

Chapter 4

THE ONLY WAY!

Are there many roads to heaven, as many like to believe? Are all religions basically the



same? These are very important questions and how you spend eternity may ride on your answer. This chapter will discuss differences between Christianity and other world religions as well as address some of the misconceptions people have that are contrary to what God tells us about what it would take to get into heaven.

What happens to us when we die is something we should give a great deal of thought to because there aren't any issues in our lives where our choice of what we believe carry such great rewards or consequences. If you believe there is a strong possibility of a heaven and hell existing then what can be more important than finding out where you could be going when you die? How sure are you about

your destination?

If we believe there is an afterlife, and the reality is there is not one, then it does not matter what we believe, does it? But what if there really is an afterlife and we don't believe there is one (or don't care)? Is there any evidence of an afterlife and how reliable is that evidence are important questions we should ask ourselves. I'm sure in today's media rich society you have heard or read about after death experiences. How much can we rely on these stories?

This was precisely the question asked by Dr. Michael Sabun, a well respected cardiologist. He had heard of these after death accounts and these accounts aroused his curiosity. Initially Dr. Sabun was very skeptical of books and studies dealing with this subject. These studies often described experiences such as going through a life review, seeing loved ones that were deceased, or feeling a presence of love and peace. Although raised by a church going family, Dr. Sabun believed when you die that is the end of it. He believed Christian beliefs about life after death only purpose was to guide our worldly behavior and reduce anxieties about dying.

Dr. Sabun, in order to satisfy his own curiosity, undertook his own study of after death experiences using an objective, scientific approach. Chapter 4 of the book "God, The Evidence", written by Patrick Glynn, describes what led up to Dr. Sabun's study and the results of that study from Dr. Sabun's own book – "Recollection of Death: A Medical Investigation". The study gives

numerous accounts of such recollections as traveling through a tunnel and encounters with a Christ like figure.

Critics have countered with such explanations as being influenced by religious upbringing (even though many of the subjects had no such background) and/or that the subjects are just dreaming. What distinguishes Dr. Sabun's study and baffles the critics are the accounts of his subjects "out of body" experiences. In this study there were several subjects who said they were at a vantage point where they could observe their body when they were being operated on or revived. These subjects were able to accurately describe what had occurred when they could not have known by any other means than actually witnessing the event. I have little doubt that there are other studies dealing with this same subject and that the evidence of all these studies seem to refute the notion that we turn into nothing when we die and points to a strong possibility of mankind having a "soul" or spirit.

This book primarily deals with how a spiritual relationship affects us while we are living because hopefully death is a long way off. But this fact remains, unless medical technology gets a whole lot better, we are all going to die! Given this fact then, if there is even a remote possibility of spending an eternal afterlife in a great place like heaven or a horrible place like hell don't you think it would be wise to know where you could be headed? I wouldn't want to take any chances of going to the wrong place and procrastinating the investigation can be dangerous because bad things do happen unexpectedly, just watch the news or read the paper to see how often bad things do happen.

In order to secure your eternal destination you will need to understand the answers to the following questions. What is the difference between Christianity and other religions, why is Jesus so important, what does believing in Jesus really mean, and why can't we earn our way into heaven? This focus of this chapter will be to answer these very important questions, and the answers to these questions will have eternal consequences.

How often have you heard Jesus described as just another prophet or just another good teacher that shows us one of many ways to reach God? If his purpose was to simply instruct us on how to have a better life then why did he have to die in the manner prophesied in so many Old Testament scriptures? What did Jesus say about himself? He is claiming to be the only way in the following scripture so you either have to reject Him as a lunatic and liar or accept He is who He says He is.

John 14:6 Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Why only Jesus? Why can't we find salvation through non Christ-centered religions? This is a common question asked by many who begin to form their own opinions instead of blindly accepting what they were taught as a child. Even though questioning our traditional beliefs can cause grief for those we love, I believe it is a healthy thing to do. I believe this is why Jesus said to love God with all our minds as well as our heart and soul in Matthew 22:37. Know why you believe what you do because only then will your beliefs have a real impact on your life and the life of others. I am seeing this from my own research in writing this book. My faith has become much stronger because questions I have had for many years are being answered due to my research and I am gaining a deeper understanding of God.

Getting back to the question of why only Jesus, especially what makes Jesus special compared to other non-biblical "prophets" and philosophies. There are some very good books that explain the differences between Christianity and other world religions and cults. One such

recommended reference book is the well-researched “Handbook of Today’s Religions” by Josh McDowell and Don Stewart. For this chapter I used the book “Fast Facts on False Teachings” by Ron Carlson and Bud Decker because it summarizes the essence of what makes true Christianity different from all other religions and cults. I will give a brief description about these differences from this book.

A major difference between true Christianity and other religions is that other religions are based on man’s attempt to reach or be like God through rituals and works. Many of these religions elevate man to more than what he is and claim we have the power in us to be like God. If there is a concept of God it is an impersonal God. Christianity is God’s attempt to reach man. Christianity is honest. Christianity acknowledges our pathetic state and understands we are not capable of earning our way into heaven because of our rebellious and self-centered nature. Our God wants to be known, and especially known for His great love for us, and desires a personal relationship with us.

One of the world’s oldest and most prevalent eastern religions is Hinduism. Hindus believe you go through cycles of rebirth (transmigration or reincarnation) until you achieve “Brahman-Atman”. Brahman-Atman is true reality and when we cease our personal existence and become one with the “Impersonal All”. Our current life is just an illusion (maya). Yoga and Transcendental Meditation are spiritual techniques used to transcend this world of illusion to a higher state of consciousness - a state of “enlightenment”. TM became popular with many celebrities in the 60’s who were seeking a deeper meaning to life but refused to look to Jesus for the answer.

