



MAPPING OUT TOUGH QUESTIONS OF FAITH
FOR NEW FOLLOWERS OF JESUS

A TRAIL GUIDE TO SUCCESSFULLY FOLLOWING JESUS
KENT WAGNER

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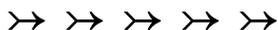
Dedication:

For my dad, Doug Wagner: for teaching me how to love relentlessly, find joy in bringing laughter, and showing me it's never too late to find your way back home to God!

The Mission:

Helping people find their way back home to God.

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HOW DO I USE THIS BOOK?

The Introduction

Good gravy!

If you are reading this book, you must have made a step towards God that is about to revolutionize your life! I can't tell you how thrilled I am to get to be a guide with you through this journey.

Once as I was leading a young man to Christ I told him that following Christ is like being on a roller coaster. He said, "Kent, I want to get on that coaster and take the ride of my life." If you don't know it, by taking your first steps towards Christ you are getting on the biggest roller coaster of your life. God is going to take you on some incredible highs and walk with you through your lowest of lows. Through it all, He is going to provide for you in ways you can't even fathom. It is a powerful thing to know the living God and walk with Him!

Before you get too far into this book, I thought it would be helpful to just share a little bit about how this book came about and how to get the most out of it:

Recently I was on a retreat in the Flat Top Mountains in Colorado with my family. It is beautiful up there. The air is

thin and crisp. It was springtime in the mountains the hills and valleys were alive with a symphony of colors - green grasses mixed with yellow and purple wild flowers and topped with white Aspens. The place was magical.

On this particular day, my family allowed me to go off and hike through the woods by myself. No plan, no map - nothing but a backpack, lunch, and my Bible. As I was picking my path up the mountain, I had to push my way through thick over-grown brambles. The trail cleared a bit only to reveal a grove of Aspen trees that had been infected with some kind of disease. Trees fallen like wounded revolutionary soldiers on a battlefield lay strewn in every direction. I tromped over the fallen trees, grudgingly making my way ever higher into the wilderness. As I climbed, my eye became ever more aware of a pattern that was emerging. Everywhere I went there were these trails that a deer or elk had created. They were like super highways through the thick overgrown wooly mammoth of a mountain I was climbing over. Quickly I learned that if I wanted to find any kind of movement through the overgrowth, I needed to follow the trail that had already been tread.

I had stopped for a moment; my muscles straining for some reprieve. And that's when I heard it. It was there in the overgrowth, bent over from dehydration, with my breath surging like a bellows from the thin air. I heard the still, small voice of God say, "Kent, you fight so hard to try and gain ground in life - stop pushing and instead, follow the trails I put in front of you. Learn to pick up their pattern and follow me." Now, I need to tell you, it wasn't

a voice per se, but more something God placed inside of my head that day. The rest of the day I could think of nothing else but following Jesus and the path He cuts.

This book is an attempt to try and help uncover at least the first few parts of that path for you. To help you learn to look for the path that God is cutting and push past some of the struggles many new Christians have. It is my sincere prayer that it will become a helpful companion on your journey.

I have designed this book to read a little differently than other books you might read. In a normal book you read from chapter to chapter with no breaks in between. In this book, I have intentionally created different trails (chapters in a normal book) for you to hike spiritually. Some are longer than others, but each is designed for you to take time to be reflective upon the material you have read. You can take the trails in the order they are presented here, or you can go from idea to idea, finding your way through the book in whatever way interests you most.

The main idea is that with each trail, you will reach the top and intentionally slow down to take in the view - in other words, don't rush past the idea or concept. I have included reflection sections at the end of each trail to help you take time to digest the material.

My intention is that each day (or even broken up into several days if you like) you would take one of the trails,

read it, reflect on it, and think about the content through the course of your day. Ask yourself how God wants to use the particular idea or concept to impact your world. My hope is that you could set aside 5-15 minutes each day to devote yourself to growing in your relationship with God. In Christian literature, this type of book is called a "Devotional."

This means that how ever much you put into this book (time, thoughtfulness, etc.), will determine how much you get out of it. Reading this book only to check an item off your to-do will produce very little in the way of actual life change. On the other hand, taking the challenge to really reflect and think about each trail - to write down your thoughts and interact with the content, will potentially capture some of the most critical concepts and motivators for change you will ever encounter.

This book is a launching pad of sorts for your faith. A launching pad to help you begin a lifelong journey of knowing the depth, height, width, and breadth of God's love. My prayer for you is that this will get you started in your journey of knowing God and coming back home to Him!

I have tried my best to answer some common questions people have when they are taking steps back home to God and to give you some insight into how to follow Christ. Much of the content is owed to years of listening, reading, and gleaning from other Christ Followers, and I am forever in the debt of those who have gone before me in helping parse out what it means to

follow Jesus. It is my hope that this synthesis will help you start out light years ahead of where I started. Think of this book as me super charging the roller coaster for you!

As a final note, I have tried to do my best to tear apart Christian language (words Christians often use with the assumption everyone understands them) and give you a basic sense of what the ideas of these words mean without delving too deeply into their specific content and attributes. I would really encourage you to use any curiosity you have about a specific idea to lead you to study the concept in deeper ways or ask good questions of solid Christ Followers to find the answers (again, follow the trail).

