

What can I do to Gain Eternal Life?

Critical Question #4

The Question: What's really important?

We live in a strange age in which it appears that someone has broken into our world and switched the price tags. The value of trivial things is maximized while what is truly important is minimized. Listen to how Blaise Pascal (17th century French mathematician and philosopher) put it, "Man's sensitivity to small things, and his insensitivity to the most important things, are surely evidences of a strange disorder." Pascal thought that if there is a possibility that there is a God in heaven, and if there is a possibility that there is eternity and judgment when we die—just the possibility!—then reasonable people should make every effort to find out what needs to be done to get right with God.

But the price tags are switched, so instead we are preoccupied with more trivial things, like how our sports team is doing, or whether or not we should try out a bigger driver, or which flat-screen TV we should buy, or where we should go on our next vacation. We live in an age in which people have all kinds of time for recreation or television or concerts, but are too busy to think about and discuss the most important questions of life. Millions of Americans believe in God but don't seem to have enough time or interest to listen to what God may be saying to them.

The most important question anyone can ask is **how they can be right with God...**, both now and forever. So much hangs on the answer. No matter how long we live, our *entire* life on earth is like a weekend compared to eternity. Just think — one million years after we die, we will be no closer to the end of eternity than the day we were born! With so much at stake, the question of ultimate importance is, "What do I need to do to have eternal life?"

The Longing in Our Heart: Why do we all long for something more?

Whether we realize it or not, the Bible teaches that everyone has been created in the image of God with hearts and souls that only God himself can fill. God designed us to find satisfaction and peace and happiness *in him*. And as long as our relationship with him is broken, we will never be complete and we will never be truly satisfied.

God has imprinted his image on our very soul and "has also set eternity in the hearts of men" (*Ecclesiastes* 3:11). This means that God has put in every heart an instinctive, inconsolable longing for a deeply satisfying kind of happiness that lasts forever. We have a longing for eternity with God buried deep within our heart.

The two instincts of *eternity* and *happiness* are bound together within us and form our

deepest longings and greatest hopes as human beings. Together, they define the essence of what we long for in heaven—*eternally satisfying happiness*. Notice that our greatest fairy tales all end in one form or another with that phrase—"And they lived happily ever after." But Jesus taught that the only way our longing for eternal satisfaction will ever be realized is by *living happily ever after* in the presence of God, our Creator.

Pascal said, "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man." This describes what underlies every longing of our hearts. We all have a sense that there is something missing in our life. We all seem to long for something more.

By the age of 28, Tom Brady, the quarterback of the New England Patriots, had already won three Super Bowls, including the Super Bowl against the Rams in which Brady engineered a last-minute drive that led to the winning field goal. He was only 24; at that time the youngest quarterback to ever win an NFL championship. Since then, he has won two more Super Bowls. He was invited by the president to the 2004 State of the Union Address, had an audience with the pope, and even hosted "Saturday Night Live." In addition to his good looks and great success, he also has a \$60 million, 10-year contract to play for the Patriots.

But with all Brady's fame and career accomplishments, in an

Motto:

If it doesn't matter
on the day you die, it
doesn't matter

"There is a God
sized vacuum in the
heart of every man"

Blaise Pascal

One Solitary Life

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another obscure village, where He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty. Then for three years He was itinerant preacher. He never had a family or owned a home. He never set foot inside a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place He was born. He never wrote a book, or held an office. He did none of the things that usually accompany greatness.

While He was still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against Him. His friends deserted Him. He was turned over to His enemies, and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While He was dying, His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had - His coat. When He was dead, He was taken down and laid in a borrowed grave.

Nineteen centuries have come and gone, and today He is the central figure for much of the human race. All the armies that ever marched and all the navies that ever sailed and all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as this "One Solitary Life."

interview on CBS's 60 Minutes (11/6/05), correspondent Steve Kroft was surprised to hear Brady ask; "Why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still think there's something greater out there for me? ...I think, 'God, it's got to be more than this.' I mean this isn't, this can't be what it's all cracked up to be." "What's the answer?" asked Kroft. Tom Brady only replied; "I wish I knew. I wish I knew."

No matter what we have, or what we've accomplished, we all still seem to long for something more. It's imprinted upon the human soul. We all have a sense that there is something missing in our life—that we're all made for, as Tom Brady put it, *something greater out there*.