Buddhism is greatly influenced by Hinduism because Buddha was born a Hindu and he was out to reform Hinduism. Buddha means “the Enlightened One” and this enlightened person was Siddhartha Gautama who probably lived around 500 B.C. and his teachings (dharma) are at the root of Buddhism. He was an atheist who felt Hinduism was being polluted by idol worship. In Buddhism the goal of human existence is to free oneself from the law of “Karma” and to achieve a state of “Nirvana”. Karma is the cause and effect of good and bad deeds. Nirvana is a state of the highest consciousness, when one stops desiring. Desiring is believed to be what causes suffering (some truth to this). You reach this state by going through the “Eightfold Path”, eight right things you must achieve, with the last step being when you achieve “Right Ecstasy”. Life then is a process of “rebirths” (reincarnation) until you finally reach this last step – then all sense of experiences will cease and universal knowledge is obtained. You become one with the “Impersonal”.

Many eastern religion concepts have been adapted into “New Age” teachings. A common belief is – man can become like god. You reach this higher state through reincarnation or techniques to bring you to a higher state of consciousness. This mind over matter theology is prevalent in Christian Science doctrine as well as other mind science cults. God is just some impersonal force (the force be with you) or part of all – trees, rocks, you name it. Some of these New Age teachings recognize our failings so they claim we will reach this higher state through the help of benevolent aliens or some other source of mysterious power.

I can’t help but notice that after more than 4,000 years of being on earth mankind is not any closer to being like god and has not made any real progress in solving the moral problems of mankind. Technology has helped us live longer and live in more comfort but we still commit terrible acts against each other, we have more substance abuse problems than ever, we kill ourselves more than ever, we still have poverty, and we still see much suffering in the world. We think we solve one problem, such as creating welfare to eliminate poverty, and we just create other problems such as destroying the will to be self-sufficient. One can even argue we are more depraved than ever because of increases in child abuse, incest, addictions, and the explosion of

pornography. You would think if we keep getting chances through reincarnation we would eventually get it right! The bible explains it best – we are sinful.

Most people sense a need for spirituality because they know there is something missing in their lives. The problem is many fill this void with beliefs that feed their egos and self-centered lifestyles. This is why you see so many celebrities and well to do professionals embrace New Age and other eastern religion teachings. They see possessions don't bring fulfillment but they reject the real Jesus because their egos won't allow them to see or admit to the sin in their lives, so they don't see the need for Jesus as a Savior, instead they see him only as another spiritual teacher. Many New Age teachings claim we are gods and this appeals to big egos. Many who follow new age and Eastern teachings have little love for others because they love themselves too much. Instead they see their value to mankind by saving the environment because we are one with the earth. Please don't misread what I am saying because our environment is important and many environmentalists have nothing but good intentions. Saving the environment is a noble cause because we should be good stewards of our natural resources.

The problem is when our love of nature is a substitute for loving God and for loving others. Loving others is a major aspect of the Christian life and distinguishes Christianity from other major religions. Hinduism and Buddhism focus on self and leave others to work out their own "Karma". New Age teachings focus on "looking to self" to find fulfillment and value. Islam focuses on obedience and rituals, while Christianity focuses on a personal relationship with God that only means something if we seek this relationship out of our own free will. Love is the foundation of this relationship.

These differences were manifested in the refugee camps along the Cambodian border during the 70s. These camps were created because of the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge. In the heart of Buddhist country there were no Buddhist, Hindus, or Muslims taking care of the more than 300,000 refugees. The only help came from Christian missionaries and relief organizations according to Dr. Ron Carlson, co-author of *Fast Facts and False Teachings*, who visited these camps. Christians can be as heartless as anyone but true Christianity should result in loving individuals who value life and who have a desire to help those who are suffering. It's a faith that makes a difference in lives of others as well as in your own life.

Since Eastern religions and new age thought are more based on philosophies on how to live rather than by scriptures based on historical evidence along with divine "truths" I am going to give you something to think about. These "religions" focus on works and their effects (Karma) and the concept of God is usually a distant, impersonal God. Absolute truths are downplayed with these religions, and this fits well with the currently popular post-modern view that all truths are possible (or none can be known). So if any of these religions are really "the truth" and you error by following the God of the bible – what does it matter, especially if you are doing a lot of "good deeds". After all, absolute truth is not valued with the teaching of these religions. Many teachings say you will get another chance in the next life anyway! What if the God of the bible is "the truth" and you reject this God? You only get one chance and what if you are wrong?

The last major world religions that need to be discussed are Islam and Judaism. The Islam religion, who's followers are Muslims, can be appealing to those seeking order in a world of chaos. Islam is a rapidly growing religion in our country, especially among the African-American community. Muslims believe there is one God called Allah (Arabic translation for Allah - "the God"). Allah ordains the fate of all, and on the day of judgment our good and bad deeds will be balanced to determine our fate. Allah has spoken through many prophets including Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus of the bible. The last and greatest prophet, according to Muslims, is

Muhammad who lived in seventh century Arabia. This is why Islam is strongly influenced by the culture during the life of Muhammad.

Judaism is related to Christianity, and to a very small degree Islam as well, because Jews (those of the Jewish faith, or Jews, the name given to followers of Judaism) accept the books of the Old Testament as the inspired work of God, as do Christians, and Muslims accept some of the stories in both the Old and New Testament but rely on the Koran as their holy book. The major difference between Jews and Christians is those of the Jewish faith are still waiting for the prophesied Messiah, the Savior of the world, while Christians believe the overwhelming evidence points to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophesies in the person of Jesus Christ and Muslims look to Muhammad as the ultimate prophet of God and they view Jesus as just another prophet.

There is a strong connection between Islam and Judaism originating from the Bible. In Genesis chapter 16, the first book of the Old Testament, the story of Abraham and his first-born son Ishmael is told. In verse 12 it is prophesied that Ishmael will be a “wild donkey of a man” and his hand will be against everyone’s and everyone’s hand will be against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers. Abraham is considered the original father of the Arabs, through his son Ishmael, according to Muslims and Jews, while he is also considered the father of the Jews, through the line of Isaac, Abraham’s second son and Ishmael’s brother. One only needs to occasionally pay attention to world news to see how this prophecy has come true.

