem?
5. Did the 3,000 exercise free will in obeying the gospel?
6. On what basis can we identify today’s church with that of **Acts 2**?
7. What is the link between the rule of Christ and His subjects?

Lesson 6

The Heart of People of God

THE WORD “HEART” IS USED NEARLY ONE THOUSAND TIMES IN THE BIBLE, where it predominantly refers figuratively to *the seat of thought, emotion, and will*. Note such expressions as “the thoughts of your heart,” “love God with all your heart,” and “obey from the heart.” *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* says “it came to stand for man’s entire mental and moral activity . . . used figuratively for the hidden springs of the personal life.” Peter sees it as the “hidden person” (1 Peter 3:4), the real person, hence what one “really is”; and this may signify either a good or bad character.

The Carnal Mind vs. the Spiritual Mind

When God sought a “*people*” among the Israelites, He looked for those who would “circumcise . . . [their] heart, and be stiff-necked no longer” (Deuteronomy 10:16). Paul expands this to the Romans as he wrote: “He is a Jew who is one *inwardly*; and circumcision is that of the heart, *in the spirit, not in the letter* . . . “ (Romans 2:29). He is not saying “letter” obedience is unimportant, but when it is “letter only” — and not from an honest heart, thus not truly representing our innermost feelings — then it is hypocritical, and may be “stiff-necked” rebellion against God. Little wonder that Jesus said the first and great commandment is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all you mind” (Matthew 22:37,38). While *heart*, *soul*, and *mind* do have meanings independent of one another, Jesus pools them here to say our love must be genuine, from the very depths of our being, trimmed of subterfuge.

Again, in both Romans 2:29 and 7:18-25 the “inward man,” his “will,” or “mind,” are ways of identifying the “spirit” that is in him. Paul acknowledges two “laws” in himself: (1) the urge to satisfy the *flesh*; versus (2) this “*spirit*”: his mind, will, or inward man, that *desires to do the will of God*. Through the mercies of Jesus Christ he can say: “I serve God — *with my spirit* — in the gospel” (Romans 1:9), and “I serve the law of God — *with my mind* — through Jesus Christ” (Romans 7:25). Paul understood that “to be carnally minded” (yielding to the flesh) meant spiritual death, but he thanked God through Jesus Christ that “to be spiritually minded” (in the inward man) is “life and peace” (Romans 8:6).

Paul did not claim to be sin-free. He acknowledged sin in his life, saying “I am carnal, sold under sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do” (Romans 7:14,15). But “I do not understand [allow not - KJV]” and “I hate” tell us he struggled against sin. He did not have a “carnal” mind, will, or spirit that reveled in sin; and his desire to do right tells us that he went humbly to God for forgiveness when sin occurred. In fact, such a “spirit” or attitude is essential for access to the throne of mercy.

The Need for a Truly Changed Heart

We have stressed the importance of worship and service coming “from the heart” — by which we mean it must be sincere — evidence of a heart given to God. But Isaiah warned of mouth and lips which “draw near”

and “honor” God, “but have removed their hearts far from [God], and their fear toward [God] is taught by the commandment of men,” i.e., even the fear is a doctrine of men, “reverence” no deeper than human traditions (**Isaiah 29:13; Matthew 15:7-9**). Our actions may demonstrate a heart given to lust (**Matthew 5:28**); and Jesus said, “Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies” (**Matthew 15:19**). Regardless of how we seek to hide our innermost “spirit” — even cover it with outward acts of goodness — God sees our heart, and judges us accordingly. “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked: for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap” (**Galatians 6:7**).

Many Scriptures teach that conversion to Christ is basically a *change* of heart. We are taught, we hear, learn, and come to Christ (**John 6:45**); all of which involve intellect, emotion, and will. “With the heart one believes unto righteousness” (**Romans 10:10**). The Greek *metanoeo* (repent) means “to change one’s mind” — a change of heart. And baptism, to be more than an external washing, must be “the answer of a good conscience toward God” (**1 Peter 3:21**). God *seeks a people* whose innermost being is turned toward Him — who give Him their all. David expressed it: “Bless the Lord, O my soul; *and all that is within me*” (**Psalms 103:1**).

Such dedication in intent and purpose must accompany our coming to Christ. *Change* must be intended, and evidence of that intent will be seen in a changed life style. But there will be failures and the need for further forgiveness. Here again the “heart” is of great importance. Simon’s heart was “not right in the sight of God,” and he was told to repent and pray that “the thought of your heart may be forgiven you” (**Acts 8:21,22**). His heart was yet unstable, he was a “babe” in Christ, *but God’s ears are open to the prayers of His people who will truly repent and come humbly to the throne of grace for mercy*. This indicates that the development of a spiritual heart is not a miraculous, once-for-all-time occurrence (as some teach), but a continuing process of learning, believing, and growing “in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (**2 Peter 3:17,18**).

Becoming One of God’s People

The above, and many other “heart” Scriptures, lead to the conclusion that the condition of one’s heart *depends upon that individual*. The *means* of forgiveness is of God — through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ; and the *message* which we must hear, believe, and obey, is also of God. But each individual must, through faith, *accept and use* the means and message to change the heart and become one of **God’s people**. God does the inviting, but man must do the coming and the being faithful. Each accountable being is a free moral agent, capable of selecting and following the narrow path that leads to life eternal. God does not ask the impossible of man, but this is not to say the journey is an easy one.

The “message of the cross” (**1 Corinthians 1:18**) on God’s part is the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. But Jesus said, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him *deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me*” (**Matthew 16:24**). Sacrifice is also demanded on the part of man. Denying self, and *taking up our cross*, means putting Christ before our former life style — and it may well mean before mortal life itself (**Matthew 16:25**).

The “vain traditions” received from those who have gone before (**1 Peter 1:18**) have colored the world in which man lives, and programmed much of his thinking (his heart). Man’s own selfish inclinations make

him an inviting target for Satan, and can make self-sacrifice a difficult choice. To be merely “religious” is not demanding, for there seems to be something for every taste. And a “church member,” as the world sees it, simply pays his dues and occupies a pew now and then. These may benefit society and help to shape social morals, but God is seeking far more than this, as we have already seen. From Adam and Eve, from the early inhabitants of the earth, from Judaism, and even from among those who were first “called out” on Pentecost following Christ’s resurrection, *God has sought “a people for [His] own possession,” whose “heart” is truly given to Him.*

Nothing short of *full, wholehearted dedication* will satisfy. Self is sacrificed on the altar of humble service. Love, for God and for our fellow man, takes on meaning completely beyond an “eye for an eye” and love-the-lovely (**Matthew 5:38-48**). The pursuit of such a standard will challenge mankind throughout his life, for its principles come from heaven above. In this life, they are unattainable in their fullness, but God *seeks a people* who will wholeheartedly strive for them. They will affect life on this earth, and are essential for life eternal with the God and Father of us all.

Study Questions

1. What is the meaning of “heart” in the expression “obey from the heart”?
2. How are the “heart,” “spirit,” and “mind” of man associated?
3. May one obey in fear of God, without obeying from the heart?
4. Does a changed heart guarantee one will not sin?
5. What are the means by which God seeks to change one’s heart?
6. Does a change of heart come before or after baptism?
7. What is the first and great commandment?

