



NEXT STEP

How to cultivate your relationship with God

THE NEXT STEP

Congratulations on deciding to become a follower of Jesus Christ. This is the most important decision of your life. Let me explain why. You see, you now have peace with God through Jesus who restores your relationship. You had given Jesus authority to be the leader and director of your life. You've been cleansed of all your sins, been given the Holy Spirit and belong to God's kingdom.

Following Jesus has radically changed your life.

You may not be completely sure what happens after you decide to follow Jesus. There are probably many questions running through your mind. This book will answer some of those questions and help you get on the right track in your new Christian life.

For me, I started attending a youth group in Chatswood. It was here that I saw people reading the Bible and praying. It opened my eyes to the possibility of a personal relationship with God.

It was here that I discovered that Christianity is more than being a good person. If I was to have a relationship with God, I would need to acknowledge that I hadn't lived with Him at the centre of my life. I also had to admit that only Jesus could forgive, reconcile and cleanse me so that I could approach God as my Heavenly Father.

So, one Saturday morning in 1986, shortly after waking up, I prayed for forgiveness and for Jesus to be the Lord of my life. I knew that things were different, but I had no idea of how this impacted my day to day life. So I stumbled along, learning and making mistakes in following Jesus.

I probably needed some guidance.

It's with this in mind that I hope these

pages help you move forward as a Christian.

Let me run through what you'll find:

- An explanation of your five Next Steps
- A summary of key Christian beliefs
- The entire Gospel of John, plus a reading plan to help you get started
- Additional resources to help you grow

The key to spiritual growth

Before we go any further, I need to be clear on what is the key to your spiritual growth.

The answer is God.

God is the one who called you into relationship with Himself. He is the one who sent Jesus to cleanse and forgive you. He gave you the Holy Spirit to bring about new life and He will complete what He has begun.

This is incredibly important, because you can embark on your spiritual journey as a personal development program where it all comes down to you. In this scenario, any failures or hiccups are more than setbacks. They can be soul destroying.

So let's be clear: God in His mercy has chosen you to be His child. He loves you and delights in you. He is completely committed to you and is directing your life towards the time when you will be in His presence forever.

If you get this, then you will want to please and serve Him. That's where the next steps become so rich: they are a response to what God is doing in your life. Otherwise, these steps become rules that judge your worth as a person. They will tyrannise and accuse you, instead of liberating and promoting joy.

STEP NO.1

READING GOD'S WORD

Some of you will hear this and think, "Great! Another textbook to study." If you think this way, then reading the Bible will be a chore. What I want to suggest is that you view differently. Rather than thinking of the Bible as a textbook, view the Bible as God's word *TO YOU*. Let me give an example.

Every year we would get a letter from my great Uncle. In it he shares about what is happening in the greater family, what he is passionate about and some specific issues for me. Through the medium of a letter I got to know my great Uncle better.

This is what we get in the Bible: it's God speaks to us about the history of His family (Israel), His passion and plans for the world and His people and how this impacts on me. God speaks to you to help you see your life in the bigger picture.

Most Australians have a copy of the Bible in their homes. Some have read sections, but very few would have read through it all. So let me give a brief rundown of what the Bible is about:

1) It is multiple books

The Bible is made up of 66 different documents. You'll find historical narratives, letters, poetry and biographies. There are also over 40 different authors who wrote at different times over a 2000 year period. For a long time they were kept as individual scrolls, but now have them bound together into one book: the Bible.

2) Telling the same story

From beginning to end, the Bible is about God's plan to put things right. Now what God is doing is often beyond our minds to comprehend. So God provides models in the Old Testament (people, kingdom, sacrifice, temple) to help us understand what's happening.

The key and hero of the story is Jesus Christ. He comes to stitch back together heaven and earth and provide us a place in the new creation He is establishing. In other words, the Bible is the story about Jesus and the salvation that He brings.

