

“How to Become a Christian”
Romans 3:20-26 and other Selected Scriptures
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(salvation, evangelism)

Most of us know the story of the people of Israel escaping from slavery in Egypt.

Well over a million people, with their cattle and household belongings caravanned across the Egyptian and Sinai deserts.

By the time they got to Mt Sinai, I think they were shell-shocked.

- They had seen miracle after miracle in Egypt before the Pharaoh allowed them to leave.
- They had seen a pillar of fire at night moving to guide their way.
- They had seen the Red Sea open up before their eyes to allow them to escape the pursuing Egyptian army after Pharaoh again changed his mind.

Then when they came to Mt Sinai the Bible says:

Exodus 19:16-19; 20:18-19 “On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God... Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder.... When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."

I can only imagine the fear they experienced.

Can you imagine standing before God?

Have you ever felt vulnerable, so vulnerable that you were afraid?

Have you ever stood alone atop a mountain, or at the edge of the ocean, or under a night sky and had even a fleeting experience of almost overwhelming insignificance?

What will it be like to stand before **God**; God the sovereign creator of those stars, that ocean, and those mountains?

Deuteronomy 4:24 “For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.

In the Gospel of Luke, chapter 8 (26-37), there is an interesting account of an incident with Jesus.

Jesus and some of his disciples took a boat across Galilee.

When they got out of the boat they were met by a man who had been acting in crazy ways, apparently for a long time.

He went around naked, didn't live in a house but lived in the graveyard.

When he saw Jesus he began screaming.

Jesus recognized that the man was possessed by demons and so he ordered the demons out of the man.

The demons begged not to be sent to hell but be allowed to inhabit a herd of pigs nearby.

Jesus gave them permission and they entered the pigs and the pigs immediately went crazy and rushed into the lake and were drowned.

Those who were tending the pigs saw the whole thing happen and rushed to town to tell about it.

When the villagers came out to see for themselves they found the formerly crazy, naked, tomb-dweller clothed and in his right mind.

Here's the part I most want you to hear: When the people realized what had happened “they were afraid.”

Luke 8:37 “Then all the people of the region of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them, because they were overcome with fear.”

It's a little hard to put ourselves in the villagers' place but maybe we can try.

Life was normal. People did their jobs. Yes, there was a crazy man loose in the graveyard but he'd been there a long time and everyone knew how to ignore him. Life went on.

Then this man Jesus came and something happened that they couldn't fit into their understanding of how life works.

In fact it was so out of the ordinary, so disconcerting, so disrupting of life, as they knew it, that the emotion they felt was fear.

Something was happening here that they couldn't account for and they couldn't control.

There was something very dangerous about Jesus!

What will it be like for us to stand in the presence of that Jesus?

Colossians 1:15-16 "He (Jesus) is the image of the invisible God (HE IS GOD)... By him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible... all things were created by him and for him.

Rudolf Otto, a theologian of a previous generation, coined the phrase, "mysterium tremendum" – the awesome mystery.

He said there is a vague, incomprehensible, something in the universe, surrounding the universe, and experienced in the heart of every person.

In all of human nature there is this instinct that there is something uncreated, something besides us.

According to the Apostle Paul in Romans all people have that instinctive knowledge of the existence and power of God - the awesome mystery:

Romans 1:20 "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

Did those villagers in Luke 8 believe in God?

I suppose they did – at least they believed in their concept of God that left them alone to pursue life as they saw fit.

But when they met Jesus – the holy one – they were terrified.

They were afraid because here was an awesome mystery, one who was unique, wholly other, who didn't fit their categories.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "An impersonal God (we accept), well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, better still. A formless life force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap, best of all. But God himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at infinite speed, the hunter, king - that is quite another matter. There comes a moment when children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: was that a real footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found him? We never meant it to come to that. Worse still, supposing he had found us?" (C.S. Lewis *Miracles* 98)

What will it be like, for you, to stand before Jesus?

Early in his experience with Jesus, the fisherman Peter had a feeling similar to the villagers.

Peter and the others had been fishing all night and had caught nothing.

Early in the morning Jesus, watching from the shore, called to them to put their nets down in a different place, which they reluctantly did.

They caught so many fish that two boats could not contain the catch.

Here's what the Bible says in Luke 5:8 "When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"

As with the villagers, Peter experienced something he couldn't categorize and understand.

It was so out of place, so out of the normal experience of life, so unnerving that he wanted to get away from it, or in this case, he wanted Jesus to go away.