Lesson 7

The Calling of the Elect

IN OUR STUDIES THUS FAR WE HAVE FOUND the words “elect” and “chosen” frequently used in Scripture with reference to becoming one of *God’s people*. To many this is enough to warrant the conclusion that God selects the individuals He will save, and (in His “inscrutable wisdom”) leaves others to be lost. We freely acknowledge man’s inability to grasp the fullness of God’s ways (“the secret things belong to the Lord”), but we are told “those things which are revealed belong to us” (**Deuteronomy 29:29**). Well, it is clearly revealed “there is no partiality [respect of persons - KJV] with God” (**Romans 2:11-13**). Can we understand that “revelation”? Paul wrote of “the dispensation of the grace of God which is given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, *when you read, you may understand* my knowledge in the mystery of Christ . . . revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets” (**Ephesians 3:2-5**). We can understand things revealed in God’s word, and they teach an election and choosing that respects free will and response on man’s part.

“Elect,” “Chosen,” and “Called”

“Elect” and “chosen” are often translated from the same Greek word, *eklektos*. See **Matthew 22:14**, “For many are called, but few are *chosen*,” and **Matthew 24:22**, “but for the *elect’s* sake those days shall be shortened.” “Elect” and “chosen” are linked to the word “called,” as seen in **Revelation 17:14**, “for He [Christ] is Lord of lords, and King of kings; and those who are with Him are *called, chosen [eklektos], and faithful*.” (Note, “and faithful.”) If we can determine how God “calls” His people, we will better understand how He “elects” or “chooses” them, and why “faithful” is essential to the process.

1 Peter 1:1,2 is addressed to the “elect [*eklektos*] according to the foreknowledge of God” and some, erroneously equating foreknowledge with foreordination, have concluded that God selected these individuals apart from and unrelated to their faith and response to His call. But “knowing” ahead of time (as Christ foreknew who would betray Him - **Matthew 26:21,22**) does not remove individual responsibility to God. **1 Peter 1:2** continues: “in [*en*] sanctification [the root word is *hagios*, setting apart, dedication to holiness] of the Spirit [lit., spirit] . . . “ There is no “the” in the Greek, nor anything in the context to demand capitalization of the “s” in spirit. The setting apart of *their spirit* was “for obedience” (response of the believers to their faith), which resulted in cleansing by the blood of Christ (**Hebrews 5:9**). Later, in **1 Peter 1:17,18**, Peter says God judges according to every man’s work, but we should be humbled in the knowledge that acceptable obedience is response to the “call” that precedes it — a call made possible by Christ’s sacrifice. We are “born again” by obedience to the word of God “which by the gospel was preached to you” (**vv.22-25**).

A closely paralleled scripture is **2 Thessalonians 2:13,14**. God chose the Thessalonians “for salvation through [*en, in*] sanctification by the Spirit [no “the” in Greek, nor capital “s”] and belief in truth [no “the”], to which *He called you by our gospel*, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” God was “calling” as the gospel of Christ was preached; and those who believed and obeyed that “call” were “chosen to salvation.”

Light and darkness represent the two extremes or realms of right and wrong, and **1 Peter 2:9** says God had *called* His people “out of darkness into his marvelous light.” **Verse 10** continues, “who once were not a people but are now the people of God.” The “call” was by the gospel to the Gentiles, “. . . to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among those how are *sanctified by faith* in Me” (**Acts 26:17,18**). “Faith comes by hearing . . . the word of God” (**Romans 10:17**). God *called* Gentiles when the gospel was preached unto them; as Peter had said (**Acts 2:39,40**), “For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will *call*.”

The Necessity of Heeding God’s Call

“And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, ‘Be saved from this perverse generation.’ Then *those who gladly received his word* were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added unto them” (**Acts 2:41**). **Verse 47** reads, “And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” Man does not merit salvation. It is available to “whosoever will” according to the “eternal purpose” which God purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord (**Ephesians 3:11**). God freely provided the *means* of salvation (Jesus Christ) before the world began (**2 Timothy 1:9**) but man must hear the “call” of the gospel, gladly receive the word, and obey it, to be forgiven of his sins (see **Mark 16:15,16**; **Acts 2:37,38**; **22:16**). By the same principle, those who have been forgiven of past sins are now called to “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord . . .” (**2 Peter 3:18**).

A study of the *people of God* repeatedly brings us back to that which “went forth” from Jerusalem: “the law and the word of the Lord” (**Isaiah 2:3**). Our conclusions must not be subjectively determined, i.e., how we “feel” about a matter, but by objectively determining what God has said about that matter. Some say this makes the Bible our “God,” but these accusers, who accept their “feelings” as the standard, have made a “god” of themselves. Their “god” has no uniformity, is as varied as the people who dream him up, and has no more moral integrity than the society who invents him. There certainly are honest differences among people who read the Bible, but those differences can be resolved by further study and faith in God’s word. They will not be removed by depending upon a standard no higher than those who need it.

God calls the whole world population. With “all power” (authority) Christ said, “Go therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (**Matthew 28:18,19**). The Lord is “not willing that any should perish [hence, a universal *call*] but that all should come to repentance” (**2 Peter 3:9**). This says that people of the world must *respond to the Lord’s call* in order to be benefited by it. As seen throughout this study, the love and glorification sought by God and essential to His purpose in creating man demands a free-will response of man to His will. The ultimate *people of God* are not puppets: (1) condemned by a depravity inherited from Adam; (2) unconditionally elected; (3) to be among the “limited” number for whom Christ died; (4) saved (or lost) by an irresistible force (*that makes God partial — a respecter of persons*); nor (5) preserved, regardless of the individual’s rebellion against God’s will. Not one item in this Calvinistic doctrine is true.

God’s Word, the Instrument Used by the Holy Spirit

We have seen that the Holy Spirit guided the apostles into all truth (**Luke 24:46-49**; **John 16:12,13**); and spiritual gifts endowed others in those formative years with wisdom, prophecy, etc. (**1 Corinthians 12:7-11**).

Today those who accept their message are guided by the Spirit, through the instrumentality of the word. Someone has compiled a list of twenty-five blessings that are assigned both to the Spirit and to the word, but we note only a few of them here. The new birth is “of the Spirit” (**John 3:8**), but it is also by the word of God (**1 Peter 1:23**). We are sanctified “by the Spirit” (**1 Corinthians 6:11**), but Jesus taught that it was through the word of truth (**John 17:17**). The Spirit “dwells in you” (**Romans 8:11**), but so does the word (**Colossians 3:16**). We are quickened (made alive) by the Spirit (**John 6:63**), but *this same passage* tells us, “The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.” We repeat, the *word* of God is the instrument of the Holy Spirit, and it must be approached objectively — looking outside ourselves and our “feelings” — in order to profit by the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

In the nineteenth century a strict Calvinistic sect reached the conclusion that there was no need for “missionaries”; for if God selected the individuals to be saved, and “called” them with an irresistible working of the Holy Spirit, “missionaries” would be a waste of time and money. Their conclusion was consistent with their doctrine, but failed to consider the New Testament explanation of faith. “How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent?” (**Romans 10:14-17**). A quotation within these verses, from Isaiah 52:7,8, shows that the “preacher” under consideration is God-sent; a Messianic prophecy of apostles and prophets in the Christian era (see Isaiah 53). But the principle here clearly established is consistent with many other passages. An example: “these are written that you may believe” (**John 20:30,31**). God saw to it that we had the message of salvation in Christ, but man must do the believing.

Peter says **God’s people**, having believed, will “add to [their] faith virtue; to virtue, knowledge; to knowledge, self-control; to self-control, perseverance; to perseverance, godliness; to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness love.” For those who abound in these things, there are great promises; but for those who lack them, there are serious warnings. And Peter concludes: “Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to *make your call and election sure*” (**2 Peter 1:5-11**).

