

START

WELCOME.

We're so glad you're here. Why? Because if you're reading this, chances are you're interested in growing in your faith and learning what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Maybe your faith is brand new, maybe you're seeking a relationship with God, or you're looking to strengthen your faith. Either way, this resource is for you.

If you're a new Christian, this is an exciting time for you. It can also feel a little overwhelming and confusing, too. This guide will give you an overview of what the Christian faith is all about and simple steps you can take today to deepen your faith.

BECOMING A DISCIPLE

Disciple. It might sound like a churchy word with some super-religious meaning. But honestly, it's really basic and something you can, and should, grab hold of.

DISCIPLE

SOMEONE WHO ACCEPTS AND
HELPS TO SPREAD THE TEACHING
OF A FAMOUS PERSON¹

Ask: What was your former definition of disciple?

Being a disciple of Jesus, however, is different. Being a disciple of Jesus means that you model your ways after His ways, and adapt your life to look more like His. It's exclusive worship of Jesus, changing your priorities to serve like He served, and pointing others to God like He did. The Bible is full of Jesus' teachings and the best news: the gospel. By deepening our understanding of who God is and what the gospel is all about, we can grow to be better disciples and followers of Jesus, the Son of God. And as our faith deepens and grows, we should feel motivated to share it in a natural way with those God has placed in our lives.

Ask: How do you feel about being a disciple after reading this definition?

¹ First definition of the word disciple from www.merriam-webster.com.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Growth happens best in relationship, so we've designed this book to be walked through with one or two others. Think about fellow Christians who might be a little further down the road on their faith journey and ask if they'd like to go through this guide with you. And if you choose to go at it alone, we've given you questions for reflection and space to process what you're reading. Either way, here's what you'll get out of this:

- The basics of the Christian faith
- Understanding the why the Bible is essential to our faith, and how to read it for yourself
- How to talk with God in prayer
- What to do in the face of trials and temptation
- Steps for growing your faith and sharing your story

Life is busy. It's easy to find ourselves wanting to make changes or live life differently, but we lack the time and motivation. This guide is designed to encourage you and help you take practical steps in following Jesus. We urge you to make this a priority. Block out time in your calendar to read through this book and reflect or discuss with others.

This is just the beginning; it's a starting block for understanding Christianity, not the finish line.

A FOUNDATION IN CHRIST LEADS TO MORE AND BETTER DISCIPLES.

Let's dive in.

CHAPTER 1: THE GOSPEL

By now you've probably heard the phrase "the gospel" tossed around quite a bit. But are you confident about what it means exactly? Sometimes, faith terms are shared without much explanation, leaving you with more questions than answers. Let's walk through what the gospel really means.

WE'RE STARTING HERE BECAUSE

IF YOU DON'T TRULY UNDERSTAND THE GOSPEL,

YOU'LL NEVER BE CHANGED BY IT.

So what exactly is the gospel?

If we had to boil it down, it'd look like this:

God is perfect. We are not. Because of sin, our relationship with God is broken. And to fix that messed up relationship, we need help. Jesus is that help. He was perfect in all the ways we can't be. And He took our sin upon Himself when He died on the cross. Through His death and resurrection, He restored our relationship with God and made a way for us to know Him personally.

Gospel can actually be translated as "good news." It's the story of God's pursuit of broken souls and the promise of a transformed life because of Jesus. Let's explore a little deeper, breaking the gospel down into four points.

1. Plan ²

"Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...And God blessed them..."
(Genesis 1:26-28, ESV)

There is a God and He can be known. In the beginning, He created humanity to display His glory. You were given life with purpose and intention by a God who cares about you. God's plan all along has been for wholeness, hope, and a deep and satisfying relationship with Him.

² Plan, Problem, Provision, Path framework used with permission from Pastor Adam Narciso of City Central Church, Tacoma, WA

2. Problem

"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23, ESV)

When Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the garden, sin entered the world. Think of sin as an arrow being shot at a target. It may completely miss the mark, or it may only be off by a hair. Either way, it's off center and the result is the same. God's perfect will is like the center of that target, and when we sin—big or small—we miss the mark.

The bottom line is that perfection is an impossible task. It's a standard we simply can't meet on our own, leaving us fractured and disconnected from God. A life separated from God is filled with a restlessness and longing that is impossible to take care of on our own. The void is too much, and we're unable to repair our relationship with God on our own. Thankfully, it's not up to us to fix this.

Ask: What is your contribution to the problem?

3. Provision

"But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8, ESV)

God made a plan of redemption through Jesus, who lived a life on earth without sin, died, and was raised from the dead. As one with a spotless record, He bridged the gap of brokenness and offered us reunion with God. Jesus came to provide freedom and hope, and to release us from the consequences and power of sin in our lives. And it's not just your own sinful past that's been erased by Jesus, but the sin of the entire world, starting with Adam and Eve. Really think about how much He freed you from, and you'll begin to understand the deep love that He has for you.

Ask: What have you been freed from?

4. Path

"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." (John 1:12, ESV)

We're able to set foot on a new path and get back to God's original plan for our lives, thanks to God's forgiveness and Jesus' work on the cross. We get to choose to follow Him by turning from our sin, our old way of doing things. God doesn't force us to go His way, but rather offers it up as a free gift. Choosing this path of forgiveness and redemption allows us to not just know of Jesus, but to really know Him.

Ask: What path have you been set on?

THE GOSPEL IS AN INTRODUCTION TO A PERSON, NOT A BIG RELIGIOUS IDEA OR SET OF RULES.