A difference between Christianity and Islam is the philosophy of personal freedom. Islam governments wield great control and authority over their followers and prescribed rituals are a major part of their religion and culture. Christianity, especially the teaching of the apostle Paul, claim we have been set free from rituals (Galatians 5:1 – it is for freedom Christ has set us free) and our emphasis should be on building our faith through our personal relationship with Jesus and not through religious rituals.

A significant difference between Christianity and Islam, as well as Judaism, is the relationship Jesus had with God and how these faiths view this relationship. As stated earlier Jews and Muslims reject the many Old Testament scriptures (Chapter 3 pointed out several of these scriptures) that Christians believe describe Jesus as the promised “Messiah” (Savior). Christians go much further by recognizing the divinity of Jesus that is made evident in New Testament scripture.

In John 10:30-38 Jesus explains he and God are one, he is in God and God is in him, he is God’s son. He claimed to be divine, proving his divinity by performing many miracles that were recorded in the gospels, while Muhammad only claimed to be a prophet. There is a major difference between claiming to be a spokesman (prophet) for God and being God. When the Pharisees (Jewish religious leaders) accused Jesus of blasphemy because of his claim, he never denied his deity. Being God’s Son gave Jesus divine power (Luke 5:24) and He demonstrated that power through miracles such as healing, bringing the dead back to life, turning water into wine, feeding a huge crowd from one basket of fish and barley, subduing a storm, and his greatest miracle - his own resurrection.

Not only was Jesus superior to a prophet, Jesus and Muhammad were not even close to being on the same page with what they taught. Jesus teaches assurance of salvation through faith in him while faith is also very important to Muslims, salvation is from the will of Allah, and it could be your works or even just a deed that lets you in or keeps you out of heaven. In fact the status of Jesus is not only what differentiates Christians from Muslims and those of the Jewish faith, it is at the core of what differentiates mainline Christianity from Mormons (The Church of the Latter Day Saints) and Jehovah’s Witnesses as well.

At the heart of this controversy is the doctrine of the Trinity. Although the Bible never specifically mentions a “Trinity”, there are ample scriptures that point to a very unique relationship between God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. How we view the relationship between Jesus and God can be critical because a wrong view can lead to very misleading and dangerous doctrines concerning salvation and other life impacting biblical truths. Plus a false view of Jesus and the Holy Spirit can diminish their important involvement in our lives, not because we don’t want them to be involved, but because we underestimate their power by not understanding who they really are.

Trying to understand the relationship between God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit is not an easy task, just as trying to understand infinity and eternity challenges us because it is so foreign to our normal thinking. In fact there have been “religious leaders” who have created their own version of the bible because they didn’t understand or didn’t accept the significance of Jesus. Even Thomas Jefferson, our third President, created his own bible, omitting any scriptures that pointed to the concept of the Trinity, a convenient solution to dealing with a theological concept he never understood.

Changing God’s word and going against the grain of the many traditional biblical scholars has to raise suspicion (note: to check out the effort that went into having an accurate translation of the New International Version of the bible go to the website www.NIV.org). The scriptures clearly point out there are “dark spiritual forces” that are at war with us. It is not unrealistic to assume these forces would try and influence powerful individuals to downplay the deity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. If these forces are successful in diminishing our understanding of the power of Jesus and the Spirit then this could increase their demonic power in our lives.

And these demonic influences are not the type you typically see in horror flicks like “The Omen”, “Bless This Child” or similar type movies. We won’t see any heads turn 360 degrees (a well-known scene in the movie “The Omen”) or huge grotesque demonic monsters. It is a very subtle influence that keeps individuals from really knowing God and tapping into his life benefiting power. These individuals may lead very good lives but they will be robbed of the full joy and power our spiritual relationship should provide not to mention even the possibility of being robbed of their salvation.

I admit I debated about tackling the issue of the Trinity because I wondered how much it really mattered as long as we understand the role of Jesus in our salvation, a role that will be discussed in this chapter. I have concluded it does matter, and what led to this conclusion is that I felt there had to be even more of a reason why these demonic forces would want to diminish our view of Jesus other than just robbing us of joy and God’s power (although these are very important reasons!).

My focus has been how a wrong view affects us, but the more important issue may be how does it affect God and our worship of him? After all, our number one purpose for our creation is to love and worship God, an important point that was touched on in the first chapter and will be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters. In John 4:24 Jesus makes it clear he wants us to worship in “spirit and truth”. Denying or downplaying the deity of Jesus, making him to be someone far less than he is, is not worshiping in spirit and truth. In fact I believe it grieves God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit when we don’t fully understand the significance of the sacrifice Jesus, God in the flesh, has made for us.

So what do we need to understand about the relationship between God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit? Is Jesus just a human being, a created being, a super angel, or something more? Are there three separate Gods or does one God play three separate roles? Is the Holy Spirit just some

mysterious force, a force of God? Before I begin the task of trying to explain what may appear to be something unexplainable, I want to point out what we really need to know is made clear in scripture and for the scope of this book I will just touch on what we should understand using a few key scriptures. For a detailed explanation of the Trinity I would recommend Wayne Grudem's book "Systematic Theology" (chptr14), my primary resource for this topic. Dr. Grudem is research professor of Bible and theology at Phoenix Seminary. He holds degrees from Harvard (BA), Westminster Seminary (M.Div.), and Cambridge (Ph.D.). He has also taught for 20 years at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

The concept of the Trinity can be summed up as follows – there is one God, God exists as three separate persons, with Jesus and the Holy Spirit having subordinate roles to God (but not meaning they are inferior to God), and each person is fully God. It is not three roles played by one person (modalism), or three gods in a cluster (tritheism).

Deut. 6:4 states the Lord is one, Isaiah 44:6 quotes God as saying "I am the first and I am the last; beside me there is no God. And the New Testament does not contradict this claim as 1 Corinthians 8:4-6 states there is no God but one and for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. This last scripture does give us a clue that Jesus is far more than some "super angel".

