

Brand New

Finding Your Feet with Jesus

Teachings by Shwabe

About this book

You just became a Christian, or someone you love did, and now what? This is a short, plain guide for the very first steps. It does not assume you grew up in church or know any of the words yet.

It walks through what actually happened to you when you were saved, why grace and not your performance is what holds you, and how to know you are really His even on the days you fail. Then it covers the simple habits that grow a new believer: reading the Bible, praying, who the Holy Spirit is, what baptism means, why you need a church, how to fight the old sin, how to follow Jesus when it costs you, how to stand when life gets hard, how to tell somebody else, and what it means to give your life back to God.

These are Shwabe's teachings, in his own voice, aimed at the very beginning of the journey. It is not a rulebook. It is a hand on your shoulder for step one.

Introduction: You're Brand New

Something happened to you. Maybe it was this morning, maybe it was a few weeks ago. You prayed, or you finally stopped running, and you gave your life to Jesus. I want to be one of the first to tell you what that actually was, because it is bigger than you probably realize.

It was not you turning over a new leaf, not you gritting your teeth and deciding that this time you would try harder and finally be a better version of yourself, not some self-improvement project with a little God bolted on the side to help it along. No. The Bible has a far stronger word for it than any of that. It calls it being born again. You did not get touched up. You did not get improved. You got made new. **"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation."** Old gone. New here. That is not a figure of speech. That is what God says happened inside you.

So welcome to the family. I mean that.

Now, here is the honest part. Being brand new is wonderful, and it is also a little disorienting. You might be excited and nervous at the same time. You might be wondering what you got yourself into, whether you did it right, what you are supposed to do now, and whether God is going to change His mind about you by the weekend. I get it. Every one of us started exactly where you are.

Let me take some pressure off before we go one step further. You cannot do this by being impressive. You did not get saved by being good enough, and you are not going to stay saved by being good enough either. A newborn baby does not earn its place in the family by cooking dinner the first night. It belongs because it was born. You belong because you were born again. That is the whole thing. Rest there.

This little book is not a rulebook, and it is not a test. Think of it as a hand on your shoulder for the first steps. We are going to walk through the basics, the things I wish somebody had sat me down and explained plainly when I started. What actually happened to you. Why grace, and not your performance, holds you. How to know you are really His, even on the bad days. What to do with sin now. How to read the Bible without it feeling like homework. How to pray when you have never prayed. Who the Holy Spirit is. What baptism is. Why you cannot do this alone and need a church. How to fight the old habits. How to follow Jesus when it costs you. What to do when life gets hard. How to tell somebody else. And what it means to give your whole life back to the God who gave you a new one.

None of it is complicated. Some of it will stretch you. All of it is good.

Here is one promise before we start, and I mean it the same way I meant it when I taught these things out loud. If you come with a heart that says, *God, I want to hear from You, show me*, then you will grow. Not because of me. Because the Word of God is alive, and the same Spirit who made you new is going to keep working on you. You do your part. He has never once failed to do His.

You are brand new. Actually new. Let's take the first step.

Chapter 1: The Gospel: What Actually Happened to You

You became a Christian. Maybe it happened in a church. Maybe you were alone in your room. Maybe somebody explained the gospel, you finally understood it, and you prayed right there. You knew you needed Jesus. You believed He died for you and rose again. You asked Him to save you.

But what actually happened?

Did you join a religion? Did God give you a clean page and tell you to try harder this time? Did you promise to become a nicer person, start going to church, and quit a few bad habits?

No. Something much bigger happened. Something only God could do.

You were guilty before a holy God, and Jesus took your place. You were far from God, and Jesus brought you near. You were spiritually dead, and God gave you life. The record against you was not ignored. It was paid. And the Jesus who paid it did not stay in a grave. He rose from the dead, He is alive right now, and your whole new life rests on Him.

That is the gospel. The word simply means good news. Not good advice. Advice tells you what you should do. News tells you what has already happened.

And this happened.

The One Who Came for You

Before we talk about the cross, you need to know who was on it.

Jesus was not merely a good teacher who got killed for saying unpopular things, He was not an angel, and He was not one more prophet in a long line of prophets: Hebrews says God has spoken to us by His Son, the One through whom He made the worlds, the One who is **“the brightness of His glory,”** who made everything, holds everything together by the word of His power, and sits at the right hand of God.

The One hanging on that cross was the Creator.

That matters, because no ordinary human could pay for the sin of the world. I cannot take your place. I have my own guilt. You cannot take mine. An animal cannot truly answer for a human heart. Only a sinless man could stand where sinful people deserved to stand, and only God could make that sacrifice enough for everyone who believes.

Jesus was both.

The tabernacle in the Old Testament gave a picture of this long before Jesus was born: at the center of it stood a wooden chest called the ark of the covenant, covered inside and out with pure gold, because wood in that picture speaks of ordinary, frail humanity while gold speaks of God. Put them together and you get a picture: Jesus is fully man and fully God, not half of each, close enough to get tired, hungry,

rejected, bruised, and killed, yet still the God who made the tree on which people nailed Him.

Why would God come that close?

Because He loves you. Christians, wake up and hear that. God loves you. The scars Jesus still carries are not vague religious symbols. They are proof that His love entered our pain and paid a real price to bring us home.

Your Place, His Cross

First Peter says Jesus **“bore our sins in His own body on the tree.”** That little sentence explains the cross. Your sins were placed on Him. He became your substitute.

A substitute stands where somebody else was supposed to stand, so if you look at the cross and understand the gospel, you have to say, “That should have been me,” not because you deserved the exact Roman punishment Jesus suffered, but because sin earns death and separation from God. Jesus had no sin: He never lied, never gave in to temptation, never acted from selfishness, never once disobeyed His Father, and from birth to death, He lived the perfect life you and I have not lived.

Then He willingly stepped into the place of guilty people.

Isaiah described it hundreds of years before it happened: **“He was wounded for our transgressions.”** Transgressions is just another word for sins. Jesus was silent before His accusers like a lamb being led to slaughter, mocked, beaten, whipped, crowned with thorns, and nailed to a cross, yet He did not lose control: He committed Himself to the Father, and although He could have called angels to stop it, He stayed.

He stayed for you.

The violence of the cross shows us something we would rather avoid. Sin is serious. We tend to treat sin like God is trying to keep us from a little fun. The cross tears that lie apart. If you could pull sin out of the human heart and show what it really does, it would look like Jesus on that cross, bloody and bruised, barely recognizable. Sin destroys. It kills peace, shreds relationships, hardens hearts, and separates people from the God who made them.

God did not shrug at it. He judged it.

But if you belong to Jesus, He judged it on Christ instead of you.

Why All That Blood?

If you read the Old Testament, you are going to notice blood everywhere. Bulls, goats, and lambs were sacrificed. Priests sprinkled blood on the altar, the tabernacle, the sacred furniture, and even the people. It can feel strange and brutal to a new reader. Why would God require that?

Hebrews gives the reason: **“Without shedding of blood there is no remission.”** Remission means forgiveness, a debt released because it has been paid. Sin brings death. Forgiveness is costly.

But the blood of those animals never truly took sin away, because it was a picture. Think of a dollar bill under the old gold standard: the paper was not the gold, it represented gold held somewhere else, and its value pointed beyond itself. In the same way, every believing person who brought a sacrifice was looking forward to the sacrifice God had promised, because the lamb was the picture and Jesus was the reality.

All forgiveness has always pointed to the same cross. People before Jesus looked forward to it. We look back at it.

Here is the difference. Those animal sacrifices had to be repeated. Day after day, year after year, another sacrifice was brought. The repetition itself told you the job was not finished. If the blood of bulls and goats could have cleaned the human heart, the sacrifices would have stopped.

Then Jesus came.

He offered one sacrifice for sins forever, and Hebrews says He **“sat down at the right hand of God.”** The old priests kept standing because their work kept going. Jesus sat down because His work was finished. He did not cover some of your sins until you made another mistake. He paid for them once for all.

Once.

You do not add to that payment by reading your Bible, going to church, praying for an hour, giving money, or becoming impressive. Those things have a good place in your new life, but they cannot buy forgiveness. If they could, then Jesus did not need to die. Going back to a checklist as your hope is just trading one altar for another.

There is nothing more you can pay, and nothing more you should try to pay.

The Great Exchange

So what happened when you believed?

You switched places with Jesus.

Your sin was counted as His at the cross, and His perfect record was counted as yours. The Bible calls that righteousness, which means being right with God. You did not earn it. God gave it to you because you trusted His Son.

Inside the ark of the covenant were the stone tablets of God's law, the law His people had broken. Over that broken law sat a golden lid called the mercy seat. Once a year the high priest put blood there. Above it stood two golden angels, looking down. What did they see? Not the broken law inside the box. They saw the blood on the mercy seat.

There is your picture.

When God looks at you in Christ, He does not pretend you never sinned. He sees that your sin has been answered by the blood of His Son. He does not see a condemned person trying to earn a second chance. He sees someone forgiven, covered in the righteousness of Jesus, welcomed into His family.

Not a flawless human. A forgiven one.

You will still stumble. You will still have things to confess, habits to unlearn, and whole sections of your heart that God needs to change. But your failures do not send Jesus back to the cross. The sacrifice is finished. Your place in God's family rests on Jesus and His faithfulness, not on your ability to have a perfect week.

That is why grace feels almost too good to be true. We think, "Surely I need to do something to make God keep loving me." But He loved you while you were still in rebellion. He gave His Son before you could offer Him anything. Do you really think the God who paid everything to bring you home is going to forget you now?

A Clean Conscience and an Open Door

The blood of Jesus does more than change a record in heaven. Hebrews says it can **"cleanse your conscience from dead works."**

You know what a guilty conscience does. It replays the moment. You lie in bed and think, "I should have said this. I should not have done that." Around and around it goes. You want to travel backward and repair what cannot be undone.

Some consequences may still need to be faced. You may need to apologize, return something, tell the truth, or rebuild trust. Forgiveness does not make honesty unnecessary. It makes honesty possible. You can stop hiding because Jesus already knows the worst and paid for it.

When you confess your sin to God, you are not telling Him new information. You are agreeing with Him and bringing it into the light. And because of Jesus, you can get up clean. Holding on to condemnation after He has forgiven you does not honor the cross. It acts as if His blood was not enough.

It was enough.

You also received access to God. Under the old system, only the high priest entered the holiest place, and only once a year, but now Hebrews tells every believer to draw near with a true heart and full assurance of faith: you can talk to God in your room, in the car, in the shower, on a mountain, or during the worst night of your life, because you do not need a human priest to carry your words to Him. Jesus is your High Priest, and He has opened the way.

The door is open. Come in.

Alive, Not Merely Improved

The gospel does not end with a dead Savior.

Jesus was buried, and on the third day He rose. This is not a decorative piece of Christianity. It is the center. Jesus pointed to His resurrection as the great sign that proved who He is. The frightened disciples saw Him alive, and those same people who had scattered in fear went out boldly proclaiming that He had conquered death.

If Jesus stayed dead, we would have a sad story about a brave teacher. Because He rose, we have salvation. The sacrifice was accepted. Death was defeated. The One you trusted is alive and able to keep you.

And He put His Spirit in you.

That is why something inside you has changed. Before Jesus, the question may have been, "Can I get away with this?" Now there is a new desire, sometimes quiet and sometimes burning, to please God. You are not perfect, but you are no longer at peace with sin. The Holy Spirit corrects you, pulls you toward Scripture, and teaches you to love what God loves.

Good works do not save you. But the Savior who saves you also changes you. You do not obey so God will make you His child. You begin to obey because He already has.

So what actually happened to you?

Jesus, fully God and fully man, took your place. His blood paid your debt. His righteousness became your new standing. His resurrection became your hope. His Spirit gave you life. You were forgiven, brought near, welcomed into God's family, and set free to live for Him.

Not because you finally became good enough.

Because Jesus is enough.

Jesus, thank You for taking my place. Help me understand what Your cross has done and trust that Your sacrifice is enough. When guilt pulls me backward, remind me that You paid for me once for all. Teach me to come near to God, listen to Your Spirit, and live like someone You have truly made new. Amen.

Chapter 2: Grace, Not Performance

There is a trap almost every new Christian falls into. I fell into it. Maybe you already have too.

You give your life to Jesus, and at first you are just grateful. Your sin is forgiven. God loves you. You belong to Him. Then, somewhere along the way, you start building a checklist.

If I read my Bible every day this week, God will be happy with me. If I pray long enough, stop struggling with that sin, go to church, and do something useful, then God will bless me. Then I can ask Him for help. Then I will be a good Christian.

And what happens when you miss a day? What happens when the same old temptation wins again? The whole thing collapses. You feel ashamed, so you hide from God. You promise to do better. You last a few days, fail again, and begin to wonder whether God is tired of you.

Pretty soon you are watching every Christian around you and keeping score, deciding that the person who prays longer must be closer to God, the one who knows more verses must be loved more, and the one who seems to have everything together must possess some secret that God refused to give you.

Can I tell you the truth? You are trying to earn something Jesus already bought.

That is not freedom. That is performance. And it will keep you discouraged as long as you make your standing with God depend on how well you did this week.

So let us start with the law of God, because you cannot understand grace until you understand what the law is for.

Think about the Ten Commandments. No other gods. Do not make an idol. Do not misuse God's name. Honor your father and mother. Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not covet what belongs to somebody else.

Most people hear that list and immediately start grading themselves. *Well, I have never murdered anybody. I am not that bad.* But Jesus said hatred comes from the same murderous heart. He said lust is adultery in the heart. And coveting happens entirely inside you. Nobody else may ever see it.