My prayer is that as you let finding your way back home to God become the passion of your life, you will see how you are a part of something special, big and monumental. I am praying you will begin to see how you fit into God's plan to fix the world from the inside out and that you will join Him in that effort.

Follow Him, He will lead you where you never imagined you'd go!

-Kent Wagner

TRAIL 1: DOES GOD REALLY CARE ABOUT ME?

Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

Jeremiah 1:5 (NIV)

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart"

"What just happened?"

You've probably asked that question before. Maybe it was after being shook up in a terrible wreck. Sitting in your car, dazed - wondering what hit you and how you didn't see it coming. Or maybe you found yourself asking, "What just happened?" after your wife just dropped the bomb on you that she was pregnant, again...for the fourth time... (so maybe that happened to me, who's counting?) Or what about the time your boss plopped down in his seat at the conference table, took a slow drink of his coffee, and in one single breath announced, "The company is closing. We will have work for you through the end of the month, but after that you need to make sure you've secured other options." You sat there stunned as he picked up his stuff and walked out of the room with

a matter of fact turn and retreated. You sat there, drowning in the words, "What...just...happened?"

We've all been there, in the, "What just happened?" moments of life. Maybe for you, you just experienced another, "What just happened?" moment - one that still has you bouncing around inside your head. My guess is it might have happened after you listened to a sermon or were invited to some event at a church. Maybe you heard a presentation of the good news that God loves you and He wants to have a relationship with you through His Son, Jesus. You heard the old story that has been passed down through the centuries: through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, God wiped clean your slate and has chosen to not hold your sin (the bad stuff we've done) against you. You heard the message and made a decision, a conscious decision, for the first time to say, "Yes, I want a relationship with God. I want my slate wiped clean."

And now you are sitting there wondering, "What just happened?" or "what did I do?".

I don't know how it happened for you. Maybe you prayed a prayer, came forward at a church service, or had an enlightening conversation with someone who is already following Jesus. In that moment, God came alive to you in a way you had never known or experienced - and for someone who has been far from God, that can be a little unsettling, a little unnerving. I remember wondering if what I was experiencing was real.

Can I tell you something? What you experienced was real.

Didn't it feel as though what happened to you was ordained - meant to be? That in an instant God came to life for you?

You need to know that you just experienced something extraordinary. It is hard to explain to someone who has never experienced it. I once heard Francis Chan (a well known author and pastor) say that trying to explain that moment to someone who has never experienced that kind of transformation is like trying to explain to someone who has been blind all their life what it is like to open your eyes and see.

How do moments like that come about? How do we go from one minute not knowing God, to the next feeling Him calling us to respond to Him?

If you will allow me, I would like to propose that "what just happened" did not begin at the moment you made the decision to walk forward, raise your hand, be baptized, or any other action. The "what just happened" moment didn't even start when you decided to go to church or the event at which you woke up to God. The moment didn't find its genesis in the conversation you had earlier this week or even in the situations in your life that got you thinking about "going back to church."

No, God works on a much deeper level than that. The moment where you began to find your way back home to God started years ago. It may have even started decades ago. God moving and working, orchestrating people and events in your life all to bring you into contact with this exact moment in time so that He could speak specifically into your life. He did all of this to speak into your life at the exact right moment when you were most ready for it. This moment with God is not a mistake, it is not coincidence - you are experiencing the providence (divine guidance) of God!

What just happened was a divine appointment of epic proportions! If you take the time to think about it, the idea that God has been pursuing you for years through events and other people has huge implications. It means that He has been looking for you, waiting for you, desiring for you to come back home. It means there are others out there that He feels the same about and now you get to be one of His ambassadors of divine appointment!

“What just happened?”

God just became real. The secret, however, was that He always was real, and now you know it!

You should really throw a party or something.

REFLECT ON IT:

☆ *Before going any further, take a moment and think about the past few years, months, and weeks. As you look back, where can you see God working to bring you to this point?*

☆ *Write down some key people or events that have directly influenced you and brought you to this point.*

☆ *What do the two Bible verses from Jeremiah, under the title of this chapter, tell you about how much forethought God has put into trying to help you find your way back home to Him?*

☆ *Spend some time talking with God (I know if you've never really prayed before, this may feel weird, but talking to God is not difficult. There is no special formula, it's just an opportunity for you to tell God what's going on in your life and invite Him to direct the next steps of the journey). For some people, writing out their prayers really helps - like a diary entry (we call it a journal for spiritual things like this). Use the space below to journal your prayers and thoughts.*

TRAIL 2: HOW IS CHRISTIANITY DIFFERENT FROM EVERY OTHER RELIGION?

Romans 3:21-26 (NLT)

"21 But now God has shown us a way to be made right with him without keeping the requirements of the law, as was promised in the writings of Moses and the prophets long ago. 22 We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are.

23 For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. 24 Yet God, with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins. 25 For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood. This sacrifice shows that God was being fair when he held back and did not punish those who sinned in times past, 26 for he was looking ahead and including them in what he would do in this present time. God did this to demonstrate his righteousness, for he himself is fair and just, and he declares sinners to be right in his sight when they believe in Jesus."