3) With two halves

The Bible is divided into the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is about God's relationship with the people Israel. He makes promises to them and we see how He keeps them. The New Testament

is about God's relationship with everyone who places their trust in Jesus. Here we discover God's promises to us in Jesus and the future we have when Christ returns.

How to read the Bible

Here's a simple method devised by Marshall Segal¹ that is really helpful.



What struck you as you read through the passage?

It could be something new or just a reminder of what you have forgotten. A new or fresh idea comes to the fore.



What questions did the passage raise?

Sometimes it's a word, an idea or the phrasing that seem odd or you don't

¹ <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/six-questions-to-ask-when-studying-the-bible-in-a-group>

understand. We find this frustrating, but it does open up an opportunity to learn.



What does this teach me about Jesus?

The whole Bible is about His rescue mission. So you're looking for models that Jesus completes (ie sacrifice), promises He fulfils or solutions to problems (ie Israel continues to do the wrong thing).



How does this impact on my life?

It may lead to a specific action, a change in the way I think or my priorities, or thanksgiving and worship for the great God that we serve.



Who can I share this with?

If God's word had a powerful effect on you then it will do the same with others. Why not share with someone else what you learnt?

Choosing a translation

If you go to buy a Bible you'll soon discover that there are a lot of options. Once you get through the range of versions, sizes and colours, you also need a Bible that you find easy to read. So let me explain how there worked at translating.

Imagine that you're the translator for the French Ambassador. After he has spoken, do you:

Say what they said word for word: "Want to get something to eat?" [Verbal equivalent]

Restructure what the words with a little freedom: "Would you like to get something to eat?" [Dynamic equivalent]

Paraphrase what they said: "Hey, it's dinner time. Want to grab a bite?" [Paraphrase]

Different translations take one of these three approaches. Here's what I recommend from each:

Verbal Equivalent- The English Standard Version (ESV) and New American Standard Bible (NASB) are best for this

Dynamic Equivalent- The New International Version (NIV) and the Good News Bible are best for this

Paraphrase- The Message is best for this

For me, I'd try before I buy. So I'd google one of the versions and read it online first. If I find that I'm not slowed down by the language, then I would go and purchase a copy.

STEP NO.2

PRAYER

In the first chapter I mentioned that a personal relationship with God was possible. This is because Jesus takes us into the presence of God. More than that, Jesus, being God's Son, invites us to approach God and call Him "Father". This is a privilege that should leave us feeling privileged and humbled.

To build a relationship requires that you get to know them. Here is where the Bible fits in. We learn about God so that we can understand how to love and worship Him. To go with this is our response, our expression of dependence upon our Heavenly Father. That's where prayer comes in. Prayer expresses our new relationship with God.

So far so good. Except it's not clear what you talk with God about. Do I discuss how happy I was with my sporting team winning? How about my frustrations about politics? Or maybe I can ask what I should wear today?

Now the Bible is clear that we can pray about anything, but if prayer reflects our relationship with God, we may wish to give it a little more thought.

So let me suggest a structure for you by providing an acronym: **FACTS**

Fatherly goodness

Ask

Confess

Thanksgiving

Seek the kingdom

Fatherly goodness

I start prayer recalling the privilege of approaching God in prayer, of His love and goodness towards me, for His Fatherly care seen in all of creation and for the joy of being adopted into God's family. There's lots of examples of God's goodness. Just choose a couple and praise Him.

Ask

We can bring before the throne of grace whatever is on our hearts. Jesus invites us to ask for all things in His name (John 14:13-14). So whatever is weighing on your heart or making you anxious, ask for God to change this.

Confess

We cannot hide what we do or think from God, and doing so doesn't help us. It is much better to acknowledge what we have or haven't done and seek God's mercy. It's also incredibly liberating and reminds us of how gracious and loving God is.

Thanksgiving

The Lord has given us many good gifts, both physical and spiritual. Take some time recalling these and thanking God for them.

Seek the kingdom

The Lord's prayer raises areas that matter to God. So add to your prayers issues that bring glory to God and for the salvation of many. Also consider the various ministries that you know of or take part in.