We love comparing ourselves with people who make us look good, because if I stand beside the worst person I know, point at everything they have done, and keep the light away from my own heart, I can walk away feeling fairly clean without ever facing God's standard at all.

God does.

His standard is not that you did more good than the person next to you. His standard is perfection. **“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”** Not some. All.

Picture three people on a sinking ship who have to swim to an island. One cannot swim and sinks beside the ship. The second makes it a little farther. The third is a tremendous swimmer. He cuts through the water, leaves the others far behind, and gets closer than anybody else. Then his strength

gives out too.

All three drown.

One was better than the others, but none reached the shore. That is us trying to reach God by being good. You may look impressive beside somebody else. You may keep nine commands while they keep three. But the island is perfection, and none of us can get there.

It does not matter whether you sank beside the ship or swam until the beach was close enough to see the trees, because if reaching that island is what saves you, almost reaching it will do you no more good than never learning how to swim.

The law was never given so you could congratulate yourself. It was given to stop your mouth and show you your need. James compares it to a mirror. When you look into a mirror in the morning and see that your face is dirty, you do not pull the mirror off the wall and scrub your face with it. The mirror can show you the dirt. It cannot wash you.

You would never stand in the bathroom rubbing glass across your face, getting angrier at the mirror because it keeps showing the same mess, yet that is exactly what we do when we take God's commands, try harder and harder to wash ourselves with them, and then blame God when the guilt remains.

That is what God's law does. **“By the law is the knowledge of sin.”** It tells the truth about you. It shows the anger, pride, dishonesty, lust, selfishness, and idolatry that you would rather excuse. It says, *You are guilty. You need help.*

That sounds harsh until you realize where God is leading you.

When Moses first carried the Ten Commandments down the mountain, the people were already breaking them. Before the stone tablets even reached the camp, Israel had made a golden calf and was worshiping it. The first command said to have no other gods, and they had already failed the first command.

God knew they would fail.

Later, He told them to place those commandments inside a wooden chest covered with gold, called the ark of the covenant. On top of that chest sat the mercy seat. Once a year, the high priest sprinkled the blood of a sacrifice there. So when the place of God's presence looked down, the broken law was covered by blood.

Do you see the picture?

The law was inside, testifying that the people were guilty. Mercy was on top. And the blood stood between a holy God and the people who had broken His commands.

That whole picture was pointing to Jesus.

There has only been one man who kept God's law for His whole life. Jesus faced temptation just as we do, yet He never sinned. He hit every mark. Then He went to the cross and took the judgment that belonged to us. The nails were terrible. The beating, mocking, and suffocation were terrible. But the deepest suffering was that the wrath our sin deserved was poured on Him.

The spotless One stood where the guilty should have stood, received what the rebels had earned, and allowed the people whose lungs He created to mock Him while He struggled for breath, all so people like you and me could come home to the Father we had run from.

He took your place.

Think of the thing you are most ashamed of. The thing you hope nobody ever finds out. If you have trusted Jesus, He took that sin to the cross. It is not waiting for you at the end of your life. The payment was made. **“It is finished.”**

And something else happened at the cross. Your sin was placed on Jesus, and His perfect record was credited to you. God does not accept you because you finally managed to clean yourself up. He accepts you because you are in His Son. **“Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”** Freely. Grace means undeserved favor. If you could earn it, it would not be grace.

This is why the order matters so much.

You do not keep God's commands so you can be saved. You begin to obey because He saved you. You do not serve to make God love you. You serve because He loved you first. Your obedience is not the price of His favor. It is the fruit of receiving His favor.

That does not mean God's commands no longer matter. Paul asked whether faith makes the law worthless, and his answer was, **“God forbid.”** The law is holy and good. It shows us what love looks like. Love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself. The commands protect us from things that destroy people.

But they cannot save us.

If you confuse those two things, you will end up in one of two ditches. In one ditch, you think your behavior earns heaven, so you become proud when you succeed and crushed when you fail. In the other, you say grace means sin does not matter, so you keep living exactly as you did before. Both miss the gospel.

Real grace does not make you shrug at sin, because once you understand that your lying, lust, anger, and pride were not little mistakes but part of the load Jesus carried to the cross, gratitude begins doing inside you what guilt and fear could never accomplish from the outside.

When God saves you, He gives you His Spirit. Something begins to happen inside. Before, you could sin and feel at home in it. Now there is a fight. Part of you pulls toward the old life, but another desire has appeared. You want to follow God. You want to please Him. You may struggle badly, but the struggle itself tells you that something has changed.

You are alive.

God works from the inside out. The tabernacle shows us that too. When God gave Moses the plans for that tent, He started with the inside, with the place of mercy and His presence. Only afterward did He describe the outside coverings. We usually do the opposite. We fix the visible things first. We learn the right words, carry a Bible, show up at church, and try to look polished while the inside is still starving.

God starts in the heart.

The outside of that tabernacle was covered with plain animal skins. Nothing impressive. Inside was gold, light, bread, and the place where God met with His people. Jesus was like that. Isaiah said there was nothing unusual in His appearance that would draw a crowd. Yet inside was the glory of God.

And this is how He works in you. Becoming a Christian may not change your face when you look in the mirror. You still look like you. But He begins dealing with the fear, anger, pride, depression, and selfishness buried inside. He gives courage where there was fear, peace where there was anxiety, and life where everything felt dead.

Sometimes that work is so quiet you hardly notice it until months later, when the insult that once would have controlled your whole day no longer owns you, or the temptation that used to drag you without a fight now meets a new resistance because the Spirit of God is alive in you.

Slowly, the outside follows.

Philippians says, **“He who has begun a good work in you will complete it.”** Notice who began the work. God did. Notice who will complete it. God will. You participate. You listen, obey, confess your sin, read His Word, pray, and stay close to other believers. But you do all of that depending on His strength, not trying to replace it with yours.

You need to hear this because you are going to fail.

When you do, do not pretend. Do not blame somebody else. Go to God and tell the truth. *I lied. I looked at what I should not have looked at. I was cruel. I put something ahead of You. It was wrong, and it was mine.* The Bible says, **“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us.”**

Confession is not giving God information He missed, as though heaven had a bad camera angle and you need to fill in the details, because He already knows everything. Confession is agreeing with Him, dropping the excuses, and bringing into the light the very thing shame keeps telling you to hide.

Then get up.

Do not spend three days punishing yourself as if your misery adds something to the cross. Do not wait until you feel worthy to pray. You were never worthy. That was the point. Come back because Jesus is worthy, because His blood is enough, and because the mercy seat is still where God meets you.

In the temple, a thick veil once separated people from the place of God's presence. Only the high priest could enter, and only once a year, carrying blood. When Jesus died and said, **“It is finished,”** that veil

tore from top to bottom. God tore it. Through Jesus, the way to Him is open.

So come to Him.

Come on the good day when you read four chapters and prayed before breakfast. Come on the awful day when you failed before you got out of bed. Come when you feel strong. Come when your hands are empty and you have nothing to show Him. You are not approaching God with your weekly score. You are approaching through Jesus.

This is grace. Not God pretending your sin was harmless. God placed its full cost on His Son. Not God leaving you the way He found you. His Spirit is changing you from the inside out. And not you working hard enough to keep yourself in His family. The One who saved you has promised to finish what He started.

Rest in that. Then get up and follow Him.

God, thank You that Jesus did what I could never do. Keep me from pride when I obey and from despair when I fail. Teach me to confess my sin, trust Your grace, and follow You because You loved me first. Change me from the inside out. In Jesus' name, amen.

Chapter 3: You Really Are His

There is a question that comes for almost every new Christian, usually right after you mess up.

Am I really His?

You believed in Jesus, and you meant it, and maybe for a few days everything felt new, but then you got angry again, went back to something you said you were done with, had doubts, and woke up one morning without feeling close to God at all. Now the question is sitting there in your head: *Did anything actually happen to me?*

Let me take you into a room with Jesus and His disciples, men who had walked with Him for three years, heard Him teach, watched Him heal people, and seen things nobody else had ever seen. Now Jesus tells them He is leaving, one of them will betray Him, and Peter, chest puffed out, says everybody else might leave, but he never will. Jesus looks at him and says Peter will deny Him three times.

How do you think that room felt?

These were grown men, but their hearts were falling apart. Jesus knew it too. So He said, **“Let not your heart be troubled.”** Then He told them why.

“I go to prepare a place for you.”

Notice what He did not say. He did not say, I am preparing a place for you if you manage to be perfect from now on, hand them directions, and warn them not to miss a turn. He said He was going to prepare their place, He would come again, He would receive them to Himself, and His plan was to bring them where He was.

Thomas still did not get it. I love Thomas. He is the kid in the class who finally raises his hand while everybody else pretends to understand the math problem. He says, Lord, we do not know where You are going, so how can we know the way?

Jesus answers, **“I am the way, the truth, and the life.”**

He does not merely know the way. He is the way.

Think of it like this. If I gave you a list of turns to get across town, you could miss one, and if I told you to follow my car, you could get caught at a red light and lose me. But what if I opened the door and said, get in? Now getting there is not resting on your ability to remember every direction, because you are in the car with the one who knows the way, and it is up to him to bring you there.

That is what Jesus is saying. Christianity is not you gripping a list of rules, terrified that one wrong turn will leave you lost forever. You have put your trust in a Person. Jesus Himself took responsibility for bringing you to the Father.

And He is not going to get lost.

This is where your assurance starts. Not with how strong you felt this morning or whether you had a perfect week, but with who Jesus is and what He promised to do: He died for your sins, rose from the dead, and received you when you turned from your sin and trusted Him as Lord. Your hope is now in Him, and where there is Christ, there is hope.

Look at Peter. If anybody could have decided he was not really Christ's, it was Peter, because he bragged that he would never leave and then denied three times that he even knew Jesus. That is not a small failure. Yet Jesus did not throw Peter away, He restored him, and then, empowered by the Holy Spirit, that same bumbling, frightened man stood up and preached while three thousand people were saved.

Peter was not perfect after that either. Years later Paul had to correct him publicly because fear had pulled him into hypocrisy. Peter still needed grace. He still needed correction. But he was still Peter, still an apostle of Jesus Christ, still a man God was using.

That matters for you. All of us are going to fail until we see Jesus face to face, but that is not an excuse for sin, and you should never use grace as permission to run back into the thing that nailed Jesus to the cross. Your failure is also not an excuse to give up. The answer when you sin is not to hide from God for a week until you feel worthy again, because you will never make yourself worthy. Come straight into the light.

First John 1:9 gives you a promise: **“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us.”**

Faithful means He will do it every time. Just means Jesus already paid for that sin at the cross. God is not pretending the sin did not matter. It mattered enough for His Son to bleed for it. But because Jesus paid, God forgives you completely when you confess and turn from it.

Immediately.

There is no rule that says you have to wait a week before you can be a good Christian again, sitting outside the family until God cools down. You confess it, call it what God calls it, turn around, and then believe His promise more than you believe your shame.

One of the clearest signs that you really are His is not that you never sin, but that you cannot settle down and make peace with your sin. Before, maybe you could lie, hate somebody, look at whatever you wanted, and move on, but now there is Someone inside you saying, this is not who you are anymore, make it right. That is the Holy Spirit.

Jesus told those worried disciples, **“I will not leave you orphans.”** He promised another Helper who would live in them, not a vague feeling or a little extra religious energy, but God living in the believer. Jesus did not leave you alone to perform the Christian life by your own power, because the power of God lives inside the Christian.

So when you know you should forgive, when you feel conviction over a lie, when something in you wants to obey God even though another part still wants its old sin, do not look at that struggle and say

nothing happened. The struggle may be evidence that something did. Dead people do not fight. Your heart was made alive, and now there is a war where there used to be surrender.

Peter used another word for Christians. He called them pilgrims, people living in a place that is not home. You are still in this world, going to work or school, dealing with people, paying bills, getting tired, and having bad days, but you do not belong to this world the way you used to. Your citizenship is in heaven, and you are on your way to a real city whose builder and maker is God.

That means you will feel out of place sometimes. First Peter says people may think it strange that you do not join them. Good. You are not called to copy the world so closely that nobody can tell whose you are.

But being different is not what makes you His. Get the order right. You do not live differently so Jesus will take you. You live differently because He already has. A cow knows its owner. A pilgrim knows his home. And a Christian is learning to recognize the voice of the One who bought him.

What happens when you lose sight of that? David did. God had promised that David would become king, but David started listening to fear instead of the promise. He said in his own mind, Saul is going to kill me. That one lie pulled him step by step into enemy territory. Eventually his home was burned, his family was taken, and his own men talked about killing him. Everything he had leaned on disappeared.

Then the Bible says, **“David strengthened himself in the Lord his God.”**

His God. Do not miss those two words. David had compromised badly, but he turned back to the God who was still his God, not strengthening himself by repeating that he was amazing, but going back to God's word, God's promise, and God's presence. He asked God what to do, and then he acted on what God said.

You will need to do the same. When that question comes, *Am I really His?*, do not search your feelings for an answer, because feelings move around too much. Go back to what God said: Jesus is the way, Jesus prepared the place, Jesus promised to receive His people, Jesus paid for your sin, Jesus gave you His Spirit, and Jesus said He would not leave you as an orphan.

Strengthen yourself in the Lord your God. Read His promises. Pray them back to Him. Then obey the next thing He tells you to do. Faith is taking the Word of God and living like it is true.