Study Questions

1. “Elect” and “chosen” are linked with what words?
2. What is the difference in “foreknowledge” and “foreordination”?
3. We are born again by obedience to what? See **1 Peter 1:22-25**.
4. How does God “call” those who become people of God?
5. Who were baptized on Pentecost? See **Acts 2:41**.
6. The Holy Spirit operates on man’s heart through what medium?
7. Who is responsible to “make . . . call and election sure”?

Lesson 8

Living “As Unto The Lord”

PEOPLE OF GOD ARE THOSE PEOPLE WHO HAVE HEARD THE CALL OF THE GOSPEL, AND HAVE OBEYED THAT CALL FROM THE HEART. They have not simply “joined a club” to which they owe allegiance and “attendance” now and then. They “hunger and thirst after righteousness” (**Matthew 5:6**), and allow the principles of Christ to permeate every aspect of their lives. **Colossians 3** puts great emphasis upon this new “life style” by saying, “Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth” (**v.2**). The thought is expanded: “Put to death . . . fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (**v.5**). Further, “*put off* . . . anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language,” etc. (**vv.8,9**); and “*put on* the new man who is renewed in knowledge *according to the image of Him who created him*” (**v.10**).

The Individual Christian “As Unto the Lord”

This last statement clearly sets the proper standard before us. **People of God** are to let God pattern their lives. **Colossians 3:17** states it, “Whatever you do in word or deed, *do all in the name of the Lord Jesus*, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.” Lest we miss the “whatever,” Paul then calls specific attention to various aspects of the individual’s life. “Wives, submit to your own husbands, *as is fitting in the Lord*. Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them” (**vv.18,19**). A like passage in **Ephesians 5** says, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, *as to the Lord*” (**v.22**); and “Husbands, love your wives, *just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her*” (**v.25**). While marriage is applied to the church in a figurative way only, yet this private and domestic aspect of the lives of **people of God** is divinely regulated. Children are taught to “obey [their] parents in all things, *for this is well pleasing to the Lord*” (**Colossians 3:20**); and parental obligations (in Christ) are stressed (**Ephesians 6:1-4**).

“Bondservants [slaves, when this was written], obey in all things your masters . . . not with eyeservice, as menpleasers [when being watched], but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. And whatever you do, do it heartily, *as to the Lord, and not to men . . .*” (**Colossians 3:22,23**). Then Paul turns to the slave owner: “Masters, give your bondservants what is just and fair, knowing that *you also have a Master in heaven*” (**4:1**). This principle applies to employer-employee relations today.

In **Romans 13**, Paul writes that “the [governmental] authorities that exist are ordained of God. Therefore whoever resists the authority *resists the ordinance of God*” (**vv.1,2**). Later he writes, “He is God’s minister to you for good,” and, “For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are *God’s ministers*” (**vv.4,6**). This was written at a time when the Roman government was corrupt and heavily taxed the Jews. Paul is not commending the specific rulers, then or now; but he teaches that the *principle* of civil government is “of God.” He calls upon **people of God** to submit to civil authorities as “God’s ministers,” needful to punish evil doers and have an orderly society.

When Jesus described the final judgment (**Matthew 25:31-46**), He said that when we minister to the needs of others, “*you did it to Me*,” and when we fail to be good neighbors, “*you did it not to Me*.” And so, on it goes! The New Testament is filled with exhortations for the **people of God** to live “as to the Lord” in every

aspect of their lives. Peter puts it this way: “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man *for the Lord’s sake* . . . For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men — as free, yet not using liberty for a cloak of vice, but *as bondservants of God*. Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king” (1 Peter 2:13-17).

People of God are much more than Sunday morning Christians. They work hard and faithfully through the week, their social life is clean, their business deals are honest and fair. Even their manner of speech is affected by their allegiance to Christ (Matthew 5:34-37). There is no hypocrisy in any of this, for they live “from the heart” and “as unto the Lord.” As we call attention to these things, we are aware that many today (perhaps even church members) will say (or think) “This is just preacher talk — we could not function that way in our world.” First, please note that “that way” has been established with specific citations from God’s word. Second, the **people of God** are not “of this world,” but are pilgrims, just passing through on their way to “a city which foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Hebrews 11:10,16). God **seeks a people** who are not “ordinary.” The way is narrow and restricted, and “few there are who find it,” or who qualify (Matthew 7:14).

The Local Church “As Unto the Lord”

With Christians walking circumspectly “as unto the Lord,” every aspect of their work and worship will of necessity be affected. We will discuss in another lesson the work of the church, but we should notice here the effect “as unto the Lord” will have on the functions of the local church.

(1) The faithful members cannot consistently condone those who ignore the Lord. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles — that a man has his father’s wife! And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you” (1 Corinthians 5:1,2). Verses 4,5 read, “In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, *with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ*, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh [i.e., withdraw fellowship, “let him be unto you as heathen and publican” - Matthew 18:17] that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” Clearly, “as unto the Lord” affects the conduct of Christians acting collectively.

(2) In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul criticizes them for not settling their differences as Christian with Christian, and failing that, to “go before the saints” (v.1). But instead, “brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers!” (v.6). He continues, “Why do you not rather accept wrong?” (v.7). A church that operates “as unto the Lord” and brothers who function “as unto the Lord” have principles in common, even though individual and church obligations are not identical. This does not mean the church is an infallible decision maker. But “tell it to the church” (Matthew 18:17) has reference to brethren who gather “in [Christ’s] name” or in keeping with His authority (v.20). The character of true **people of God** is shaped by their recognition of God’s presence, and their desire to do His will. This makes for fair judgment.

(3) The Lord’s church will *support and encourage* the teaching of the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27-31), while distinguishing between that which applies to the church and that which applies only to individual saints. Bible teachers will urge honesty in business, and work ethics that regulate each individual (Ephesians 4:28); although the church does not engage in secular business. The Bible regulates one’s conduct at a feast

(1 Corinthians 10:27,28), but this does not authorize church banquets. The warning about sin against our body (1 Corinthians 6:18-20) does not authorize a church gymnasium. The Lord's church supports and encourages Bible teaching regarding respect for civil authorities, but does not involve itself in politics. Individuals "render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21). The local church has an obligation to support needy saints, but individual obligations go much further. Living "as unto the Lord," *God's people* visit the sick, feed the hungry, as "good Samaritans" as they are able (Luke 10:25-37).

By now it is surely apparent that *people of God* are not casual about their relationship with Christ. He requires nothing of them that a dedicated and truly converted person or "team" cannot do, and nothing will be accepted that does not come from just such dedication. *People of God* realize that they function in His presence. They see this not as a dreaded oversight, but as opportunity to serve One who loves them and gives guidance that, in the final analysis, is in their best interest. They are grateful for every blessing, and are keenly aware that were it not for His mercy and forgiveness they would be eternally lost.

Study Questions

1. Who sets the standard or pattern for all Christians?
2. This standard affects what fields or aspects of a Christian's life?
3. What should "masters" remember as they rule others?
4. In approving civil government, does God approve specific rulers?
5. What does it mean to be a "pilgrim" in this life?
6. How does a local church conduct itself "as unto the Lord"?
7. How should being constantly in God's presence affect us?