IT'S A RELATIONSHIP.

How is the gospel unlike anything else out there?

Simply put: grace. You've likely heard that word used—and possibly misused—in all kinds of ways. The definition is simple: undeserved favor. Have you ever been given a gift that you didn't deserve? That's grace. God showers us with grace even when we aren't paying attention or don't deserve it. Not because we asked for it. Not because we are entitled to it. Just because He's God, and He loves us that much.

Christianity differs from other religions because it's not about what you can do for God, it's about what God already did (and continues to do) for you. Other religions focus on earning favor from God based on the things we do (or don't do). These worldviews are based on personal performance and doing enough good in our lives to outweigh the bad. The work would never be done. No matter how hard we try, we can never live a good enough life to work our way to God on our own. Our track record is seriously inadequate. Right before Jesus died on the cross, He uttered this phrase: "It is finished," (John 19:30, ESV). His death took care of everything for us. The work was done by Jesus.

"FOR BY GRACE YOU HAVE BEEN SAVED THROUGH FAITH. AND THIS IS NOT OF YOUR OWN DOING; IT IS THE GIFT OF GOD, NOT A RESULT OF WORKS, SO THAT NO ONE MAY BOAST."

(EPHESIANS 2:8-9, ESV)

Grace changes our hearts, not just our behaviors.

God takes our track record and substitutes it with a perfect one that we don't deserve. He's not afraid of our imperfections and messes. Jesus has done the work and gone to great lengths to remove barriers so that we can know God personally. That's why following Jesus isn't about being a nicer person, praying more, or working harder. It's about drawing nearer to the One who does those things perfectly already. When we truly get to know God, and let Him take control of our lives, we experience change in our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. We become new.

SHARING THE GOSPEL

Evangelism. (Now there's a word that can freak people out.) Some envision the angry, raving street corner preacher, others imagine going door-to-door, cramming religion down someone else's throat. That's not what we're talking about here. We're talking about sharing the best news we've ever heard with someone we care about, someone God has placed in our path. There's no prize for sharing the gospel. No contest to win or fast track to heaven. But it's like sharing anything else that we are fired up about with those around us. Imagine you try a new restaurant and it's incredible. Are you going to keep that to yourself? Or are you likely to rave about it to some of your closest friends? "Man, you have to try this place!" In the same way, we should feel motivated to share what God has done in our lives through the gospel.

Want to know one of the most powerful and simple tools for sharing the gospel? Tell your story. It's that easy. Share with someone how the gospel turned your life inside out and upside down in the best of ways.

Your Story

Part of sharing the gospel is also living it. People around you will take notice as you start maturing as a believer. There are many negative ideas out there about Christians. Be the one who shatters those stereotypes by living out your faith in a genuine way.

**LET GOD USE YOU TO
DISPLAY WHO CHRIST IS
AND HOW ONLY HE CAN
TRULY CHANGE LIVES.**

REFLECT

- What is your story in light of the gospel?
- Who were you before Christ?
- Who are you now?
- What was life like in between? What's changed?
- How would you describe the gospel to someone who has never heard it?
- What trips you up or holds you back from talking about your faith/ sharing the gospel?

GO DEEPER

- *Mere Christianity*, book by C.S. Lewis
- iamsecond.com, personal stories of faith transformation

CHAPTER 2: THE BIBLE

How do you see the Bible? Some people view it as just a historical book full of stories from the past or a list of how-to rules for living a better life. Or, they see it as something they are supposed to read to be a good Christian. They beat themselves up or feel ashamed when they haven't read in awhile.

HERE'S THE THING:
**BEFORE THE BIBLE CAN CHANGE US,
WE HAVE TO SEE IT FOR WHAT IT REALLY IS.**

Over the course of 1,400 years, God spoke to shepherds, kings, warriors, and poets who wrote down His words. And in all 66 books of the Bible, all of the different stories and writings point to the same thing—Jesus. So that big book is really just one giant story. A story of God's rescue plan starting in Genesis and going clear through to Revelation.

THE BIBLE IS

WRITTEN BY MEN, INSPIRED BY GOD (2 TIMOTHY 3:16)

ALIVE AND RELEVANT (HEBREWS 4:12)

100% TRUE (JOHN 17:17)

A LETTER TO US FROM GOD (1 JOHN 3:1; 1 JOHN 4:8)

THE BIBLE ISN'T

MAN MADE

OUTDATED AND IRRELEVANT

INACCURATE

A BOOK OF RULES

WHY IS READING THE BIBLE SO IMPORTANT?

We have a personal God who is all about relationship. And we all know that the basis of any relationship is trust. How can you trust someone you don't know well? Trust is based on what you learn about someone's character, and grows as you get to know them more and more. Reading the Bible is how we get to know God. He reveals all kinds of things about Himself to us through His Word. The Bible is our invitation to better understand His character and what He's all about.

God's not up in heaven with a giant clipboard keeping track of when we read and when we don't. It has no bearing on whether we're going to heaven or how pleased God is with us. But the more you read and learn about Him, the richer your relationship with Him—and your life—will be.

In this mixed-up world we are bombarded with all kinds of crazy messages about who we are, what life's all about, and what choices we should make. God's Word is an amazing filter for all of that noise. It catches all of the untrue and twisted voices that enter our heads and gives us clarity on what's good and true. The more familiar you are with God's voice through the Bible, the more you'll recognize it and be transformed by it.