Maybe you say, but I am weak. Of course you are. So was Peter. So was David. God loves to take ordinary, unimpressive, failing people and show what His power can do through them. Peter had two names. Simon was the old name, the man who was always putting his foot in his mouth. Peter meant a stone. In his own strength he was a piece of clay. In the hands of Jesus, that clay became a rock.

You are not finished yet either.

The same Jesus who saved you is changing you from the inside. He will correct you, call you away from sin, teach you to trust His promises, and make you look more like Him. Some days that growth

will feel slow. But the One driving the car knows where He is going.

So let your heart settle on this. If you have turned from your sin and put your trust in the risen Jesus as your Lord, you really are His. Not because your grip on Him is flawless, but because His grip on you is. You are not an orphan. You are not a stranger trying to earn a room in the house. You are His child, His pilgrim, and He is bringing you home.

Jesus, thank You that You are the way and that You have not left me alone. When I sin, help me confess it, turn from it, and believe Your promise to forgive me. Strengthen me in Your Word, fill me with Your Spirit, and teach my troubled heart to rest in what You have done. Bring me all the way home. In Jesus' name, amen.

Chapter 4: Repentance: Turning From Sin

Repentance is an old word, but it is not a complicated word.

Picture yourself walking down a road toward sin, knowing exactly where you are going even if nobody else knows. Then God gets your attention, and you stop. That matters, but repentance is more than stopping. You turn around, begin walking toward God again, and start living for Him by doing what He says.

That is repentance.

It is not feeling awful for a few hours, getting caught and wishing the consequences would disappear, or promising God that you will never fail again. Repentance is agreeing with God about what you did, taking responsibility for it, and turning back to Him.

And you need to know this at the beginning: there is restoration. No matter where you have gone, what you have seen, what you have said, or what you have done, there is forgiveness for the person who turns to God. There may still be consequences. We will talk about that honestly. But God is not looking for an excuse to throw you away.

Look at David.

The Bible calls him a man after God's own heart, and David still fell horribly. He took another man's wife, tried to cover it up, and arranged for that man to be killed in battle. The man was Uriah, one of David's own mighty men, not a stranger but a loyal soldier and a friend, and other soldiers died in David's plan too.

This was not a little mistake.

Then David went silent. For about a year he hid what he had done, and from the outside it might have looked as if he had gotten away with it. No courtroom. No public charge. No lightning bolt from heaven. But silence did not mean approval, because God was giving David time to turn.

And David was miserable.

In Psalm 32 he described that hidden year: **"When I kept silent, my bones grew old."** He said God's hand was heavy on him and his strength dried up like water in summer. Sin promises freedom, then locks the door behind you, and it promises pleasure, then steals your joy. David still had a palace, a crown, money, power, and the woman he wanted, but none of it gave him peace.

You may understand that more than you want to admit. You lie down at night, everything gets quiet, and the thing you have been avoiding walks right into your thoughts. You know. God knows. You try to distract yourself, but the joy is gone.

That discomfort may be mercy.

God loves His children too much to let them walk happily toward destruction, just as a good father does not ignore the road that will ruin his child. Sometimes God allows the weight of conviction, that inward knowledge that something is wrong, to press on you because He wants you awake. He is not trying to crush you. He is calling you home.

When David would not turn on his own, God sent his friend Nathan, who told him a story about two men. One was rich and owned more sheep than he needed, while the other was poor and had one little lamb. That lamb ate from his plate, drank from his cup, slept in his arms, and was like a daughter to him. When a traveler came to visit the rich man, the rich man would not take one of his own many sheep, so he stole the poor man's only lamb and served it for dinner.

David exploded. That man deserved judgment.

Then Nathan pointed straight at him and said, "**You are the man!**"

That story hit its target because sin always looks worse on somebody else. Have you noticed that? You pull into traffic too close and hope the other driver will have mercy, but when another driver does the same thing to you the next day, suddenly his license should be taken away. We excuse in ourselves what we condemn in everybody else.

Amos preached the same way. He named the sins of the nations surrounding Israel, and the people of Israel probably loved it. Yes, Amos. Those people are terrible. Keep preaching. But his message moved closer and closer, like rings on a target, until the bullseye landed on the very people who could see everybody else's sin while remaining blind to their own.

Be careful here. When another person's failure makes you unusually angry, stop and ask God to search you. Sometimes the thing that burns us up in them is the thing we have been hiding in ourselves. Condemning somebody else will not make you clean.

God's question to David was heartbreaking. He reminded David of all He had given him, then asked, "**Why have you despised the commandment of the Lord?**" Sin is not only breaking a rule. It is looking at the love and goodness of God, then reaching past Him for something else.

That is why repentance starts with truth.

David did not blame Bathsheba, his childhood, his stress, his position, or some natural urge, and he did not say Nathan had misunderstood the situation. He said, "**I have sinned against the Lord.**" Short. Clean. No defense attached.

That is confession. It means you agree with God. You name the thing for what it is and stop arguing your case. God, I lied. I hated that person. I used someone. I watched what I knew I should not watch. I put this thing above You. I did it. It was wrong. Please forgive me.

The moment you add, "but," you are usually reaching for the sin again. I know I lied, but they made me afraid. I know I lost my temper, but you should have heard what she said. I know this relationship is wrong, but we love each other. An explanation may tell how you arrived there. It does not turn wrong

into right.

Own it.

And watch what happened when David did. Nathan answered, "**The Lord also has put away your sin.**" The forgiveness was immediate. David did not complete a religious checklist or spend six months proving he was serious enough. He confessed, and God forgave him.

First John 1:9 gives the same promise to you: "**If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us.**" Not some unrighteousness. All of it. The blood Jesus shed on the cross is strong enough to cleanse you, and you do not need to wonder whether your failure surprised Him because Jesus knew every sin you would ever commit when He chose the cross.

Now, forgiveness does not mean sin has no consequences. David was forgiven, but the damage reached his home, his children, and his kingdom because sin never stays neatly inside the fence you build around it. It touches spouses, friends, children, churches, and people you never meant to hurt. If you steal, repentance may require giving back what you took, and if you lied about someone, it may require correcting the lie. If you broke trust, forgiveness can be immediate while trust takes time to rebuild.

Do not confuse consequences with rejection.

God may forgive you and still let you walk through what your choice produced, but that does not mean He has abandoned you. It means choices are real, people matter, and grace does not pretend damage never happened. David's life carried scars, but God was not finished with him, stopped loving him, or done using him. David did not become some second class child of God.

This matters because you are going to fail as a Christian. I wish I could tell you that the moment you believe in Jesus, you never sin again, but that is not true because perfect people do not exist. Abraham had lapses of faith, Moses failed, Jeremiah wanted to quit, and Peter denied that he even knew Jesus. First John says that if we claim we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.

God does not use perfect people. He uses people who come back.

So when you fall, do not run away from God until you feel worthy again. You cannot clean yourself well enough to earn your way back. Run to Him. Tell the truth. Receive His forgiveness. Then ask a very practical question: what was the last thing God told me to do? Go back there and obey Him.

Maybe He told you to end something. End it. Maybe He told you to apologize. Make the call. Maybe there is something in your room, on your phone, or in your schedule that keeps pulling you toward the same sin. Get rid of it. Repentance has feet. You are not buying forgiveness with those actions. Jesus already paid for forgiveness. Your actions simply show that you really have turned.

Pay attention to what you keep placing in front of your mind too. Amos warned people who had traded the truth of God for lies. We become like what we worship, and worship is more than singing in a church. What receives your attention, affection, time, and obedience? What are you soaking up every day? Human beings are like sponges. If you continually fill your mind with something that celebrates

the sin you are trying to leave, do not act shocked when you are pulled back toward it.

God is not trying to empty your life and leave you bored. He wants to give you something better: Himself. Repentance is not only saying no to sin. It is saying yes to God. Turn off what feeds the old life, then open your Bible; step away from the person who drags you backward, then spend time with believers who will help you follow Jesus; stop hiding, then pray honestly in the quiet place where nobody but God sees.

This has to move from your head to your heart. You can know the right church words and still hide. You can explain grace, salvation, and forgiveness, yet never become convinced that the cross is enough for your own sin. But it is enough. What Jesus did is powerful enough to cleanse you from all unrighteousness and restore you to the work He has for you.

So do not wait a year like David did. Do not wait for your secret to be exposed. Do not wait until the thing has taken more from you. God is giving you an opportunity right now, not because He hates you, but because He loves you.

What do you need to name?

No excuses. No hiding. Bring it into the light, confess it to God, and turn around. There is forgiveness. There is restoration. There is a road home, and Jesus has already opened it for you.

God, search my heart and show me where I have been excusing or hiding sin. I confess that I have sinned against You. Thank You that the blood of Jesus is enough to forgive me and make me clean. Help me turn from what is wrong and walk toward You again. Restore the joy of Your salvation, and teach me to obey the next thing You put in front of me. In Jesus' name, amen.

Chapter 5: The Bible: Your Daily Bread

You have a soul, and your soul gets hungry.

You already know what happens when your body goes without food. You get weak, you get grouchy, your thinking gets foggy, and suddenly eating a bag of chips seems like the most important mission in human history because your body was made to be fed.

So was your soul.

Jesus said, "**Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.**" That means breakfast can keep your body moving, but it cannot keep your heart close to God, because your soul needs something this world cannot cook, sell, stream, or deliver to your door. It needs the Word of God.

If you are a brand new Christian, this is one of the most important habits you can begin. Read your Bible. Not because reading earns salvation, because it does not, and not because Christians get points for finishing chapters, because they do not. Read it because God has given you food, and you need to eat.

Peter says, "**As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby.**" A newborn baby does not need to be convinced to want milk. That baby knows one thing. Hungry. Then everybody in the house knows it too.

That is the picture God gives you. You have been born again through faith in Jesus Christ, and now you need the milk of His Word so you can grow, but you do not need to know everything today. Babies do not walk out of the hospital carrying their own car seat. They start small, they eat, they sleep, they grow, and then one day they stand.

Give God time to grow you, but give Him something to work with. Open the book.

This Book Is Different

Paul calls the Bible the Holy Scriptures. Holy means set apart. Different. This book is not sitting in the same category as every other book you have ever read, because while there are good books that can teach you history, make you laugh, or help you understand another person, there is the Bible, and then there is everything else.

Why? Because "**all Scripture is given by inspiration of God.**" The word inspiration means God breathed. God used real human writers with real personalities. One was a fisherman. One was a doctor. One was a tax collector. They did not all sound alike, and God did not turn them into machines. But He guided what they wrote.

Think about a sailboat. The sailor is really there, steering the boat, but the wind fills the sail and carries that boat where it needs to go. In the same way, God moved human writers so that what they wrote was His Word, and although these men were flawed, God was not, and His power was great enough to carry His message safely through them.

This is why you can depend on what the Bible says about God, humanity, sin, salvation, life, and death. Every account is true, even when the account records somebody telling a lie. Satan speaks in the Bible. His words are not true, but the record of what he said is true. Job's friends said some terrible things about God. The Bible faithfully tells you what they said, and then it shows you that they were wrong.

You can trust this book.

The first attack Satan made in the garden was a question: "**Has God indeed said?**" He is still asking it. Did God really say that, can you really trust Him, and does that verse really apply to you? Satan knows that if he can get you to doubt God's Word, he can slip almost any lie into the empty space.

Do not give him the space.

The Bible Leads You to Jesus

Now let me make something very clear. You are not saved because you own a Bible. You are not saved because you read it every morning. You are not even saved because you can win every Bible trivia game in the room.

You are saved by Jesus Christ.

Jesus told the religious leaders of His day, "**These are they which testify of Me.**" Those men searched the Scriptures and knew details most of us would never remember, but when the One the Scriptures pointed to stood in front of them, they rejected Him. They knew words on a page and missed the living Christ.

Do not make that mistake. The Bible is not the finish line, because it leads you to Jesus, shows you that you have sinned and cannot save yourself, reveals God's plan of salvation, takes you to the cross where Jesus bore the punishment you deserved, and then shows you the empty tomb so you can know that because He lives, you can have eternal life.

The whole Bible does this, not just the last few pages.

In Exodus, God told Moses to build a tabernacle, a tent where God would meet with His people, and He spent chapter after chapter giving the details. Why spend so much time talking about a tent? Because the whole thing was a picture of Jesus.

From the outside, it was covered with ordinary animal skins, while inside it was filled with gold. Jesus came humbly, with nothing flashy about His outward appearance, but inside was the glory of God. The tabernacle was where God dwelt among men, and Jesus is God who came to dwell among us. Inside the ark were the commandments the people had broken, and above them was the mercy seat where blood was sprinkled. What a picture. God's broken law was covered by blood, just as your sin is covered by the blood of Christ.

You need the whole Bible to see the whole picture. The Old Testament lays out the shadows. The New Testament turns on the light and shows you Jesus standing there.

So when you reach a part you do not understand, do not decide it is useless. Slow down. Ask questions. That strange law, family list, sacrifice, or tent peg might be holding a picture of Jesus you have not seen yet.

Food That Changes You

The Bible does more than give information. Paul says it is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness. Let me put that in plain language.

It shows you what is right, shows you what is wrong, shows you how to get right, and then teaches you how to stay on the right road.

That is why reading it can sometimes feel uncomfortable. The Word of God does not only pat you on the shoulder, because sometimes it puts a finger on the exact thing you hoped God would not mention: your anger, your dishonesty, that relationship, or the bitterness you keep feeding. It convicts you.

But conviction is not God trying to crush you, because the same Bible that exposes the wound shows you the remedy. It rebukes and encourages, telling the comfortable sinner to wake up while telling the broken sinner that there is mercy in Jesus. A faithful Bible teacher once described it this way: afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.