Peter tells what frightens him.

The very presence of Jesus was so indicting of Peter's own character that Peter couldn't take it.

Peter didn't just feel afraid in the presence of overwhelming power in comparison to his puniness; **he felt afraid in the presence of the genuine purity in comparison to his own sinfulness.**

Somehow the miracle Jesus performed gave Peter a glimpse of Jesus' holiness and like a crimson stain on white linen, Peter saw himself out of place, unworthy, and vulnerable.

According to the Bible, since Adam and Eve and because of Adam and Eve, every person who has ever lived is both a sinner and has sinned against the sinless, sovereign, creator, God – Jesus. (Genesis 3; Romans 3 and 5)

- Sin is not just the breaking of arbitrary laws.
- Sin is defiance against a sovereign holy God – Sin is rebellion.

Sin wouldn't be such a problem for us if we didn't have to stand before an all-powerful, holy God.

1 Peter 4:5 "But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

What will it be like to stand before him?

The whole point of the creation of humans was for us to have a relationship with God.

Both the Old and New Testaments declare the same: God says, "You shall be holy for I am holy." (Leviticus 11:45; 1 Peter 1:15; and other places)

But the OT preacher in Habakkuk 1:13 declared, God, "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.

Holiness is like pregnancy; you can't be "just a little."

Sin is the antithesis of both the character and the will of God. We cannot have a relationship with God while we are unholy.

But the situation is actually worse than what I have thus far described.

The Bible says in Romans 1:18 “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men...”

The Bible says God is angry.

And God’s anger is not just petty pique at injustices done but it’s a settled hatred of the sin that violates everything God is and desires for his people.

- We laugh at an immoral Monday Night Football advertisement but God hates it.
- We wink at slander and gossip but God hates it.
- We overlook lies, petty theft, envy, coveting, disrespect of parents and the rest but God hates it.

Because sin destroys everything it touches.

It destroys God’s created world; it destroys relationships, it destroys people’s lives and it destroys the soul.

Do you not see its destructive power all around you and have you not felt its power in you and in others because of your sin?

It is God’s permanent, enduring nature to oppose and judge sin.
He would cease to be God if he didn’t judge sin.

And the Bible promises that God will eventually **destroy** sin and the unrepentant sinner.

Jesus said in Luke 12:4-5 “I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more.

⁵ But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.

Paul wrote, 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9 “He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes (again).

Jesus said, John 3:36 “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for **God's wrath remains on him.**”

What will it be like to stand before him?

The Bible says, Hebrews 10:31 “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

260 years ago a famous sermon was written wherein the preacher, attempting to communicate the certainty and terror of judgment, said the following:

*Unrepentant people “are held in the hand of God over the pit of hell; they have deserved the fiery pit, and are already sentenced to it; and God is dreadfully provoked, his anger is as great towards them as to those that are actually suffering (in hell already), and (the unrepentant) have done nothing in the least to appease or abate (God’s) anger. Neither is God in the least bound by any promise to (keep them out of hell for **one more minute**); the devil is waiting for them, hell is gaping (open) for them, the flames gather and flash about them, and (waits to) swallow them up; the fire pent up in their own hearts is struggling to break out: and they have no interest in any Mediator. There are no means within reach that can be any security to them. In short, they have no refuge, nothing to take hold of, all that preserves them every moment is the mere arbitrary will, and forbearance of an incensed God... You probably are not (aware) of this; (You know) you are (not now in) hell. You look at other things: (Your good health), your care of your own life, and the means you use for your own preservation. But indeed these things are nothing; if God should withdraw his hand, they would avail no more to keep you from falling, than the thin air to hold up a person that is suspended in it.”* (J. Edwards in “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”)

We don’t often use that kind of language today; it seems too severe, too “over the top.”

But is it not the language of our Lord in his Word?

Revelation 20:11-15 “Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened... The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books Then (all) were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone’s name was

not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Like an ostrich that puts its head in the sand in the face of danger, so we too are fools who believe some of what Jesus says and ignore the rest.

Jonathan Edwards, the preacher I mentioned earlier, went on to say, “How dreadful is the state of those that are daily and hourly in the danger of this great wrath and infinite misery! But this is the dismal case of every soul in this congregation that has not been born again, however moral and strict, sober and religious, they may otherwise be. Oh that you would consider it, whether you be young or old! There is reason to think, that there are many in this congregation now hearing this discourse, that will actually be the subjects of this very misery to all eternity.... If we knew that there was one person, even one, in the whole congregation, that was to be the subject of this misery, what an awful thing would it be to think of! If we knew who it was, what an awful sight would it be to see such a person (in hell)! (J. Edwards in “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”)

What will it be like to stand before Jesus?

