Practical Christian Living: A Road Map to Spiritual Growth

How Can I Become a Christian?

John 3:1–16

The Heart of the Matter

God has made numerous promises throughout the Scriptures, but none is more significant than His offer of eternal salvation through His Son, Jesus. Motivated by His love for humankind, God desires to renew His relationship with us—a relationship that has been broken and marred by human sin and rebellion. So God chose to send His Son to earth. Jesus died on the cross for our sins, rising from the dead that we might live with Him for eternity. All that remains for each one of us is to accept His offer of salvation. Will you trust in Him?

Discovering the Way

1. Nicodemus, the Prestigious Teacher of the Jews (John 3:1–2)

We learn three truths about Nicodemus when he comes to visit Jesus.

2. Jesus, the Teacher of Nicodemus (John 3:3–16)

Jesus knows what Nicodemus needs—to be born again. So Jesus teaches Nicodemus what that means.

Starting Your Journey

The gospel message can be summarized in four brief statements. After hearing these statements, will you trust in Jesus for your salvation?

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How Can I Begin the Christian Life?

Colossians 2:6–10

The Heart of the Matter

Whether we're new to the Christian life or we've had a personal relationship with Jesus Christ for many years, it's easy to quickly lose our footing. We fall into sin, or we become distracted by temptation. We forget the joy and gratitude we felt when we first accepted God's free gift. We lose sight of heaven in our pursuit of the earth. To get back on track, we need to return to the basics of the Christian life—to understand and embrace what it takes to live God's way.

Discovering the Way

1. Back to the Basics

When our Christian faith gets buried under the mundane of life and the habit of tradition, it's time to return to the essence of our faith—the saving work of Jesus on the cross.

2. The Christian Life (Colossians 2:6–10)

The Christian life is a life of walking by faith, growing up in Christ, cultivating an attitude of gratitude, resisting those who bind, and focusing fully on Christ.

Starting Your Journey

Reading God's Word, staying faithful in prayer, and being grateful for God's blessings will help us keep the basics of the Christian life at the forefront of our minds.

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Ten Reasons to Give God Praise

Ephesians 1:3–14

The Heart of the Matter

Complaints and grumbling come so much more easily to us than praise and thanksgiving—this in spite of the fact that God has lavished us with His goodness and mercy. His ultimate act of love is His plan to save us from our sins. God has consistently acted on our behalf to bring us to Himself, and ultimately, to "seal" us—to make our salvation sure. In a world that seeks to undermine our confidence in the unseen, God assures those who believe in His Son that they will be forgiven and saved to spend eternal life with Him. For this, He deserves our praise.

Discovering the Way

1. A Doxology of Praise

This passage of praise is structured around the triune God—Father, Son, and Spirit.

2. Ten Reasons to Praise God (Ephesians 1:3–14)

From choosing to redeeming, from forgiving to sealing, God has done so much for His people. Our response? Praise Him.

Starting Your Journey

The reasons we praise God all begin with Him, so He gets all the glory. And since the reasons all center on Christ, they are all dependent on His death.

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The Heart of the Matter

"You can prove anything you want from the Bible!" Have you ever heard someone say that? Probably. For the most part, it's true! If a person really wants to find biblical justification for some belief or action—and if he or she is willing to quote half-verses, rip passages out of context, and twist the meaning of words—then that person can "prove" just about anything from the Bible. We need to develop good habits and cultivate correct methods of handling the Word of God so that we can avoid engaging in or falling victim to spiritual abuse. We'll also become better students, interpreters, and appliers of Scripture.

Discovering the Way

1. The Problem: Mishandling the Bible

Not everyone who handles Scripture handles it accurately.

2. Our Need: Maintaining the Meaning (Matthew 9:10–13; 12:1–8; 15:1–14; 16:5–12)

Jesus faced off against those who mishandled Scripture in His day. The same will be true for us. We must keep in mind the goal of Bible study and teaching—to maintain the meaning!

3. An Example: Ezra and the Scroll (Nehemiah 8:1–9)

Ezra's teaching of the rediscovered Law is one of the clearest illustrations of the Scripture being handled correctly, accurately, and with needed sensitivity.

Starting Your Journey

As we seek to handle Scripture accurately, there are five principles to remember.

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Prayer: Calling Out

Acts 6:1–4

The Heart of the Matter

Can you name any command more often disobeyed than "Pray without ceasing"? Aside from a quick prayer before meals, can you honestly say that you are a person who consistently cultivates the discipline of prayer? If your answer is yes, that's wonderful! But you are the exception rather than the rule! Most of Christ's followers would openly confess that they fail here more often than in any other area of the Christian life. Yet calling out to God is a necessary part of being like Christ.

Discovering the Way

1. Understanding What Prayer Is . . . and Isn't (1 Timothy 2:1–2)

Prayer is simply conversing with God. As a vital expression of trust, prayer involves laboring together with God and emerges from an intimate devotion and commitment to Him.

2. Prayer Practiced as a Priority (Acts 6:1–4)

Prayer should not be our last resort but our first priority. Especially in an age when anxiety, stress, and worry eat at our souls, prayer is the great relief (Philippians 4:6–7).

Starting Your Journey

As we engage in the discipline of prayer, we need to keep in mind four promises and four perils.