Lesson 9

“The Church” and People Of God

The Universal Church

WE HAVE SAID THAT “CHURCH” IS A COLLECTIVE NOUN, APPLIED IN THE UNIVERSAL AND ULTIMATE SENSE TO THOSE WHO ARE THE TRUE **“PEOPLE OF GOD.”** Because these people have answered the call of the gospel, and have been baptized into Christ (**Acts 2:41,47; Galatians 3:27**), to come into Christ is to come into His church, i.e., the universal body of the saved. Can one equally say that to be in this church is to be in Christ? If careful definitions and faithfulness are maintained, these expressions do refer to the same “in” relationship. However, even then it is erroneous to say that Christ and the church are interchangeable. Christ is the Savior, while the church we speak of here is the product or result of His saving process. Only those “added” by the Lord (**Acts 2:47**) are members of this church, and the Lord makes no mistakes (**2 Timothy 2:19**).

Some call this the “invisible” church, although its members with their influence are “visibly” engaged in serving their Lord. Many figures of speech are used to define their functions. In the figure of “kingdom,” Christ is the King, and those ruled are citizens (**Ephesians 2:19**). When likened to a “body,” Christ is the Head (**Colossians 1:18**) to whom members (foot, hand, etc.) submit in singleness of spirit (**1 Corinthians 12:1-31**). In terms of a “building,” Christ is the Foundation, and individuals are living stones (**Matthew 16:18; 1 Peter 2:5**). As a “family,” Christ is the firstborn Son, and “born again” ones are brethren or children (**Romans 8:29**). In all such figures Christ is predominant — the key factor, that upon which the function of the whole depends. Christ is the true Vine, and “if *anyone* does not abide in Me, *he* is cast out as a branch” (**John 15:6**). The universal church has as its units individual Christians, not local churches or denominations.

We are reminded of fleshly Israel, called “chosen,” a “holy nation,” and “[God’s] own possession”; but of whom God said only a very small remnant would be saved (**Isaiah 1:9; 10:20-23**). Paul discusses the saving of that remnant, “according to the election of grace” (**Romans 11:5**). Expanding on this theme, he pictures the Jewish “tree” with the physical phase of the Abrahamic promise at its root, i.e., “I will make of you a great nation” (**Genesis 12:2,3**). But Paul says some of the natural branches (Jews) were “broken off” (**Romans 11:17**). This was “because of unbelief” (**v.20**). Wild olive branches (Gentiles) were grafted in “to partake of the root and fatness” (**v.17**) of that tree, evidently referring to spiritual blessings in Christ (**Genesis 22:18; Galatians 3:16**). Paul also reminded those in the tree that they “stand by faith.” Further, “Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either” (**Romans 11:20,21**). The “tree” is no longer Jewish, nor yet local church membership, but it has become a tree of those *faithful to Christ* (**Romans 11:22-24**), regardless of race, social status, or gender (**Galatians 3:28**). One’s “election by grace” depends upon individual faithfulness to Christ.

These will be the church in its ultimate sense — the bride presented to Christ. A proper understanding of *the people of God* can leave us with a feeling of helplessness if we expect to achieve that status on our merit. But the true church (or bride) of Christ is “holy and without blemish” (**Ephesians 5:27**), not through perfection on man’s part, but because Christ “gave Himself for her” (**v.25**). Faithfulness involves humility: recog-

dition of sins, genuine repentance, and obedience that brings one to God, seeking forgiveness through the sacrifice Christ made on man's behalf (**Romans 6:1-6; Galatians 3:26,27**). The faithful "have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (**1 John 2:1**). He is their hope and confidence. Those who remain faithful, maintaining a humble, penitent, and prayerful dependence upon Him, are told that "nothing shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (**Romans 8:39**).

The Local Church

A plurality of saints (who have access to one another) by mutual agreement and in keeping with New Testament examples, form *local churches* in their various communities. Paul addressed a letter to "the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons" (**Philippians 1:1**), later calling them a "church" (**Philippians 4:15**). We can read of "the church of God . . . at Corinth" (**1 Corinthians 1:2**), and "the church of the Thessalonians" (**1 Thessalonians 1:1**). Ideally the local church is a "team" of universal church saints. It should have as members only those who are Christians (**Acts 9:26-28**), and reject those who persist in sin (**Matthew 18:17**); but this membership is not as certain as that of the universal church. *Fallible people* make these decisions, and determine those added or rejected. Their knowledge of God's word and of the hearts of the people is subject to error. They may retain some whom God would "put away" (**1 Corinthians 5:1,2**), or "cast out" some whom God would receive (**3 John 10**). We must not conclude that all whom men recognize as "church members" are truly in Christ and are, therefore, *people of God*.

We must remember, however, that God knew the fallible nature of His creatures when He left the forming of local churches to man. That imperfect brethren may function acceptably as a local church is shown in commendations extended by inspiration (**Philippians 1:3-11; 1 Thessalonians 1:8**). Paul could say to the brethren in Corinth, "I . . . could not speak to you as to spiritual people, but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ" (**1 Corinthians 3:1**); yet still call them "the church of God . . . at Corinth" (**1 Corinthians 1:2**). This does not excuse error, but it does show that becoming a member of a local church is not the final step to glory. We should see the local church as a journey, not a destination. It consists of imperfect people, yes; but God intends for them to "grow up" in Christ (**Ephesians 4:14,15**) in keeping with His instructions. This humble "press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (**Philippians 3:14**) may well be the spirit behind a "sound" church. For sure, the lack of such a spirit, and an unwillingness to be measured by God's word, identify an "unsound" church.

The letters to Corinth are filled with warnings and admonitions to correct various errors found there. In fact, much of God's will concerning local churches comes to us via correction of churches in the first century. We are also shown that a local church may leave its first love (**Revelation 2:4,5**), and lose its place before God — "unless you repent." The Laodiceans were only "lukewarm," and were told, "I will vomit you out of my mouth . . . Therefore be zealous and repent" (**Revelation 3:16,19**). Further study of the seven churches of Asia (**Revelation 2 & 3**) should convince us that being "accepted" by the local church is far from satisfying divine demands for the *ultimate "people of God."* However, these letters also show that each person is judged individually, and their hope and confidence is based on Jesus Christ, not on the local church.

God looked for His ultimate "*people*" among the Jews on the basis of faithfulness; and there is much evidence that today only the "faithful few" among spiritual Israel (**Galatians 3:29**) will be acceptable to Him. Meantime, the local church becomes our proving ground: for mutual edification and encouragement in the

worship and service of God, and the spreading of His saving message. Its members have been saved from past sins, as Israel was saved from Egypt; but there is yet the “journey through the wilderness” before entering into Canaan, or into heaven.

This means the local church is a spiritual institution: for planting and developing divine moral and spiritual values in its members, and for spreading the gospel to others. Its purpose is perverted when “this life” goals take the place of “eternal life” goals. It is not a social club nor a civic center, but has a positive effect upon society by developing the character of the individual. “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people” (**Proverbs 14:34**). We need not expect the spiritual ideals of a true church to appeal to worldly minded people, in or outside its membership.

Individual Responsibility

In the final analysis, God is looking for faithful individuals. Each one comes to Him individually, obeying the call of the gospel and pledging allegiance to Jesus Christ. His word instructs us to work and worship together (**Hebrews 10:25**), but each must accept responsibility for response to the word that will judge him individually in the last day (**John 12:48**). “The church” cannot worship for me, or you. “But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (**1 Corinthians 11:28**).