With this framework in place, I'd like to provide some tips that will help your prayer life.

1) Set aside time every day for prayer.

It's true with anyone. If you factor in time you maximise and enrich the relationship. So let's do the same with God. Now please

don't hear me saying "Block out 3-4 hours", or "The only time for God is in the morning". You need to work out when and where works for you.

2) Combine it with your Bible Reading

Your understanding of God changes how you view the world and shapes the way you pray. So I'd make time for both. Try setting aside 7 minutes, where you read the Bible for 3 minutes and pray for 4 minutes.

3) Be honest.

Jesus teaches against the idea of trying to impress God (Matthew 6:5-7). You don't need to speak in a certain tone with key words. What's important is that you share with your Heavenly Father what is on your heart.

3) Learn from others about prayer.

I use prayer cards. They keep me on track and praying for a variety of ministries and people. Some use a journal and look back to how God has answered their prayers. I've also read books about prayer.

It's worth hearing and trying different methods. So ask and try what people suggest

Prayer has a huge impact. God answer your prayers and you are left assured that God loves you.

STEP NO.3

CHURCH

So far we've focussed on our relationship with God. There are other relationships which we also want to foster. You see, God has placed us in His spiritual family. We have brothers and sisters throughout the world. Wherever we are, family (church) is nearby.

God made us for community.

There are many communities that we can belong to, but there is only one that will last into eternity: the church. Like your physical family, you don't get to choose who your brothers and sisters are. You love them as they come.

I wonder what you think of when you hear the term "church"? Do you think of a building('the church building') or a service

('going to church'), a denomination ("the Anglican church") or organized religion ("church vs state"). None of these match what the Bible means when it uses the term.

Church in the Bible means "gather". It refers to getting together. Like any gathering there is a focus, a reason we meet. For us, our focus is God. We come to praise Him, pray to Him and be transformed by His word. This can take place in a Sunday service or in a small group.

God made us to gather. We're meant to spend time together and care for each other. There is no such thing as a healthy, growing, lone ranger Christian. This is a person who hasn't understood what God is all about: gathering to people into His presence to worship. So let me encourage you to find a church where you can meeting with other Christians on a weekly basis.

How do I make the most of church?

Let me give some practical ideas.

Making time

Whether it's a Sunday service or Bible Study group, it shows a value for the meeting when you block it out in your diary. You make a statement, "This really matters!".

Welcoming

Be the person who goes and says "Hi" to someone new. You may find this scary, but they're probably terrified. Alternatively, say "Hi" to someone who you've seen around but never spoken to.

Singing

Forget about whether you nailed the note. Sing praises to the Lord. Show a joyful heart. Thankfulness and praise are more than perfect pitch.

Pray

If you can see that someone is stressed or going through a hard time, pray with them. If things have worked out well for someone,

then give thanks to God together. It doesn't have to be a long prayer. It may be "Thanks God for the amazing things you've done in _____ life. Amen"

Discuss God's Word

If something hit home from the Bible then share it with someone. If you were struck by a passage from God's word during the week open it with someone so they too can grow as a Christian.

Bring others to your meetings

I gather you think that meeting with other Christians is important, so why not invite others to come with you so that they can discover the new life found in Christ?

It brings me joy when I watch my daughters spending time together. I believe the same is true for God.

STEP NO. 4

SERVE

In the last chapter I shared how you are part of God's family known as the church and I encouraged you to join one. The next step is to contribute.

The reason to contribute is because we love our brothers and sisters in Christ and we want to show this in some practical form. Perhaps we'll offer a word of encouragement, pray for them, invite them over for dinner or help them move. These are all acts of service. Or let me put it another way, this is what ministry is all about: practical love stemming from our relationship with Christ.

Now when we hear the word "ministry" we again have a lot of preconceived ideas. It could be that you think of ministry as a formal role (what the minister does). It may

be a structured position (church warden, bible study leader) or always having a teaching component. If you look at the New Testament it becomes clear that everyone ministers in different ways. Let me show you what I mean.