Jesus took part in the creation and he always has existed along with God, he is not a created being! In the very last chapter of the Bible Jesus tells us (Rev. 22:13) I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last (also see Rev. 1:8,11,17,18). This is not inferring he is the first creation as God used this phrase also in Isaiah 44:6 to describe himself and this phrase is used in Rev. 1:8. This means he always was, always is, and always will be. John in his gospel wanted to make this point very clear, as well as the involvement of Jesus in creation by starting his book with

John 1:1-3 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. *Note - Jehovah Witnesses translate "the Word was God" to mean "a god" but Greek language scholars agree the context should determine the meaning and the context, along with other supporting scriptures, point to "the God"*

In Genesis 1:26 God is saying "let us make man in our image", giving us evidence of the involvement of Jesus in our creation (along with the Holy Spirit as Genesis 1:2 tells us the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters). Some language scholars claims the plural form indicates a form of majesty, not a plurality of persons, but the Hebrew word for "us" is only used two other times (Gen. 11:7, Is. 6:8) where a plurality of persons is the more obvious meaning so biblical scholars agree this is more than likely a reference to Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

The most important truth we should understand about Jesus is his full deity. Not only did Jesus perform many miracles he also claimed to be one with God (John 10:30). The Jewish leaders accused Jesus of blasphemy because he claimed to be equal with God (John 10:33) and he indicates his equality with God when he tells us to trust in God and trust in him (John 14:1), he claimed to exist before Abraham was born (the point being made – he always existed) and used the same title in John 8:58 to describe himself as God did in Exodus 3:14 when Moses asked how to describe God and God said "I am!". John described him as God in 1:1, the apostle Thomas calls him God in John 20:28, so does the apostle Paul in Romans 9:5, as well as the apostle Peter in 2 Peter 1:1.

He has been given power only God could have – to determine who has salvation and who doesn't (John 5:21,22). We are even told to worship him the same as his Father God in John 5:23

when Jesus says “that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father, He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.” So if we fail to give Jesus the proper honor due him we are not worshiping in spirit and truth, as we are commanded to do, and not understanding the full deity and personhood of Jesus is not giving honor to God because we are not giving proper honor to Jesus.

John 3:16 declares Jesus is the one and only Son of God (this verse contradicts the Mormon claim that Jesus and Satan are brothers). This is a very important theological truth because of how it effects our “atonement” for our sins. Atonement is the method God uses to satisfy the demands of his law, his natural order. God’s law exists because it is part of his nature, a natural part of his creation, and living within these laws is the only way man can live in harmony with the universe, in other words live in harmony with mankind as well as God. God’s laws are far more because living by his laws will lead to a more abundant life. Chapter 6 (True Freedom) covers the topic of obedience in more detail.

Just as physical laws exist to keep a certain needed order in nature, moral and spiritual laws exist to keep a necessary order and maintain harmony with mankind and God. Breaking God’s physical, moral, and spiritual laws all carry consequences, a form of required justice (a penalty for breaking the law), and ignorance doesn’t matter. Someone may not know the physical laws concerning nutrition but justice is automatically carried out when he or she would eat unhealthy foods. We may not know we are breaking God’s moral and spiritual laws but this does not change the fact there are still serious consequences, physical and spiritual, for breaking these laws.

In order to satisfy the demands of justice for breaking God’s spiritual laws, and not complying with the will of God is breaking his spiritual law, God has provided a “substitutional” method of spiritual justice. A price had to be paid for breaking the law but someone other than the lawbreaker could pay that price instead of the lawbreaker, and this method is called “atonement”. Jesus paid the price for all lawbreakers.

The meaning of “to atone” is to cover for, to pay a ransom for, or pay a price for another. Before the death of Jesus God required the sacrifice of an “unblemished” animal (the reason why Jesus is sometimes referred to as the Lamb of God) as a ransom, or covering, for the penalty mankind should pay for their sins – a penalty of spiritual death! The animal had to be unblemished to be of value in order to truly be a sacrifice. The innocent blood of animals (animals don’t willfully sin against God) was used as a symbol that pointed to the future Savior, the only one who could truly pay the price for mankind.

Normal man could not pay the price because the blood of one “guilty” sinner cannot cover for another guilty sinner, it had to be innocent blood. The reason why we need atonement will be discussed later in this chapter. The point I now want to make is why the death of Jesus is so significant, why it is important that Jesus became fully man as well as fully God, and why the “virgin birth” described in Matthew 1:18 is a critical part of the Christian doctrine.

It would seem that mankind should pay the price of sin for mankind, and Jesus was fully a man. The problem if Jesus was only a man is that his sacrifice would not totally fulfill all the requirements of the atonement because as discussed in the previous paragraph, only innocent blood could cover for guilty blood. If Jesus had been born of a natural mother and father he certainly would have been a sacrifice of value but would not have been sinless as our sinful nature is inherited at birth. Mary was the mother of Jesus but she conceived by the Holy Spirit so this chain of sin was broken and Jesus remained sinless – thus the perfect and final sacrifice for the price we should be paying for our sins.

The full deity as well as the full humanity of Jesus is also important because who better to be an agent between God and man than someone fully God and fully man. How better for God to communicate with the world and to relate to full humanity than for God to become human. How better to get the message across that mankind cannot do anything to “earn” salvation on his or her own than to have someone more than just a man, someone of the utmost value, God’s one and only Son, to pay the price for us and reconcile us to God the father. And the role of God the Father and Jesus the Son did not start with his virgin birth. God has always been the initiator of all things while Jesus carries out his will. Jesus stated in John 6:38 he came to do the will of his father but scripture indicates he has also made appearances before his virgin birth to communicate God’s will with man as recorded in the Old Testament (Gen. 16:7-13, 18:1-22, 19:1-28).

Before I start going into more detail about God’s plan for our salvation I want to wrap up this discussion about the Trinity by making a few more important points. As already stated God is one, in other words there are not three separate Gods and this was an important distinction because this message was being conveyed to a culture where polytheism, the worship of many gods, was common. The Trinity is also not one God playing three roles because there are numerous instances where God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit communicate with each other or are identified as three separate persons.