Christians constitute a holy and royal priesthood, with individual access through Christ (our High Priest) to the throne of grace in heaven (**Hebrews 4:14-16**). We can and must encourage and assist one another to serve God acceptably, but in the final day “each one shall bear his own load” (**Galatians 6:1-5**). Each is responsible for knowing God’s will so that his conscience will be properly adjusted. Each must act in keeping with his conscience even if this means conflict with the local church. Respect for the judgment of church overseers is very important, but it must not take the place of respect for God’s word. Jesus Christ, as revealed in His word, is the final authority; and it is individual response to the law of the Lord that satisfies God’s purposes and makes the true *people of God*.

Study Questions

1. Is it accurate to say that if we are in a local church we are in Christ?
2. What are the units of the universal church?
3. Upon what does man’s “election of grace” depend? Cf. **Romans 11:1-36**.
4. How is the true church (bride of Christ) “without blemish”? Cf. **Ephesians 5:27**.
5. Who determines membership in a local church? The universal church?
6. Explain perfection by “pressing toward the mark” (**Philippians 3:14**).
7. Is final judgment made on local churches or on individuals?

Lesson 10

The Work of the Local Church

THE WRITER OF HEBREWS urges brethren to “consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together” (**Hebrews 10:24,25**). “Love and good works” is a broad definition of the work each “team” of saints is expected to accomplish, but when we examine details of love and good works in the Scriptures we find they are far different from the “church socials” of today. The Acts of the Apostles is a history of the early church. Let us look at that history, and a few other scriptures, to see why these saints assembled.

Congregational Action in the New Testament

They “were together, and had all things in common” (**Acts 2:44,45**) *to render assistance to needy saints*. They assembled together to *pray* (**4:31; 12:12**). They were assembled to *select servants* for church work (**6:2-6**); for *instructions* in divine matters (**11:26**); to *hear reports* of a preaching tour (**14:27**); to *hear discussion* regarding God’s will for Gentiles, and *be party to a letter* about God’s will (**15:12,22,23**); while others gathered to receive that letter (**15:30,31**). They came together to *break bread* [i.e., to observe the Lord’s Supper - cf. **1 Corinthians 11:18,20**] (**20:7**); to *withdraw fellowship* from a sinner (**1 Corinthians 5:4,5**); to *edify one another* in spiritual matters (**1 Corinthians 14:26**); and to *teach and admonish in worshipful songs* (**Colossians 3:16**).

Check these passages, and let them tell you something about the approved work of saints acting collectively. They worship God together, cooperate in learning more of His will, and in taking the truth to others. They take an open stand against sin, and they give alms to saints who are in need. Did you notice the absence of church ball teams, banquets, holiday socials, or church-sponsored coffee breaks?

Another way to look for the work of the local church is to see how Bible churches used their money. I once talked with a man who was a member of a local church that did not believe in having a “church treasury.” He said they only collected funds when there was some need . . . and when I asked for an example, he cited one time when hail broke several windows of their meeting place. I told him we also only collected funds when there was some need — but we *found a constant need* to promote the Lord’s cause and take the gospel to the world. To this end we printed and distributed tracts, preached the gospel over the radio, supported gospel preachers in several fields, cared for indigent members, etc. A church pools resources (for collective action) by gathering funds that can be exchanged for such work. Let us look again at the history of some Bible churches to see how they used their resources.

To assist brethren in want they sold lands and houses, and laid the money at the apostles’ feet (**Acts 4:32-37**). Later, Paul instructed churches regarding *sending relief to saints far away* (**1 Corinthians 16:1-4**). The local church *supported preachers* who spread the gospel (**2 Corinthians 11:8; Philippians 4:15**). They cared for “widows indeed” (**1 Timothy 5:3,16 KJV**); and supported *elders (overseers)* who labored in word and doctrine (**1 Timothy 5:17,18**). Not one church kitchen, social fellowship hall, or gymnasium. Amazing! How do you suppose they got new members? Or found joy (**Philippians 4:4-7**)?

The Spiritual Nature of Church Work

There seem to be two major divisions of church work in the above — things for which the church could spend its collective resources: namely, *self-maintenance* (worship, self-edification, and care of their own needy) and *world work* (preaching to the world, assisting other needy saints). Of course this is only an outline, and does not specify the details that must be considered. But it gives insight to that which is the authorized function of a local church. It is a spiritual institution, especially designed to meet spiritual needs. This does not mean it is wrong for individual saints to have social fellowship, sports activities, a place in the business world, etc. Such activities are even regulated by God's word "as unto the Lord" discussed in a previous lesson. But the local church, like a fire department, is financed for special reasons. Imagine a fire department, needing a new fire truck, but using its allocated tax money to sponsor a ball team. I knew of a church that built an auditorium and a gymnasium, but did not have sufficient funds to build classrooms and buy needed equipment for them.

At this point we are often asked, "Where is the Bible authority to build any kind of church building?" Authority to assemble is also authority for a *place* of assembly (borrowed, rented, or built), but we know even this can be abused. The place, its furnishings and equipment should be suited to the use God authorized (see above), not a monument to pride nor a place for fun and frolic. When the Corinthians misused the Lord's Supper — making a common meal of it — Paul asks, "Do you not have houses to eat and drink in?" (**1 Corinthians 11:22**). Their *place* of assembly was not under consideration — early churches often worshiped in their homes. And there was nothing wrong, per se, in a common meal. But they were confusing a worship assembly and function (sacred communion with the Lord, **vv.23-29**) with a domestic function, and that was sinful.

Individual Activity vs. Church Activity

Bible evidence indicates a distinction must be made between individual obligations of a Christian and those of the church acting collectively. In 1 Timothy 5:16 we read, "If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and *do not let the church be burdened*, that it may relieve those who are really widows." ("Those who are really widows" — or "widows indeed" in the KJV and ASV — must have special characteristics, according to **1 Timothy 5:3-10**.) Here is an obligation of certain individual saints that is not the obligation of the local church unit.

Another passage showing a distinction in "the church" and individual saints is found in **Matthew 18:15-17**. One brother should go to another who wronged him, and seek to correct the matter privately. Failing this, he is to take one or two more, "that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." Here are a plurality of brethren working on a spiritual problem; but the passage continues: "And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church." The "church" is more than just a plurality of brethren. That distinction must be remembered in studying the work of the church. "But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector." The "church" becomes an extension of those original individual efforts for fairness.

This passage also shows the local church is an entity — it can hear, and speak, and it can function as a unit. While people of God as individuals are to glorify God in all their activities (**1 Corinthians 10:31**; **1 Peter**

4:10,11), the local church is the only organized unit of saints recognized in God's word to accomplish His work. True **people of God** will not organize other than local churches to do the collective work God has assigned them. Evangelism is a work of the church; but local churches overstep divine authority when they organize a "missionary society" and pool church funds in this human organization to carry the gospel to the world. Now, ignoring for the moment the scriptural objects of church benevolence, how can we think church may organize a benevolent society to carry material assistance to the world? Such an organizational concept is erroneous, regardless of emotional appeals.

We have shown that individual saints have God-approved civic, social, and domestic obligations that are not obligations of the local church. But some who agree with us on those distinctions find it difficult to include benevolent obligations in the list. Some cite **Galatians 6:10**, "Let us do good to all [people], especially to those who are of the household of faith." But the context (**6:1-9**) shows individual donors are under consideration, as does the following context regarding circumcision (**6:11-18**). Others cite **2 Corinthians 9:13**, "and [unto] all [people]." Again, the context of this assistance to "poor saints at Jerusalem" is well established (**Romans 15:25-27,31; 2 Corinthians 8:4,14; 9:1,12**). Paul even says the Gentile givers had been made "partakers of their [the recipients' — saints'] spiritual things," and should minister to them [saints] in material things" (**Romans 15:27**). In **2 Corinthians 9:13,14**, the recipients "glorify God" and "pray" for the givers — hardly the response of unbelievers. General benevolence is the responsibility of individual saints.