OTHER NAMES FOR THE BIBLE

GOD'S WORD

SCRIPTURE

THE WORD / THE WORD OF GOD

HOLY BIBLE

LET'S GET PRACTICAL.

If you've ever been overwhelmed at the thought of reading and understanding the Bible, you're not alone. It can definitely feel that way at first. We've outlined some tips on how to set yourself up for success and make the most of your reading time. Don't get caught up on how much you read or even how much you understand at first. Just make a genuine effort to read a portion of God's Word every day, and to look for ways to apply it to your life.

- 1. Pray.** Before you crack open the Bible, take a moment to talk to God. Ask Him to reveal Himself to you through His words, to direct your thoughts, and to see and hear what it is He has to say to you. If you're struggling to find the motivation to read, tell Him. If you are confused or frustrated by it, share that.
- 2. Set aside time and find a good place.** Block out a regular time in your schedule to spend with God, just like you would any other friend. Don't be afraid to start small with 10-20 minute chunks of time. Remove any distractions (your phone, laptop, etc.), and find a quiet, comfortable spot to settle in and start reading.
- 3. Find a Bible that fits your needs.** If you don't already own a Bible, now's the time to get one. They come in all shapes and sizes—some with lots of background information, notes, and cross-references, others with just the passages themselves. The ESV Study Bible is a great place to start. It's packed with background information like details on the author and historical context and definitions of tricky terms.
- 4. Read thoughtfully and slowly.** It can be tempting to blaze through your reading time, but taking a deeper look at the details will help you make sense of what you're reading. It's also helpful to read when you are awake and alert (maybe not bedtime). Try these three techniques to really dig in.

Observe. Simply look at what the verse says. Then think about the context. Who wrote it? What was happening in the world at that time? It may be helpful to do a little research on your own or read through the notes in a study Bible to get some insight.

Interpret. What does it mean? Think about how the text might have applied to the people who heard it initially. Imagine what their lives were like and how the message likely impacted them. What does it say about God and His character?

Apply. Consider the themes and implications of the passage and how it relates to the world today and to you personally. How might it apply to current culture? What could God be trying to teach you? What will you do with what you've learned?

- 5. Ask questions.** You will likely run across things that don't make sense or leave you frustrated. We've all been there. Have a notebook or journal handy and jot down confusing passages and questions that you have. Share your questions with a believer you trust who can talk through it. No question is a bad question.

WHERE TO START IN THE BIBLE

Maybe you've tried to read the Bible before without much success. You sit down, open the cover, and start reading. But then things get boring, confusing, or outrageous... and you're still in Genesis. There must be a better way! When you begin reading the Bible, you need a strategy to help you make sense of what you're reading and get you excited about regular time spent with God. The readings we suggest below will give you a good look at the basics of Jesus' life, expose you to His teaching, and provide some context for other parts of the Bible.

THE BOOK OF JOHN (NEW TESTAMENT)

John was a fisherman-turned-disciple who wrote this and several other books in the New Testament (1 John, 2 John, 3 John, and Revelation). He is known as the "beloved disciple," one of Jesus' closest friends. The book of John shares Jesus' miracles, teaching, and prayers. It also gives a behind-the-scenes look at ideas that Jesus shared only with His inner circle.

ROMANS (NEW TESTAMENT)

Another disciple, Paul, wrote this letter to Christians in Rome about how to be devoted to God and to better explain God's righteousness. Do a little research on ancient Rome, and you'll see that Paul's message to the Romans has lots of application for us today.

EPHESIANS (NEW TESTAMENT)

Ephesians was also written by Paul to the early church in Ephesus, a port town on the coast of modern day Turkey. Ephesians has some great applications for personally applying truth to our lives and advice on how to live a faith-growing, soul-filled life.

JAMES (NEW TESTAMENT)

This book was most likely written by James, the brother of Jesus, who wasn't a believer during Jesus' life, but later became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. James is sensible and ethical, directing us to have a faith that produces real life change and explaining what it means to practice godly living.

PSALMS AND PROVERBS (OLD TESTAMENT)

While you are reading the books recommended above, make a goal to read a proverb and a psalm each day. These collections of songs, poems, and wise sayings are easy to read, thought-provoking, and so relatable and applicable to your life.

These are all great passages to dive into, but honestly, where you start is not nearly as important as just starting somewhere. Keep at it, even if you're still struggling in your reading time. Sometimes obedience has to come first, and the rewards come later. In Psalm 119:103, David talks about God's words tasting sweeter than honey in his mouth. The more you read, the more you'll grow a taste for the Bible and be transformed by it. So pick a passage and just go for it.

REFLECT

- Share your recent experiences with reading the Bible. What was it like for you? Was it easy, interesting, fun, hard, frustrating, or confusing (or a mix)?
- How would you like your reading time to change?
- Did you feel like God spoke to you through something you read?
- Is there someone in your life that you can share this with?

GO DEEPER

- *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, book by Gordon Fee
- The Bible App, free mobile app by YouVersion
- Biblegateway.com, free online Bible resource

CHAPTER 3: PRAYER

"WHEN YOU STRUGGLE IN PRAYER, YOU CAN COME BEFORE GOD WITH THE CONFIDENCE THAT HE IS GOING TO GIVE YOU WHAT YOU WOULD HAVE ASKED FOR IF YOU KNEW EVERYTHING HE KNOWS."

(TIM KELLER, *PRAYER: EXPERIENCING AWE & INTIMACY WITH GOD*)

55% of Americans say that they pray daily, often for family, friends, and personal difficulties. Others admit that they've prayed to win the lottery, get an ideal parking spot, or for their favorite sports team to win. What about you? Is prayer a regular part of your life? Or just something you do out of habit before a meal?