God's goal is to make you complete, **"thoroughly equipped for every good work."** Picture somebody getting into shape. At first, one flight of stairs feels like climbing a mountain. But daily training changes what that person can carry and how far that person can go. The Bible gets you into spiritual shape. It equips you to recognize lies, resist temptation, love difficult people, serve others, and do whatever God puts in front of you.

I have seen the opposite in my own life. When I am compromising, when sin keeps winning, when my thoughts are a mess, usually I have pushed the Bible aside and replaced it with games, shows, or endless noise. None of those things has to be evil by itself, but snacks are not dinner, and entertainment cannot feed a soul.

The old saying is true: the Bible will keep you from sin, but sin will keep you from the Bible.

When you fall, do not hide from the very book that can lead you home. Open it. Let God correct you. Confess what He shows you, receive His forgiveness, and obey the next thing He says.

Eat It, Do Not Just Taste It

There is a difference between reading the Bible and letting the Bible into you.

You can race through four chapters, close the cover, and remember nothing before your feet hit the floor. What did you eat? Nothing. You moved your eyes across words. That is not the goal.

Read slowly enough to remember. Meditate on it. That does not mean emptying your mind or doing something strange, but thinking about what you read, turning it over, asking what it tells you about God and yourself, and asking what you need to believe, stop, start, or obey.

One verse understood and obeyed is better than five chapters inhaled and forgotten.

Start somewhere simple. The Gospel of John is a wonderful place because it was written so you could believe Jesus is the Christ and know that you have life in His name. Read a small section each day, and before you begin, pray, "God, speak to me, show me Jesus, and show me what You want me to do." Then read with a pen nearby, write down one thing that stands out, and carry it with you through the day.

And then do it.

That last part matters. You can hear sermon after sermon and deceive yourself into thinking that hearing is the same as obeying. It is not. God did not give Moses the blueprint for the tabernacle so Moses could admire the drawing. He told him, "**According to the pattern, so you shall make it.**" No creative improvements. No replacing gold with something cheaper because it was easier. Build what God said.

The Bible is your blueprint too, and there is no room to replace God's words with whatever is popular, comfortable, or convenient. If He says forgive, forgive, if He says tell the truth, tell the truth, and if He says love your enemy, love that difficult person. If He says flee from sin, stop standing there asking how close you can get without falling in.

Truth becomes strong in your life when you obey it.

Gather the Manna Every Day

When Israel traveled through the wilderness, God fed them with manna. Every morning it appeared on the ground, and they gathered what they needed for that day. They could not live on yesterday's gathering. They had to come back.

That manna is a beautiful picture of God's Word. It sustained the people and gave them what they needed to keep walking. But after a while, they complained about it. They wanted something more exciting. Something with a stronger flavor.

Be careful there. We live in a world drunk on entertainment. Everything flashes, buzzes, moves, and begs for another minute of your attention. Then you open the Bible and it can seem quiet. Plain. Like manna.

Do not confuse quiet with powerless.

The world can always put on a better show, with louder music, brighter lights, and endless new things to watch. But the world does not have the blood of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, or the living Word of God. This book can do what entertainment never will, because it can tell you the truth, expose a lie, bring you to Christ, and change you from the inside.

Come back tomorrow. Gather again.

Some days the Bible will hit you like lightning, and you will read a verse and know God is speaking straight into your situation. Other days it will feel ordinary. Eat anyway. You do not quit breakfast because yesterday's toast was not an emotional experience, because daily food does its work quietly, one meal at a time.

And do not walk alone. Hear the Bible taught in a church that actually opens it, explains what it means, and applies it. Talk about it with other Christians. Ask questions when you are confused. God gave His Word to a family, not to a collection of isolated people trying to survive by themselves.

But never forget that you can open it for yourself. You do not need a scholar standing beside you before God can speak. If you belong to Jesus, His Spirit lives in you. The Spirit of God and the Word of God work together. Pray for understanding. Read carefully. Stay humble. God knows how to feed His children.

You are going to get hungry every day. That is not failure. It is how you were made. So tomorrow morning, before the noise takes over, open your Bible. Take the bread God has given you. Look for Jesus. Listen. Obey.

Then come back the next day and eat again.

God, thank You for giving me Your Word. Give me a real hunger for it. Help me understand what I read, see Jesus in every part, and obey what You show me. Feed my soul, correct me when I wander, and grow me into the person You want me to be. In Jesus' name, amen.

Chapter 6: Prayer: Talking With God

Prayer can feel strange when you are new to following Jesus.

You close your eyes. You start with, "Dear God," because that is how you have heard other people do it. Then your mind goes blank. Are you supposed to sound holy? Do you need special words? Is there a right length? Maybe you hear somebody at church pray for ten straight minutes, quoting half the Bible from memory, and you think, *Well, I cannot do that.*

Let me make this simple. Prayer is talking with God.

That does not mean prayer is small. You are speaking to the God who made heaven and earth, who knows every secret in your heart and holds every king in His hand. But you are speaking to Him. Because of Jesus, you have been invited to come close.

The Bible says, "**There is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.**" A mediator is someone who brings two sides together. Sin separated us from God. No pastor, priest, saint, or church could build a bridge across that separation. Jesus did. He gave Himself as the ransom, the payment that set us free. When He died, the veil in the temple that pictured separation from God was torn in two. The way was opened.

So you do not need me to carry your prayer to God. You do not need to clean yourself up enough to earn an appointment. You come through Jesus.

Boldly.

Not boldly because you have had a perfect week. You have not. Neither have I. You come boldly because Jesus is perfect, His sacrifice was enough, and you belong to Him now. Prayer does not rest on your record. It rests on His.

That matters, because pride can sneak into prayer in some strange ways. We start thinking, *I read my Bible every day this week, so God should answer me. Or, I had enough faith, so God has to give me what I asked for.* No. God is not a machine where you put in the correct number of spiritual coins and your answer drops out.

Daniel understood this.

Daniel was a young man living as a captive in Babylon. One night King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that scared him so badly he could not sleep, so he called in his magicians and astrologers and advisers and handed them an assignment that could not be done: they had to tell him both the dream itself and what it meant, and if they failed, he would have them cut into pieces and their houses turned into piles of rubble.

The advisers finally admitted the truth. Nobody could do what the king demanded. Nebuchadnezzar flew into a rage and ordered every wise man in Babylon killed. That order included Daniel and his friends.

Picture the scene. Armed guards arrive at Daniel's door. They are not there to deliver a warning. They are there to kill him. Yet Daniel does not run around screaming. He asks why the order is so urgent, goes to the king, and asks for time. Then he goes home and tells his friends to pray.

Listen to the words the Bible uses. They were going to **"seek mercies from the God of heaven concerning this secret."**

Mercy means you do not get what you deserve. Imagine you are driving over the speed limit and the lights start flashing behind you. You pull over. The officer walks up and gives you a ticket. That is judgment. You broke the law and received what the law required. But suppose the officer says, "You deserve the ticket, but I am letting you go with a warning." That is mercy.

Grace goes even farther. The officer lets you go, then gives you a gift you never earned. You did wrong, yet you walk away with something good.

That is how Daniel went to God. He did not say, "God, I am so holy that You owe me an answer." He asked for mercy. And that is how we pray too. God, I do not deserve Your help. I have nothing to brag about. But You are compassionate. You love to help the weak. Please help me.

"God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." If you go to God saying, "You are great, and I need You," you are standing in the right place.

Notice something else Daniel did. He called his friends. Some burdens are simply too heavy to carry by yourself, and there is no prize waiting at the end for the person who gritted his teeth, handled it alone, and quietly came apart on the inside while everybody around him assumed he was fine. Tell another Christian. Ask them to pray with you. Daniel was facing death, and he brought Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah into the room. Together they asked God for mercy.

God answered. He revealed the dream and its meaning to Daniel during the night.

Now watch Daniel's first response. He did not sprint to the king and show off. He stopped and blessed God: **"Wisdom and might are His."** He thanked the God who reveals deep and secret things. The answer turned into worship.

That is an important part of prayer we forget. We are good at calling God when the house is on fire. God, fix this. God, heal that. God, I need help by Friday. And you should bring your needs to Him. Jesus taught us to ask, **"Give us this day our daily bread."** Supplication is the Bible word for asking God to supply what you need. There is nothing wrong with that.

But prayer is more than handing God a shopping list.

Paul told Timothy that prayers, requests, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone. Intercession simply means praying for another person. You tell God about people, then you go tell people about God. Both matter.

Pray for your family. Pray for your friends. Pray for the leaders of your church, because their strength does not come from intelligence, personality, or education. It comes from the living God. Pray for your school, your workplace, your city, and your country, and pray for the people in authority over you even when you did not vote for them, do not like them, and cannot for the life of you understand why God allowed them anywhere near the job.

Paul wrote that command while Nero ruled Rome. Nero was not a harmless leader with a few policies Paul disliked. He brutally persecuted Christians, and he would eventually have Paul killed. Paul still said to pray for kings and all who are in authority.

What if we did less complaining about leaders and more praying for them?

And do not stop with people you like. Paul says prayer should be made for *all* people. You know what all means in Greek? All.

Put the difficult person in your mind. The one who mocks you, irritates you, lies about you, or makes every room harder. Jesus said to pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you. Do not pray that their teeth fall out. Pray for their salvation. Pray for their peace. Pray that they would come to know Jesus.

Why? Because that is what Jesus did for you. **"While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."** He did not love you at your best. He came for you in your rebellion. When you pray for an enemy, you are treating them the way Christ treated you.

Then give thanks.

This can change the whole direction of your heart. Usually we go to God because something hurts. That is fine. You do not have to pretend it does not hurt. Tell Him the truth. But while you are there, start remembering.

God, thank You that You saved me. Thank You that You came looking for me when I was lost. Thank You for the health I do have, for the people You have placed around me, for the food I ate today, for every time You carried me and I did not even notice. Thank You that I had something worth grieving when I lost it. Thank You that You have not left me.

Something happens as you do that. The storm may still be there, but your eyes move from the storm to Jesus. Peter could walk on water while his eyes were on Christ. When he fixed them on the wind and waves, he sank. Thanksgiving turns your face back toward the One who is holding you.

Philippians says, **"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God."** Then it says God's peace will guard your heart and mind through Christ Jesus. That is not a promise that every painful feeling disappears in five seconds. It is a promise that you can bring everything to God, and His peace can stand guard over you while the storm is still making noise.

Sometimes God says yes, as He did for Daniel. Sometimes He says wait. Sometimes His answer is no because He knows what you cannot see. Prayer is not controlling God. It is trusting Him enough to ask, listen, obey, and leave the answer in His hands.

Knowing your Bible will help you do that. Daniel knew the story of Joseph, another young man carried off into a strange land to whom God had once revealed the meaning of a troubled king's dreams, and because Daniel already knew what his God had done before, he knew exactly where to run now. The more of the Bible you know, the more you know your God. And the more you know your God, the more courage you will have to pray when the request looks impossible.

Prayer also reaches farther than what your eyes can see. We live in a physical world, so we tend to think only in physical terms. Money can fix this. A doctor can treat that. A vote can change this law. Those things have their place, and prayer should never become an excuse to refuse the action God has put in front of you. There is a time to pray, and there is a time to get up and cross the sea.

But the Bible says there is also a spiritual battle around us. No phone, machine, weapon, or human plan can touch it. Prayer can. Not because your words are magic, but because the living God hears His children. The darkness must answer to His authority. Satan is not God's equal. He is a created being, and Jesus is Lord over him.

So when you pray for a friend who is far from God, you are not doing nothing. When you ask God for victory over a sin that keeps dragging you back, you are not wasting your breath. When you pray for your home, your church, or your city, you are bringing the need to the only One who can reach every part of it, seen and unseen.

There comes a point when prayer becomes more important than another show, another hour online, or another round of worrying. Desperation has a way of clearing the room. You finally say, "God, I cannot do this without You."

That is not weakness. That is the beginning of strength.

Start where you are. You do not need an hour. Give God five honest minutes. Tell Him what is true. Confess your sin. Ask for mercy. Bring your needs. Name the people you love, the people who lead, and the people who have hurt you. Thank Him for what He has done. Open your Bible and let His words shape yours. Then be quiet long enough to remember who you are talking to.

The God of heaven hears you because Jesus opened the way.

So talk to Him.

Father, thank You that Jesus opened the way for me to come near. Teach me to pray with honesty, humility, and faith. Give me mercy for my needs, love for other people, and courage in the battles I cannot see. Turn my complaining into thanksgiving, and help me trust Your answer. In Jesus' name, amen.

Chapter 7: The Holy Spirit in You

There is something you need to understand right at the beginning of your Christian life: God did not save you and then leave you alone to figure the rest out.

He put His Spirit in you.

Now, that can sound strange if you have never heard it before. Who is the Holy Spirit? Is He a feeling? Is He that moment when the music gets loud at church and you get chills? Is He some power only pastors and unusually spiritual people receive?

No. The Holy Spirit is God. He is not an emotion, and He is not an invisible force you learn to control. He is God living in every person who has put their faith in Jesus Christ. Romans 8 says plainly, "**The Spirit of God dwells in you.**" If you belong to Jesus, that is true of you right now. You may not feel anything. It is still true.

And He was at work before you even knew what was happening.

