

Keeping the Ember Glowing



TouchPoint 11

Welcome back, my friend! I want to thank you for taking time in your busy life to allow me to open up for you some of what the Bible says about who God is, why He is important, and how He has done some pretty selfless and wonderful things to restore humanity to our originally-intended position and stature.

Along the way we've learned the Bible's history of creation, the cause of evil, and what it has done to our planet and the human race. I've shown you how evil impacts our lives and how sad God was that we ever had to even learn about it.

Knowing about the presence of evil helps to explain the horrible things that happen in this life: disease, death, pandemics, war, selfishness, greed, hatred, bigotry, abuse, and all the rest.

It's not uncommon for people to use the existence of such terrible things to question God. "God can't be a God of love if he permits these kinds of things," his critics say.

Actually, it's part of the dual-edged sword that God's plan allows for. Remember John 3:16? I hope this is one of those texts that you commit to memory. I'll quote it one more time for you:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life."

What I want you to see in those words today is the choice that you are offered. Everlasting life is given to those who believe in Him. To those who choose to believe in Him.

Now hear me clearly. This is important. This text is not talking about a mere belief in the Son of God – just a mental assent to His existence. Rather, it is speaking of the belief that results in your trust in what He has to offer for giving you this everlasting life, of your allegiance to Him, of giving your life over to Him, to follow Him.

You have the choice to follow Him. In fact, God is only willing to give you this everlasting life if you choose it willingly. That's how much God honors your choice. He won't give you everlasting life against your will! God paid a premium with His own life to provide you this choice. Your personal free choice is very important to God.

But here's the other edge of the sword. God also freely allows someone to not choose Him. And if He doesn't allow that choice to be made, then He is a liar and we cannot choose Him freely! So in essence, if God prohibits evil to be active He would actually be taking away our freedom of choice! So evil will have to be a reality for now in order for God to allow humanity to freely choose Him or not choose Him. But the good news I'll be sharing with you in our last TouchPoint is that God will not allow evil to stay around forever.

So What Would It Mean?

So, what would it mean to choose to be a follower of Jesus? What are the steps one would have to take? Is there a contract to sign? A promise to make? What are the "rules of engagement?"

Since this is the core of the beginning of life with Jesus, I'll use another text to say in essence what John 3:16 says to underscore it:

"...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. As the Scripture says, 'Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.' For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile-the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'" Romans 10:9-13 (NIV).

“Jesus is Lord.”

You start by declaring your belief in Jesus, and you tell God that you accept Jesus' incredible sacrifice on your behalf. You allow yourself to believe that though you are a sinner by nature and by practice, that the blood of Jesus is enough to cover your sin.

This means that you talk to God – Christians call it praying – and you tell Him of your desire to follow Jesus, that you ask for His forgiveness for your sinfulness, and that you accept His offer to give you eternal life.

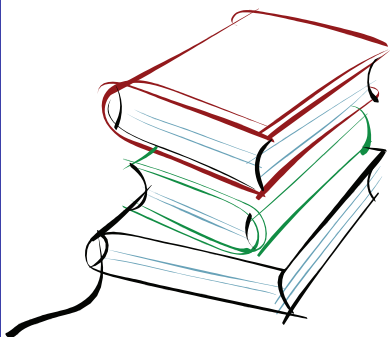
That's where it starts! In case you think this is still just too easy to be true, I'll give you a few texts you should pause to read before we continue our conversation. You've seen some of these already, but in light of what we are talking about today, you can read them again with new eyes: Romans 3:20-26, Ephesians 2:1-10, 1 John 1:8 – 1 John 2:2, and 2 Corinthians 5.17. There are more, of course, but these will get you started. Write down some of what you learned in these texts so you'll remember them: _____

From here, life takes on a different meaning! No longer do you need to feel you are on your own! No longer do you have to guess at how you should live your life. You need never worry again about the ultimate meaning of your life, or feel that death will be the end for you. All those issues are wrapped up in Jesus now. They are now his concerns, and no longer yours. There's a lot that comes with this package!

Nourishment is Important!