Just like reading the Bible, praying is a way to draw nearer to God. It's a conversation. And it's based on the fact that God loves us unconditionally and has invited us to have a personal relationship with Him. So when you think about prayer, think about pulling up a chair next to a close friend—someone who knows you inside and out, and loves you despite your flaws. You don't have to rehearse what you say to someone like that. You don't have to get all the words right or hide your emotions.

**GOD'S NOT INTERESTED IN YOUR ABILITY;
HE'S INTERESTED IN YOUR AVAILABILITY.**

YOU JUST HAVE TO SHOW UP, TALK, AND BE READY TO LISTEN.

Prayer isn't about getting what you want from God. He's not in the business of being manipulated or coerced. But so often our prayers are extremely self-focused. We pray because nothing else seems to be working, or because we hope that God will grant our wishes about something. When we don't get everything we want, we wonder: did God not hear me? Does this prayer thing actually work?

When we only pray from a place of selfishness or when we don't really pray at all, our understanding of prayer—and God—is way off base. We are completely missing the relational invitation of prayer, and don't have a clear picture of the One inviting us in. So what is prayer really all about, and what difference can it make in our spiritual lives and to the world?

Ask: Have you ever thought you had to pray perfectly? Why?

WHAT PRAYER IS

Prayer gives us access to the creator of the world. Just let that sink in for a moment. We can approach God in confidence, knowing that He cares about us (Hebrews 4:15-16), and wants to talk with us. Prayer is a connection through a conversation that God started with us through His words in the Bible. It connects what we know about God (in our heads), to a real and meaningful experience with Him (in our hearts).

Ask: Has this truth sunk in for you? Does prayer feel like a privilege?

"FOR WHAT GREAT NATION IS THERE THAT HAS A GOD SO NEAR TO IT AS THE LORD OUR GOD IS TO US, WHENEVER WE CALL UPON HIM?"

(DEUTERONOMY 4:7, ESV)

WHY PRAYER MATTERS

For starters, God commands us to pray. Not suggests or recommends, but commands it (Ephesians 6:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; 1 Timothy 2:1). Why? Because He loves us and He desires to have a deep and meaningful relationship with us. If we think about prayer in terms of speaking with the person who knows and loves us best, why would we neglect it? From the beginning of the Bible into modern day, we see that prayer is a gift from God and has served as a distinguishing mark of His people. In the ancient world, God broke the mold by interacting with His people in this unprecedented way. The Psalms are a vulnerable Old Testament example of the the type of honest and real relationship we can have with God through prayer. And the New Testament gives us a glimpse into the way Jesus interacted with God through prayer, as well as showing us how the early disciples prayed regularly. Prayer is woven through the Bible for us to see and imitate.

So what exactly does prayer do?

- 1. Prayer connects what we know about God in our minds to what we experience of Him with our hearts.** If you've started reading the Bible on a regular basis, you may know the truth of God and be familiar with the stories He's shared with us. But the only way truth can transform you is through dialogue with the One who can make it personal and real to you.
- 2. Prayer reminds us about the strength, beauty, and vastness of who God is,** and should make us curious to know more about Him. As we talk with God about the details of our lives, we'll be continually reminded of the grace we've received, and be prompted to live out our identity as His sons and daughters.
- 3. Prayer shifts our perspective.** It reorients us, especially when it comes to dealing with the hard things in life. We're able to come to God no matter how we're feeling or what we're thinking, and ask Him to refocus our minds and attention.
- 4. Prayer invites us to join what God is doing.** It's more than spending time alone with God; it's also about working alongside Him to change the world. When Jesus taught His disciples how to pray, part of their responsibility was to pray that the kingdom of God would come to earth. As we get to know God, our desire for change will increase as we see the world more clearly for what it is versus what God designed it to be like. God is working on something radical, and He invites us join. This desire for change is fueled by prayer.
- 5. Prayer alters history.** It may seem far-fetched that our prayers can make such a difference, but prayer can change current circumstances to alter the course of history. The book of James says, "the prayer of a righteous person has great power," and reminds us of the story of Elijah, whose prayers affected the weather of a nation over the course of three and a half years (James 5:16b-18, ESV).

Ask: What jumps out to you about these five points?

HOW DO I PRAY? WHERE DO I EVEN START?

Does prayer feel hard? That's because it is. You might get distracted, fumble through it, or even fall asleep. When sin entered the world, it affected everything, but first and foremost our relationship with God. So it's no surprise that prayer can sometimes feel like an uphill battle. But it's too important to just give up. Prayer is the thread that holds your relationship with God together.

SEE WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT IT.

Both the Old and New Testament have many examples of people praying in all sorts of ways and situations. There isn't a formula for prayer or a series of magic words that you have to say in order for God to hear you. Jesus was a man of prayer who both taught and modeled what a healthy prayer life should look like. Following His example is a great place to start.

When Jesus talked to his followers about prayer, He said "But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matthew 6:6-8, ESV). Just like with reading the Bible, it's important to set aside specific time for prayer and eliminate distractions. Jesus would get away by Himself to be refueled through prayer, especially during the most challenging moments of His life. Just before His arrest, Jesus snuck away to the garden to be in God's presence and honestly talk about all that He was feeling and experiencing.

Ask: Do you set aside time to pray? If so, what benefits have you seen? If not, how can you begin?