Jesus told a man named Nicodemus that a person must be born of the Spirit to enter God's kingdom. Your first birth gave you physical life. You had a mom and a dad, you got a body, and here you are. But flesh can only produce flesh. It cannot produce spiritual life. No amount of good works, no amount of keeping commandments, no amount of going to church, and no amount of having Christian parents can make you alive to God. That takes a supernatural work, something only God can do.

That is what happened when you believed. The Bible calls it being born again.

Peter says we have been born again through the living Word of God. Put those two truths together and you begin to see how God works. The Word of God tells you the truth about Jesus, and the Spirit of God makes that truth alive to you. Somebody may have explained the gospel. You may have read it in a Bible, heard it from a friend, or listened to a preacher. But then it did more than enter your ears. It landed in your heart. You saw that your sin was real, that Jesus really died in your place, and that He rose again. You believed.

That was not because the person speaking was anything great. God is real, and He ministers to people through His Word. The Spirit of God and the Word of God work together.

This is why two people can sit in the same room, hear the same Bible passage, and have two completely different experiences. One person is checking the time and thinking about lunch. The other feels like God is drilling straight into his heart. He is encouraged, convicted, fed, and changed. Same room. Same words. What happened? The Holy Spirit was making the Word alive.

So when you open your Bible, pray something simple: *God, speak to me. Show me what You want me to see. Help me obey it.* You do not need fancy words. You need an open heart.

The Holy Spirit also begins changing what you want. Before Christ, sin might have bothered your conscience sometimes, but you could keep going. Now something is different. You sin, and you lose

your peace. God starts calling you back.

I know what that is like. When I am in rebellion against God, I do not want to go to church. I do not want to talk to other believers. I definitely do not want to talk about the Bible, because the light is uncomfortable when you are trying to hide something. I can try to ignore it, but the Holy Spirit will not let me settle down and make a home in my sin. He convicts me.

Conviction is not God saying, *I hate you, get away from Me*. It is God saying, *You are Mine. Come back*. There is a difference between condemnation and conviction. Condemnation pushes you toward hopelessness. It tells you that you are filthy, finished, and should run from God. Conviction is specific. It puts a finger on the thing that is wrong and calls you to confess it. Then Scripture gives you this promise: **"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us."**

Do not fight that voice. Respond quickly. Confess the sin, turn from it, and thank God that the blood of Jesus has already paid for it.

But hear me carefully. Having the Holy Spirit does not mean you suddenly become perfect. Look at Peter. Before the day of Pentecost, Peter was the guy who always seemed to put his foot in his mouth. He promised he would die with Jesus and then denied Him three times. He was ordinary, untrained, and prone to fail.

Then the Holy Spirit empowered him, and that same Peter stood up and preached Christ to thousands. Three thousand people were saved in one day. Religious leaders looked at Peter and the other disciples and could not understand it. These were not educated religious professionals. They were common men. But everyone could tell they had been with Jesus.

Never underestimate what God can do through an ordinary person who spends time with Him.

That includes you.

You may think you are too quiet, too awkward, too unknown, or too messed up to be useful. Good news. God's power does not depend on your natural ability. Peter did not transform himself from a frightened fisherman who had cursed and sworn that he never even knew Jesus into a bold preacher who stared down that same crowd and those same religious rulers, and he certainly did not pull it off by standing in a mirror and thinking positive thoughts about himself. The Holy Spirit gave him the power to speak. God loves using people the world overlooks because then it becomes obvious where the power came from.

And even after Pentecost, Peter was not perfect. Later, Paul had to confront him because Peter pulled away from Gentile believers out of fear of what other people would think. The man filled with the Spirit still stumbled. So will you. That is not an excuse to sin, but it is also not an excuse to give up. When you fall, confess it, get up, and keep walking with God. The Spirit who began this work in you has not walked away.

Here is another thing He does: He makes you part of a family.

Every real believer has the same Holy Spirit dwelling within. Different age, different background, different personality, different language, same Spirit. The outward things that divide people are temporary. The Spirit who unites us is eternal. You were not only saved from sin. You were born into God's family.

That means Christianity is not meant to be lived alone. A stone by itself is just a stone sitting in the dirt. Peter says believers are "**living stones**," each one being built into a single spiritual house with Jesus as the first and founding stone, the one laid down before all the others, the stone that sets the line and the direction for the entire building, and we get lined up with Him as He fits us together piece by piece. Not stacked in a pile. Built.

Isolation makes you easy to defeat. When you hide from other Christians, especially because of sin, you cut yourself off from people God intends to use to encourage you, correct you, pray for you, and help you stand. But when believers walk in the light together, something powerful happens. Not because any of us is anything great. Because the Spirit of God is working through the whole family.

So get connected to a church that teaches the Bible and tells the truth about Jesus. Do not just slip in late, sit in the back, and disappear before anybody learns your name. Let people know you. Serve them. Pray with them. Love them. And when you meet Christians who are not like you, remember what matters most. You call on the same Father, trust the same gospel, stand on the same Word, and have been born again by the same Spirit.

The Holy Spirit also gives you power for a battle you cannot see. Isaiah looked at the violence and pride of earthly kings and, through the Spirit, showed the spiritual evil working behind it. The Bible says our struggle is not merely against flesh and blood. There is a spiritual world running underneath this one, and none of our technology can touch it. You can pour every dollar you have into the most powerful weapon human beings have ever built and it still cannot reach one inch into that unseen place.

Prayer can.

That is why prayer is not a warmup before the real work. Prayer is the work. Do you want victory over a sin that keeps dragging you back? Do you want boldness to speak about Jesus? Do you want to see God change your family, your friends, or your city? Get desperate enough to pray. Stop trying to win a spiritual battle with nothing but human strength.

The flesh wears out. It is like grass. It grows for a little while, looks impressive, and then it is gone. Your intelligence, energy, personality, and willpower can only carry you so far. Doing things in the flesh can only do so much. But the power of God in you is a different story.

Ask Him for help. Ask Him to fill you, lead you, give you strength to obey, and make you useful. Then when He shows you what to do, do it.

This is where the Christian life becomes more than a list of rules. The question stops being, *How close can I get to sin and still be a Christian?* That is not a healthy question. The better question is, *What can I do to get closer to God?* Christ paid everything. You are free. And because the Holy Spirit now lives

inside you, actually lives in you and is not merely dropping by on Sundays when the music swells and the lights go low, He begins to hand you brand new desires you never could have manufactured on your own. You begin to want what pleases the God who loved you enough to save you.

Some days you will feel strong. Some days you will feel nothing. Do not build your faith on either feeling. Build it on what God said: "**Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.**" He is in you. He makes the Word alive. He convicts you when you wander. He joins you to God's people. He gives ordinary people power to live for Jesus in a world pulling the other direction.

You are not alone anymore. God did not save you, point toward a long road, and tell you to do your best. He came to live in you.

So listen to Him. Walk with Him. And watch what God can do with a life that is simply willing to say yes.

God, thank You for giving me Your Holy Spirit. Make Your Word alive to me, convict me when I wander, and give me power to obey You. Help me stay close to Your people and use my ordinary life for Your glory. In Jesus' name, amen.

Chapter 8: Baptism: Your Public Yes

You believed in Jesus, trusting Him to forgive your sins and give you new life. Now what?

One of the first things Jesus tells a new believer to do is be baptized, and before we make this confusing, because Christians are sometimes really good at making simple things confusing, let me tell you what baptism is. Baptism is your public yes to Jesus, the moment you stand in front of other people and say, "I belong to Him now, my old life is buried, and Jesus gave me a new one."

Jesus told His followers to "**make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them.**" That is in Matthew 28, and in the book of Acts, when people believed the gospel, they were baptized. They did not wait until they knew the whole Bible or had been Christians for ten years with every bad habit cleaned up. They believed, and then they obeyed.

So if you have put your faith in Jesus and you have not been baptized, this is for you. Not someday. This is the next step.

Now let me make one thing very clear. The water does not save you.

Water can wash dirt off your body, but it cannot wash sin off your soul, and if getting wet could save us, Jesus would not have needed to go to the cross. We could install a pool at the church, toss everybody in, and call it a day, but Scripture never teaches that. First Peter 3:21 says baptism is "**not the removal of the filth of the flesh,**" but an answer of a good conscience toward God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Catch those last words: through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Your salvation rests on what Jesus did, not on what you do in the water. He died for your sins, He was buried, and on the third day He rose from the dead. A dead Savior can save nobody. But Jesus is alive, death has been conquered, and the work of salvation has been completed and accepted by the Father, which is why Peter calls our hope a living hope. Our hope is alive because our Savior is alive.

Baptism is the picture of that gospel.

Romans 6 says we were "**buried with Him through baptism into death**" so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead, we should walk in newness of life. When you go under the water, you are picturing burial. The old you, the life ruled by sin, goes into the grave. When you come back up, you are picturing resurrection. New life. A new direction. A person who belongs to Jesus.

Does that mean you come out of the water perfect? No. I wish it worked that way, because if it did, we might hold some of us under a little longer. But no amount of time underwater will make you perfect, and please do not test that. You will still have things to learn, you will still mess up, and you will still need grace every day. Baptism does not say, "Look at me, I have finally fixed myself." It says, "Look at Jesus, He died for me, He rose for me, and now my life belongs to Him."

The Bible gives us some amazing pictures of this.

Think about Noah. God told him judgment was coming and commanded him to build a huge boat in the middle of a wicked world. Can you imagine what people said? What are you doing there, old man, building a boat out here? For years Noah worked while people mocked him, and he kept hammering because he believed God.

Then the last nail went in, Noah and his family entered the ark, the door shut, and the rain came. The world Noah had known disappeared beneath the water, but Noah was safe inside the ark while the waters rose and carried it above the judgment, until at last he stepped onto dry ground to begin a new life.

Peter says that is a picture of baptism, and the ark is a picture of Jesus. Noah was not saved because he was a great swimmer, but because he believed God and entered the place of safety God provided. In the same way, you are not saved by the baptismal water, you are saved by trusting Jesus Christ. You are safe in Him.

But look at what the water pictures. The old world gone. The old life buried. Noah stepping out into something new.

That is what you are saying when you are baptized. **"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation."** You are saying that the person you used to be is not in charge anymore. Your old attitudes, your old sins, your old way of deciding that you would do whatever you wanted, all of it has been handed over to Jesus. You have been set apart for Him.

This was serious for the early Christians, not a cute religious ceremony or a way to join a social club. For some of them, publicly identifying with Jesus meant losing friends, work, and even family, because everybody would know which side they had chosen. Baptism drew a clean line across their lives: before this, I lived for myself, now I belong to Christ.

That is why I call it your public yes. Jesus already knows you believe. Baptism tells everybody else.

There is another picture in the Old Testament. Israel had been enslaved in Egypt, which pictures the world and the old slavery of sin, but God brought His people out, opened the Red Sea, and led them across on dry ground. First Corinthians 10 calls that a kind of baptism: behind them was Egypt, and ahead of them was a life of following God.

Did the people split the sea? No. God did. Did they earn their freedom by walking across? No. God had already rescued them, but they still had to move their feet, leave Egypt behind, and walk where God opened the way.

That matters because sometimes a new believer says, "I believe in Jesus, but I am nervous about getting baptized." Maybe you hate standing in front of people, your family will not understand, your friends will laugh, or you think you need to know more first. I understand that fear, but there comes a moment when faith has to move its feet.

God told Joshua that every place the sole of his foot touched would be given to him, so Joshua had a promise, but he still had to step forward. He could have stood on the edge of the Jordan River talking about faith for the rest of his life and nothing would have happened. He had to go.

Some things in the Christian life take time to understand. This one is plain. Jesus told His disciples to baptize believers. You are a believer. So take the step.

You may ask, "What if I fail after I am baptized?" You will fail at something. So will I. That is what grace is for, because baptism is not a promise that you will never stumble, it is a declaration of who owns you when you do. When you fall, you do not run back to Egypt, you confess your sin, get back up, and keep following Jesus.

And you do not take this step in your own strength, because the same risen Christ pictured in your baptism gives you power to live the new life. Galatians 2:20 says, "**It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.**" Christianity is not you gritting your teeth and trying to act like a better person. Jesus is alive, His Spirit lives in you, and He gives you the desire and the power to do what pleases Him.

This is the difference between treating Christianity like a product and receiving it as a new life. The first asks, what can God do for me? The second asks, what did God do in me? Baptism gives the answer where people can see it. He buried my old life with Christ. He raised me to something new. I am His.

So talk to a pastor or a mature Christian at your church, tell them you have trusted Jesus and want to be baptized, and let them explain when and how your church does it. Do not worry about making the moment impressive. Noah was successful in God's eyes because he was faithful, not because people applauded him. Your job is the same: believe God, obey Him, and give Jesus the credit.

When you stand in that water, remember what it means: Jesus went into death for you, and Jesus came out of the grave for you. You are not washing away your own sin, because His blood already did what water never could. You are showing the world the truth you have believed: the old life is buried, your King is alive, and you are following Him now.

That is baptism. Your public yes.

Jesus, thank You for dying in my place and rising from the dead. Give me courage to obey You, to leave my old life behind, and to show openly that I belong to You. Help me walk in the new life You have given me. Amen.

Chapter 9: The Church: You Need a Family

When you trusted Jesus, God did not just forgive you and send you off by yourself.

He brought you into a family.

The Bible calls that family the church. Now, when I say church, you may picture a building with rows of chairs, a stage, and a sign out front. But the building is not the church. One building we met in for a while used to be an RV repair shop, and there was nothing especially holy about the place, because long before anybody ever gathered inside those walls to sing to Jesus and open a Bible together, somebody was rolling campers in through the big bay doors and fixing their plumbing. Nothing holy about the building. The holy part walked in the door.