So we search for *something greater out there* in new relationships, in new career challenges, in our new purchases, and in new adventures. But after the newness wears off, we realize that we never quite found what we were looking for. It seems our heart is full of desires that cannot be satisfied with anything on earth.

If beauty, brawn, brains and bucks really did lead to a truly satisfying life, then celebrities like Tom Brady would be the happiest and most satisfied people on earth. Since they have what so many of us are pursuing, it's worth asking, "Do those things really satisfy the human heart?" It's interesting to see how so many music and film "stars" even pursue the latest in-vogue religion with an almost neurotic passion, changing spiritualities like new clothes. All this seems to indicate that their wealth, popularity and accom-

plishments don't really meet their heart's deepest longings. Meanwhile, the rest of us are on the same treadmill; still chasing after those things that do not seem to satisfy those who already have them. Why do we want to live like that?

The Problem: What keeps me from God?

The reason our hearts are not satisfied is because of *sin*. Sin has broken our relationship with the God who created the universe; the One who created us, and the eternal longings within our heart. It is our sin that keeps us from seeing God as the object of our true satisfaction. The Bible says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (*Romans 3:23*). Sin masks our hearts from seeing God as the source of our deepest desires.

Consequently, that's why one effect of sin is that it changes the price tags on what's truly significant in life, and so God actually appears to be a threat to our happiness. Most people would never guess that their dissatisfaction with life is a sign of being dissatisfied with God and therefore, alienated from him. And yet the truth is that the sin in our hearts has caused a *falling short* in our relationship with our creator, putting an *infinite* distance between us and the God for whom we were created.

Trying to earn merit with God in order to bridge the sin gap is like trying to jump the Grand Canyon. Imagine three people trying to jump the Grand Canyon. The first guy is a stereotypical overweight couch potato. He huffs and puffs and chugs and gives it his best effort but fails to make it more

than a couple feet and falls to his death on the first ledge 50 feet below. The second guy is Michael Powell, who holds the world record in the long jump at 29 feet 4.5 inches. While Powell's jump is considerably longer than the couch-potato, he still falls to the rocks far below, and far short of the other side. The third guy is Evel Knievel, who in the 1970's tried to jump the Snake River Canyon in his \$150,000 "skycycle", goes further than the other two—much further—but still can't make it all the way across and, if his parachute had not deployed, he too would have died upon the rocks below.

Just as some may make it further across the Grand Canyon before falling short, some of us may appear to be more righteous than others, but all of us fall short of the kind of righteousness God requires.

The Bible demands that we come to terms with some hard truths about who we really are. It is the inability to truly see our own sinful heart that keeps us from being right with God. Jesus said it this way; "Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call sinners, not those who think they are already good enough" (*Mark 2:17*). Jesus' point isn't that some people are *sick* and others are *well*; or that some are sinners and others are not. His point is that some people have a sense of their own sinfulness and others do not. Only those who realize their own sinfulness will want Jesus to bridge the sin gap and rescue them from the wrath of God.

The Solution: What has God done?

Surveys reveal that most Americans believe that God will accept them if they live good lives. But we've already seen that no one's heart is righteous enough to be accepted by a holy God. Everyone falls short. The good news of the Christian message is that God accepts us, not because of what we have done for him, but because of what he has done for us in Jesus.

The Bible makes this promise and this offer to everyone; "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. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" (*John 3:16, 18*).

Becoming a Christian isn't about what we do for God but what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ (God born into the human race) lived a sinless life and then died in our place. When he died on the cross, he took on himself all of our sin and God's entire wrath that we deserved. But the story doesn't end there. Three days after Jesus died and was buried, he rose from the dead. His resurrection showed God's perfect acceptance of Jesus' sacrifice for those who believe in him and proved that death was finally conquered.

The Response: What must I do?

In one sense the answer to that question is, "Nothing." Again, becoming a Christian isn't about what we do for God but what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. In order to become a Christian and spend eternity with God, all you need is *nothing*. The problem is that most people don't accept the truth that that's all they really have.

Another commonly held misconception is that becoming a Christian requires a pledge to become more religious. But imagine a wife, looking out the window of her home, commenting to her husband about how great it would be if the tree in their backyard produced Fuji apples instead of crabapples. Eager to please, the husband might be tempted to run out to the grocery store and buy some Fuji apples. The next time she looks out of the window, she sees her husband up on a stepladder stapling Fuji apples onto the branches.