- Four uncommon promises:

- Four common perils:

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Shedding Light on Our Dark Side

Selected Scriptures

The Heart of the Matter

When we accepted the forgiveness Christ bought for us on the cross, His blood washed away the penalty for our sins . . . but not our ability to sin. Yet with the new life in Christ given to us as a free gift and with the Holy Spirit working to bear fruit in our lives, we have something we did not have before our salvation—the ability to resist temptation and refuse to sin. Understanding how sin affects us and what can be done when we sin will help us get a handle on living the Christian life. Unless and until we shed light on our dark side, we will be confused and unable to walk in victory over sin.

Discovering the Way

1. Some Clarifying Remarks about the Christian and Sin

First, becoming a Christian is not synonymous with becoming a model of perfection. Second, remaining sinners by nature means we can become sinners in practice. Third, living above the practice of sin is not automatic.

2. Key Questions That Deserve an Answer

The issue of the Christian's sin nature brings up five important questions: 1.) What happens when Christians sin? 2.) Is it possible for Christians to be enslaved to sin? 3.) Does sin have power over Christians? 4.) How can Christians recover and walk in victory? 5.) Are there some techniques that will help?

Starting Your Journey

At least four practical techniques will help achieve and maintain a consistent walk with Christ.

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Is the Spirit's Filling That Big a Deal?

Selected Scriptures

The Heart of the Matter

There's a lot of confusion within the Christian family about what it means to be "filled with the Spirit." Fortunately, God's Word can guide us as we seek to answer these questions. We know that the Spirit indwells every believer when he or she accepts God's free gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. We also know that God commands us to be filled with the Spirit and to yield to His control—Scripture often illustrates the effects that the Holy Spirit has on believers' lives. And as we begin to study what traditionally has been a confusing and divisive issue among Christians, may we be careful to treat others with love and grace.

Discovering the Way

1. The Key to the Christian Life (1 Corinthians 6:19–20)

When we are saved, we yield control of our lives to Christ. He has bought us with a price, and as a result, He sends the Holy Spirit to those who believe.

2. The Fuel for the Christian Life (Ephesians 5:18)

Let's look at four key principles as we seek to understand what it means to be filled by the Spirit and four results of being filled by the Spirit.

Starting Your Journey

As we seek to live lives filled with the Spirit, we need to remember three points: First, *abnormal experiences are not necessary to Christian maturity*; second, *the fullness of the Spirit is all of ours to enjoy*; and third, *we should seek to enjoy the vast common ground among believers.*

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Jesus: He Is Lord

Ephesians 3:14–4:32

The Heart of the Matter

When we study the life of Jesus, we often consider the mystery of His incarnation, His miraculous birth from a virgin, His jaw-dropping miracles, the cruelty of His crucifixion, and the hope of His resurrection. His position as Lord over all is one truth that sometimes gets overlooked. Because He is Head over all the church and has first place in everything, it stands to reason that nothing falls outside the scope of His rule—including, of course, every aspect of our lives. When we understand His lordship over everything, we see our role as Christians much more clearly. He has called us to surrender our lives completely to Him.

Discovering the Way

1. Jesus: Lord of All "Externals"

Jesus is Lord over everything that goes on outside of us, including relationships, work, circumstances, and the body.

2. Jesus: Lord of All "Internals"

Jesus's lordship extends even to the unseen places in all our lives, including the mind, the emotions, and the will.

Starting Your Journey

Each of us should examine our lives and surrender every area of our lives to the service of Jesus Christ.

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Discovering Your Part in Reaching the Lost

Acts 8:25–40

The Heart of the Matter

Ever tried to drink water from a fire hydrant? You probably wouldn't have much success. Fire hydrants release too much water for any one person to drink at one time. Too often our attitude toward spreading the gospel is the same: it's just *too much*. We feel there is too much to do—too many people to reach. However, we should be encouraged that sharing the truth about who Jesus is and what He has done for us can happen one person at a time. Jesus has given each one of us a significant part in reaching others with His message of forgiveness and grace (Matthew 28:19–20).

Discovering the Way

1. Persecution Leads to Proclamation (Acts 7:59–8:6)

The proclamation of the gospel in the early church began to spread beyond Jerusalem only as the Christians there were persecuted.

2. Six Keys to Reaching the Lost (Acts 8:25–40)

Six attitudes characterize those who reach the lost for Christ: sensitivity, availability, initiative, tact, precision, and decisiveness.

Starting Your Journey

As you apply these six principles, commit yourself to reaching one lost person for Christ this year.

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The Heart of the Matter

As we mature in our Christian faith, one of the most significant realizations we will reach is a healthy understanding of and appreciation for the church. Most of us go through great difficulty as we come to this conclusion. During our spiritual "growing-up years," the church usually suffers the brunt of our criticism and the bulk of our complaints. We go through periods of ignoring and resenting the church and then travel to the other extreme of virtually worshiping the church. Therefore, we need to come to terms with the biblical role of the church and its God-given place in our lives.

Discovering the Way

1. People's Comments about the Church

People bring a wide variety of perspectives on the church, which tend to revolve around three ideas: the identity of the church, criticism of the church, and their expectations of the church.

2. Christ's Statement on the Church (Matthew 16:18)

When Jesus said, "I will build My church," He made it clear that the project is His, that the church belongs to Him, and that the church will survive regardless.

3. Paul's Commitment to the Church (Romans 12:4–13; 1 Corinthians 12:24–26; 2 Corinthians 8:1–7; Galatians 5:13–14)

Paul reminds us that the church should be a place to exercise healthy relationships; a place of unity, compassion, and giving; and a place for liberty, love, and serving.

Starting Your Journey

There are at least eight expectations for a thriving member of any local church.

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