The church is the people. Every man, woman, and child who has been born again through faith in Jesus belongs to Him and belongs with His people. Peter says we were once **"not a people but are now the people of God."** You may have walked into the Christian life feeling alone, but God says you are not alone anymore.

You have brothers. You have sisters. You have older believers who can become fathers and mothers in the faith. You have younger believers you will one day help care for. You need them, and whether you realize it yet or not, they need you.

Born Into Something

You did not enter God's family because you started attending services. Sitting in a church does not make you a Christian any more than standing in a garage makes you a car. You entered God's family by a new birth.

Jesus called it being born again. Your first birth gave you physical life. Your new birth came through the Spirit of God and the Word of God when you believed the gospel. God made you alive in Christ. And everybody else who has been born this way now calls on the same Father, trusts the same Savior, and has the same Holy Spirit living inside them.

That is stronger than all the things that normally divide people.

The church will contain people who are older than you, younger than you, richer than you, poorer than you, and nothing like you. Some will have different backgrounds, different personalities, and different ways of doing things. Unity does not mean everybody looks the same. Children in one family do not all look alike, and they certainly do not all act alike. But they share a name, a home, and a life together.

So do we.

Peter says, **"Love one another fervently with a pure heart."** Fervently means this is not casual, polite love from across the room. It is earnest love. Family love. The kind that stays, serves, forgives, tells the truth, carries a burden, and notices when somebody is missing.

This kind of unity can never be built by pretending truth does not matter. Christians are united around Jesus Christ and the truth of His Word. If somebody denies who Jesus is, denies that He died for our sins, or denies that He rose from the dead, smiling and calling it unity will not make it Christian. Love people. Share the gospel with them. But real Christian unity has Jesus at the center.

When He is at the center, all kinds of people can stand together.

The Brick by Itself

Peter gives another picture of the church. He calls Jesus the living Stone that God laid as the foundation of the whole house, the one everything else is lined up against and measured by, and then he turns around and calls us **"living stones"** too, each of us set into that same spiritual house and held in place by Him.

Think about a brick lying by itself on the ground. You can pick it up, throw it, chip it, or smash it with a hammer. It is exposed. Easy to move. Easy to break.

Now take that same brick and cement it into a wall with hundreds of other bricks. Build another layer behind it, then another. That brick is not so easy to move anymore. What changed? It did not become a stronger kind of brick. It became part of a building.

That is what Christian fellowship does for you. And fellowship means a great deal more than standing near a few other Christians for an hour on a Sunday, nodding at the right moments, shaking a couple of hands, and then driving home without one single person there knowing what is actually going on in your life. It means sharing life with them. You learn together, pray together, worship together, serve together, and help each other follow Jesus. When you are discouraged, somebody reminds you what is true. When you drift toward sin, somebody loves you enough to call you back. When you suffer, they sit with you. When God answers your prayer, they celebrate with you.

Isolation leaves you exposed. When I am walking in sin, do you know what I usually do not want? I do not want to go to church. I do not want to talk to believers. I do not want anybody opening the Bible around me. Sin loves privacy because nobody is there to challenge the lie.

Do not help it.

Your church will not save you. Jesus saves you. A pastor cannot stand between you and God. Jesus is the one mediator, and because of Him you can pray right now, open the Bible for yourself, and come directly to God. But the same Jesus who saved you put you into a body. Refusing that body is not independence. It is weakness wearing a proud face.

You need a church that teaches the Bible, holds to the gospel, and helps people obey Jesus. Then you need to become part of it. Not a visitor forever. A brick in the wall.

You Have a Place

Paul changes the picture from a building to a body. He says, "**We, being many, are one body in Christ.**" Jesus is the head. He leads. The rest of us are different parts, each with a job to do.

Picture your hand waking up one morning and saying, I am tired of feeding that mouth. It can figure things out for itself. Then your feet decide they are done carrying everybody's weight, your eyes close because they are tired of looking for the rest of the body, and your heart says it does not feel like pumping today.

You have a serious problem.

A healthy body needs its parts to work together. The hand is not the foot, and it should not try to be. The eye does not need to feel inferior because it cannot walk. Each part does what it was made to do, and the whole body benefits.

God has given every believer a way to serve. Some teach. Some encourage frightened people and push lazy people to get moving. Some lead. Some give generously. Some show mercy. Some notice practical needs, move chairs, prepare meals, clean rooms, visit the lonely, and quietly make everything work. These are gifts, which means you did not earn them. God gave them to you so you could help His people.

You may be brand new and have no idea what your gift is yet. That is fine. Start serving. Ask where help is needed. Pay attention to what God gives you a heart for and what other mature believers recognize in you. Gifts become easier to see while you are using them.

Do not sit around waiting for a dramatic assignment. The chairs do not set themselves up. Hungry people do not feed themselves with your good intentions. The discouraged person across the room may need the simple word God already put in your heart.

Christianity asks a better question than, what can this church do for me? It asks, how can I serve God, and how can I help His people? Yes, the church should feed you. A family feeds its children. But children grow. Before long they start carrying plates to the table too.

Love That Shows Up

The church is a family, so Paul tells Timothy to treat older men as fathers, older women as mothers, younger men as brothers, and younger women as sisters, with purity. That one truth changes the way you walk into a room.

The older believer is not outdated and useless, some relic to smile at politely and tune out until he finally stops talking. He has walked roads you have not reached yet and weathered storms you cannot even see coming. Listen. The younger believer is not an annoyance. She is your sister. Protect her. The lonely widow is not somebody else's problem. She is family. Honor her. The struggling believer does not become invisible because helping would cost you time.

From the beginning, the church cared for people who could not care for themselves. When widows in Acts were being overlooked, the leaders did not shrug and call it unfortunate. They appointed

trustworthy people to make sure the need was handled fairly. Teaching God's Word stayed central, but the Word they taught moved hands and feet.

James calls caring for widows and orphans pure religion. Hebrews says, "**Do not forget to do good and to share.**" It also says to welcome strangers, remember prisoners, and stand with believers who are mistreated. The point is simple. Christian love shows up.

If one part of your physical body hurts, the rest of your body responds. Stab your hand and your eyes look for help, your feet start moving, your other hand grabs the wound, and your mouth calls out. The whole body cares because one part is suffering.

So "**weep with those who weep.**" Do not rush them. Do not throw a verse at them from a safe distance and disappear. Sit down. Pray. Bring food. Listen. And "**rejoice with those who rejoice.**" Do not let envy poison somebody else's good day. Their joy is family joy.

Hospitality is part of this too. That word simply means making room for people. Hebrews says some people welcomed angels without knowing it. God cares deeply about how you treat the stranger who cannot advance your career, improve your reputation, or pay you back. Use wisdom, especially when safety is involved, but do not let fear or inconvenience turn your heart to stone.

No Perfect Church

Now let me save you some shock. The church is full of flawed people.

You are one of them.

There was never once a perfect church, not even back in the book of Acts when the apostles themselves were still alive and running things with the dust of Jesus' footprints barely settled: people got overlooked, believers argued, and leaders had to step in and correct real problems. The New Testament letters exist partly because churches kept getting things wrong. So if you find a perfect church, do not join it. You will ruin it.

That is not an excuse for false teaching, abuse, hidden sin, or leaders who refuse correction. God's Word gives standards for leaders. They should teach truth, live faithfully, care for people, and be accountable. You should never follow a leader into sin. But do not expect your pastor, your small group, or the person sitting next to you to be Jesus. They are not.

Healthy church life means learning to forgive, speak honestly, receive correction, and give grace. Sometimes you will be hurt. Sometimes you will be the one who caused the hurt. Stay humble enough to make it right.

Hebrews also says, "**Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls.**" Good spiritual leaders are not rulers who replace Jesus. They are shepherds under Jesus who teach His Word and will answer to Him for how they cared for people. Make their work joyful. Listen when they show you the Bible. Pray for them. Encourage them. And examine what they teach by Scripture, because faithful leaders want you anchored to God's Word, not dependent on their

personality.

You do not need a crowd that entertains you. You need a family that helps you become like Jesus.

So find a faithful local church and keep showing up. Learn names. Let people know yours. Join a smaller group where people can know when you are hurting. Ask questions. Sing, even if you cannot sing on key. Serve before you feel like an expert. Give when you can. Let older believers teach you. Look for somebody lonely and make room.

And when the newness wears off, keep going.

Jesus did not rescue scattered bricks and leave them in a field. He is building a house. He did not save disconnected body parts. He is forming a body. He did not adopt one child and tell that child to grow up alone. He brought you home to a family.

You need them.

And they need you.

God, thank You for bringing me into Your family. Lead me to a church that teaches Your Word and loves people well. Keep me from hiding and trying to follow You alone. Show me where I can serve, teach me to forgive, and help me love my brothers and sisters with a pure heart. Make us one in Jesus, and use us together for Your glory. In Jesus' name, amen.

Chapter 10: Fighting the Old You

You gave your life to Jesus. Your sins were forgiven. God gave you a new heart, put His Spirit inside you, and called you His child.

Then you woke up the next morning and discovered something uncomfortable.

You were still you.

The old thoughts were still there. The old temper still knew your address. The same temptation that bothered you before Jesus showed up at the same time, wearing the same clothes, knocking on the same door. Maybe somewhere in the back of your mind you had assumed that becoming a Christian would flip some switch and you would simply never want to sin again, so the first time you actually failed, really failed, the doubt came pouring in and now you are lying awake wondering whether any of this was ever real in the first place.

It was real. Welcome to the fight.

Paul knew this fight. He loved God. He wrote part of the Bible. And in Romans 7 he said, **“What I hate, that I do.”** He wanted to do what was right, yet he kept finding another power at work inside him, pulling the opposite direction. Finally he cried, **“O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me?”**

Notice the question. He did not ask, what new rule will deliver me? He did not ask, how much harder should I try? He asked who.

Then he gave the answer: **“I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”**

That is where your fight starts. Not with confidence in you. With confidence in Jesus.

The Bible gives us a picture of this battle in a man with two names. His first name was Jacob, which means heel catcher, trickster, conniver. And he lived up to it. Jacob was always working an angle, always making a deal, always figuring out how to get one step ahead of whoever was standing in front of him, and over the years that caught up with everyone around him: he cheated his own brother out of what belonged to him, lied straight to his blind father's face for a blessing, and then ran for his life the second the consequences came looking for him.

Years later, God told him to go home. There was one problem. His brother Esau was coming to meet him with four hundred men, and Jacob thought Esau was going to kill him. So Jacob did what Jacob always did. He made a plan. He sent gifts ahead. He divided his family. He tried to manage every possible outcome.

Then, alone in the dark, he wrestled with God.

Jacob held on and said, **“I will not let You go unless You bless me.”** So God touched his hip and left him limping. That sounds like a strange blessing until you understand Jacob. This man had spent his

whole life running, and God took running away from him. Jacob would have to face tomorrow leaning on God.

Then God gave him a new name: Israel, governed by God.

Same man. New name. New walk.

That is you now. You have an old way of living, and God has given you a new identity. The old you says, I can handle this. I will protect myself. I will satisfy myself. I will run if I have to. The new you says, I belong to Jesus. I will lean on Him, even if I have to limp.

Throughout the Old Testament, God sometimes calls His people Jacob and sometimes Israel. It is almost as if He is reminding them, I know who you were, and I know who I called you to be. When they returned to their old ways, there was Jacob again. When they trusted God, Israel showed up.

You will feel that same pull. One moment you are praying and loving God. Five minutes later you are thinking, where did that come from? Why did I say that? Why am I doing the very thing I decided I would never do again?

Because the old nature is still fighting.

Galatians says, **“The flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.”** The flesh means that old sinful nature in you, the part that wants life without God. The Holy Spirit now lives in you, and He wants what pleases God. Those two desires do not hold hands and get along. They are at war.

Israel saw a picture of that war right after leaving Egypt. God opened the Red Sea, brought them out of slavery, and almost immediately the Amalekites attacked. They did not attack the strongest people at the front. They came from behind and went after the weak, the tired, and the ones who had fallen away from the group.

That is how the flesh works. It loves isolation. It waits until you are tired, discouraged, distracted, and drifting away from God’s people. Then it attacks the stragglers.

So do not fight alone.

You need Christians around you who know the real you. Not the cleaned up version that smiles in the church parking lot after fighting in the car the whole way there. The real you. You need somebody you can look in the eye and say, I am struggling with this. I do not want it anymore. Will you pray with me? Will you check on me?

That is not weakness. Hiding is weakness. Honesty brings the fight into the light.

And stay close to Jesus. I cannot say that strongly enough. When the Amalekites attacked, the ones drifting at the back were easy targets. In the same way, if your Bible stays closed, prayer disappears, fellowship becomes occasional, and your mind is filled with everything but Christ, do not act surprised when the old you starts winning ground.

Your mind is like the sail on a boat. It catches something and carries you in that direction. Philippians 4 tells you where to point it: **“Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure... meditate on these things.”** Those words lead you to Jesus. He is true. He is pure. He is lovely. He is worthy of praise.

Most of the time, it is not some brilliant deception that takes us down. It is distraction.

You replay yesterday. You think of what somebody said, what you should have said back, how unfairly you were treated. You run the whole scene again in your head, only this time you win every argument. Ten minutes later you are angry, bitter, and miserable. What happened? Your sail caught the wrong wind. You stopped looking at Jesus.