Any life needs nourishment, including this new life you have started with Jesus. You will need to spend some time every day with Jesus. How do you do that? To start with, begin each day with a prayer of thanks and then offer yourself to God's service for that day. Ask him to inhabit your day, your thoughts, your relationships, your work, your mind and heart. And then just go about living your life and see what happens!

If you are really serious about nourishing this new life, you'll probably want to spend time learning more about who God is and what He is doing in your life and in this world's life. Your curiosity will get the better of you, and you'll want to find out all you can!



There are lots of good books written by Christian authors, and many of them are worth your time reading. But your most worthwhile time will always be spent reading the Bible. There is so much in there yet to be discovered that we couldn't possibly cover in our TouchPoints but which you will want to delve into. I suggest that

you start with the Gospel of John. Read it all the way through in one sitting if you can. It's a lot shorter than the current New York Times Bestseller, but it will change your life like no book from their list ever can! See Jesus through the eyes of a personal eye-witness. John was the youngest of all Jesus' disciples, and I love his perspective on watching Jesus live here on earth as God/man.

After you finish John, try Luke's Gospel. There are a lot of stories in there about Jesus, a lot of his parables. You'll learn a bit more about his philosophy there. Then finish up with Matthew's and Mark's Gospels so you will have read the entire set.

When you are ready to explore further, I suggest Philippians, then Ephesians, the book of Psalms, and then perhaps 1 & 2 Peter and 1 John.

Take the Scripture in any order you wish, but dive in! Learn to know your God better! Don't wait until you think you are good enough to be accepted by Him (that time will never come). Instead, do what He suggests: come as you are, and let Him begin to work things out in your life.

Here's the cool thing. As you actively pursue learning about the things of God, God will begin the process of remaking you from the inside out. He will change your desires, even your behaviors. Once you give Him permission to come into your life, He will do all sorts of incredible things in you. Here are some words from Galatians that mark the distinct differences that are between your old life

of sin and your new life in Jesus as nourished by the Holy Spirit:

“God will begin the process of remaking you from the inside out.”

“The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.” Galatians 5:19-26.

Don't worry if you don't recognize very much of yourself yet in the 2nd of the

two paragraphs from Galatians above! Fruit takes awhile to grow, to ripen, to mature. So will you. These are things you will become as you and Jesus spend time together. And the things in the first paragraph are things that will begin to describe you less and less. All this comes from the Holy Spirit living in you as you and Jesus walk together.

One More Thing – And This Is Important!

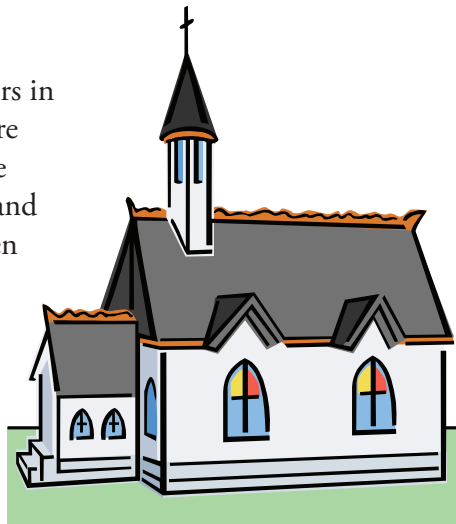
Jesus laid out a very critical principal in some of His last words to His followers just before He was taken away to be crucified:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful...Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” John 15:1-8.

Jesus asks us flat out to stay connected to him. Your personal commitment to talk with Him and to continue to learn of Him is indispensable in staying connected. And there’s one more thing He has in mind for you.

You can’t do this alone. You will need partners in your walk of faith. You’ll need people who are learning just like you are. You’ll want to have people around you who can encourage you and teach you and pray for you. Remember, when God created us, they created us for community just as the Godhead shares community. We are better together than we are alone, especially as it comes to our spiritual life. As you already know, this world can be pretty



hostile to people who choose to follow Jesus. We need a loving community to help keep us going!