For a comparison check the usage of "unto all" (*eis pantas*) in **2 Corinthians 9:13**, see **1 Thessalonians 3:12**: "The Lord make you increase and abound in love one to another and to all [people], *just as we do to you.*" Then **v.13**: "so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ *with all His saints.*" "*Eis pantas*" (unto all) does not rule out other saints. See **Philemon 5**, "toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints" (*eis pantas hagious*). I believe the Scriptures limit benevolent work from the church treasury to assistance of needy saints; so that the chief collective work of the saints can be the spreading of the gospel and the worship and edification of those who become the **people of God**. Clearly, churches are to be *independent and autonomous*, not forming "teams" of churches that pool their funds in missionary or benevolent projects under some "board" or "sponsoring church." Alms to a church in need (**2 Corinthians 8:14**) is a far cry from sending funds to a church with abundance, and allowing its elders to control and supervise those funds.

Study Questions

1. Why did New Testament Christians assemble? How did they use resources?
2. How does this tell us the work of the early churches?
3. Why should this determine the work of the churches today?
4. Explain some New Testament distinctions in individual and church obligations.
5. What was a basic error in the Corinthians' use of the Lord's Supper?
6. Name works of self-maintenance and world works of early churches.
7. Explain Bible authority for providing a place of assembly.

Lesson 11

Misconceptions of “Church”

“CHURCH,” FROM *EKKLESIA* (“CALLED OUT” ONES), IS A COLLECTIVE NOUN, like “flock” (Acts 20:28) or “herd.” When we say “church” we should think “people” — those who have obeyed the call of the gospel, and have Christ as their “one Master” ([Matthew 23:8-10](#)). But this is not the popular conception.

The “Institutional” Concept of the Church

Roman Catholics declare that the church is “a visible, hierarchical society, that is, one made up of subjects and superiors who rightfully rule subjects.” It seems likely that early apostates in the Lord’s church adopted the Judaistic concept of priesthood, considering the bishops (shepherds, overseers, elders) as standing between the “laity” and God. Our quote continues: “The Roman Pontiff and the bishops under him are the ruling hierarchy of the Church.” This hierarchical society is seen as having “the power and authority not only to teach [Christ’s] doctrines but also to administer His sacraments” (channels of divine grace). Those sacraments according to Catholics are Baptism, Confession (forgives actual sins), Holy Eucharist (the Lord’s Supper), Confirmation, Holy Orders (confer powers of priesthood), Matrimony, and Extreme Unction (*Baltimore Catechism No. 3*, with notes by John A. O’Brien; Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, IN).

Note the expression above: “the power and authority” to teach, confer blessings, etc. This is the institutional concept of “church,” whereby the *institution* validates and administers. The assumed authority of the church is clearly seen in the following quote. “That the minister validly confer the sacraments it is necessary: first, that he have the power of administering them; second, that he have jurisdiction for those sacraments which require it; third, that he perform all the essential ceremonies; fourth, that he have the intention of at least ‘doing what the church does,’ that is, of performing the sacred ceremony that is usual among Catholics” (*ibid.*, p.190). Catholicism is a prime example of institutionalism, but its principles are found elsewhere.

Among early “Protestants” there was an emphasis upon the priesthood of believers, and some efforts to break with the institutional concept of “church”; but as each denomination grew, and political “rule” was deemed necessary, the clergy-laity distinction and “church authority” were again asserted. Creed-bound partisanship contributes much to this concept, even among those who once stressed the independence and autonomy of the local church. Many cannot seem to believe — to really believe that: (a) each local church appoints its own overseers, who “rule” only in those matters of judgment left to man, and (b) each Christian is a “priest” and must answer to God individually for his worship and service. Matters of faith are determined by Jesus Christ, who rules and will finally judge all by His word.

The “Little Red Wagon”

Catholicism views the church as “established by God for the salvation of souls” (*ibid.*, p.121); while the Scriptures teach that it is the *product* of salvation in Christ. It does not save, *it is the saved*. But Catholics are not alone in this view either. Some seem to see church history in the following way (allowing for a little hu-

mor). The Lord established a saving institution — we will call it a “little red wagon” — so people could climb in and be transported to heaven. But church history tells us drastic changes occurred through the years. The metropolitan system grouped local churches, led to sacerdotalism (authority in the priesthood/church), changes in doctrine occurred — the little red wagon began to break down, and finally was so corrupted it could not take souls home to glory.

Reformers tried to fix the little red wagon, but added unauthorized parts. Working on the bed, they bent the tongue. They put the wheels on backward, and ended up with a wagon going so many different ways it could not take souls to heaven. Then Alexander Campbell (or your favorite Restoration preacher) awoke one beautiful morning, stretched himself, and said, “Believe I’ll fix the little red wagon today.” He took off all unauthorized pieces of equipment, replaced them with strict “GI” parts, straightened out the tongue, put on fast-rolling, well-aimed wheels, repainted the bed, and labeled it down the side: Church of Christ. Now the little red wagon (church) was restored, and could again take souls home to glory. I sincerely hope the reader does not believe that. Appreciation of “Back to the Bible” preaching is a far cry from saying that the perpetuity of some earlier institution is the key to Christ, hence to heaven. The *word* is the seed of the kingdom (**Luke 8:11**). By the power and authority of Christ that word went forth from Jerusalem (**Isaiah 2:2,3; Acts 2:1-47**) and continues today. It can still be received and obeyed, and the recipient can worship and serve God acceptably.

“Church Authority”

Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are not “church ordinances,” i.e., they do not depend upon the church for their validity or authority. Suppose a copy of the Bible should wash ashore on some far-away island, and the inhabitants could translate its message of salvation in Christ. Although no “church” had ever been there, one could accept and obey the Lord (thereby becoming a member of the “body of Christ,” the church universal), and could worship God acceptably. Answer, “if not, why not?” and you may discover how institutionally oriented you are. As others obeyed, the New Testament teaches they should work and worship together (forming a local church), but *the word would validate their baptism and worship*, not some supposed “church authority.”

Churches that believe the apostolic “office” continues today face a number of problems. In the appointment of Matthias to “fill the place” of Judas, qualifications were demanded no man can have today. To be one of the twelve, one must “have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us” (**Acts 1:21,22**). He must be inspired to know “all truth” (**Jn 14:26; 16:13**), “confirming the word through the accompanying signs” (**Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:1-4**). The word “apostle” (one sent), like “angel” (messenger), can have an ordinary usage, but when applied to those who introduced the gospel on Pentecost it has strict requirements. Even Paul, especially “sent” to the Gentiles, had to see the resurrected Lord (**Acts 26:16; 1 Corinthians 15:7,8**). There are no such apostles today (their work lives on in the Scriptures), and to contend there are men today who can add to or change doctrines, and are a ruling hierarchy in the church, is a dangerous absurdity.

(1) If today’s message is truly of God it will not contradict the earlier revelations of the Bible (**Galatians 1:8**). (2) Such latter day revelation would indicate the first revelation was incomplete — but it claims completeness (**John 20:30,31; 2 Timothy 3:16,17**; cf. **Revelation 22:18,19**). (3) The New Testament revelation prepares us “for every good work” (**2 Timothy 2:21**; cf. **Hebrews 13:20,21**).

