

If you could ask God one question, what would that question be?" I put together some survey questions for you. There are different choices – why do bad things happen to good people, what really happens to a person when he dies, what is my purpose in life, and why don't all my prayers get answered. You can also give me your own question if those choices didn't suit you. Ok. I see one of you out there raising your hand. Your Question is: Why did God make mosquitoes? I'll put that one down.

Do you know which question I believe most of you would ask? It is "why do bad things happen to good people." But that is not the question of the ages. The most important question is not on my survey list. Do you still want to take a guess? I'll give you a hint – it has nothing to do with mosquitoes. The Question of the Ages is: "Am I 'right' with God?" That is the most important question of them all – "Am I right with God?"

Do you know what it means to be "right with God"? To be "right with God" means that you and God are on the same page – you have a good relationship with God – your relationship with God is so good that you know for sure, without a doubt, that when you die, your soul will be in heaven. No doubts. No worries. Not even a little. Is that you? Are you "right with God"?

That is what we are going to be talking about this morning. It is my goal that by the time you are done listening to this sermon, by the time you leave church this morning, you will know that you are right with God. It is possible to have no doubts, no worries, as you think about the eternal future of your soul. Let's answer today, "The Question of the Ages".

Where is the last place people look when they want to learn about God? It's ironic, really – the last place people look is the Bible. It reminds me of what happens in my house - when my wife and I buy something that requires assembly. I at times try to put stuff together. I try to use common sense with the various parts. But it doesn't work out. I get frustrated. My wife then suggests that I read the directions. She then takes out the directions, studies them, and puts the appliance together. She is a fixit queen. She always tells people, Mark has his gifts in other areas. Jeanne studies the directions, and puts stuff together.

So it is with God. If you want to learn how to be right with God, don't try to figure it out yourself, because you won't get it right. Read the directions. They're right here, in this book called the Bible. If you want to find answers to life's most important questions, the first place to look is the Bible. Let's see what it says about being "right with God." Romans 3:22 says, "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Wait a second – that doesn't sound good. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"? That tells me that no one is right with God.

But that's not what I hear when I make evangelism calls. You don't know how many people I have run into who tell me, that I don't go to church, but I really am a decent person. In other words, the way to be right with God is to be a good person. If you try hard to be a good person, do the best you can, then you will go to heaven when you die. Then you will be right with God. Sounds good, but it's not true. Those people haven't read the directions. Here it says, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." That whole "good person theory" doesn't work, because no matter how good you are, you're still a sinner. You still fall short of the glory of God.

Did any of you see the giant sinkhole on Baseline Road in Ocala? I guess a guy was driving and hit some electrical wires near it and died as a result. How many of you think you could put on your tennis shoes and shorts today, and try to jump the Ocala sinkhole? Is it possible to jump over that sinkhole? Obviously not. Even if you took the greatest athlete in the world, and the wind was at his back, and he ate 100 energy bars, he still wouldn't be able to

jump across that sinkhole. No matter how far you jump, everyone would fall short.

That's bad news. But there is good news. There is a way to be right with God. There is a way to heaven. The very next verse talks about you: "and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." This is God's solution – "I will give you a way to heaven, and it's free."

Years ago, my wife and I saw an article where we would receive a free life raft, if we visited a beautiful time share resort in Massachusetts. We would need to listen to a short presentation of the resort to receive our gift. Anyway, after visiting the resort, we sat down in a room for over an hour with the most high pressured salesman, I ever met. It was awful. We received the life raft, but later when I put it together it didn't inflate properly. I vowed I would never listen to a timeshare spiel again. I received a free life raft, but there were strings attached.

But with God there are truly no strings attached. It's natural to feel skeptical, but as you read the Bible, you find out that God's way to heaven is truly free. You are "justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." The reason God is giving you a free pass to heaven is because of what Jesus Christ did – the redemption that he earned when he died on the cross.