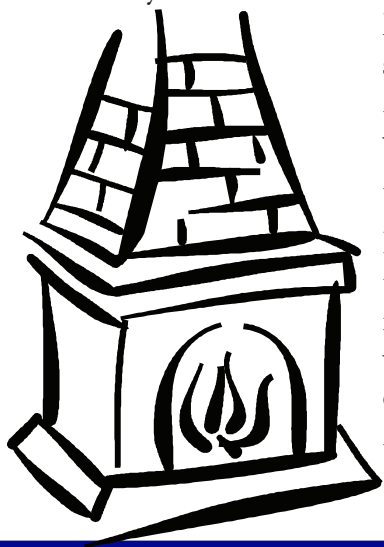
This is where church comes in. Oops – sorry! I know that church has a bad name these days. It's not hard to find news of one church or another failing or some church leader failing. Here's the headline below the headlines, though. Churches are made up of sinners! We are all sinners, even in church.

It will be true that even in a church community that you will experience disappointment from time to time. Our frail humanity almost guarantees that! Actually, I find that most of the times that we are disappointed happen when we have put our eyes on each other instead of Jesus.

In spite of her failings, the church is still the bride of Christ (according to Revelation). She is the object of Jesus' special affection, because He gave His life for the church. It is through the church that the work and person of Jesus gets expressed in the world. It is because of the church that word of the life of Jesus has been preserved down through the centuries. It is because of the church that I can write you all the things I've written to you!

If you really want to stay connected, if you want to keep growing, you should check out the church. You can know and worship Christ outside of the church, but it will be a different kind of struggle. We need the community of a spiritual family to share our common experience of learning about Jesus and dealing with this life. Going it alone is really harder than you think. And actually it's dangerous, in a way.

An old story will illustrate this better than just saying it. A church member who had previously been attending services regularly, suddenly stopped coming to church. He was missed in the community of faith, and after some weeks, the minister decided to visit the absent member.



It was a chilly evening, and the minister found the man at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire in his den. Guessing the reason for his pastor's visit, the man welcomed him, led him to a big chair by the fireplace, and waited. The minister made himself comfortable but said nothing. In

grave silence, he contemplated the play of the flames around the burning logs.

After some minutes, he took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth, all by itself. Then he sat back in his chair, still silent. The host watched all this in quiet fascination. As the lone ember's flame diminished, there was a momentary glow, but then its fire was no more and soon it was cold and dead. Not a word had been exchanged between the two men since the initial greetings. But as the minister rose to leave, the host said, "Thank you so much for your visit, and especially for your fiery sermon. I will be at church next week."

Now I know I've said a lot in this TouchPoint, and I've been very direct about some things that call for you to make some decisions.

But as always with Jesus, the choice will be yours. I just hope that you'll take His invitation to new life seriously, and that you'll decide to dive in, learn about Him, and stay connected to Him.

I've already told you about the gift He has promised for doing it. Everlasting life. I know it sounds too good to be true, but I've decided that it's worth making the choice. That's my choice. Nothing would make me happier than to hear that it is yours, too!•

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Questions

John 3.16 says that those who believe in Jesus will have everlasting life. What does the Bible mean here by believe? (it's not merely information, but we believe in His sacrifice as our atonement, and accept Him into our lives)

How can we know that our free choice is sacred to God? (He died to preserve it, and He will not force you to accept him)

Where does one start in living a life for God? (declaring your belief in Jesus as Savior)

What is it important that this be the foundation of our relationship with Jesus? (Re-read Eph 2.6-10 if you need help) (answer: because then it would be as payment for work and not a gift)

What are some of the ways you can nourish your new life with Jesus?

What, according to Galatians 5, are the "fruit" of Jesus living in you?

Do you have this fruit all at once?

How does the analogy of these fruits of the Spirit help you to understand the process of growing into the likeness of Jesus?

What does the analogy of the grapevine say about life after you meet Jesus?

Why is it so helpful to belong to a body of believers in the Christian faith?

Would you like some help in becoming connected to a body of believers near you?

Please send this answer sheet, either by e-mail or land mail

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