I have a confession, I have made some terrible mistakes in my life. Worse yet, I have made some terrible choices. Can I get real with you for a minute?

I'm a pastor, and even though I know it's not okay, I have said really hurtful things to my wife - things I regret. Not only that, I have lied to those I care about to avoid the negative consequences of my actions. Honestly, I have taken advantage of people. I have gossiped behind friends' backs. As much as I wish I could sit here and write to you that I am a person who has it all together, the reality is, I'm pretty messed up. It is difficult to admit that, even harder to write it on this page, it's true, I'm messed up.

Can I get a little personal with you? Can I ask you a few questions?

How about you - do you have it together, or are you messed up as well? What if I asked the people in your life about the bad (sinful) things you've done, and they knew they had permission to tell it like they were opening up to Barbara Walters or Oprah, what would I find?

I have a sneaky suspicion about the way we Americans perceive ourselves. My suspicion is that most of us think about ourselves in terms of being a "good person." Not so bad... right? I mean, if we are grading on a scale¹ (you remember the "scale" from school, right?), then you are not doing so bad compared to everyone else. Every single day we are evaluating the world around us to see

¹ *The Scale is a grading system where a teacher inputs your grade into a spreadsheet along with everyone else's grade. The teacher then compares everyone's grades to the others and assigns scores by where your grade fell in comparison to the rest of the class.*

how we measure up to it, determining if we are a good person or bad person by the comparisons we make.

For most of us, we end up looking pretty good. "I'm not a murderer, rapist, thief, etc. I almost look like a saint compared to the crazy people I hear about on the news." Does this sound make sense? The idea is that my bad is not nearly as bad as other people's bad. On the reverse, my good is better than other people's good. Since those two things are true, I must be a good person.

There is a problem with this way of thinking. See, what if I told you, there is no scale? What if I told you there is not some big chart in the sky with murderers on one side and Mother Teresa on the other; each and every one of us plotted out somewhere in between? What if I told you that, for God, this is a pass or fail test - either/or? In God's economy, you are either good or you are not.

I'm going to present a logical progression that will help build towards why God HAS to view us as either good or bad, but it's going to take a few curves - so I'd advise hanging on:

God has a major dilemma on His hands when it comes to humanity. You see, the Bible tells us that God is Love. Actually, God is so much the epitome of "love", that the concept itself is defined by His very character and nature (if you want to know what love is, you study who God is). The dilemma for God comes from the very fact that God is Love.

It works like this:

- Because God is love, He cares about you deeply.
- God also has that same intense level of care for every single person in all of time and history - from Moses to Mussolini (Good and bad, God has loved every single person).
- God's love for humanity requires that God must be just (He must hold people accountable for their actions).

The need for God's "justice" is a little complicated to work out. Let me give an example to shed some light on it using a fictitious event:

Let's assume that God loves both my wife and I the same - that's reasonable since we know that God is Love, right? Now imagine that you were standing around the corner when you heard me say something incredibly hurtful and abusive to my wife - like the kind of thing that would make you want to run around the corner and drop kick me in the face. Ok, you've got the scene. Let me ask you a question:

What should God's response be to me?

He loves me, right?

Does my saying something hurtful and abusive deserve discipline or punishment?

Depending on your view of God, you may say "yes" or "no." You may be leaning towards "yes," seeing as how I deserved a drop kick to the face.

Let me ask you a different question. What about the bad things you've done? Do they deserve punishment or discipline? What about being sent to hell? That's what the Bible says will happen.

See, I think most of us are banking on the fact that God will not hold us accountable for these situations, because at the end of the day God loves us. Not only that, but we are "good people", right? We may not be Mother Teresa, but neither are we murderers - all of us slip at some point. If God is really love, wouldn't He overlook my little offenses, and even some of my big ones in order to still love me? Wouldn't how good I am be enough to overcome the stuff I've done? A loving God can't send someone to hell, can He?

To answer those questions, let me ask a series of questions from a different perspective. Use the same imaginary event you witnessed of me being a complete and miserable wretch toward my wife.

Imagine you are my wife Jenni now. What if you had just gone through a terrible incident where your husband was verbally abusive towards you. How would you want God to respond in that event? Would you want him to just let the perpetrator off the hook? Would that feel like love towards you? Imagine God saying to Jenni, "I know

Kent was a real jerk to you. He had no right saying what he said. But I love him and I just don't think it would be right for me to punish him or discipline him, because he might confuse my discipline with me not loving him." How do you think Jenni would react? Do you think she would feel loved by God? What about her value? What about love for her and caring for her?

See, God is stuck between a rock and a hard place, he cannot withhold discipline or even punishment from me because ultimately by not upholding justice, He would be acting unlovingly toward my wife. In order to show love for her, He MUST hold me accountable for my actions. His love dictates His justice.

God's love requires that God be just (that He would hold people accountable for the wrongs they do in this life - both big and small).