For example John 1:32,33 describes the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus while God tells John “this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. My focus has been on the relationship between Jesus and God but the role and personhood of the Holy Spirit should not be overlooked! The Spirit also has divine attributes (see Gen. 1:2, Ne. 9:20, Isaiah 39:7) and is called God by Peter in Acts 5:4. Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 28:19 to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit indicating an equal standing of the three. The important role of the Holy Spirit will be discussed in Chapter 11 – The Game Plan.

The rest of this chapter will be dedicated to explaining why our good deeds have little (I say little because our deeds or “works” have nothing to do with getting into heaven but our faith should produce good deeds in us) to do with our eternal salvation and why Jesus is so desperately needed to reconcile us with God. In order to be reconciled with God all we have to do is “believe” in Jesus, unfortunately there are many who do not understand what this really means. When Jesus talks about believing in Him He means more than just believing in His existence. This is made very clear in James 2:19 where it is pointed out that even demons believe that God is who he say he is (and that Jesus is the Savior) and that belief doesn’t help them one bit.

Have you ever been asked if you believe in a professor, teacher, a coach, or anyone who has an influence in your life? What do you think is meant when that question is asked? Do you think they want to know if these individuals exist and are who they say they are? It should be obvious existence and their position of authority is not the issue, yet there are many who think that is the issue when talking about Jesus. They think it is enough just to acknowledge (give credence) he is our savior.

In fact in John 2:23-25 this very point is being made by Jesus. In verse 23 it is told that many people saw the miraculous signs Jesus was doing and they believed in his “name” (Messiah which means Savior). Yet in the next verse it is stated Jesus would not entrust (commit) himself to them. He knew their hearts (verse 25) and he did not believe their belief. Jesus understood that

GREEK VERB “BELIEVE” = PISTEUO

To believe, also to be persuaded of, and hence to place confidence in, to trust, signifies, in this sense of the word, reliance upon, not mere credence.

Source – Expository Dictionary of New Testament words , by W.E. Vine

needed to reconcile us with God. In order to be reconciled with God all we have to do is “believe” in Jesus, unfortunately there are many who do not understand what this really means. When Jesus talks about believing in Him He means more than just believing in His existence. This is made very clear in James 2:19 where it is pointed out that even demons believe that God is

these people did “acknowledge” him as their savior, and he also knew they were more interested in what they could get out of him than believing him enough to actually follow him, just like many do today. Was their belief still enough to save them? Some bible scholars may say yes, while many no, but there is little debate how this type of belief damages a fruitful spiritual relationship with him.

When you really believe in anyone you believe in what they stand for, what they are all about. If you believe in anyone you want to know what that they have to say about life and you listen and act on what they tell you to do with a passion. You need to believe in Jesus in that very same way! Intellectual knowledge is not enough.

John 5:39,40 You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

When we are called to believe in Him we are expected to understand who He is, what His purpose is, why we need Him, and how He wants us to lead our lives. Believing He existed means nothing. What means everything is if we believe him enough to act on what he wants us to do and only then will His words have meaning for our lives.

Fortunately the Bible explains who Jesus is, what His purpose is, and why we so desperately need Him. The first thing we have to do to understand why Jesus is so important is to know we don't live up to God's standards. This is a real problem for a lot of people because we are deceived into thinking we are really good people and are good enough to go to heaven if there is one.

Hollywood perpetuates this myth with countless story lines about someone having to do a good deed or deeds to get into heaven. These messages appeal to us but also deceive us about our condition in God's eyes. If we compare our standards to Adolph Hitler, mass murderers, or hardened criminals we seem to be pretty good people but we are not compared to God's standards. Not doing God's will, and His will is for us to live up to His standards and commands, is called sin. If you examine the Bible and are honest with yourself you will see how often we sin. Understanding we do not live up to His standards is critical for understanding why Jesus is so important.

Romans 3:23 “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”

We probably break many of the “Big Ten” list of commandments more often than we think. Exodus 20:1-20 lists the Ten Commandments. If you read them you will see we are to honor our mother and father, keep one day to be holy (the Sabbath), not to bare false testimony (lie), not to covet (desire to have what is not ours), and not to use Gods name in vain. Have you ever swore using God's name or been disrespectful to your parents? Do you set aside one day to rest and truly honor God? Do you ever lie or wish you owned what someone else has? The first commandment tells us not to have any other gods before the God of the bible. We may not worship any other deity but when we make other things in our life more important than God we are effectively doing the same thing.

God's standards go deeper than what we do because we are also judged by what we think. Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:21,22 if we are even angry toward our brother, we will be judged the same as if we actually committed murder. In versus 27,28 of the same chapter he tells us if we look at another person lustfully that is the same in our heart as if we actually lived out what we were thinking. This makes sense coming from a perfect God because our thoughts are what give

birth to our actions. If someone fantasizes committing adultery what would stop him or her from acting on a real opportunity, especially if there was little fear of getting caught and suffering any consequences? If someone even thinks about stealing something what would stop him or her if they knew they wouldn't get caught? So it should not be hard to understand why we are judged by what is in our hearts.

Not only are we guilty of sins of commission, we are also guilty of sins of omission. Do we love our neighbor and even our enemies, do we worship and honor God, do we help those in need, and do we tell others about God? Sins of commission are doing things we shouldn't do while sins of omission are not doing the things we are expected to do and we are guilty of both.

The next thing we need to understand is the implications and the penalty for not living up to these standards. Our rebellion and failure to do God's will separate us from God. God is holy, perfect, and that is just the way it is whether we understand God or not. If we learn to know him we will learn to appreciate his perfection. But if we really examine ourselves, if we are really honest about ourselves, we can begin to see how far we are from being holy. This huge gap separates us from God because we are on such different levels of "goodness" and what we think is good is not even close to God's "holiness" standards.