After giving the disciples a basic foundation for prayer, Jesus went on to give them an example commonly referred to as the Lord's prayer. Pray then like this:

**"OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN,
HALLOWED BE YOUR NAME.
YOUR KINGDOM COME,
YOUR WILL BE DONE,
ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN.
GIVE US THIS DAY
OUR DAILY BREAD,
AND FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS,
AS WE ALSO HAVE FORGIVEN OUR DEBTORS.
AND LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION,
BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL."**

(MATTHEW 6:9-13, ESV)

This simple prayer praises God for who He is, asks Him to move in the world and our own lives, and acknowledges our shortcomings.

Talk with God using His own words.

Try speaking back to God what He's spoken to you. Praying the words of the Bible is a great way to let God's Word start influencing how you think and speak. It's also a way to honor God and to internalize the powerful words He has given us. His words are full of truth and life, so what better to focus our minds on?

You can pray any part of the Bible, and there isn't a right or wrong way to do it. But if you need help getting started, you might choose a few verses that are meaningful or interesting to you. Or, find a prayer from the Bible and read it back to God, word for word. You can also try personalizing prayer with God's Word as a starting point, like this one. Pray Isaiah 43:1-4 out loud, adding your name in the blanks below.

But now, this is what the Lord says—
he who created you, _____
he who formed you, _____
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you, _____
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

Wherever you start, take your time and don't worry about getting it perfect. When you're done with a passage, talk to God about what the words mean to you. Share your thoughts and questions with Him.

One way to pray: the ACTS model

Here's one prayer exercise you can try, but don't force it. Remember, this is a conversation! Just be yourself and talk to God like you would anyone with whom you have a personal relationship.

A	ADORATION WORSHIP GOD FOR HIS CREATIVITY, FAITHFULNESS, ETERNAL NATURE, AND OTHER AMAZING ATTRIBUTES.
C	CONFESSION REMOVE BARRIERS OF SHAME, GUILT, AND PRIDE BY EXPRESSING REGRET OVER THINGS YOU'VE DONE WRONG AND ASKING FOR FORGIVENESS.
T	THANKSGIVING RECOGNIZE GOD FOR WHO HE IS AND SHOW GRATITUDE FOR ALL THE WAYS HE'S PROVIDED, LOVED, PROTECTED, AND TAUGHT YOU.
S	SUPPLICATION ASK GOD TO INTERACT AND INTERCEDE IN YOUR LIFE AND IN THE LIFE OF YOUR FAMILY, FRIENDS, NEIGHBORS, AND LEADERS

Pray with others.

The thought of praying out loud with another person might freak you out. It can even feel awkward or intimidating at first. But if we look at the early church, we see that prayer is an important part of community life (Acts 2:42, ESV). The Bible encourages believers to be transparent and unified. There's no better way to do that than praying together in an open and genuine environment. It's a practice of vulnerability that can also build trust and friendship in a big way. So, take a step out of your comfort zone and give prayer a try with someone you trust.

And like we said, it's not a formula or something you can do wrong. Some people like to pray out loud, others in their heads, or some prefer writing prayers in a journal. To each their own. No matter how you do it, the more you pray, the more comfortable you'll become in God's presence and in conversation with Him.

REFLECT

Share your experiences with prayer.

- What have been some of your misconceptions about prayer?
- What does your prayer life currently look like?
- What about this chapter challenged your preconceived notions about prayer?
- What can you change about your prayer life this week to reflect the truths that you've learned this week?

GO DEEPER

- *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, book by Tim Keller
- Prayer: Fire from Heaven, tpcc.org/sermons

CHAPTER 4: SPIRITUAL WARFARE AND TEMPTATION

"SHOW ME A PERSON WHO'S WISE,
AND I'LL SHOW YOU THEIR SCARS."

(AARON BROCKETT, LEAD PASTOR)

Life isn't always easy. As we grow from children to adolescents to adults, we see and experience more of a world that leaves us full of questions and hurts. Sometimes, when people start to explore what it means to follow Jesus, they see Him as a problem-solver who will make life easier. That's just not the case. In fact, we're promised that if we decide to take on a life of faith, we'll inevitably face struggles and hardships of all kinds. Sounds great, right? The good news is that this battle is not our own. In fact, it's already been won.

WHAT IS SPIRITUAL WARFARE?

"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:12, ESV)

There's a world we see, and one we don't. As much as Satan, demons, and even angels have been misrepresented over the years in Hollywood, books, and magazines, they actually do exist in a spiritual realm that we don't see. There's a war going on, between good and evil, right under our noses. That's what we mean by spiritual warfare.

We can encounter spiritual warfare in all kinds of ways. It can come in the form of difficult things that happen in the world or directly to us, and also in the personal temptations and struggles we face every single day. While not every bad thing that we encounter is a direct work of Satan and his evil army, we can't look past his identity as the "Father of lies" (John 8, ESV). He lies about the nature of God, and he lies about your identity. Our human logic and reasoning are no match for his deception, so we're called in 1 Peter 5:8 to be sober-minded and watchful when it comes to spiritual warfare.

A BROKEN WORLD

Just pull up cnn.com or look around you for a glimpse of today's broken world. It's impossible to miss the pain, tragedy, disease, crime, death, and relational hardships that mark our everyday lives. And it begs the question: Why would God allow all of this to happen? We all wish we knew the answer. But while only God knows that, we do know that the world we live in is broken and far from God's original plan. This world is not the one that He created in perfection at the start. And we can take comfort in the Bible telling us that God always acts with our best in mind and works for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28). Despite difficult circumstances, we can hold on to hope knowing that trials have a divine purpose. Things are not always what they seem to us since we can only glimpse a tiny piece of the story that God is weaving together. Don't lose sight of how great God really is, and don't lose hope in the restoration that He promises to bring.