This is why what you put into your mind matters. You are free in Christ. Your salvation is based on what Jesus did at the cross, not on whether you watched a show or deleted an app. But do not stop the thought there. You are also free to put the phone down. Free to turn off the noise. Free to open that dusty Bible and spend time with the God who gave everything for you.

Elijah once reached the point where he wanted to quit. He ran into a cave, exhausted and afraid, and poured out his complaint to God. Then came a mighty wind. Then an earthquake. Then a fire. But the Lord was not in all that noise. Afterward came a still, small voice. A whisper.

Some of us say we cannot hear God while we keep every noise in our lives turned all the way up. The screen is always on. The music is always playing. The feed never ends. Then we wonder why our hearts feel empty and the old desires sound so loud.

Turn it off for a while.

Sit with God. Read until something grips you. Pray honestly, even if all you can say is, God, I am hurting. God, I am tempted. God, if You do not help me, I do not know what I am going to do. He already knows. You are not giving Him new information. You are finally opening the door.

Now, staying close to Jesus does not mean you will never fall. Israel stood at Mount Sinai and said, **“All that the Lord has spoken we will do.”** They sounded determined. A few chapters later they were dancing around a golden calf. That is human strength. It makes enormous promises in the morning and falls flat before lunch.

You cannot beat the flesh with the flesh.

The law of God can show you what is wrong, but it cannot give you power to make it right. The law is like a mirror. You look into a mirror and see that your face is dirty, but you do not rip the mirror off the wall and scrub your face with it. The mirror exposes the problem. It cannot wash you.

Jesus washes you.

This matters because one of the old nature’s ugliest tricks comes right after you sin. First it says, go ahead. This will satisfy you. Nobody will know. Then, the moment you fall, it changes its voice. Now it

says, look at you. You are disgusting. God is finished with you. You might as well quit.

Do not listen.

Romans 8 comes right after Romans 7 for a reason: **“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.”** No condemnation. If you belong to Jesus, your failure does not send Him back to the cross. He already paid for it. Confess it plainly. Turn from it. Receive His cleansing. Get up.

Grace does not make sin harmless. Sin always pulls toward slavery. Amos stood up and warned a whole crowd of people who were comfortable and religious and still quietly living in compromise, the kind who showed up to worship, brought their offerings, sang along with every song, and then walked back out the door exactly as unchanged as they had walked in. God kept calling them back. They would not return. Their sin eventually led them away like prisoners pulled by hooks.

That is what sin does. It promises freedom and puts a hook in you.

Jesus does the opposite. He came to set captives free.

So take sin seriously, but do not confuse seriousness with hopelessness. You fight because Jesus has already made you His. You say no because you are a new person, not because you are trying to earn a new identity. At Sinai, God called His people a special treasure and a holy nation. Holy simply means set apart for God. In Christ, that is what you are. Bought at a price. Loved. Chosen. Given the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit of God is not standing far away, yelling instructions while you drown. He lives in you. The same Spirit who changed Peter from a frightened man denying Jesus into a bold preacher is at work in you. Your habits may not change overnight. Your desires may fight hard. You may walk with a limp for the rest of your life. But you do not walk alone.

When you fall, return to Jesus. When you are tired, return to Jesus. When your mind starts replaying bitterness, return to Jesus. When you feel the old Jacob taking over, remember your new name.

You are His.

Stay near Him. Stay near His people. Fill your mind with His Word. Be honest about the battle. And when the old you starts shouting, let the truth shout louder: **“If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.”**

Jesus, I cannot win this fight in my own strength. Thank You that my failure does not change what You finished on the cross. Teach me to walk by Your Spirit, to stay close to You and Your people, and to get up quickly when I fall. Make my mind clean, my heart honest, and my life set apart for You. In Jesus' name, amen.

Chapter 11: Following Jesus: Obedience and Surrender

When you became a Christian, you did not just get forgiven. You changed kings.

That is the part a lot of people miss at the start. We hear that Jesus is Savior, and we love that, because we needed saving. But the same Jesus is also Lord. Savior means He rescues you. Lord means He runs things now. You cannot keep Him as the One who pays your debt and refuse Him as the One who directs your life. He is both, or He is neither.

So let me ask you the question this whole chapter turns on. Who is on the throne of your life?

There is only one seat, and somebody is sitting in it.

Israel had to answer that same question, and they answered it badly. For a long time God Himself had been their King. No crown, no palace, but He led them, fed them, fought for them, and kept every promise He ever made. Then one day the people came to the prophet Samuel and said they wanted a king. A real one. A king like all the other nations had.

Listen to what God said about that. He told Samuel, they have not rejected you, they have rejected Me from being king over them. That was the real issue. It was never about a man in a crown. It was about a people who looked at the God who had carried them and said, we would rather be like everybody else.

Samuel warned them what a human king would do. He will take your sons. He will take your daughters. He will take the best of your fields and your flocks. He will take and take and take, and one day you will cry out because of the very king you begged for. They did not care. Give us a king anyway, they said. We want to be like the nations.

Here is why that matters for you. The pull to hand your life to something other than God did not die when you got saved. The world will still tell you to be like everyone else. Your old nature will still want the throne back. And whatever you put on that throne instead of Jesus will do exactly what Samuel said a false king does. It will take from you. Sin always rules like a tyrant. It promises to serve you and ends up owning you.

Think about anything people chase instead of God. Money promises to make you safe, then quietly takes over the whole operation until you are lying awake at two in the morning doing math. The approval of other people promises to finally make you feel like somebody, and then it turns you into a performer who cannot stop scanning the room to see what everybody thinks. The sin you keep crawling back to promises a few minutes of relief and then shows up to collect, with interest, every single time, and the bill is always bigger than the thrill. That is what a false king does. It moves in as a servant. It settles in as an owner.

Following Jesus means you let the right King sit down.

Now, the word surrender scares people, because we think of it as losing. You wave the white flag, you give up, you lose the war. But surrendering to Jesus is not losing. It is finally being on the winning side.

You are not handing your life to an enemy who wants to ruin you. You are handing it to the God who made you, who loves you, and who proved it by dying for you. Who would you rather have in charge, you or Him? You cannot see tomorrow. He holds it. You get tired, confused, and selfish. He never does. Let Him drive.

But let me be honest about something, because a lot of new believers get this backward.

Obedience is not how you get God to love you. He already loves you. He loved you before you cleaned up anything. You do not obey so that God will finally accept you. You obey because He already has. Get that order wrong and the Christian life becomes a miserable grind, you trying to earn a love you already own. Get it right and obedience becomes what it was always meant to be. A thank-you. A response. Love answering love.

So what does following Him actually look like on a normal Tuesday?

It looks like doing what He says even when you do not feel like it, and especially when it costs you. Peter wrote to Christians who were getting mistreated, and he told them to submit, for the Lord's sake, to the people in authority over them. Not because those people were always right. Because the watching world needed to see something different. Then Peter pointed to Jesus as the example. When He was insulted, He did not insult back. When He suffered, He did not threaten. He kept entrusting Himself to the Father who judges justly.

And if surrender sounds too hard to ask of you, look at what Jesus did before He ever asked it. The night before the cross He knelt down in a garden, under the weight of everything that was coming, and sweat fell from Him like drops of blood while He prayed that if there were any other way, any way at all, the Father would take this cup from Him. He did not want the pain. Nobody in their right mind would. But then He said the words that saved your life: not My will, but Yours be done. The King who now sits on the throne of your life once got on His knees in the dark and surrendered to the Father so that you could be brought home. He is not asking you for something He dodged. He walked it first.

That is the pattern. When life is unfair and you could fire back, you trust God instead. When obeying is hard and disobeying would be easier, you obey anyway, because the One on the throne knows what He is doing.

Peter put it so plainly. He said you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd of your souls. That is a beautiful picture of what happened to you. A sheep wandering off alone is not free. It is lunch. It is in danger the second it leaves the flock. Coming under the Shepherd is not the end of your freedom. It is the end of your wandering.

Surrender gets real in small, specific, unimpressive moments, not in some dramatic scene with the music swelling. It is the text you do not send because it would cut somebody down, even though firing it off would feel fantastic for about four seconds. It is money held with an open hand instead of a clenched fist. It is the relationship you decide not to chase because you already know, deep down, that it would slowly pull you away from God, and that one aches, because you can see exactly what you are

giving up and you cannot yet see what He plans to give you instead. That is the whole test. Surrender is trusting that the King who gave His own life for you is not about to shortchange you now.

Here is the good news for the days you fail, and there will be days you fail. Surrender is not a one-time ceremony you perform once and never think about again. It is a daily thing. Every morning the throne is up for grabs again, and some mornings you will climb right back into the seat before your feet hit the floor. That does not mean you were never His. It means you are still learning to walk. When you catch yourself back on the throne, you do not hide and wait until you feel holy enough to come back. You get up, you hand Him the seat again, and you keep walking.

And watch what He asks for, because people imagine God as a cruel king demanding things that will make them miserable. He is not. Everything He commands is for your good. When He tells you to forgive, it is because bitterness would have rotted you from the inside. When He tells you to flee that sin, it is because that sin was going to destroy you. When He tells you to tell the truth, to stay pure, to love the person who is hard to love, He is not stealing your fun. He is a Father keeping His child off a road that ends in a cliff.

A false king takes from you. The true King gives His own life for you.

So here is the daily prayer of a person who is following Jesus. Not, God, stay out of my way. But, God, have Your way. Not, I will serve You if it is convenient. But, You are Lord, so tell me what to do and I will do it. That is surrender. It is not weakness. It is the strongest, sanest thing a human being can do, because you were built to be ruled by Him, and you only fall apart when you try to rule yourself.

You changed kings. Let the new one lead.

Jesus, You are not only my Savior, You are my Lord. Forgive me for the times I climb back onto the throne and try to run my own life. I surrender it to You again today. Teach me to obey You out of love, not to earn what You already gave me. When it costs me, help me trust You like You trusted the Father. Lead me, and I will follow. In Your name, amen.

Chapter 12: When It Gets Hard

Nobody tells you this part up front, so let me tell you.

Following Jesus does not make your life easy. In some ways it makes it harder. You will still get sick. People you love will still hurt you. Bills will still come. And on top of all the normal trouble every human being faces, you now have an enemy who did not care about you much until you switched sides, and a world that does not always love it when you live for Jesus instead of blending in.

So when the hard thing comes, and it will, you need to settle one question ahead of time. Does hardship mean God left? Does it mean you did something wrong, or that He is angry, or that the whole thing was never real?

No. The Bible says the opposite, and you need to hear it before the storm, not during it.

The first Christians knew hard. The book of Hebrews was written to believers who were getting squeezed from every side. They had followed Jesus, and it had cost them. Friends cut them off. Some lost their businesses because people stopped showing up. Some were arrested and beaten. Marriages split when one person followed Jesus and the other would not. And a lot of them were sitting there thinking the same thing you might think on a bad day: this is too hard, maybe I should just go back to an easier life.

The writer of Hebrews does not scold them. He points them to a race.

He says we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, so let us lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily trips us, and run with endurance the race set before us, looking unto Jesus. That is the picture. Not a sprint you win in ten seconds. A long-distance race, the kind that is decided by endurance, by whether you keep going when your legs are on fire and everything in you wants to stop.

And notice where your eyes go. Looking unto Jesus. Not down at your feet. Not back at the people who hurt you. Not around at everyone who seems to have it easier. You run this race by keeping your eyes locked on Him, the One who, for the joy set before Him, endured the cross. Jesus got through the worst suffering in history by looking past the pain to the joy on the other side. He is not asking you to endure something He skipped.

Now here is a truth that changes everything about hard times, and it surprises a lot of new believers. Sometimes the hard thing is not God against you. It is God raising you.

Hebrews says God disciplines the ones He loves. He corrects His own children. Then it asks a question that will reframe your whole life if you let it: what kind of father never corrects his kid? If God let you run straight toward a cliff and never once grabbed your arm, never let a consequence sting, never made you uncomfortable enough to turn around, that would not be love. That would be a father who does not care. The fact that God will not leave you comfortable in something that is killing you is proof you are His.

Hebrews is honest about how it feels, too. It says no discipline seems pleasant at the time. It is painful. But afterward, it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness in those who have been trained by it. Read that again. At the time, it hurts and makes no sense. Afterward, if you let it do its work, it grows something good in you that could not have grown any other way. The problem is we want the afterward without the at-the-time. It does not work like that. The gym is not fun while the weight is heavy. The muscle comes later.

So when life presses on you, start with a better question. Not only, God, make it stop, though you can absolutely ask that. Also, God, what are You growing in me through this?

Peter says the same thing with a different picture. He told suffering Christians that the trials they were walking through were testing their faith the way fire tests gold. When you heat gold, the junk rises to the top and gets scraped away, and what is left is purer than what you started with. Your faith is worth more than gold, Peter says, and God is not wasting your fire. He is purifying something in you that will still be standing when everything easy has burned off.

That does not mean you have to pretend it does not hurt. Please hear that. Being a Christian does not mean slapping a smile on real pain and saying everything is fine. Jesus wept at a funeral even though He knew He was about to raise the man. You can grieve. You can tell God it hurts. You can say, I do not understand this, and I am barely holding on. He is not fragile, and He is not disappointed in your tears. Bring Him the real thing, not the cleaned-up version.

But while you are hurting, remember what is holding you. Peter opened his whole letter to suffering people by reminding them they had been born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Living hope. Not wishful thinking, not crossing your fingers, but a hope anchored to a Savior who actually walked out of a tomb. Whatever you are facing, the worst thing is not the last thing. Jesus beat death. That changes the math on everything else.

