

HOW CAN WE BECOME LIKE JESUS ?

Adam failed dismally to obey the commands of God and to become perfect. The Lord Jesus Christ triumphed marvellously over all the temptations that confronted him. The Bible invites us to become like Jesus. We are made in Adam's image which means that we are naturally inclined to sin and must eventually die: that's the inheritance Adam passed on to all mankind. We can, however, be changed to become like the Lord Jesus Christ. He achieved what God meant for mankind and reflects the character and likeness of Almighty God his Father. So when the Bible promises that we can become like Jesus it is offering us the wonderful prospect of becoming godly or godlike in all our ways.

This is what is on offer from God, because of the saving work of the Father and Son:

*“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but **we know that when he appears we will be like him, because we shall see him as he is**” (1 John 3:1,2);*

*“And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as **we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies**” (Romans 8:23);*

*“Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, **we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven**” (1 Corinthians 15:49);*

*“Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, **who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body**, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” (Philippians 3:20,21).*

❖ Jesus in the Image of God

When God created man it was His intention that he should reflect the divine image. He wanted mankind to live in such a way that they would reflect His values, character and attributes. That intention was captured in the declaration: *“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion”* (Genesis 1:26). But, as we have seen, mankind spoiled God's intention and chose a different path which we have all followed. Today people want to do it their way, not God's.

Jesus recaptured God's original intention by choosing the path of perfect obedience. He lived as God would have us all live: in perfect harmony with his Father, in complete agreement and total obedience to his Father's will. The result was that the life of God was portrayed on earth in His Son, who could say: *“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father”* (John 14:9). That did not mean that Jesus *was* the Father. He went on to make that clear by explaining that he and his Father were working together, and that both the words he spoke and the things that he did were done jointly.

We have looked at the great work accomplished by both the Father and the Son in earlier chapters. They were working together to achieve a new start for mankind. This would be a new creation, one in which mankind would have control over everything that challenges the will of God and in which God and His glory would be supreme. This is how the writer to the Hebrews sums up what God has done through Jesus:

*“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom **he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world**. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs”* (Hebrews 1:1-4).

Once again you will notice that we are told lots of different things in one tightly-packed passage and we are now able to unpack it for ourselves. We learn that:

- ✓ Through Jesus, God communicated with mankind as never before: God *“has spoken to us by his Son”*;
- ✓ God has appointed Jesus *“the heir of all things”*; this is a reward that Jesus has received from his Father for his perfect obedience (see also Philippians 2:9);
- ✓ Jesus reflected the glory of God in the way he lived. His life showed people what God is like – the original Greek has the sense of the impression made by a seal in wax to leave a perfect imprint;

- ✓ God created “*the world to come*” through, or because of, the Lord Jesus Christ – they worked together to make it possible for men and women like us to inhabit a new society;
- ✓ Jesus has become superior to the angels because he has received from God a status and position which is greater even than theirs: they are God’s servants but he is God’s Son.
- ✓ He made “*purification for sins*” in order that he might bring “*many sons to glory*” (Hebrews 2:10), namely all those who have been purified and who thus become members of God’s family, by adoption.

❖ Purification for Sins

We have reached the point in Romans where Paul explains how we can become members of God’s family. In Chapter 4 he showed the vital importance of faith and we have explored what constitutes a saving faith by examining both what Abraham and David believed and how the Lord Jesus Christ is central to the fulfilment of those promises.

He is the promised offspring – promised to Eve, Abraham and David – and he alone can undo the harm that Adam’s disobedience inflicted on mankind. But how does the work that Jesus accomplished change our position before God? Apart from believing the right things, what else must we do, if anything? This is what Paul says at the start of his detailed comparison of Adam and Jesus:

*“Therefore, since we have been **justified by faith**, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also **obtained access** by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we **rejoice in hope** of the glory of God” (Romans 5:1,2).*

Faith makes a huge difference to our relationship with God. Without it we are regarded as unrighteous: enemies of God, with no access into His presence and no hope. That is the very opposite of what Paul says we can have when we are “*justified by faith*”. In another letter he explains that without the work of God in Christ we were: “*by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind ... separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world*” (Ephesians 2:3,12). The death of Jesus makes all the difference in the world, for it makes possible “*purification for sins*”. But how and why is that possible?