Ultimately, this means that my sin (and yours) and all our wrongdoing in this world cannot be undone by how much good we have done. Did you hear that? You cannot do enough good things to outweigh the bad things you've done. God simply cannot "overlook" your sin (being unloving towards other people or God) just because you've done a bunch of good or worthwhile things. He cannot "overlook" it, because if God overlooks the hurtful things you've done, what He is ultimately saying is that the people we have hurt or wronged... don't... matter.

Some of you understand this, you grew up with a parent who claimed to love you, but they continued to let a stepparent or actual parent abuse you. You understand the worst possible way that if you claim to love someone, then it means that you MUST hold abusers, offenders, and wrongdoers accountable.

You can see how, when it comes to humanity, this puts God in a quandary, a dilemma... He loves you, but He also loves the ones you and me have hurt. There must be a just consequence for each and every wrong we have committed. In Romans 6:23, Paul the apostle says that "the wages of sin are death". In other words, the consequence (or our payment) for hurting those whom God loves, and breaking His commandments of love, is death. Not just physical death, but an eternal death, separate from God - a literal hell. What a predicament for a God, to love so deeply, but have His character and that very love dictate and necessitate the act of justice that requires a separation from those He loves - to send them to hell. What is God to do?

This is where Christianity differs from every single other religion. Other religious teaching, has at its core, one simple idea - in order to get to God, you must walk a metaphorical tightrope of good deeds (doing good stuff for others) your entire life. Hopefully you will never mess up and speak to someone out of anger, or gossip behind someone's back. Hopefully you never steal, cheat or lie. In the end, if you have done enough good deeds and been able to balance on the rope long enough that you will have made it to God (because this is such an

impossible task, some religions even give you a bunch of tries at the tightrope - we call it reincarnation).

Christianity is different.

In Christianity we acknowledge the tightrope, but we also acknowledge that NO ONE is able to walk it - you are not equipped. Christianity teaches, in fact, you will fall off if you try, for some of us, multiple times a day (when was the last time you yelled at your kids or gave someone the finger in traffic?). Instead, the God of Christianity, who is loving AND just, did something extraordinary, He chose to walk the tightrope for you. [Don't miss that last sentence - take a second to reread it.] God, knowing you couldn't balance your way to Him, chose to walk the rope for you - He did this in the incarnate (which simply means "God in the flesh") historical person of Jesus the Christ (means "God King"). This is huge - God took on the form of a man (see Philippians 2:5-11²), lived a completely perfect life - He never once sinned though He was tempted in every way that we are tempted (Hebrews 4:15³) and as a

² *Philippians 2:5-11 (NLT)* "You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. 6 Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. 7 Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, 8 he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross. 9 Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

³ *Hebrews 4:15 (NIV)* "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin."

final act of true love, He died on a cross⁴ - His death in the place of our death sentence - our wages for sin.

What you may not know (I know I didn't for years), is that God had already set up a system for His Jewish people to have their sins forgiven. They would take a spotless animal like a lamb (it had to meet quite a strict set of criteria), they would kill that animal as a sacrifice and it would take the place of the life of the person who sacrificed it. This whole process is a little gruesome, I know. But, there was a good reason for the process. You see, God said the life of a thing was in its blood and so, blood must be shed in order to make atonement (bring back into relationship with God) for the sin an individual committed [Leviticus 17:11]. The gift of God was to allow the Israelites the ability to substitute an animal's blood for their blood. The problem with this system is the sacrifice was not an apples for apples equivalent. The sacrifice was not human for human - and so it couldn't last, it could not cover all sin for all time. This is why God, through Jesus, sacrificed Himself - his perfect sinless blood for our sin-stained, messed-up blood. He walked the tightrope to you, instead of making you walk it to Him.

This is the most powerful idea you will ever encounter. That God, loved you so much, that He gave His only son for YOU (John 3:16). This is God's solution to His dilemma, in this solution, he can both be "fair" and "just" (see Romans 3:26) and still the one who brings us

⁴ Crucifixion was a Roman form of execution, very gruesome. Hands and feet are nailed to cross pieces of wood and the victim ends up dying from suffocation not being able to lift their body up to breathe as they hang by their hands.

back into relationship with Him (justify)! He is able to deal with our sinfulness by taking it upon Himself, He is able to be loving to the one who committed the sin by forgiving them and paying for their sin, while at the same time say to the one who has been hurt and wronged that those wrongs have been paid for. He walked the tightrope for us!

What an amazing gift God has given us through Jesus! It is no wonder since the beginning Christians have called this, the "Good News!"

REFLECT ON IT:

☆ Looking back at your life, what are ways you have really messed up? Hurt people? Been indifferent, or even purposefully been rebellious? (Hint: think of the stuff you'd rather forget)

☆ Write down some of the thoughts you have after learning what it means that Christ would sacrifice (allow His blood to be poured out in place of yours) Himself for you in such a way?

☆ Who are some people in your life that need to hear this message that God truly loves them? Write down their names and start asking God for an opportunity to share with them the "Good News!" (feel free to even copy this chapter and give it to them if you think it would help):

TRAIL 3: ARE THERE ANY NEXT STEPS I NEED TO TAKE?