TEMPTATION AND SIN

The enemy engages in warfare against those who hear and believe the message of Jesus using any tactic he can to discredit and discourage. In the story of Matthew 13:3-8, Jesus gives examples of the trials that new believers may face, including confusion about the gospel, hardships that make it difficult for hope to take root, worry, and distraction. Often the biggest battles we face are the ones inside of ourselves. We make decisions that we know we shouldn't and act in ways that are at odds with God's desire for our lives. But take hope, we're not the only ones. As one of the most influential disciples of all time, Paul, said about his own struggles, "I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out" (Romans 7:18, ESV). Satan knows this about us and often uses it to his advantage. He works through deception and lies, but his handiwork is not always easy to spot.

Satan loves nothing more than to subtly deceive and draw us away from God, often toward a path of destructive patterns and behaviors. These types of temptations are especially difficult because turning away from them is both counterintuitive to our human nature and to what the world around us seems to say.

"FOR ALL THAT IS IN THE WORLD - THE DESIRES OF THE FLESH AND THE DESIRES OF THE EYES AND THE PRIDE OF LIFE - IS NOT FROM THE FATHER BUT IS FROM THE WORLD."

(1 JOHN 2:16, ESV)

Temptation and sin come in all shapes and sizes. This verse talks about three different categories which can play out in all kinds of sinful behaviors and patterns. Read through the list below and think about which areas you might struggle in most.

- Lust of the flesh—addictions of all kinds including alcohol and substance abuse, destructive sexual habits, and violence. In a search for immediate gratification, lust of the flesh is the temptation to feel physical pleasure from sinful activity, anything that makes our body or human nature feel temporarily satisfied.
- Lust of the eyes—when admiration becomes greed and we become jealous because of comparison. Lust of the eyes can show up through stinginess, selfishness, a constant desire for things we don't have, or the need for more of what we already have.
- Pride of life—the desire for excessive greatness, power, and attention. Pride of life leaves us hung up on status and prestige with a need to get credit, glory, and recognition for the sake of our own egos.

DEALING WITH TEMPTATION

SEE IT.

Temptation is a never-ending battle. So what do we do about it? We need to put a plan in place to detect and avoid it at all costs. And this plan starts with a solid foundation in the Word of God, prayer, and community. Without these things, we live life in isolation and set ourselves up for failure. Here are some additional steps you can take to safeguard your heart from temptation and sin.

OWN IT.

Admit that you've missed the mark. We all have a sinful nature that is prone to certain temptations. Recognize the part you play in entertaining and acting on thoughts and ideas that are not from God. If you think you're above being tempted and tested, you're not. Don't allow pride to keep God out of your life. When you recognize the ways you fall short, it's your job to own up, ask for forgiveness, and make the decision to go in the opposite direction. This is what we call repentance, or a turning away from sin towards God. Repentance doesn't mean you're a disgrace, it means you're a recipient of God's glorious grace. Instead of being ashamed and running from God, see sin as an opportunity to turn back and experience His grace.

SOLVE IT.

Put practical steps in place that allow you to move forward instead of backward.

- Consistent time with God: How much of your day is spent with God? Reading the Bible and talking with Him lets you learn what His voice sounds like and will help you recognize and disarm Satan's influence in your life.
- Memorize Scripture: When Jesus was tempted by Satan, He used Scripture to expose his lies. Follow His example here.
- Community: Allow trusted people into your life and give them full access. Living in isolation will only make things more difficult, so find your people and build transparency, vulnerability, and meaningful relationships.

DO IT.

Ultimately, it's up to you to have integrity and choose humility over pride. You can put all sorts of tactics and strategies in place, but you won't get anywhere unless you have a change of heart. Spend time with God in prayer and His Word to understand what He's trying to teach you, ask for grace and the strength to move forward, and don't make excuses for trials and suffering that are a result of your own actions.

DEALING WITH TEMPTATION

"FOR EVERYONE WHO HAS BEEN BORN OF GOD OVERCOMES THE WORLD. AND THIS IS THE VICTORY THAT HAS OVERCOME THE WORLD - OUR FAITH. WHO IS IT THAT OVERCOMES THE WORLD EXCPET THE ONE WHO BELIEVES THAT JESUS IS THE SON OF GOD?"

(1 JOHN 5:4, ESV)

As early Christian leaders, Paul and Barnabas traveled the ancient world to visit new believers who were facing trials of all kinds, including ridicule and death, and to encourage them to hold firm in their faith at all costs (Acts 14: 22, ESV). Sacrifice is a reality of the gospel. It requires that we give up gratifying ourselves in order to change the focus of our lives and pass on the good news to others. Following a new path implies that you leave something behind, and every disciple of Jesus throughout history has had to consider the cost of starting a new life. Jesus Himself told the disciples "in the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33, ESV). Jesus' victory over death is the hope we need to fight through the temptations of the enemy and hurts of life. Life with Jesus is not going to be easy and it's not supposed to be, but every follower of God has been given a promise of victory. This is one battle that's already been won, and we're on the winning side.

REFLECT

- Can you identify one area where you are commonly tempted?
- What leads you to be tempted in that area?
- What are some practical steps you can take to deal with the temptation?