Every one knows you can't change a tree by stapling a

different fruit to it. A crabapple tree doesn't become a Fuji apple tree just because you staple Fuji apples to it. Neither does a person become a Christian by stapling religion onto his life. Stapling the fruit of "good behavior" or "religious duty" on our life will never make him acceptable with God.

One time a group of people asked Jesus a pointed question that sounds a lot like the question we are asking here; "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (*John 6:28-29*). The one "work" we must do is the response of *believing in Christ*. Only when you are ready to admit that you have nothing to offer God are you ready to believe in Jesus.

All we need to do is believe. But be careful. The Bible says there are different kinds of believing. One kind of belief is *in vain* (*1 Corinthians 15:2*) and another kind of belief *leads to eternal life* (*John 3:16*). The kind of belief that results in eternal life is more than just believing the facts about Jesus-- even about his death on the cross. The New Testament book of James says that even the devil has that kind of belief (*James 2:19*).

Saving faith moves from believing truths *about* Jesus to personally believing *in* Jesus. It relies on him to make us righteous and acceptable before God. It relies on him to be our deepest and greatest satisfaction and our source of eternal life.

A great picture of God responding to faith is found in the life of a desperate father who asked Jesus to heal his son from a horrible disease. Jesus told this man he would answer his request if he would simply believe in him. The father very honestly replied, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (*Mark 9:24*). Jesus responded by healing his son.

Perhaps you are like this desperate father. You *do* believe in Jesus, *and* to some degree, honestly, you *don't*. But in your heart, you *want* to believe in him more. Ask Jesus to do for your belief what this man asked of him—"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

Or maybe you have come to a point in your spiritual journey where you are ready to accept Christ's death on the cross for you. You recognize your inability to jump the sin gap and accept the merit of Christ's death on the cross for you. Expressing that kind of belief, or faith, results in the gift called eternal life. Our deepest desire for an eternal satisfying happiness can only be found in this faith based relationship with Jesus Christ. Once that relationship has been established, it progressively becomes the focus and center of who we are and what we do.

The Gospel of John

(The Message)

John 3:1-21

There was a man of the Pharisee sect, Nicodemus, a prominent leader among the Jews. [2] Late one night he visited Jesus and said, "Rabbi, we all know you're a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do if God weren't in on it."

[3] Jesus said, "You're absolutely right. Take it from me: Unless a person is born from above, it's not possible to see what I'm pointing to—to God's kingdom."

[4] "How can anyone," said Nicodemus, "be born who has already been born and grown up? You can't re-enter your mother's womb and be born again. What are you saying with this 'born-from-above' talk?"

[5] Jesus said, "You're not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—the 'wind hovering over the water' creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. [6] When you look at a baby, it's just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can't see and touch—the Spirit—and becomes a living spirit.

[7] "So don't be so surprised when I tell you that you have to be 'born from above'—out of this world, so to speak. [8] You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it's headed next. That's the way it is with everyone 'born from above' by the wind of God, the Spirit of God."

[9] Nicodemus asked, "What do you mean by this? How does this happen?"

[10] Jesus said, "You're a respected teacher of Israel and you

don't know these basics? [11] Listen carefully. I'm speaking sober truth to you. I speak only of what I know by experience; I give witness only to what I have seen with my own eyes. There is nothing secondhand here, no hearsay. Yet instead of facing the evidence and accepting it, you procrastinate with questions. [12] If I tell you things that are plain as the hand before your face and you don't believe me, what use is there in telling you of things you can't see, the things of God?

[13] "No one has ever gone up into the presence of God except the One who came down from that Presence, the Son of Man. [14] In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up— [15] and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life.

[16] "This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. [17] God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. [18] Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person's failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him.

[19] "This is the crisis we're in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. [20] Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and illusion, hates God-light and won't come near it, fearing a painful exposure. [21] But anyone working and living in truth and reality welcomes God-light so the

work can be seen for the God-work it is."

The Apostle Paul writing to new believers in the ancient city of Ephesus

Ephesians 2:1-10

It wasn't so long ago that you were mired in that old stagnant life of sin. [2] You let the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. [3] We all did it, all of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat. It's a wonder God didn't lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us. [4] Instead, immense in mercy and with an incredible love, [5] he embraced us. He took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ. He did all this on his own, with no help from us! [6] Then he picked us up and set us down in highest heaven in company with Jesus, our Messiah.

[7] Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus. [8] Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! [9] We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing! [10] No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving. He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing.

Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish!

¹ "Scripture quotations from THE MESSAGE. Copyright (c) by Eugene H. Peterson 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group."