Repentance, Baptism (Joining with the Resurrection), and the Holy Spirit

Acts 2:37-38 (NLT)

37 Peter's words pierced their hearts, and they said to him and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?"

38 Peter replied, "Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2:42

"42 All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer."

Have you ever been to a concert? Everyone's standing up cheering in unison. All of them shouting the band's name in a sea of cell phones lighting the dark expanse? The ocean of concert goers only want one thing, for the band to come back out one more time and perform one last song. If they don't hear that one song - the song that is "the" song then the night will be left incomplete. Empty, if you will.

I've been a preacher for a long time, and I need to tell you a sad reality. I've never had anyone ask for an encore.

Ha, actually, people usually want me to preach shorter sermons - I don't know what that says about my preaching - but I'm choosing not to go there :). There is one thing that I think a lot of people do want to know or hear about, and maybe you're wondering it yourself. It's the question the people asked Peter (one of Jesus' 12 disciples) after his sermon in verse Acts 2:37. They asked him, "what should we do?". In essence, they are wanting to know what their next step was supposed to be.

Maybe you are wondering the same thing: "What is my next step?", "what should I do?".

Peter gave his audience three things that they needed to do as their next steps and a fourth one grew out as a natural extension of these three. Let me give you the three next steps Peter talked about and then we will delve into each of them individually. Peter said the people needed to: repent of their sins and turn to God, be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and they then will receive the Holy Spirit. The fourth thing these new followers of Jesus did was to meet in smaller groups with other followers of Jesus to have meaningful relationships that changed their lives.

These four next steps have been a part of what it means to follow Jesus ever since that day over 2,000 years ago.

The big question is, what do they mean, and why do we do them?

Let's take them as they come:

Repentance:

What is it? At its core, repentance is the idea of changing sides. We already learned that we all sin or do wrong - we've essentially been on a team that is all about us and playing the game as if we are the only ones that matter. Repentance is us looking at our team and realizing that we are on the losing side (we are ultimately against God and His justice - see previous chapter) and deciding to jump over to the winning team's side - God's team. It is a declaration of who is the leader in your life (this is why I often use the term, Christ Follower instead of Christian - I have made a conscious choice in my life to follow Christ instead of my own personal leadership). This is huge. We all need to repent of our sinfulness, chose God's righteousness, surrender our will and our ways to Him and invite Him to lead in our life.

REFLECT ON IT:

☆ *Have you repented? What would it look like for you to do this? What are the areas of your life that you could surrender⁵ to God's leadership? Why not do this now? Take some time to pray to God and repent - join His team.*

⁵ *The idea of Surrender is that we would leave nothing off the table that God is not able to speak into. Our money, our friendships, the way we talk, our sexuality, our livelihood, etc. Surrender is what it sounds like it is - we give up. We give up and choose God's way over our own thinking - even if, at the time, we don't understand completely why He said something (if you don't understand, ask more mature followers of Christ to help you understand)*

Baptism:

In our culture, the idea of Baptism holds a lot of different meaning to a lot of different people. So, to simplify, we are going to go back to the actual way a person in Peter's time would have understood this concept. The word baptism literally meant for someone to go completely under water - their head and all (full immersion). In Christian baptism, a person is immersed under water for the forgiveness of sins. As the scripture describes it, baptism is the point where a believer in Jesus identifies with Christ's death, burial and resurrection (Romans 6:3-4⁶).

Water has always had a huge significance in the Bible; Noah is rescued from an evil world and brought into a new world through a flood⁷, Moses takes the Israelites, who had been slaves in Egypt, and gives them freedom through the Red Sea parting⁸ (they walked on dry land). When the Israelites came into the promised land, they again have the Jordan River parted⁹ for them - they go from living in a desert to a land that is dripping with milk and honey (must be like milk and Oreos of the ancient

⁶ *"Or have you forgotten that when we were joined with Christ Jesus in baptism, we joined him in his death? For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives."*

⁷ Genesis 5:32-10:1

⁸ Exodus 14:21-31

⁹ Joshua 3

world). God, does not want you to lose the significance of this moment. Baptism is not about making a public confession of Christ - although that is important. Baptism is not about dedicating a child to God - even though this is definitely something that matters. Baptism IS about saying, "My old life is dead and I leave it behind in this water. I am now united with Christ in his resurrected life!" This is powerful, you get to be a new creation, the old is gone and the new has come! And baptism is how we identify with it.

Does something magical or mystical happen in the water? Is it holy? Are people who haven't been baptized saved? I don't know if something magical or mystical happens. I do know it is just tap water, you could drink it if you wanted... Are you saved if you haven't been baptized? Your faith is what saves you (Ephesians 2:8 "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God"). It is God's gift that saves you, it is baptism that is the God ordained means of expressing your acceptance of that gift- I honestly think the two are so closely tied together that it is like trying to separate a piece of paper into its two different sides. If you tried to accomplish this, you would end up destroying the paper because there is so little that separates the two. I don't believe, biblically, that we were ever meant to experience salvation apart from baptism. It's only in our modern world that people have tried to separate the two events.

Another way of thinking about the concept of baptism is the marriage relationship between a man and a woman.