❖ Christ Died for Us

Our journey through Romans has already shown us that the death of Jesus on the cross declared that God was right to condemn sin, because the cross shows us how awful sin really is. If sin took Jesus to the cross we should have nothing to do with it! But we cannot conquer sin ourselves and desperately need God’s help. So God has taken action. A quick search through Romans will soon highlight some of the things God has done for us, as follows:

- ✚ “*God put forward (Jesus) as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith*” (3:23);
- ✚ “*at the right time Christ died for the ungodly*” (5:6);
- ✚ “*while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*” (5:8);
- ✚ “*we have now been justified by his blood*” (5:9);
- ✚ “*we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son*” (5:10);
- ✚ “*we have now received reconciliation*” (5:11).

Wonderful things have been done by God and the Lord Jesus Christ to make it possible for us to be saved and to become like Jesus. We couldn’t do it but they could. That’s the very contrast that Paul makes:

*“For while we were still weak, **at the right time Christ died for the ungodly**. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, **Christ died for us**. Since, therefore, we have now been **justified by his blood**, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by **the death of his Son**, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom **we have now received reconciliation**” (Romans 5:6-11).*

On the one hand mankind is described as “*ungodly*”, “*sinners*” in need of salvation and “*enemies*” who are opposed to God’s will and ways. On the other hand, Jesus has “*died for the ungodly*”, so that we might be “*justified by his blood*” and be “*saved by him*”. He now lives so that we might be “*saved by his life*” because, through him, we can be “*reconciled*” to God. This is a huge contrast between what we deserve and what God will do for us.

A little later in Romans Paul adds one further helpful detail about what exactly it was that God accomplished for us through Christ. Here it is:

*“God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. **By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin he condemned sin in the flesh**” (8:3).*

❖ Sin Condemned!

Father and Son worked together. God sent His own Son – He took the initiative and the Lord Jesus Christ fully cooperated in what was required of him. He died for the ungodly, unworthy and undeserving, just as we are, and the shedding of his blood brought reconciliation. Jesus came with our nature, but he never once yielded to its promptings. This is why Paul describes him as coming “*in the likeness of sinful flesh*”: he was made like us but he was unlike us, too, in that he was perfectly obedient to God in everything.

Having lived a sinless life, Jesus then voluntarily gave his life as a sacrifice “*for sin*”. He died that we might have life and in the process, Paul explains, he condemned sin. That which had condemned all mankind was now condemned itself! Sin was shown up for what it really is – terrible, wicked and evil. There just aren’t enough words to describe the awfulness of sin when you think about what happened to Jesus.

That condemnation was made by Jesus “*in the flesh*”. Although tempted just as we are to commit sin, he had always resisted that temptation and thus had both conquered sin and shown it up for the wicked and evil thing it is. Now, in his death, Jesus showed ultimate obedience to his Father and completely overcame any tendency to sin within his nature. In that way he was free from sin but, because he died as a sacrifice for sin, his death brought freedom for us as well. He died for us.

❖ The Blood of Jesus Christ

Twice in this explanation of what God accomplished in the death of Jesus we are told about the importance of the shed blood of the Lord Jesus. God put forward the Lord Jesus “*as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith*” (3:25) and we can now be “*justified by his blood*” (5:9) and thus be saved from the wrath of God. There are several other references in the New Testament to the shed blood of the Lord Jesus and we may wonder what this language tells us about the meaning of the death of Jesus. Is there anything special about his blood, or is it just a way of referring to his sacrificial death? There are many references to the offering of the *body* of Christ or to his *death* for us, so the *blood* as such has no special significance. But it carries an important meaning even so.

From Eden onwards, when animals were killed to make a covering for the sins of Adam and Eve, God made an arrangement which allowed people to approach Him by offering animal sacrifices. This was done from early times (for example in Genesis 8:20 and 12:7) and an important principle was established early on that the blood represented life (Genesis 9:4). In time this principle became fundamental to the law which God gave to Moses. This is detailed in the books of Exodus to Deuteronomy in the Old Testament and it comprised a way of life for the nation of Israel which embodied spiritual principles. This was one of them:

*“If any one of the house of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people. For **the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life**” (Leviticus 17:10,11).*

❖ A Life Given

This principle was demonstrated in the clearest way when a person drew near to worship God and seek forgiveness by coming, as the law required, with an animal sacrifice. The worshipper had to place hands on the animal to identify with the offering saying, in effect, that he or she was really the guilty party and that their sin deserved death. The death of the animal thus represented what should really happen to them, were it not for God’s forgiveness of sin.

Their life was in effect forfeit but, in figurative terms, it was then given back to them. They were allowed to live, though the animal was dead, and thus they could see that they had been forgiven.

One weakness in this arrangement was, of course, that the animal was likely to be an unwilling participant and could not represent the worshipper in any other way than in its death, being an animal not a person. As the animal had no moral sense, or spiritual feelings, it was also a fairly poor representative of the worshipper.