What is redemption? It's the idea of buying something back that once belonged to you – maybe there's even something wrong with it. Recently my wife bought me two shirts at Belk's. She didn't like the shirts, because they had two buttons instead of three, plus she found the same shirts cheaper at Sam's Club. She took it back to Belks. Belks in a sense bought it back. Took the price off her Visa card. In fact, Belks would buy it back even if there was something wrong with the shirts. That's redemption. You and I once belonged to God. But we sinned. There's something very wrong with us. But God buys us back. He redeems us.

And how did he do that? It was the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. You and I could never be perfect, so Jesus was perfect for us. He was the perfect child that you and I could never be. He was the perfect citizen, even obeying the corrupt Roman government. He was the perfect friend, even to the friends who abandoned him. He was the perfect worshiper, the perfect pray-er, the perfect listener of God's Word. Jesus did all of this as your substitute. Since you and I can't be perfect, Jesus was perfect in our place. And God freely gives you the credit for his perfect life. We "are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

When God bought you, it was expensive. How much did it cost God? "God presented (Jesus) as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood." God offered his Son Jesus, who died that perfect death on the cross. Instead of you and I being punished for our sins, Jesus was punished in our place. A gigantic price was paid. God did all of this because he was buying you, making you right with him. This is the way to heaven. This is the right religion. "This righteousness comes from God (not from you, trying to be a good person) through faith in Jesus Christ (not faith in yourself) to all who believe."

Imagine God the Father and God the Son having a conversation about you. God the Father says, "Tom is trying to be good. But he isn't good enough. He keeps falling back onto his own ways. He keeps committing the same sins over and over again. He's falling short. He's trying to earn his way to heaven by being nice, but it's not working. When he dies, I'm going to have to send him to hell, even though I don't want to."

Then God the Son says, "Isn't that how it is for all people?" "Yes," God the Father says. "They're all trying to earn their way to heaven by being nice. But it's not working. I don't want to punish them, but I'm a just God. Those sins have to be punished. Justice needs to be served. If

I don't punish those sins of selfishness and lust and greed – if I don't punish those sins, then I am not a just God.”

Then God the Son says, “Why don't you punish me instead.” “What do you mean?” God the Father asks. Jesus says, “Let me take Tom's place. Instead of punishing Tom for his sins, punish me. I'll take the blame. I'm the Son of God. I can take the blame for the whole world. I'll take the world's place. Punish me instead of them.”

“But that would be a terrible thing for you to go through,” God the Father says. “I would have to punish you for some pretty terrible sins. Sins of murder. Sins of rape. Every sin of the world would be on you. I would have to punish you for everything. I would have to disown you, abandon you.”

“I'll do it,” Jesus says. “I want to save the world. I will be the Lamb of God, that takes away the sins of the world.” And so God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.

There is a beautiful story about a minister who, on his vacation in the mountains, taught an illiterate boy the 23rd Psalm and its rich meaning: “The Lord is my Shepherd.” When the minister returned a year later, he found that the boy had frozen to death the previous winter. In trying to comfort the bereaved mother, the minister told her how he had taught her son, “The Lord is my Shepherd” by having each finger represent a word. The word “The” was the first finger, “Lord” was the second, and so on.

Suddenly the mother understood the strange circumstance of her boy's death. With a gleam of joy she said, “When we found him we wondered why his right hand was frozen around the fourth finger of his left hand.”

It was the finger for the word “my.” The boy knew and loved Christ the Good Shepherd as his very own. That was his comfort in the last hours of his life: “The Lord is MY Shepherd.”

Is Christ yours? Believe, and he is. Believe that he came to this world to take your sin away. Believe that he has risen from the dead. Believe that he is preparing a place for you in heaven right now. Believe that he is with you always. He is the answer to the most important question of them all. Ultimately, he is the answer to many of the unsolved mysteries of life. You ARE right with God, because of him. You will always be able to say, “The Lord is MY Shepherd.” Amen.