I am married, not because I wear a ring, but because of the commitment I have made to my wife--but I'm not certain how much longer I would be married if I didn't wear the ring. The ring doesn't make me married, but it does mean I AM married.

If you don't understand it completely, that's okay, me neither. I keep learning more about how God works everyday - this is part of what it means to be a Christ Follower. But I do know this, God wants your baptism to be a significant part of your relationship with Him. Baptism is what Christ commanded of His disciples in Matthew 28:19 - if you haven't been baptized, then this is a vital next step for you.

REFLECT ON IT:

☆ *Have you been baptized? If not talk to your pastor or the person who led you to Christ and express to them your desire to do so!*

The Gift of the Holy Spirit:

So, it's important to know a churchy word - Trinity. Trinity is a word that describes a big biblical idea¹⁰. The Trinity is the idea that God is three separate entities that

¹⁰ You won't find the word, "Trinity", in the Bible anywhere, but you will find the concept in scripture. See (John 10:30, Matthew 28:19, 1 Corinthians 8:6, 2 Corinthians 13:14, Matthew 3:16-17, John 14:26, John 1:14, 1 John 5:7-8, John 14:16-17, Colossians 2:9, Philipians 2:5-8, Genesis 1:26, John 1:1-51, 1 Peter 1:2, Ephesians 4:4-6, 2 Corinthians 1:21-22, John 10:30-36, Genesis 3:22)

are all one substance or entity in and of themselves. What? Yeah, that's right, God, is three separate persons but God is also one person. All three parts are God completely, but God is only one part.

Okay, enough with the confusing, "what is he talking about?" stuff, here is how it works out practically:

The three persons of the Godhead are the Father, Son (Jesus), and Holy Spirit. You will even find that when Jesus talks about these three entities that He is fairly liberal with floating back and forth between who is doing what. Take John 14:15-18 as an example: "If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." Jesus says that if we love Him and keep his commands, which by the way is to love one another, that He will ask the Father to give us the Holy Spirit. So, get this: God, Jesus, is going to ask God the Father to give God the Holy Spirit to us. Jesus then towards the end gets confusing about who is going to come to us, He says, "I will not leave you as orphans, I will come to you." I thought the Holy Spirit was coming. Confused yet?

This is where understanding the Trinity as much as possible, will help. Jesus is both Himself in person - caught in time and flesh - but also coexistent with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. He is able to have fluidity in

how He speaks about the three, because He is speaking of Himself in all the contexts. I can't prove it, but I believe that God has, in some ways at least, broken His existence into these categories and persons to help us better understand His character and nature (you see variations in His character in each person - the Father tends more towards justice, the son towards love, and the Holy Spirit towards counsel). That's a discussion for another day...

I understand that this is very confusing and you could read back through what I've written ten times and still say, "What?". At this point it's just important to understand that this concept is accepted as solid Christian theology (the study of God).

This brings us to the Holy Spirit. What I am about to tell you is something you may have already experienced and I have to say, it is life altering. God, through the Holy Spirit, wants to actually take up residence in your life. Take a second to let that settle in. God cares about your life and wants to literally be your counselor or guide. That is a powerful idea.

The idea that God wants to be your counselor and guide is powerful, but it's important to note that people will sometimes take this to one of two extremes. Some people make the Holy Spirit an overly emotional, mystical thing that ends up actually being a little kooky or out there. But on the other spectrum, some people pretend like the Holy Spirit doesn't really interact with us at all. They have a very cold and sterile understanding of God and His Spirit.

I will tell you my experience and leave it at that. I find my relationship with God through the Holy Spirit to be very relational. I talk with God and take time to listen to His prompting (it's usually a kind, gentle feeling that I should do or say something - most of the time something I would never think of doing on my own). As I engage in the rhythm of talking and listening, I find God engaging me more through the Spirit. He gifts me for ministry in the church and world. He gives me words to say when I engage with people who are far from God. All of it feels very natural because it's in the context of a relationship with God!

REFLECT ON IT:

☆ *Take some time to talk with God, invite Him to have permission to speak into your life and start carving out time in your schedule to be silent. If God speaks right now, that's great, if He chooses to be silent, that's okay too! There is no pressure, it's about finding some relational time with the Savior, not checking off a list of "to-do's"!*

Meeting Together:

When Peter preached that day, 3,000 people chose to follow Christ. That's a lot of people.

Those early Christians made a crucial decision that would determine how followers of Jesus would interact with one another for the rest of time. They decided to meet together regularly in smaller groups. In these

smaller group settings they devoted themselves to specific things. I've labeled them as Formative Things, Friend Things, and Faith Things.

The Formative Things are things that will help form your character in Christ. For these early disciples, they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. We do this in modern churches through good sound biblical preaching that helps us unpack God's Word into our lives to learn how to live it out.

The Friend Things are bound up in these early Christians deciding to fellowship together. Fellowship is just a churchy word to say that they were intentional about choosing to spend time with each other. They built friendships in their faith community.

The Faith Things consisted of gathering around communion and prayer. They remembered Christ's death for their sins regularly (communion). They spent time seeking God in prayer together. Gathering in smaller groups in the church is where meaningful relationships occur and where true life transformation takes grip!