And stand before him we will!

Hebrews 9:27 (AV) “It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.”

See yourself there. What will you say?

What excuse will you give for disobeying him, ignoring him, violating his commands, or disrespecting his person?

In dim comparison I imagine an earthly father growing increasingly angry with two rowdy young sons unwilling to quietly go to sleep.

After calling to them several times to obey, he throws open the door and calls them to account.

What will they say?

- Will they both say they shouldn't be punished because the other was louder?
- Will they dare to say a neighbor kid was making the noise?
- Will they venture to say they didn't mean to do it?

- Do they really think that promising to be quiet will right the injustice of hours of rebellious disobedience?
- Have they been warned so many times and still think they are deserving of mercy?

Like those boys, on our own, we stand before a sovereign, holy, and rightfully angry God, without excuse, guilty, condemned, and defenseless.

That is the situation of every human being since Adam and Eve.

- Do you know that to be true of you?
- Do you understand that unless something is done, you too are God's enemy only waiting for the completion of your destruction?
- And can you see how there is nothing you can do?
- Do you realize, as maybe never before, that you stand defenseless before a holy God?
- Do we really think we can buy our way out of judgment?
- What do we have to offer a holy God?

Do we offer promises of doing better in the future?

What fools! We know we can't be righteous, we can't be holy as He is holy!

And even if we could, what of the rebellion, the sin, already committed?

Is a holy, righteous, just God to overlook our sin?

He can't!

Romans 6:23 "The wages of sin is death."

Ezekiel 18:20 "The soul that sins will die."

Why have I spent so much time telling us we are miserable, hopeless, helpless sinners?

Because most of us don't believe it!

Too many of us will admit we might be sick in need of a little help but not sinners in need of a savior.

Today it is not that people feel too badly about themselves already and need some encouragement

but that they don't feel badly enough about themselves.

Until we know ourselves to be sinners in need of a savior we will try every futile self-help effort we can think of, including being more religious.

So is there hope for the hopeless? YES!

And the Bible was written as a witness to what **God** has done about our situation.

I hope that I have sufficiently demonstrated to you from the Bible that to have a relationship with a righteous-holy God we must be righteous; we must be holy.

And that conversely, being unholy, we are deserving of God's anger and judgment.

But how can I be holy?

How can I fulfill the commands, the laws, the expectations of God not only in action but also in word and even thought?

I cannot.

That's true for God says even my best efforts are as nothing in comparison to his perfect holiness (Isaiah 64:6).

How close do you have to get to perfect before it stops being imperfect?

I cannot, on my own, be righteous (holy) as God is righteous.

So here finally is the good news – the gospel!

God in his mercy has provided for me to be **declared** righteous, not by my efforts at goodness but solely by his grace through faith.

Here is the heart of it:

That Jesus, God the Son, who will stand as our judge one day is the same Jesus (God in human flesh), who offers us his own righteousness.

I know of no passage of Scripture that more succinctly and clearly presents that good news than Romans 3:20-26

Bear with me as I read the verses and give you a short explanation:
V20 “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his (God’s) sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin;

(We haven’t and we can’t keep the law perfectly, we can’t be declared righteous by virtue of what we have done, and furthermore the law only shows us how unrighteous we truly are)

²¹ But now **a righteousness from God**, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.

*(The entire OT, then referred to as “the Law and the Prophets,” tells about a coming time when **a righteousness from God** would be known, not a futile attempt at earning a righteousness by keeping the law, by being good enough).*

²² This **righteousness from God** comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

*(This **righteousness from God** isn’t earned but instead is given, as an unmerited gift, to those who believe in Jesus).*

²³ There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

(It doesn’t matter how religious or pagan, good or evil, you have been, all have sinned and come up short of the perfect righteousness/holiness of God).

²⁴ (But we) are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

*(Instead of any futile attempt at earning it, this **righteousness from God** is given to us by God’s grace – we are declared justified, righteous, - through what **Jesus** did).*

²⁵ God presented him (Jesus) as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.

(Before the creation of the world God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit determined that God the Son, Jesus, would come to pay the penalty for our sins.

That is what the cross is all about – The perfect Son of God dying for you and me, turning God’s anger away from us.)