Let me say something plainly to whoever needs it. You might be in it right now. Maybe it is grief that does not lift, or a home that is falling apart, or a sickness, or a loneliness so heavy you can feel it. I am not going to hand you a verse from a safe distance and walk off. I will tell you the truth instead. God has not left you. He is nearer to the brokenhearted than He is to anybody, and the dark afternoon when you feel nothing is not evidence He is gone. Feelings are terrible witnesses. Go back to what He said, not what you feel, and what He said is: I will never leave you nor forsake you.

And do not go through it alone. This is exactly when the old you will want to isolate, to pull the blinds, skip church, and quietly sink. Do the opposite. Let your church family in. Let people pray over you, bring you a meal, sit with you, carry the part you cannot carry right now. That is what the body is for. You were not built to endure the hard road by yourself, and asking for help is not weakness, it is how God designed the rescue to reach you.

One day the race ends. Hebrews points there too, to the city God is building, to the day every hard thing is behind you and you stand in front of the One you were running toward the whole time. Paul said the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed. He did not say

they do not hurt. He said, put them on the scale against what is coming, and they do not come close.

So keep running. When your legs burn, keep running. When you fall, get up and keep running. When you cannot see the finish line, fix your eyes on Jesus and take the next step, because the One who endured the cross for you is standing at the end of this, and He has never once lost a runner He was holding.

Father, when life gets hard, help me not to assume You have left. Teach me to run with endurance and keep my eyes on Jesus. Use even the painful things to grow something good in me. Hold me when I am grieving, surround me with Your people, and anchor me in the living hope of the resurrection. Get me all the way home. In Jesus' name, amen.

Chapter 13: Telling Others

Here is something that happens to almost every new believer. Something real changed in you, and you want the people you love to have it too. Your family. Your friends. That one person who is clearly drowning and does not know there is a rope.

And then you freeze. What would I even say? What if they ask a question I cannot answer? What if they laugh, or think I have gone off the deep end, or treat me differently?

Let me take that fear apart, because it is standing between a lot of people and the most important thing they will ever do.

Paul wrote to a young man named Timothy who was nervous too. Timothy was timid. He was young, he was facing pressure, and he was tempted to keep his mouth shut and stay comfortable. Paul told him this: God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. Then he said, do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord.

Notice the word testimony. Paul did not tell Timothy to go win every argument. He told him not to be ashamed of the testimony. A testimony is just your story. What you were, what Jesus did, what you are now. You do not need a theology degree to tell somebody what happened to you.

There is a man in the gospel of John who gets this exactly right. Jesus healed him. He had been blind his whole life, and suddenly he could see. The religious experts dragged him in and tried to tie him in knots with questions he could not answer. They wanted to debate the theology of it. And the man just said one of my favorite lines in the whole Bible. He said, whether this man is a sinner or not, I do not know. One thing I know. I was blind, and now I see.

That is your power right there. You may not be able to explain everything yet. You do not have to. You were blind, and now you see. You know what your life was before Jesus, and you know what He did. Nobody can argue you out of your own story.

And here is why you, specifically, might be the best person on earth to reach the people around you. They knew the old you. Your family watched you when you were angry, or lost, or chasing all the wrong things. Your friends remember who you used to be. So when they see something genuinely different, not fake, not preachy, but real, that gets their attention in a way a stranger with a microphone never could. The change in you is the sermon they cannot ignore.

I have watched it happen more than once. Somebody who was angry and selfish and frankly exhausting to be around slowly starts to become patient, and gentle, and strangely settled, and the people who knew the loud old version cannot account for it, so one of them finally leans in and asks what on earth is different with you lately. That question, the one you never had to force, is worth more than a hundred arguments you could have picked. That is almost always how it goes. Not a debate you win. A change they notice and cannot explain.

So the first thing is not a speech. It is a life. Peter said that even a husband who will not listen to a word about God can be won by watching his wife live it. People are watching you more than they are listening to you. Let them see joy that does not depend on everything going right. Let them see you forgive somebody who did not deserve it. Let them see you own it when you are wrong. That gets questions. And when the question comes, you are not forcing anything, you are just answering.

Now, living it does not mean never opening your mouth. At some point there are words. The man has to actually hear who Jesus is and what He did. Paul told Timothy to be ready in season and out of season, which is a way of saying, be ready when it is convenient and be ready when it is not. You do not need to turn every conversation into an ambush. You just stay ready, so that when God opens a door, you walk through it instead of pretending you did not see it.

And you do not carry the results. This is the part that takes the pressure off. Paul used the picture of a farmer. A farmer plants seed. He does not reach into the ground and yank the plant up by hand. He cannot make a seed grow. He plants, he waters, and then God gives the growth. Your job is to plant the seed and water it, faithfully, lovingly. Whether it grows, and when, is God's department. That means a conversation that seems to go nowhere was not a failure. You planted. Somebody else may water years from now. God may grow it long after you forget you said anything.

So stop measuring by whether they prayed with you on the spot. Measure by whether you were faithful to plant. Plant. Water. Trust God with the harvest.

That also kills the pride that can sneak into this. You did not save yourself, so you cannot save anybody else. Only God can open a blind man's eyes. You are not the surgeon. You are the beggar who found bread telling another beggar where you got it. That takes the weight off and it keeps you kind, because you remember you were on the other side of this conversation not long ago, and somebody was patient with you.

Which brings up the how. Tell them the truth, but tell it the way you would have wanted to hear it. Not with a raised voice. Not looking down on them. Paul told Timothy that the Lord's servant must be gentle, patient, correcting opponents with meekness. People do not get argued into the kingdom. Nobody ever got yelled into loving Jesus. They get loved in. When a person can tell you actually care about them and are not just trying to win, they will listen to things they would never hear from someone who is only trying to be right.

And some of them will still say no, at least for now, so be ready for that, because it stings, and it stings worst with family. When it happens, do not push harder and do not go cold on them. Keep loving them. Keep praying. Remember how long God was patient with you, standing at a door you kept refusing to open, waiting while you ran the other way, and understand that He is every bit that patient with the people you love. Your job is not to close the sale today. Your job is to keep the door open and keep the love real, so that on the day their eyes finally start to open, they already know exactly whose house to come to.

Let me make this simple enough to actually do this week. Pick one person. Just one. Somebody you already know and love who does not know Jesus. Start praying for them by name, every day. Ask God to open their eyes and to give you a door. Then live it in front of them, and when the door opens, tell them your one thing. I was blind, and now I see. Here is what my life was. Here is what Jesus did. Here is what He is doing now.

You do not have to be impressive. You just have to be honest, and willing, and kind. The God who reached you is more than able to reach them. He is just looking for someone who is not ashamed of the testimony.

Be that someone.

Father, thank You for opening my eyes. Take away my fear and my shame, and give me Your power, love, and a sound mind. Put one person on my heart, and help me pray for them, live it in front of them, and tell them my story when You open the door. I will plant and water. I trust You to make it grow. In Jesus' name, amen.

Chapter 14: Worship and Giving Your Life Back

Let me clear something up that confuses a lot of new believers, because the church uses a word in a way the rest of the world does not.

Worship.

When most people hear it, they picture the music. The band, the lights, the slow song where everybody closes their eyes and raises a hand. And that is worship, it really is. But it is a tiny slice of it. If worship were only the singing, then worship would stop the second the last song ended and the service let out. It does not. The Bible has something far bigger in mind.

Paul says it like this. He begs us, in view of God's mercy, to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, and he calls that our true and proper worship. Read that again slowly. Your worship is not mainly a song. It is your body. Your life. Your Monday, your money, your mouth, your choices, handed over to God as a gift.

That is why you can worship God while you are stacking chairs, changing a diaper, driving to a job you do not love, or being honest on a form when nobody would ever catch the lie. Worship is giving God your actual life, not just twenty minutes of music once a week.

Paul calls it a living sacrifice, and that phrase has a little joke buried in it. Old sacrifices were dead. You put the animal on the altar and that was that. A living sacrifice is different, and here is the problem with it: it keeps crawling off the altar. You give God your life on Sunday and by Tuesday afternoon you have climbed back down and taken it over again. That is normal. That is the whole Christian walk. You just keep climbing back up and saying, here, it is Yours again.

So why would anybody hand over their whole life like that? Because of who He is. That is what worship really runs on. Not your feelings on a given morning, but the truth about God.

The Bible pulls back the curtain on heaven in the book of Revelation and lets us watch worship happen around God's throne. There are living creatures who never stop saying, holy, holy, holy. There are twenty-four elders, and they fall down in front of Him and cast their crowns at His feet and say, worthy are You, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power, for You created all things. Look at what worship is in its purest form. It is not working up a feeling. It is seeing God for who He is and responding the only way that makes sense. You are worthy. You get the crown, not me.

That word worthy is the key to the whole thing. Worship means telling God He is worth it. Worth your time. Worth your obedience. Worth the thing you are scared to give up. When you grasp even a little of what He is and what He did on that cross, the response is not a shrug. It pours out of you.

That is how worship works in a life God has touched. There was a woman named Hannah who had cried out to God for years in deep pain, and when He finally answered her, the praise just came out of her like a flood. She was not performing. She was overflowing. That is the pattern. God moves in a life, and worship comes out. If your worship feels dry and forced, the answer is usually not to try harder to

feel something. It is to go back and look again at who He is and what He has done, until your heart catches up.

Now let me talk about a part of worship that makes new believers nervous, because somebody always warns them that the church is only after their money.

Giving.

Here is the truth, and it is going to sound backward. God does not need your money. He owns everything already. Every dollar you have, He gave you the hands and the breath to earn. When the Bible tells you to give, it is not because heaven is running short. It is because of what holding too tightly does to a human heart.

Money is one of the loudest false kings there is. It promises security and demands worship, and it will happily take the throne of your life if you let it. Giving is how you fight back. When you open your hand and give some of it away, freely, you are saying out loud, this does not own me, God does. That is why Jesus watched a poor widow drop two tiny coins in the offering and said she gave more than all the rich people, because they gave out of their extra and she gave out of her need. He was not measuring the amount. He was measuring the heart.

So giving is worship too. It is the living sacrifice with its wallet open. And the Bible says God loves a cheerful giver, which means this was never supposed to be a grim duty where you grit your teeth and hand it over resentfully. It is a glad thing. You give because you are grateful, because you trust Him, because you have seen that you cannot outgive a God who gave you His own Son.

You do not have to start big. Start honest. Give something, give it on purpose, and give it cheerfully, and watch what it does to your grip. The point was never the church's budget. The point was your freedom.

And giving is bigger than money, too. You can give your time to somebody who cannot pay you back. You can give your Saturday to the person who needs help moving. You can give your attention to the lonely widow nobody visits. All of it is worship. All of it is the living sacrifice. All of it is you saying, God, You gave me this life, so here it is, use it.

That is where this whole book has been heading. You were brand new at the start of it, just rescued, barely finding your feet. Now you are learning what to actually do with the life He handed back to you. And the answer, under all the habits and all the first steps, is simply this: give it back to Him. Not because He will love you more if you do. He already loves you completely. Give it back because He is worthy, because He bought you at the highest price there is, and because a life poured out in worship is the only life that was ever going to satisfy you anyway.

He is worthy. Go give Him the crown.

Father, You are worthy. Thank You for a mercy I did not earn and cannot repay. I present my life to You as a living sacrifice, my body, my time, my money, my choices, all of it. When I climb back down off

the altar, draw me back up. Teach me to hold things with an open hand and to worship You with my whole life, not just my songs. You are worth everything. In Jesus' name, amen.

Keep Walking

So now you have the first steps. The gospel that saved you, the grace that holds you, the Word, prayer, the Spirit, baptism, a church family, the long fight with the old you, and a life handed back to God. That is a lot. Do not try to swallow it all by Friday.

Here is the thing I most want you to hear on your way out. Do not try to become a mature Christian overnight. You will not, and you are not supposed to. Growth is a walk, not a jump. You are going to take some good steps and you are going to trip over your own feet, and then you will string together a few strong weeks and start to feel like you finally have this figured out, right about the time you trip again, and that back and forth is not you failing, it is just what it looks like to actually grow. You will have mountaintop mornings with God. You will have flat gray afternoons where you feel nothing at all. That is normal. Keep walking anyway.

And you will fall. Let me say it plainly so it does not knock you out when it happens. You are going to sin again. When you do, the enemy is going to lean in and whisper that you were never really saved, that you should just quit, that God is done with you. He is a liar. Do not listen. Get up, tell God the truth, let it go, and keep walking. Falling down is not the end of the walk. Refusing to get up is.

Most of all, keep your eyes on Jesus. The second you take them off Him and stare at your problems or your failures, you start to sink. I wrote a whole other book about exactly that, about trusting the God you cannot see when the storm is louder than the promise. It is called *Faith That Doesn't Sink*. When you are ready, read it next. It is the natural second step after this one.

Before you close this, let me give you four simple things to actually do, not someday, this week:

Open the Bible tomorrow morning before the noise starts. Just a little. Let God talk to you first.

Say something to Him. Out loud, in the car, in your room. That is prayer. You do not need fancy words.

Find a church and walk in. You were not built to do this alone.

And tell one person what Jesus did for you. You do not need a sermon. Just the truth.

That is it. You are brand new, you are His, and He is not going anywhere. Welcome to the family. Now go walk with your Father.

Jesus, thank You for making this one new. Thank You that it was never about being good enough, only about You. Hold them on the days they feel strong and the days they feel like quitting. Teach them to walk with You, to get back up when they fall, and to keep their eyes on You. You started this work in them. I trust You to finish it. In Your name, amen.