But those sacrifices served another purpose. They pointed forward to the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ, as the writer to the Hebrews makes very clear. He wrote to Jewish believers who had been brought up with animal sacrifices and who must many times have made such offerings many times. Now he explained the full significance of those sacrifices and what they had been leading up to.

One man had come who willingly offered himself as a sacrifice on behalf of others. Jesus was willing to die for the ungodly so that men and women can be justified by his blood. In that way he would make reconciliation possible between God and man by bridging the moral gap. It would be a once-for-all sacrifice, for it would be available for everyone who wanted to come to God through him, whether Jew or Gentile. And, because Jesus was raised from the dead, the one who made the offering would also be available to act as a mediator or priest, to bring worshippers right into the presence of God. Hebrews, chapters 9 and 10, explains this in detail and here are some key verses:

*“Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, **he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.** And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement, so **Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him**” (Hebrews 9:24-28).*

Paul says the same thing in Romans when describing the way in which Jesus was a “sin offering”. He says of the sacrifice on the cross that: *“the death he died he died to sin, **once for all**”* (Romans 6:10). Notice that Paul says two things here:

- 1 *Jesus made an offering which would never need to be repeated, and that*
- 2 *He died to sin.*

That second point means that when the body of Jesus was dead upon the cross he would never again be subject to the temptations that came from within or from any that might come from without. Sin had no more influence over the Lord Jesus from the time that he died, any more than it does over any other lifeless being. When God raised His Son from the dead it was so that he could experience a sinless life in heaven where he is described as being:

*“**Holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.** He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever” (Hebrews 7:26-28).*

❖ A Life Recovered

The sacrifice of Jesus was not, as some people suggest, a payment that had to be made – a life for a life. There was no Devil demanding the blood of Christ before he would allow God to forgive mankind, or anything like that. Such an idea is not only unbiblical; it is preposterous! The death of Jesus was God’s way of giving men and women like us an opportunity to identify with what was being declared about right and wrong.

Where Adam and Eve got things wrong, by deciding that it was right to do what they wanted to do, the Lord Jesus came to put matters right. He redefined what is right and what is wrong. Here are the attributes that Jesus declared to be acceptable to God, a declaration he made by the way he lived and died. And these are the things that he declared unworthy and unacceptable to God:

Right	Wrong
<p><i>“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control”</i></p>	<p><i>“Sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these”</i></p>

These two sets of characteristics are defined as “*the fruit of the Spirit*” and the “*works of the flesh*”, in Galatians 5:19-23, and they summarise the difference between right and wrong as Jesus defined them in his life. He always did those things that pleased the Father. Those who opposed him during his life on earth fully expressed the works of the flesh in the way they lived, schemed and worked to see him killed. They were as perverse and devious in their dealings as he was straight and open in all his ways.

Because Jesus lived in this way and died still blameless and faultless, God restored his life by raising him from the dead. Jesus did not conquer death unaided: how could he? He was dead and therefore unconscious. The Scriptures insist that God raised His Son from the dead¹⁰ that He might give him eternal life:

*“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know – this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. **God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death**, because it was not possible for him to be held by it ... **This Jesus God raised up**, and of that we all are witnesses” (Acts 2:22-24,32).*

It was part of the divine purpose that Jesus should suffer and die before entering into glory at God’s right hand in heaven. For God knew that recovering the human race would need more than just a death, even the death of a perfect man. He knew that mankind would need on-going help if they were to be able to find eternal life. So he raised Jesus from the dead.

❖ Not a ‘Substitute’

Of course if the death of Jesus was some sort of a payment – his life instead of ours – it would have been impossible for God to have raised Jesus from the dead. That would have been like paying back some money you owed and then stealing it back again! The Bible never suggests that Jesus died instead of us, or as a substitute for us. Instead it says that he died on our behalf – “*for us*”.

*“God shows his love **for us** in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8);*

*“If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up **for us** all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (8:31,32);*

*“Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up **for us**, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:2);*

*“For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died **for us** so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him” (1 Thessalonians 5:9,10).*

Jesus died for us, so that we can live with him, and now he lives for us. It is a vital part of the gospel message that Jesus Christ is now alive and is sitting at the right hand of God in heaven, waiting for the time when he will be sent again to earth, this time to rule as king. But while he waits, he is able to help us in our attempts to become like him. He died for us and now he lives for us.