Every now and then some endeavor to sustain their position by claiming “the great middle section of the church cannot be wrong.” Of course, this ignores the Bible standard, and a long history of “majorities” in error. Paul wrote the Corinthians, saying, “For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise” (2 Corinthians 10:12). Paul then says he has a “sphere which God appointed us — a sphere which especially includes you” (v.13).

When popular publications begin to think of themselves as policemen for “the brotherhood,” their beliefs may become tantamount to a creed — though they would never call it that. Apparently it is difficult for man to humble himself before God and let His word be the sphere “which especially includes” — me.

The Authority of Christ

Local churches should be formed by truly converted *people of God*, drawn together by their common interest in serving the Lord. If they are only converted to “the church,” the church will “let them down.” Seeing its faults (local churches are subject to error) they will be confused, and instead of working for a Bible solution, they will let the church down, becoming a part of the problem. But where members are converted to Christ they work and worship in harmony, each one striving to do what the word of Christ teaches. Differences in understanding God’s word (and such will occur) will be worked out by greater and deeper study of that word, for each member’s allegiance is to Christ, not to self. If this seems idealistic, remember *people of God* are seeking to measure up to a divine standard. It is in such God-ordained striving that they qualify as *people of God*, with faith in His ways as well as in His promises.

In becoming a Christian one sacrifices self to Jesus Christ and is henceforth a servant of the King. Teamwork with other saints also means giving up some independence respecting matters of human judgment; for example, the time and place for meeting together to worship. But never should one of *God’s people* act contrary to a good conscience, established by knowledge of God’s word. It is a misconception that faithfulness to the local church (team) can take the place of wholehearted submission to Christ.

Study Questions

1. What is meant by an “institutional” concept of the church?
2. How does an “institutional” concept affect baptism, the Lord’s Supper, etc.?
3. Does the universal church save, or is it the saved? What about the local church?
4. What were qualifying marks of the twelve apostles?
5. How do the Scriptures negate the concept of latter day revelations?
6. Is truth determined by what “the great middle section” of the church says?
7. Discuss “converted to the church” and/or “converted to Christ.”

Lesson 12

Truth Is A Mountain

OUR STUDY OF THE **PEOPLE OF GOD** AS REVEALED IN THE SCRIPTURES has led us through a consideration of God's search for a special "people" even among the chosen of Israel. We have read the self-sacrificing requirements for becoming a Christian, and how God examines the hearts of those who undertake to travel this narrow path. And we have seen how He expects the Christian to live *all aspects of his life* "as to the Lord." Occasionally the preacher of such stringent requirements will hear some one say, "It is too much — God is expecting too much of me."

Maybe the preacher, in his zeal to convince listeners of their sinful condition, has not placed sufficient emphasis upon the grace and mercy that is the basis for God's remedy. God has sacrificed His Son in order that man may have forgiveness of sins. The Creator is not insensitive, or non-caring about His creatures. He is "longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

But there is another explanation that man, in his pride, is reluctant to consider. We are faced with the disparity of man trying to judge divine standards with human and sin-stained limitations. The water of eternal life flows from a source far above man. Genuine Christianity is not the outgrowth or fruit of human morals, but the acceptance of standards that came from the heavenly Father — from a level of perfection beyond man. Man cannot therefore be a judge of the law (James 4:11); he is judged by the law (James 2:10-12).

Believing in God, he must believe God knows best; and that God's way is the perfect guide for the best life man can have on earth, and the only life he can have in heaven. True **people of God** are dedicated to idealistic principles (they freely admit it), for they realize these come from a source superior to man at his best. Man's effort to obey will be determined by *the extent of his faith*, and genuine faith is not what one "feels" subjectively, but an objective acceptance of the word of God.

Many treat the Bible somewhat as a "holy" icon, perhaps reading a verse or two before retiring, to satisfy emotional feelings. They have little understanding of context, and no inclination to truly *study* a subject throughout. If what they read does not accord with their concepts, they feel free to adjust or flavor it to suit their taste. They love Jesus — Oh, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus! — with little or no grasp of what this entails in application to their lives. Read to such a person, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word" (John 14:23), and you will get a blank stare or be accused of impertinence.

There are those in arrogant rebellion against Bible teaching. Identify and try to correct their error and you are unloving, or "know it all." Usually this kind have no time to "search the Scriptures, whether those things were so" (Acts 17:11). If they cannot win in a confrontation, they are "too holy" to argue with you, so they simply walk away.

The tradition-bound have inherited their religion from their parents or kin folk, and feel no need to "check it out." What was good enough for Uncle Jack is good enough for them. And some are just weak — in many ways. They want someone else to work out a system for them to accept. Leave it up to their preacher! Some come to the preacher and ask, "What do we believe about" this or that. It never seems to occur to them that

this rejects “faith — by hearing — the word” (**Romans 10:17**), and even shows they have little knowledge of the “faith” they pretend to accept. And some, like Pilate, even deny there is such a thing as absolute “truth” (**John 18:38**).

Truth Is a Mountain

Please pamper this old man’s inclusion of something he wrote years ago.

Truth is a mountain, towering high. Majestic and awesome, it beckons the climber. Great and wonderful, clothed in mysteries, it threatens and promises. Benevolently reaching to the world, it summons all; yet sternly holds aloft its crown to challenge each who comes.

Below, in railed and graded trails, move masses. Camera-clicking tourists, worn by travel, scarcely grasp their guide’s trained words, and far less understand the magic scene. The way grows steep, and many faint. They wander aimlessly — adrift in parks and glades of theory, with their creeds. Content to pay lip service to the fountain-head above; they sip its waters, grimace, and add sweets or bitters to their taste. ‘Now, it’s wonderful,’ they say. ‘We must organize a party and bring others to this way.’ So they sip and talk; they praise, with shallow phrase; then pause to rest, and resting, sleep.

Still TRUTH — glorious, wondrous, whole truth, wreathes its head with hoary clouds and calls with voice of thunder: Onward! Upward! Excelsior!

Error shouts derision, stops the ear. With arrogance he hides his wounds and walks another way. Tradition, richly garbed and stiff with age, dares not attempt the rugged path. And weaklings, fearing to look heavenward, support a course that others plan, and wish themselves in better clime.

But Faith responds, and in the earnest seeker whets desire. He dares look up. Toiling, sweating, step by step, he climbs. Struggling across downed timbers on the slope, he pushes upward. Higher and higher, his lungs afire, he climbs with foot and hand; with heart and soul. For TRUTH he lives; if needs be, dies. He asks no quarter, hears no scorn. His hope is fastened on this goal, whose misty drapery sometimes part and to his raptures eyes reveal its sun-swept crest. He needs no other prize than this, for here men bravely find themselves; and here — men humbly walk with God.

Yes, their *faith* causes **people of God** to “look up” to God, and strive to “measure up” to the standards He has set for them. To this materialistic and skeptical age that may mean these people are “superstitious,” “gullible,” or even “ignorant” — which bothers them little, for they have an inner strength that is not easily affected by name calling. Mind you, we refer to true believers — the “church” only in the universal sense of “the saved.” The world may accept “religion” as “having a place” in reducing crime or improving the mores of society; and the faithful do improve the world as they pass through. But their motivation is faith in God — their ultimate aim is heaven.