REFLECT ON IT:

☆ *Your next step is to find the place where small groups in your church meet and learn how to get involved. You can talk to any person on staff or other people in your church that have responsibilities to help people find their way around (the greeters, coffee people, etc.).*

TRAIL 4: WHAT IS MY PURPOSE?

Matthew 28:18-20 (NIV)

"18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

I love *Mission Impossible* movies! A guy goes into a phone booth, a mono-tone, matter of fact voice comes over the receiver, "Your mission, should you chose to accept it...", a screen pops up in front of our hero in the phone booth, it's flashing diagrams and maps, foreign languages and pass codes. The scene ends with our protagonist coolly walking away from the phone booth, mission in hand - the booth explodes in slow motion in the background but he doesn't even notice because he has what he came for, a mission.

The reality is, it's exciting to have a mission - a purpose. Unfortunately, lots of people live their lives without much purpose these days. If that's you, don't get discouraged, there is good news. The good news is, as a Christ Follower, you have a very specific purpose in this life, a mission, if you should choose to accept it.

Lots of people have tried to capture the mission in a short little phrase. The way I like to say it is this: "Our

mission is helping people find their way back home to God, 1 person at a time!” Really, no matter how you say it, the idea is the same. As Christ followers we want to obey Jesus’ marching orders to make disciples of all nations. This is what helping people find their way back home to God is all about! It’s our command from on high; to help others find the grace, peace, hope, community, etc. that you yourself have found in your relationship with God as you’ve found your way back home!

What an amazing thing to learn that you are not alone in this world. It’s an even grander thing to learn that your life is not purposeless. You were thoughtfully crafted and created, instilled with your personality, with your talents, with your experiences for this very endeavor. So you could walk back into your world as a new creation in Christ and live out a life of tremendous meaning and potential as you fulfill your mission every single day.

Helping people find their way back home to God, 1 person at a time!

REFLECT ON IT:

☆ Take some time to think through the difference you are already seeing in your life from starting your journey back into relationship with God. Write down some of the things that you have been thinking about or seen changing.

☆ Write down at least 5 people that you can think of off the top of your head who need to find their way back home to God.

☆ Take an action Step to invite at least one of them within the next week to come to church with you. (HINT: if you can take the things you are seeing God do and start bragging about them to your friends, you won't have a hard time inviting them and they will want to experience what you are experiencing too. Think about that new restaurant you found with amazing food and service, you told people about it and they wanted to go check it out, the same is true for church and God. When people hear that your life is changing for the better because of your journey back home to God, they naturally will want to follow.)

TRAIL 5: WHAT HAPPENS IF I MESS UP AND SIN?

1 John 2:1-2 (NLT)

"My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous. 2 He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not only our sins but the sins of all the world."

"So, now that I'm a Christian, I'm not going to cuss when I hit my thumb with a hammer, right?" Ha, don't I wish! Really, if cussing were the worst thing we would struggle with, life wouldn't be so bad. But I know some people who have had some serious addictions who come to Christ and still struggle with those things. I know others who have had bad habits for a life time, and while sometimes those things miraculously disappear, this is not the case for everyone. This leftover from your old life creates a lot of confusion and worry in a Christ Follower's relationship with God.

Questions start to pop up in your mind. For instance, "If I really meant what I said about wanting to follow Christ, then why am I doing this and can't seem to stop?", or "How could God forgive me now, I knew this was

wrong and I went ahead and did it anyway - I feel like I'm out of control..." The apostle Paul felt this same intense struggle in himself when he wrote this in the book of Romans:

"18 And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can't. 19 I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. 20 But if I do what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it." (Romans 7:18-20)

Here is what you need to know: you ARE going to MESS up. But you don't have to GIVE up, you just have to GET up.

Let me share a little truth with you real quick: God has already saved you from the ultimate consequences of sin (eternal death in hell). The Bible is clear about this - Jesus' work on the cross was a once for all time sacrifice for sin. His gruesome death has overpowered the consequences of sin and blood-debt of death in the world. The scripture also says that He has sealed you with the Holy Spirit. This idea is pretty amazing. That God gives us His Spirit so we know we can be fully assured that his promise of eternal life is the real deal - the Bible talks about the gift of the Spirit being like a deposit guaranteeing our salvation. I love that idea: imagine that God said, "I promise I am going to save you after your death - there is no hell in your future. But I understand it's hard to trust me while you are still on this side of the grave. So, to prove my trustworthiness, I'm going to leave a little something with

you as my deposit - it should seal the deal.” The thing He leaves with us is the constant counselor, His Spirit.

Everything I wrote in that last paragraph is true. It’s also heavy stuff. It is true you have eternal life sealed for you by God’s Holy Spirit and that you are free from the consequences of sin eternally. But, the heartbreaking fact still remains that you and me are unequivocally trapped in the body (the Bible calls this the flesh) that we started this party in. Me choosing Jesus may have ultimately wiped away my sins. But my body and brain have been cultivating lots of unsavory desires, addictions, temptations, and unhealthy patterns over a lifetime of living. And there it is, the dreaded conflict; “the things I want to do [because I’m now someone who loves God], I don’t do [because I still have these old hang ups from my previous life], the things I don’t want to do, I do...”