Isaiah 59:2 But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.

Imagine a mid-school age basketball player thinking he or she is good enough to play on a college basketball team. Now this player may excel among peers, in other words in his or her world they are considered very "good", but there is an entirely different standard this player has to meet in order to play on a college team. He or she would only alienate the coach because of their very unrealistic view of themselves. Because of their view of themselves there is no basis for any relationship with the coach. Imagine us thinking we should be in heaven because we are good enough to be there, that we meet God's expectations! This is our problem and Romans 6:23 tells us the spiritual wage we actually earn is death, a spiritual death that separates us from God.

Being separated from God means not being with Him in heaven. If you're not going to heaven then hell is your destination. In the book of Matthew Jesus several times describes hell as a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (8:11, 13:42, 13:50, 22:13, 25:20) and as a fiery furnace or a place of fire (13:42, 13:49, 18:8, 25:41, 9:43). It's a place I would not want to take any chances of going to!

Human behavior is shaped by rewards and consequences. Positive motivation (rewards) should be the norm but sometimes fear of consequences does get our attention. For example, coaches and employers will make rules you have to follow and if you don't follow them you run the risk of being kicked off the team or fired. For some these consequences will cause them to think more about their actions than if there were no consequences to face. Hell is definitely a potential consequence worth thinking about.

There are many scriptures describing Hell as a real place where those condemned to being there will suffer and be in torment. Maybe there are different levels of hell just as there may be different levels in heaven. From the many scriptures that refer to hell, they all indicate it is a place of suffering. There are some preachers who play on a fear of hell and they use "turn or burn" messages to scare individuals into finding out what Jesus is all about. I prefer positive messages but as I said earlier in this chapter it is foolish to ignore or procrastinate thinking about the possibility of spending eternity in hell.

Hell exists for the condemnation of Satan and fallen angels that rebelled against God. God did not create this place for us. It is important to understand God does not want anyone to be in hell because His desire is for all of us to be with Him in heaven (2 Peter 3:9). Our rebellion leaves God with no choice because our soul has to go somewhere when we die and it can't go to heaven if we reject Jesus because we are rejecting God. I sometimes wonder if hell was originally created as a place of torment because just not being with God will be great punishment. I sometimes think hell may be a place of torment because this is where Satan and his angels (demons) rule and Satan torments those in hell just to get at God because he knows how much God loves all of us – even those who reject Him. God has given us our free will and we use our free will to choose our destiny after death as well as we do in life.

Because of God's love for us He has provided a very simple way for us to be with Him yet pride and rebellion will cause many to condemn themselves by rejecting God and His plan for our salvation. Because God does love us and He knows our nature He sent Jesus Christ to pay for our inability to meet His standards (our sin). Jesus Christ paid the price, covered for us, for our inability to keep His standards and our disobedience and rebellion have been forgiven when Christ died on the cross.

Is everything OK now? Will you have the relationship God wants for us just because Jesus died for us 2,000 years ago? How has the death of Jesus made your life any different up to now? You still have to make a decision in your life to be reconciled to God. You simply need to accept (receive) what Jesus did for us and acknowledge you need Him.

It is an attitude of your heart that is important and not what you do. In other words you need to admit (confess) you don't live up to God's standards (you sin) and even though Christ paid for our "sins" 2000 years ago we have to acknowledge the need for Him in our lives. We simply have to admit we are not on the same level as God.

This would be like the young basketball player in my example going up to the college coach and saying, "I know I am not worthy to be on your team but I want to learn from you so I can become worthy someday." If this player recognizes their limitations and how much they need the help of the coach, and if this coach has a love for developing and encouraging young players, a mentor type relationship now can be formed. One major difference in this example is that in order to play on a college team the athlete will have to play at a much higher level. Performance is what counts. But with God it is our heart that counts and not what we do. We just have to know we are not good enough on our own to be on God's team. We need the help of Jesus to intercede for us.

God wants to get the best out of us. He wants us to have fellowship with him as long as we recognize and appreciate who God really is and how much he can help us because of his love for us. All we have to do is understand how far we are from living up to God's standards and if we understand how much we need his son Jesus because we are not even close to being on the same level of "goodness" as our creator, then we have a basis to form our relationship with God. The first step to improving is to always to admit you need to improve. The first step to overcoming sin is to admit we sin.

1 John 1:8-10 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

Repenting is admitting we sin and being truly sorry for those sins. It is having a true desire to change, to turn from our sin and turn to God. We will never be able to overcome sin unless we really deep down inside acknowledge and understand disobeying God is harmful to us, to mankind, and to our relationship with God. If we are truly repentant we will not want to continue disobeying God, we should want to turn to him for our strength to overcome sin. We will have a basis for a relationship with God because we will recognize how much we need Jesus and we will have a desire to be like him. God and Jesus want us to have a relationship with them and all we need is a repentant heart to have that relationship. God is so willing to forgive us of our “sins” if we just admit we sin and if we are truly sorry for those sins, as opposed to just being sorry for the consequences of those sins. Then God and his son can go to work in our life and free us (a time of refreshing) from our destructive attitudes and habits.

Acts 3:19 Repent, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord,

Not only must we accept why Jesus died for us we also need to understand Jesus rose from the dead and is still alive! He should be in control of our lives – in other words our “Lord”. A Lord is someone who had complete control over the lives of others and meant much more than a teacher, guide, or mentor.

Romans 10:9,10 That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.

The resurrection of Jesus is a crucial event. If this did not happen then Jesus was a fraud! All the teachings about the love and power of God would be meaningless. This is why Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:14 - if Christ had not been raised from the dead all his preaching and the preaching of the apostles would be useless, therefor making our faith useless.