²⁶ He (The Triune God) did this to demonstrate his justice... at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

(By Jesus' death for our sins, God remains just, punishing our sin as it deserves, and at the same time justly declaring those who trust in Jesus to be justified, righteous!).

Here's the way the Bible says it in 2 Corinthians 5:21
 "God made him (Jesus) who had no sin to be sin for us,
 so that in him (Jesus) we might become the
 righteousness of God.

Four years ago my wife, Barbara, and I stood in a Jefferson County courtroom and the judge declared a 2 ½ year old boy to be a Nelson.

That little boy had no Nelson relatives and no Nelson genes.
 But by declaration, he became a Nelson – legally and
 irreversibly.

God declares that the righteousness, the holiness, we do not have and cannot ever earn, God will simply give to us as a free gift in his Son.

He will **declare** us righteous.

That's what the Reformation, nearly 500 years ago, was all about.

Martin Luther, John Calvin and others realized that the righteousness they needed to stand before a holy God was not the righteousness that God demands (as if they could try hard enough to be that righteous) but the righteousness they needed to stand before a holy God was the righteousness God freely gives to us in his Son.

HOW? How can the righteousness of Jesus be given to me?

Look again at Romans 3:22, "**This righteousness from God** comes through faith in Jesus Christ **to all who believe**.

This righteousness of Jesus is given to us, through faith, when we believe in Jesus.

The NT uses several words to describe this:

- Trusting Jesus. (Romans 4:5)

- Accepting him. (John 13:20)
- Receiving him. (John 1:12)
- Believing him (John 3:16)
- Having faith in him (Philippians 3:9)

Responding to the Philippian jailer who asked, “**What must I do to be saved**”, the Apostle Paul replied in Acts 16:31 “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved...”

On another occasion, after the good news was preached, the people asked in Acts 2:37-38, “**What shall we do?**” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.”

This time Peter didn’t use the word “believe” but he used the word “repent.”

According to the Bible “believing” (“faith”) in Jesus is so closely linked with “repentance” that it is like two sides of the same coin.

In Acts 20:21, Paul said the appropriate response to the gospel was “(You) must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.”

So what do we do to become a Christian?

Repent and believe!

What does it mean to repent?

Repentance is not regret, though it may contain regret; repentance is not penance.

Repentance is a reversal of life-course.

Repentance is what happens when we realize that our sin, is both an offense to the holiness of God and fatal to our own soul.

Repentance is the prodigal son “coming to his senses” and going home.

It is abandoning our old way of life and running to Jesus. And it’s continuous – we continue to abandon the old way and we continue to trust in Jesus, the rest of our lives. That’s repentance.

And what does it mean to believe?

It means to believe Jesus, to trust Jesus that he **has** died to pay the penalty for **your** sins (past, present and future), and that he lives **to give you** his holiness, his righteousness, so you can have a relationship with a Holy God, now and forever.

Repentance is the turning; faith is the grabbing hold.

So what do I do?

Turn and believe Jesus!

Listen to God's promises:

Isaiah 55:7

"Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and God will have mercy upon him; and (return) to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."

Jesus said, John 5:24 "Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me **has** eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.

So what do I **do?**

Turn and trust Jesus!

Don't I have to confess all my sins?

If you mean, "Don't I have to turn away from my sin and follow Jesus?"

I say yes that is repentance – it is a turning from the past to embrace Jesus as saving-Lord.

But if you mean, "Don't I have to name my sins and be sufficiently sorry for having done them?"

I say, "No, that is not repentance, that is penance, and Jesus doesn't ask you to do anything about your sins.

He has already done it – God paid for your sins with his own life!

"Don't I have to pray a prayer asking Jesus into my heart as my personal savior?"

“No! Don’t try to do anything to earn the gift of Jesus’ righteousness.

I’m not saying you can’t pray but be careful that you don’t think that **by your prayer** you add the final element to make yourself acceptable to God.

You have already been made acceptable by what Jesus did.

Nowhere in the Bible, that I can remember, does it say you have to say a prayer to become a Christian – you must simply believe Jesus. Do you believe him?

Don’t I have to come forward or go to a prayer room or meet with someone to become a Christian?

No! Don’t add any effort or action on your part to the simple invitation of Jesus – Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

Don’t make a new requirement of praying or going forward.

Do you believe his promise that he will give you **his** righteousness if you believe him?

Then believe him! Believe him now!

Romans 3:21-22 “But now **a righteousness from God**, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This **righteousness from God** comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

Acts 16:31 “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.”