Everyone ministers

In 1 Peter 2:9-10 we are all described as priests. That's because we are all meant to serve. The same is true in Ephesians 4:15, where the purpose of the "minister" is to equip God's people to serve.

This idea of everyone ministers is best seen in Philippians where we are all call to follow the model of Christ:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.

Philippians 2:3-5

So everyone ministers. That brings me to the second point.

In different ways

Romans 12:3-6, 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 and Ephesians 4:11-13 provide a list of various gifts that God has given us. These gifts are just a sample. They point to how we can all contribute. All three use the metaphor of the body. The idea is that we work in unison even though we're all different.

If you go through the lists you'll see the talents of teaching, hospitality, administration, evangelism, healing or mercy. There's nothing special about your gift. What is special is the same source: God. More importantly, every one of these gifts is needed. Everyone ministers in different ways.

So with this in mind let me give some quick thoughts.

1) Ministry is a lifestyle

Remember the passage from Philippians 2:1-5? The idea is that you value people so that you look for ways to serve them. There is no "On/Off" switch when it comes to ministry. This is what Jesus also says:

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."
John 13:34-35

Ministry is in our DNA.

2) Ministry is practical

I meet Christians who will agree with me about everything that I have said and never help anyone. They'll smile and be friendly, but then go back to doing what they want to focus on doing. Listen to what John has to say on this:

If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

1 John 3:17-18

3) Love + Gifts = Ministry

Often when you learn about people's circumstances compassion wells up. You think about how you could help them. You realise what you can and can't do as you reflect on your gift set. Then you decide on a course of action to help them.

Congratulations! You're in ministry.

Please notice in this example that I didn't focus on my primary gift. I considered what would help them. Even though my primary gift is teaching, I may recognise that what someone needs is a night off and so I offer to babysit. The situation determines how I help.

4) Ministry is best as a team

It may sound like YOU need to take on responsibility for EVERYONE. The bible says that we take on responsibility for each other. The best way to do this is by partnering together. It's what we set up team ministries.

Joining a ministry team allows you to learn better ways of serving. You can watch how someone else would take on a responsibility. You also develop a well-rounded approach as people introduce ideas you hadn't considered. Joining a team has benefits for you church community and for you.

Serving is about love. We've experienced the love of God and so we express this in how we love others in practical ways.

STEP NO.5 WORSHIP

So let's recap. Jesus has made it possible for us to have a relationship with God. The way we develop this relationship with through Bible Reading and prayer. God has placed us in a spiritual family: the church. So we commit to meeting regularly and actively serve others.

The final step is worship. Now you would think that I would cover this earlier when I spoke of loving God. The reason I left it until now is because we worship God in all that we do.

You were made to worship God. Listen to what Paul has to say:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

Romans 12:1

And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

2 Corinthians 5:15

In fact, the picture of heaven is about worship:

Whenever the living creatures give glory, honour and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever.

Revelation 4:9-10

Now this idea put one of my friends off. The idea of spending eternity on your knees bending up and down didn't sound so attractive. But this is a misunderstanding of what it means to worship God. Worship isn't what you have to do, it's what you want to do.

Let me try and explain worship by giving an analogy.

It's birthday time for a good friend. To show how much you love them, you decide to buy a gift. So what would you get? One guy brought a gift out of obligation He worked out what was a reasonable amount to spend (\$30) and bought an iTunes card. Another person wanted the gift to reflect their friendship. So they pondered what would bring their friend joy. The goal of the gift was to reflect gratitude and love.

Worship is like a gift where we offer to God our lives to serve Him. We consider what He would like us to do and then offer that to His glory. In other words, worship can be in anything, whether it's the big or small matters of life.

Worship is what you do:

On your own

With your family

At work or school

When waiting in traffic

As you make decisions about your life.

I should be clear that we don't worship God to earn brownie points. Nor is anything you offer God of any worth. The difference is that Jesus has forgiven us. It is only through Christ that anything we offer is acceptable. When you get this, you realise that it's from a heart filled with love for God that you ask, "Today Lord, how can I please you?"