The resurrection of Jesus proves His divinity and because of this it is the main source of attack from critics of Christianity. Critics say it just plain didn't happen, it's just a myth. Ask yourself this question – do you think someone, let alone a group of individuals, would give up their lives for someone they knew was a fraud? Jesus predicted his resurrection and if Jesus did not rise from the dead the apostles would have known this and they would have discovered He was not who He said He was. What do you think caused such a big change in the apostle Peter? The night before the crucifixion he denied he knew Jesus three separate times (Mark 14:66-72) and after the event he risked his life, eventually losing it, to tell the world about Jesus. Matthew 26:56 tells us the disciples deserted Jesus and fled when he was arrested. These were not men of courage before the death of Jesus.

The book of Acts, which describes the growth of the early church, shows a very obvious change in their convictions and courage after the death of Jesus. Most of the apostles died the deaths of martyrs. After all, their leader was thought to be dead, so it would have been even easier to desert him when he was gone. The ministry of the disciples was not about money or power but about changing lives so what did they have to gain by risking their lives if Jesus was a fraud? Something significant must have happened! Something did – the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Because of His resurrection and His power your life will be changed if you accept Him as your “Lord” as well as your Savior. The result of your decision will result in you becoming a new person because you will be reborn spiritually.

John 3:3 In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Your spiritual rebirth will cause you to view life differently than you did before because of the Holy Spirit. You will make changes in your life with God's help, not because you feel you should but because you want to. You will be changed on the inside and this inside change should change you on the outside as well. Now this does not mean you will go around speaking "Christian speak" all the time (i.e. hallelujah brother, amen to that) and hitting everyone over the head with your bible, but your life's priorities will be different.

In your old life you were living for yourself and the norms of the day (living for the world). In your new life you are living for God. It would be like starting a new relationship with someone that really cares for you after an old relationship with someone who didn't. This refreshing new relationship will change your motivation, your attitude, your priorities, and therefore your life.

This new relationship should set us free from the guilt associated with our sins. So you would think it would be obvious to Christians, especially after reading what you have read in this chapter, that we should not have to worry about earning our way into heaven. Yet earning salvation is an issue many Christians still struggle with and it is an issue that has deceived many through out the history of the church. You will still hear individuals that regularly attend church say they hope they will be good enough to get into heaven. The scriptures clearly indicate we are not good enough, which is why Jesus died for us. The following scriptures deal with this issue by clearly stating we can't do anything or work our way into heaven.

Ephesians 2:8,9 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no man may boast.

Jesus makes this point clear in John 6:28 when he is asked "what must we do to do the works God requires. In verse 29 he answers, "the work God requires is this, believe in the one he sent". If we think it is our works that get us into heaven we run the risk of developing a false sense of pride.

The concept of obtaining salvation through simply accepting Jesus as our Savior can be a hard pill for many to swallow. We have to earn every thing we get – right? You earn your spot on the team, year earn the grades you get, or you earn your promotion at work. Believing we have to earn our way into heaven can cause many problems. We can get puffed up with pride (like the Pharisees during the time of Jesus) by thinking we are a lot better than we really are. Pride in believers can really turn off to those who do not know God because it makes us more judgmental than loving.

We can also become burdened with guilt because we don't think we are good enough. Later chapters deal with pride and guilt in more detail. A casual reader of the bible can become confused as well as a not so casual reader if they focus on certain scriptures without taking the entire bible account and not reading carefully what the intentions of Jesus were in some of His teachings. For example, there are two stories Jesus tells about salvation with two very different conclusions about what it takes to get into heaven.

In Luke 18:18-25 Jesus tells a story about a rich young ruler. The rich young ruler asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. He tells Jesus he has kept all the commandments since he was a boy. Jesus tells him he lacks just one thing – he must sell all that he has and then give it to the poor. Obtaining wealth was probably the focus of this guy's life and Jesus tells him to give it all up. A very important question is asked by those who heard the answer Jesus gave – "who

then can be saved”. Would any of us do what Jesus asks? Can any of us earn our way into heaven according to this story? Jesus goes on to answer the question of who can be saved in verse 27. He says “what is impossible with men is possible with God. Jesus is saying point blank it is impossible to be saved on our own merits.

Contrast this story to the one told in Luke 7:36-50. This story tells about a sinful woman, probably a prostitute, who showed great honor to Jesus by kissing his feet and putting perfume on his feet and wetting his feet with her tears. Why did she have tears? She knew her sinful condition, possibly because of listening to the teachings of Jesus, and she truly felt sorry for her sins. She knew Jesus had the power to save her because she believed in Him and who He was. Jesus told her in verse 48 “your sins are forgiven”. Then in verse 50 he tells her “your faith has saved you; go in peace”. In the first story Jesus tells the rich ruler to give up all he has when he asked “what must he do to earn eternal life while in the second story the sinful woman didn’t have to do anything! It was her faith only that saved her. Another great example of salvation by faith is found in Luke 23:39-43. These verses tell of two criminals who were being crucified with Jesus. One of the criminals asked Jesus to remember him in heaven and Jesus replied “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise. These examples clearly indicate we can’t do anything to earn our way into heaven, and that all we have to do is accept Jesus as our Savior.

If we think we can earn our way into heaven then how much more would the Pharisees during the time of Jesus be able to claim their works can get them into heaven. Their lives were dedicated to studying (do you study God’s requirements?) and following God’s laws. Yet many of the Parables and stories of Jesus were directed to these religious leaders and Jesus was constantly pointing out how far they were from living up to God’s standards. The Pharisees were so into laws they even created a bunch of their own, something churches and religious leaders still do today. Luke 11:42-52 exposed what Jesus thought of the Pharisees as he really slammed them for loading (verse 46) people down with laws while neglecting doing anything to help them.

In Luke 6:27-29 Jesus preaches that we are to love those that hate us, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who mistreat us. He also says if someone strikes us turn the other cheek and let them strike us again and if someone takes our cloak give them our tunic also (in today’s world – if they take our CD player give them our CDs also). Yeah right! How many of us would do these things even once let alone all the time?