The *truly faithful* take no joy in the weakness of others; rather, they sorrow at their plight, and are anxious to assist them. **People of God** are moved with compassion for all mankind, and are humbled by recalling their own weaknesses. “But for the grace of God there go I.” Jesus pictured the proper attitude in the parable of the Pharisee and publican’s prayers. One prayed, “I thank You, that I am not like other men — extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector [publican - KJV] . . .” But the publican “would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner.’ This man was justified rather than the other” (**Luke 18:9-14**).



The climber of God's mountain is neither self-centered nor arrogant. He is well aware of his weakness, and of the demands of the slope before him. But his faith in God keeps him struggling with a determination that will, through God, ultimately win.

Study Questions

1. Answer the complaint that God is too strict.
2. Why is it impossible for man to judge God?
3. Distinguish "faith" from "subjective" feelings.
4. Is Christianity the fruit of man's moral development?
5. What are some inadequate uses of the Bible?
6. What is the proper attitude toward those in error?
7. Name some key points in "Truth Is a Mountain."

Lesson 13

People of God for Eternity

THE BIBLE PRESENTS GOD AS “IN THE BEGINNING” (**GENESIS 1:1**), the *eternal* Creator. In blessing the children of Israel, Moses said, “The *eternal* God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms . . .” (**Deuteronomy 33:27**). And Paul wrote, “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His *eternal* power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful . . .” (**Romans 1:20,21**). God ever was and ever will be.

Throughout this study we have seen that God, in Jesus Christ, has supplied His creatures with a perfect example for their lives, and the means of forgiveness when they fail. His stringent requirements of a faithful life on the part of mankind are aimed at making a “*people*” who would (a) seek after and find Him; (b) worship and recognize dependence upon Him; and (c) reciprocate His love — in a word, *glorify* God. Peter wrote “to those who have obtained like precious faith with us,” and said to such were given “exceedingly great and precious promises; that through these you may be *partakers of the divine nature*, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust” (**2 Peter 1:1-4**). It seems obvious that God’s “great and precious promises” reach far beyond man’s temporal life, encouraging him to prepare for eternity — the realm of the Eternal Creator. They serve as a prelude for an eternal destiny.

The faithful are promised heaven, life everlasting, and eternal life so often that we need mention only a few Scriptures (**John 3:12-16; 6:40; Romans 2:7; 6:23**). Even in such limited citations, the resurrection of man and immortality is clearly taught. Peter says there will be “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (**2 Peter 3:13**). Man’s resurrection is linked with that of Jesus Christ (**1 Corinthians 15:12-28**), and the destiny of the faithful is “thus we shall always be with the Lord” (**1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**).

We are told that the Lord is at God’s right hand, in heaven (**Mark 16:19; Ephesians 1:19-23**). So, to “be with the Lord” is to be in heaven, but what does this mean? Descriptions of heaven are few, and are usually couched in figurative language. Apparently the reason for this is that time-and-space-bound people are not capable of grasping details of the hereafter. A literal description of heaven could bring no mental image to the mind of those whose power of perception is limited to things of this life.

In **2 Corinthians 12:2**, note how Paul tells his out-of-this-world experience. “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago — whether in the body I do not know; or whether out of the body, I do not know, God knows — such a one was caught up to the third heaven.” He repeats much of this in **v.3**, then says, “How he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.” Puzzle over that awhile, and it will add to what has been said about man’s limitations. In **Luke 16:19-31** a parable-like account is given concerning the dead, which pictures the place of the dead divided into “torment” and “Abraham’s bosom,” separated by a great gulf. The main point of the lesson is not to describe eternity, but that man must heed God’s word in this life, if he would escape torment in the next.

John’s Revelation describes various aspects of heaven in apocalyptic fashion. If we will respect the figura-

tive style of writing (see [Isaiah 13:9-13,17](#)), we can learn enough about heaven to want to dwell there. We are told the faithful will come before the throne of God and serve Him. There will be no more hunger; the Lamb will lead them unto living waters; and God shall wipe away all tears ([Revelation 7:13-17](#)). Christ will overcome evil, and those who die in the Lord (the faithful) will rest from their labors ([14:11-13](#)). Reward is pictured in Jewish terms — New Jerusalem, coming down from God, with twelve gates of pearl representing the twelve tribes of Israel; twelve foundations representing the twelve apostles; and a street of gold ([Revelation 21:1-22:21](#)). The imagery is clearly that of unimaginable beauty and wondrous glory, inadequately described despite all superlatives — desirable above all else. In eternity the true *people of God* will dwell in a God-worthy setting, in the presence of Deity. What more can we say!

It is heartbreaking to hear materialistic perversions of heaven. “I want a gold mansion, silver lined.” The Greek word for “mansions” in [John 14:2](#), means simply an “abiding place,” used again in [v.23](#), concerning the Father and Son making their “abode” in man. Do not allow lust for material possessions to cheapen concepts of the eternal home of the soul. (And why would one want a home made of street material?)

We often hear eternity discussed as though all are going to heaven. A sign at a cemetery entrance read “Gateway to Glory,” and it set me to looking for the “other gate.” I have never found it — unless it is right there in the first sign. Could it be that we invite that “other” destination by empty words and soothing assurance that come from well-meaning friends and loved ones who have neither right nor reason for such hope? What I am trying to say is, *there are two (yes, two) destinations in eternity*. Take a long look at [Matthew 25:46](#). Following the judgment scene ([vv.31-45](#)), Christ says, “And these will go away into *everlasting punishment*, but the righteous into *eternal life*.” The two destinations are of equal duration; declared by the same divine authority.

We said in the introduction to this study, “The sovereignty of God is vindicated in final and irrevocable judgment ([2 Corinthians 5:10](#)), for none can reject God with impunity.” Man is free to say either “Yes” or “No” to God — else we are mere puppets, and our words and actions have no moral value. Heaven is prepared for those who say “Yes” — who glorify God in faithful obedience from the heart. The grace and mercy of God make this possible, as we have seen. But the justice of God makes eternal punishment necessary for all who reject His magnanimous invitation. The same Revelation that tells us of heaven also says, “But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death” ([Revelation 21:8](#)). Jesus put it simply, “Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins” ([John 8:24](#)).

In this study the writer pleads unashamedly with the reader to consider these eternal destinies. A life of faith demands self-sacrifice — a death blow to pride that is based upon worldly ambitions. But with genuine faith we find an inner “peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” ([Philippians 4:4-9](#)). There are other blessings in this life if we value character, a happier home, better citizenship, and the like; but genuine Christianity never loses its emphasis upon the life to come — the promise of a home in heaven.

People of God have no denominational or national organizations, the local church being their only collective activity. They are not seeking your money, have no political goals, are not simply “number hungry,” but are truly concerned for your spiritual well-being on an individual basis. They recognize their own spiritual

weakness, but freely acknowledge this and pray God for forgiveness. *People of God* believe Christ has gone to prepare a place for them, and will return to “receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also” ([John 14:1-6](#)).

The Great Commission

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” ([Matthew 28:19,20](#)).

“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” ([Mark 16:15,16](#)).

“Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” ([Luke 24:46,47](#)).

The Abrahamic Promise Fulfilled

“For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” ([Galatians 3:26-29](#)).

Study Questions

1. Could man understand a literal description of heaven? Why or why not?
2. How many destinations are there in eternity?
3. What does justice demand for the rebellious sinner?
4. Is Christianity aimed chiefly at this life? Explain.
5. Name some characteristics of true people of God.