CHAPTER 5: SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Ask: What's been the greatest season of spiritual growth in your life? Why do you think that is?

Growth is part of life, and we all understand the concept of emotional, mental, and physical maturity. But what does it mean to grow spiritually? Simply put, it's becoming more like Jesus. When your thoughts, actions, reactions, and patterns of thinking increasingly shift to reflect the life and heart of Jesus, you're experiencing spiritual growth.

Like in others areas of our lives, growth doesn't happen without sacrifice and training. At first, the practice of spiritual discipline can be just that: discipline. And just like having a healthy body, sticking to a plan to set yourself up for a healthy spiritual life can be challenging. When you want to get in better shape, it's often hard to get up early, go to the gym, and follow through. But once you get in a routine, results start showing and you begin to enjoy better health. Healthy living becomes a life-giving part of your week, and you realize you wouldn't be able to function nearly as well without it. In a similar way, at first we may have to push ourselves to spend time reading the Bible, talking to God in prayer, serving, and being generous. But once we do, we'll start to see changes in our lives and be inspired to continue. It can be hard at first, but it's so critical that it's definitely worth the effort.

Ask: Have you experienced this - physically or spiritually?

Remember: spiritual growth isn't the goal. The goal is getting to know more of Jesus. Growth is the result of a vibrant and authentic relationship with Him. Spending time on this relationship is something we get to do, not have to do. So check your heart to make sure you're not creating a religious to-do list, or you run the risk of becoming burned out and bitter.

WHAT DOES GROWTH LOOK LIKE?

Did you know Jesus called you a branch? That might sound weird, right? The context was this: Jesus tells this great story in John 15 where He talks about God the Father as a gardener, Jesus as a vine, and you and I as branches. Like many of the stories Jesus tells in the Bible, it's not to be taken literally but it's an analogy to describe how we are connected to Him. And He says when you remain connected to Jesus, and only when you do this, you will "bear fruit," or grow spiritually. So when Jesus says, "You are a branch," that means you've been grafted in by God's grace, and now you are a conduit of God's love. Isn't that incredible to think about?

Ask: What's the difference between showing up to check the box and showing up to grow?

Spiritual growth means to become more like Jesus and grow in character. Have you heard people in church talk about “sanctification?” That’s what we’re talking about here. Spiritual growth is evidence of our relationship with God, not something we force ourselves to do to win favor with Him. Jesus doesn’t ask for perfection, He asks for growth. Fruit on the vine of our life is proof of faith, even if it’s the smallest bud to start.

BARRIERS TO GROWTH

It’s natural to go through periods of spiritual growth and spiritual dryness. The key is to just stay aware and keep our eyes on Him in all seasons. And a withered spiritual life doesn’t happen overnight. It’s usually the result of a series of small choices to move away from God and His will for us, separating ourselves from the nourishing vine that Jesus is. Some of the most common barriers to growth are listed below. Think about which ones might apply most to you.

TIME

It may feel like you never have time to do all the things that you need or want to accomplish. We tend to take on way more than our schedules and energy allow, leaving ourselves running on fumes. When this happens, it’s all too easy for our relationship with God to become an afterthought as we give Him a few sleepy minutes before we crash at night. Maintaining any relationship is hard work, and this relationship is no different. As difficult as it can be to admit, you have time for what you value. Or, more accurately, you make time. You do have enough time to connect with God in a meaningful way, you just have to make it a priority. Look at your schedule and see where you can make changes to make it happen.

FEAR

Fear can be crippling and plays out in so many ways. You may be afraid that you’ll try this Jesus thing and won’t be good at it, that vulnerability will end in hurt, or that you’ll be burned in this relationship just like others before. We challenge you to give God a chance to prove you wrong. One of His main characteristics is love, and the Bible says that “perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18, ESV). If you feel reluctant to trust God and prioritize Him, talk to Him about it. He is more than capable of proving Himself and reassuring you. It may also help to talk with someone a little further down the road in their faith journey.

PRIDE

When people think of pride, they often think of someone who assumes they are better than everyone else. That can be true. But pride can take a less obvious form, like trusting in your own abilities, or the world's, more than God's. In order to grow spiritually, you have to fully grasp that you don't know it all or have everything under control. God's in charge of this life, not you. Showing vulnerability and asking God to teach and lead you isn't weakness, it's humility—the opposite of pride.

Ask: Which of these three things has been a barrier to growth for you?

KEYS TO GROWTH

Just starting out on your faith journey? Or maybe you've found yourself feeling distant from God? Here are some simple steps you can take to encourage spiritual growth.

1. STUDY GOD'S WORD

"Blessed is the man... [whose] delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night." (Psalm 1:1-2, ESV)

We can't stress this one enough: reading the Bible is the primary way to know God. It's a book full of His own words, unveiling His nature, character, and voice to each one of us. The more you know about God, the easier it becomes to recognize and be involved in what He's doing around you. Not only should you just read the Bible, but try memorizing some of it. Think about your favorite song or an ad that you see on TV over and over. After a few playbacks, you get it stuck in your head. That's because the repetition sears the image, sounds, or words into your brain, even if they aren't positive, helpful, or true messages. That's why it's important to meditate on and memorize the words of God. When your brain begins to default to words of truth and life, your thought patterns and actions start to change in really positive ways.

Ask: How has studying God's word helped you grow?