We are human and Jesus knows this so he was pointing out to the Pharisees the futility of thinking you can actually earn your way into heaven. Faith has always been the only way to get into heaven, yet prideful man always thinks they can earn their way. I believe Jesus still wants us to strive for reaching the standards He set while at the same time recognizing we need Him as our Savior because we are not capable of getting into heaven because of our works. Think of a star basketball player who’s goal is to make every shot they take (does anyone shoot with the goal of missing?). No one is going to make 100% of their shots in a season because they are human. They will miss shots because of imperfect judgment, lack of concentration, and underestimating an opponents ability. Yet this player will practice and train with the intent of making every shot – that is the standard. God is perfect and His standard is perfection – 100%!

As good as we may think we are we will never be able to shoot 100%. Because of His love for us He sent “Coach” Jesus to intervene for us and allow us to be on God’s team. All we have to do is admit we are not even close to being perfect and allow Jesus to be our coach because we know we need Him. Jesus knows we won’t shoot 100% but He will provide instructions on how to shoot better. His coaching will improve our game in every way!

This chapter about salvation cannot be complete without the often-quoted scripture John 3:16 because this verse shows God's open invitation to reach the entire world.

John 3:16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Although there is some debate if these are the words of John or Jesus, the majority view of scholars is that these are the words of Jesus (irrelevant anyway because the message would be just as true if it came from John).

Note, Jesus is not saying you have to belong to any particular denomination or religious group to be saved. He is not saying you have to be "pre-chosen" as some who misunderstand a doctrine of pre-destination. This is another doctrine (religious teaching) that can be confusing to Christians and one I am not going to spend much effort on because what we really need to understand is quite clear. Jesus is saying in John 3:16 anyone, whoever believes anywhere in the world will be saved because God loves everyone. To make certain this point is not missed in verse 15 Jesus also states anyone who believe is in him has eternal life and in verse 18 again he says whoever believes in him is not condemned and whoever does not believe stands condemned.

For those that want to cling to scriptures that seem to state we have no say in the matter because we are pre-chosen by God, John 6:37-40 should remove any doubt about the false doctrine that our will has nothing to do with our salvation. In verse 37 Jesus says "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. Verse 38 states Jesus came to do the will of God and verse 40 tells us what God's will is – "for my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life".

Who will look to the Son? Jesus tells us in verse 44 and 45 – "No one can come to the me unless the Father who sent me draws them (if we stop here easy to see how this can mislead someone to think we have no choice in the matter but read on), and I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the Prophets: They will all be taught by God. Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me". Jesus is saying God calls (chooses) those who sincerely want to know The Truth. He is not going to call those who do not listen to God, those who are mainly interested in accepting philosophies and beliefs that support their desires, which describes many who even attend church regularly but could care less about knowing and obeying God's word.

The following scripture is another that points to a choice out of free will, yet not everyone will make that choice. Jesus invites all of us to ask him into our lives, to accept him as our Lord and Savior, but only those who "hear his voice" will "open the door" to actually accept him.

Revelations 3:20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

In John 10:14 Jesus tells us he is the good shepherd and he knows his sheep and his sheep know him, they will listen to his voice (verse 16). 1 Corinthians 2:13,14 also drives home the point that there will be those that reject the things that come from the Spirit of God, The Truths of God will seem like foolishness to those individuals. In other words they will not hear the voice of God no matter how loud that voice is. Does this mean that at birth our fate is sealed? No it doesn't because anyone can change, anyone can come to a point in their life when Truth becomes more important than self-serving philosophies or beliefs. This is when someone is ready for a conversion experience, ready to be "born again".

So God chooses, draws to him, calls those who choose Him. Since God is Truth those with a sincere desire for Truth will choose to follow God and God will make himself known to them because their hearts are ready to receive him. It should be clear salvation comes to anyone who believes Jesus is who he says he is, believes he is their savior, and believes in the truths he teaches and no one is excluded from this invitation, but many will reject this invitation because they have no desire to submit to God and his Spirit.

You may be asking yourself - what about the many people in the world who have never heard about Jesus or are raised to follow other religions. Maybe God will judge their hearts. If they are full of pride, are self-centered, and rarely see any faults with themselves then they may be in for an eternal disappointment to say the least. If they realize they do not live the lives they should be, regret their sinful nature, and look to a higher source for strength, then maybe they will have salvation. Or maybe God will choose those that he knows would have chosen him if they had the opportunity.

Then again Jesus says He is the only way and that there is no other way and whoever does not believe in him stands condemned. If we do not believe these words than what other teachings of Jesus will we reject? Is Jesus sometimes right and sometimes wrong? Is he just a fallible teacher? If this is what we believe then we don't really believe him, because selective belief is no belief at all!

There is only one earth (would those who do not believe in absolute truth, or those who believe truth cannot be known, deny this?) and there could only be one creator, believing the earth could be created by a "committee" of gods is absurd to me and there is no scriptural basis in any religion to believe this. So I would want to know how to reach my creator, God, and He tells us how to do this because He has made himself known to those who have written the books of the Bible. There is only one creator, and only one way to reach him and this is why it is critical to tell the world about Jesus. In fact in Matthew 28:19 Jesus specifically instructs his disciples to tell all nations about him. All of us have heard about Jesus so we are without excuse if we reject him. We will be accountable for our choice to reject or follow him.

Jesus is the only way because we can never be good enough to earn salvation on our own. Being saved (salvation) means we will spend an eternal life with God in heaven but we also will be saved from an unfulfilled life on earth. To be saved we have to admit our weaknesses and inability to live up to Gods perfect standards. We also need to truly be sorry for our failure to follow Gods will, unlike a person full of pride who may admit when he or she is wrong but does not really care to do anything about it. Understanding and accepting the fact we need to be saved is the key to being saved! We simply need to accept the fact that Jesus died to pay for our sins and ask Him in our lives.

Finally, understand Jesus has risen and is alive. He loves you, He wants you to have joy, He wants to know you and for you to know Him, He wants you to be with Him in heaven, and He wants you to allow Him to be in control of your life now. It is a relationship with Jesus that will make a real positive difference in your life, not religious practices or traditions, or the deceptions of the world that we think will make us happy.