You bring pleasure to God when you

- Love Him supremely
- Trust Him completely
- Obey Him wholeheartedly
- Praise Him continually
- Use your abilities

Worship starts with a desire to do God's will. It humbly hands your life over to His purposes.

So let's take work. Here we can worship God as we work with integrity, care for our colleagues, plan our time and share about how Jesus has changed your life. These are just examples of where you can plan to honour God by the way you think or act during the day.

Worship is pretty big. It starts with Jesus making it possible, it flows from my desire to love God back and it expressed in everyday life. Worship may sound daunting but it brings a great deal of contentment and purpose to our lives.

Final word

The good news is that God sent Jesus so that we would experience forgiveness and have our relationship with God restored.

So how can we cultivate this relationship?

- 1) Spend time in God's word
- 2) Come before Him in prayer
- 3) Meet weekly in church
- 4) Look for ways to serve
- 5) See your life as an opportunity to

worship

APPENDIX NO. 1

BIBLE READING PLAN

Reading	Done (✓)
John 1:1-18	
John 1:19-51	
John 2:1-25	
John 3:1-36	
John 4:1-38	
John 4:39-54	
John 5:1-47	
John 6:1-21	
John 6:22-71	
John 7:1-36	
John 7:37-8:11	
John 8:12-30	
John 8:31-59	
John 9:1-34	
John 9:35-10:21	

Reading	D o n e (✓)
John 10:22-42	
John 11:1-44	
John 11:45-12:19	
John 12:20-50	
John 13:1-38	
John 14:1-31	
John 15:1-27	
John 16:1-33	
John 17:1-26	
John 18:1-27	
John 18:28-19:16	
John 19:17-42	
John 20:1-23	
John 20:24-31	
John 21:1-25	

APPENDIX NO. 2

SUMMARY OF CHRISTIAN BELIEFS

We worship God as our Creator and our saviour. With Him is the origin and destiny of our lives.

We believe the Bible is God's inspired word for humanity. Its purpose is to reveal who He is and it is accurate, authoritative and applicable to our everyday lives.

We believe in the Tri-unity (Trinity), one God in three Persons, consisting of Father, Son Jesus, and Holy Spirit. He is holy, loving and relational. He desires that we would experience His love and enjoy a relationship with Him.

We believe that every person has rejected God (either actively or passively), separating us from God and placing us all under His judgement.

We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ as both God and man is the only One who can reconcile us to God. He lived a sinless and exemplary life, died on the cross in our place, to take the punishment we deserve for our rejection of God. He rose again to prove His victory over sin and empower us to live His way by the Holy Spirit. In Christ, we are cleansed of our sins (sanctified) and acquitted of our condemnation (justified).

We believe that in Christ we are part of a new creation born again by the Holy Spirit who enables us to turn from our sin and follow Christ. Our lives are now marked by praise, joy, peace, freedom, service, witness and love.

We believe that the church is fundamental to God's plan for our reconciliation. In the church we discover our identity, are shaped by God's word, express His love and give Him the praise that He deserves. The barriers of race, gender and

social standing are swept away as we embrace each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

We believe that Jesus is the judge of all the earth. He has promised to return and call all people to account. He will judge people's thoughts, intentions and actions and His judgements are fair. Those who have placed their trust in Jesus as their saviour have their names in the book of life and are welcomed into God's kingdom. Everyone who has rejected Jesus will answer for their actions and are condemned to being separated from God for eternity. The Bible refers to this as hell.

APPENDIX NO. 3

BOOKS TO HELP YOU GROW

Books to set up good habits and patterns

The Purpose Driven Life Rick Warren

Too busy not to pray Bill Hybels

The practice of godliness Jerry Bridges

Books that outline the Christian life

The ordinary hero Tim Chester

Follow Me David Platt

Books that provide the big picture

According to plan Greame Goldsworthy

God's big picture Vaughan Roberts

At the heart of the universe Peter Jensen