*“For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be **saved by his life**” (Romans 5:10);*

*“Christ Jesus is the one who died – **more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us**. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?” (8:34,35);*

*“He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since **he always lives to make intercession for them** ... For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, **now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf**” (Hebrews 7:25; 9:24).*

❖ Jesus the Great High Priest

Jesus lives in heaven today as our God-given go-between. The role he now fulfils is a vital part of his atoning and reconciling work; without it we would still be unable to be right with God. So the saving work of the Father and the Son continues.

*“It is pleasing in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For **there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus**, who gave himself as a ransom for all” (1 Timothy 2:3-6);*

*“How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. Therefore **he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant**” (Hebrews 9:14,15).*

It follows that we need no other mediator or intercessor – no priests or any other intermediaries. There are people who pray to ‘saints’ to intercede on their behalf or to the Virgin Mary, as though any of those were alive today. Scripture informs us that they are all asleep in the unconsciousness of the grave that awaits all of us. But Jesus is alive and active on our behalf. Each one of us is able to approach God through the Lord Jesus Christ; indeed we are encouraged to do so. We are now told to approach God in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, but notice the pre-conditions: those things that we must do to be acceptable to God:

*“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since **we have a great priest over the house of God**, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful” (Hebrews 10:19-23).*

❖ **Spiritual Checklist**

Here is some more analysis for us, for this passage gives us a lot of careful advice:

- ✓ The writer addresses his readers as “*brothers*”, which means they are members of the family of God and are related to the Lord Jesus Christ (see Hebrews 2:10,11);
- ✓ They are approaching God “*by the blood of Jesus*”. This means that they are somehow associated with the great sacrifice that was made by Jesus;
- ✓ This approach is by the only available way – “*the new and living way*”; clearly there is no other way of approach except this one;
- ✓ Jesus is the one who will guide the worshipper through into God’s presence, for he is the “*great priest*” over God’s house;
- ✓ Faith – belief in the promises of God and trust in Him – is the vital key, as we have worked out. But it needs to be “*full assurance of faith*”, just as we need to have “*a true heart*”, for we must be honest and sincere in our approach to God.

Now notice how all these things are brought together:

- 1 *Our hearts must be sprinkled clean from an evil conscience;*
- 2 *Our bodies must be washed with pure water, and*
- 3 *We must confess our hope in God without wavering.*

The apostle is writing about Christian baptism and is telling his readers that this is the way God has appointed for anyone and everyone to approach Him. We must take advantage of the saving work that has been accomplished for us in the death and resurrection of Christ. And baptism is the only way we can do that.

❖ **Christian Baptism**

It is precisely this way of approaching God that the apostle Paul writes about in his Letter to the Romans. Chapter 6, which is where we have now reached, is all about the meaning of baptism. If we want to be like Jesus when he comes again, we have to identify with him now and associate ourselves with the experiences he went through. We’ll be looking at what baptism comprised in first century days in the next chapter, but here is an extract of what Paul said about the way in which we can follow Jesus now and thus start to live a new life with him, one that is right with God.



*“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been **baptized into Christ Jesus** were **baptized** into his death? We were buried therefore with him by **baptism** into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his ... Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him” (Romans 6:1-5,8).*

To be baptized into Christ is to be baptized into his death. In the waters of baptism a believer goes under the water as though a burial was taking place and comes out of the water as though it were a resurrection. This act thus symbolises an association with Jesus, much as worshippers in Old Testament times would have placed their hands on a sacrifice to signify that *they* should really have died, not the animal. Baptism is designed to do the same thing – to help us identify with the saving work of both Father and Son for us.

It also marks a clean break with our old life, the one we declare we want to put to death and leave behind. Henceforth the baptized believer will be seeking to live with Jesus, so that we can “*live with him*”, both now and in the age to come. Baptism is the beginning of the road for all those who want to walk along the “*new and living way*” that leads to the kingdom of God. It is the first step, and a vital one at that, into a new life with the Lord Jesus. It is also the way that God has ordained whereby we enter into His family and become adopted children, brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus Christ.

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we will be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:1,2).

Things to Read

-  If you want to read a little more about the work of Jesus as both sacrifice and priest, then read Hebrews chapters 9 and 10.
-  In this chapter we have been thinking again about the death of Jesus. This was a real and terrible event and you may want to read another of the gospel accounts. Try Mark chapter 15.

Questions to Answer

- 13.1 If we want to be like Jesus in the future, should we try to live like him now? How can we do this in our everyday lives? (Philippians 2:1-5; Colossians 3:1-6; John 15:12-15)
- 13.2 What has to happen before our present human nature can be changed to be like that of the Lord Jesus Christ – for ever free from sin and death? (1 Corinthians 15:51-58)