2. MAKE TIME TO PRAY

"Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving."
(Colossians 4:2, ESV)

Human relationships can't progress without communication, and it's no different with God. Prayer is a two-way street—it's just as important to listen to what God might be saying to you as it is to talk to Him. And if you're in the midst of a season where you're finding it difficult to talk to God or to see progress in your spiritual life, talk to Him about it. Be open, ask for help, and listen for Him to speak. When we begin to hear from God and gain insight into how and why He's working in our lives and our world, it changes our outlook and transforms our attitudes and actions. Look back at chapter three for specific help in this area.

Ask: How has making time to pray helped you grow?

3. FORM TRANSPARENT RELATIONSHIPS

"Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." (James 5:16a, ESV)

Don't try to walk through the Christian life alone. During Jesus' time on earth, He developed friendships with 12 men who spent years walking, talking, eating, and joking with Him. Among those 12, Jesus connected in a special way with Peter, James, and John. They were His "inner circle," the people He could trust and be the most transparent with. Think about building an inner circle for yourself where real talk is allowed and everything is on the table. Confess your struggles, ask for prayer, and encourage each other with stories of what God's doing in your lives.

Ask: How has forming transparent relationships helped you grow?

4. GET PLUGGED IN AND SERVE

"...remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" (Acts 20:35, ESV)

We're commanded to love others in the same way that we have been loved (1 John 4:19). Jesus shows us over and over again in the Bible what it means to love sacrificially. In John 13, He even washed the feet of His 12 disciples as an act of kindness. Following Jesus in service is a way of denying our wants and desires in the process of having our lives look more and more like His.

Each of us have been given a set of unique gifts and talents. Think about how you might use your distinct skills and abilities to serve others. Having trouble coming up with ideas? Ask someone who knows you well. You might be surprised to hear what they have to say. We're often strong in areas that we don't even realize. But the point is, we all have God-given strengths that we can use for God's glory and the good of others.

Ask: Do you serve now? If so, how has that experience helped you grow?

5. GENEROSITY

"Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." (2 Corinthians 9:7, ESV)

Generosity can come in the form of giving your time or your specific talents or skills, or in the letting go of things you treasure like possessions or money. But why is generosity such a big deal? It's both a response of gratitude and an opportunity for joy and growth in our lives. God doesn't have a generosity quota that you have to meet, He just wants your heart to be in the right place. *In the Old Testament, God required a tithe, and in the NT it's not required, but Jesus knew that where your money goes, your heart will go also. God ultimately wants your heart. He wants something for you. It's not a way of trying to win God's favor or impress others. Generosity is all about having an accurate understanding of God's kindness and responding naturally with gratitude.

Ask: How has generosity stretched your faith?

REFLECT

- What's standing in your way as you desire to grow in your faith?
- How do you find it easiest to connect with God? What's most difficult or unnatural for you?
- List a few practical steps you can take this week to jump-start your spiritual growth?

GO DEEPER

- *My Utmost for His Highest*, book by Oswald Chambers

CHAPTER 6: TIME TO GROW

You've reached the last chapter of START. Now what? We want to help you put a plan in place to continue growing in your faith. Just like a child has to mature to successfully eat solid food, you have to continue growing and taking in truth and nourishment from God's Word. As you continue down the road of spiritual maturity, you'll find that life with Jesus leads to living with more and more freedom, purpose, and meaning. The Bible calls this "abundant life." In John 10, Jesus says that He offers a full life, one where we can experience increasing amounts of joy, fulfillment, and nearness with God. It's what we were made for!

Ultimately, the goal is for you to know and love God wholeheartedly, and to become a disciple who makes other disciples. Before Jesus left the earth, He gave His followers instructions to spread His teaching to every part of the world. This is called The Great Commission, and it's still our assignment today. Jesus promises that He is with us, and gives us authority to go out, explain the good news to every nation, and to make new disciples (Matthew 28).

As you move from uncertainty, to belief, to disciple-making, self-assessment of your faith journey is important. Not as a religious exercise or to-do, but as a tool to help track progress and hold yourself accountable. Don't underestimate the power of integrating spiritual disciplines to provide space for you to grow closer to God and create change in your life. Take some time to review the key concepts we've talked about, and do an honest self-evaluation using the prompts below. Once you've answered the questions, think about who you can share this with. Find someone you trust who can weigh in and hold you accountable in taking positive steps towards spiritual growth.

VICTORY OVER SIN

- Am I continuing in the same sin over and over, or am I beginning to change?
- Do I experience conviction when I sin? How quickly do I confess and ask for forgiveness?
- What's my plan for moving forward with victory over sin patterns?

STUDY GOD'S WORD

- In the course of a week, how much time do I spend reading the Bible?

- Am I actively memorizing God's Word to renew my mind?

- What are some steps I can take to better understand and internalize the Word of God?

PRAYER

- In the course of a week, how many days do I spend time in prayer? For how long?

- What barriers do I continue to find myself running into when I try to pray?

- How can I have a more honest and vibrant prayer life?

TRANSPARENT RELATIONSHIPS

- In the course of a month, how often do I have transparent conversations with other believers?

- Who are the people in my inner circle? Who might I try to build a new or deeper relationship with?

- What holds me back from sharing my personal thoughts, hurts, and desires with others?

SERVICE

- Part of living life as a follower of Jesus learning from and imitating His example when it comes to loving and taking care of the people around you. God calls each of us to take action and play a part in his kingdom. If you're ready to plug in and start serving, go to tpcc.org connect for some great ways you can be involved in God's work at our church, in the community, and around the world.

- How much time do I spend in service to others?

- What is my attitude toward serving?

- Where or how might God be calling me to get plugged in and/or serve? What next steps can I take?