Never fear God, as always, has a plan! His plan is to take this next part of your life's journey, the God part, and begin restoring your old (fleshly) nature - that part of you with the unsavory desires and addictions - back to the way you were always intended to be. If you are like me, this seems like a daunting proposition. To try and overcome a lifetime of ungodly habits - where in the world would I even start? Which ones do I target first? How do I make sure that I’m not sinning in the meantime? This would be the entirely wrong way to try and lean into God’s plan. His plan is much more sophisticated and yet brilliant in its simplicity. His plan is for you to focus on two things: loving Him and loving people. Get this, He doesn’t want you to focus your energy on trying to eradicate sin in your

life (I know this seems strange, but follow me here) - that's His job. He wants, instead, for your whole energy to be focused like a laser into your job of loving Him, God, and loving people. Did you get that? Your job is to focus all your attention on Him, NOT on eradicating sin. Paul calls this, living by the Spirit (Romans 8 Paul explains more fully the answer to the dilemma of Romans 7 by saying that it is only through living by the Spirit that we can overcome the problems created by our old sin life).

So, how do I live by the Spirit? Where do I start? Here's the first step to learning to live by the Spirit. It's really less complicated than you might think. You live by the Spirit by setting your mind on the things God cares about: love, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, etc. (see Galatians 5:22-24¹¹). Notice that every single one of these things has a laser focus on being loving toward others. This is why I am so passionate about living my life on mission, because God's most treasured possession in all the universe are people. People are what matter to God, and by thoughtfully, prayerfully seeking to treat people with love, we will necessarily engage God and His Spirit in order to find the strength to do so. Ultimately love is the counter agent to sinfulness (which almost completely has its root in selfishness). When you are living by God's Spirit your life becomes focused on love for God

¹¹ "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires."

and love for people¹². God uses this love to refocus your desire(s) away from sin and onto Him.

When you mess up, don't let it be the end for you, don't give up. Even if you don't understand all of this right now, you need to trust that God is working in you and that He is not going to forsake you because you still struggle.

Following Jesus is a marathon, not a sprint. I had a friend who said one of the biggest problems with running a big long distance race is when you get a small rock in your shoe. He said, you just can't get it out of your head. Sin can do the same thing, it can eat up all your focus. Pretty soon you aren't thinking about God anymore, you are thinking about how bad you are. You have to shake that rock out of your shoe and get back up and run - put your focus back on God. Remember this, Jesus died for you BECAUSE you were a messed up sinner, not because you could "hold it all together on your own." Our job is not to fix ourselves, our job is to turn ourselves over to Him as a master surgeon, and let Him cut out the parts that are broken, heal the parts that are wounded, and repair the deep parts of us that have become distorted. The Christian word for this whole process is "sanctification" - God is sanctifying you, making you holy over the process of your lifetime.

Lastly, I feel like it's important to say. You should never use the fact that God knows you are going to still struggle

¹² see *Matthew 22:36-40*

and sin as an excuse to cover up sin, or to engage in sinful activity. Sin is a direct affront to God; because the message our sin conveys to God is that we can do things better our own way than His. It is dangerous to belittle the effects of sin, but it is just as dangerous to give them so much weight that we lose track of following Jesus. Don't fall into either trap. Instead, recognize that you are going to mess up, you just don't have to give up!

REFLECT ON IT:

☆ *What are some old habits you have been struggling with?*

☆ *What do you think God wants you to do about them?*

☆ *Make a commitment today that when you fail spiritually, you will use it as the soil of success to get up and start growing again. This week, share with a Christian friend that you would like to be able to call them when you mess up and ask them to pray with you and to encourage you.*

TRAIL 6: WILL THIS LAST? I'M WORRIED I'LL GO BACK TO MY OLD LIFE

(Engaging God with Grit)

Philippians 3:13 (NIV)

"Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead,"

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 (NIV)

"Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. 17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

I remember the night very clearly. I was driving to Wendy's in order to meet some friends after a really powerful night of worship at church. A month or two before this night, I had decided I wanted to follow Jesus - that one decision upended my entire life. I was suddenly full of joy and hope with an inner peace I couldn't fully explain. I was a different person through and through. The transformation had been drastic and definite. As I meandered down the road that night my mind began to

wander. I watched houses fly by and drift into the background as a thought crept over the wall of my mind and started to worm its way into my heart, a thought that at the time was startling and terrifying, "what happens when this all fades away...."

I don't know if you've had similar thoughts about this new faith adventure you are on or not. But for me, that thought sent my heart throbbing in my throat. The hope, joy, and peace I had found were so prolific that I couldn't imagine going back to what I was before, but my experience told me it was only a matter of time before I drifted back to the way I was.

Maybe you know what I'm talking about, you have tried yoga, running, or some other hobby and, for a while, you can't get enough of whatever activity or thing it is you are enraptured with. Eventually, as all things do, the early morning yoga classes are not as enticing as sleeping in, the running has run its course and your hobbies have just simply gone dull. Eventually, those activities fall into the past as just something you "used to do." We even have a phrase in Western culture that captures this idea, "Every good thing must come to an end."

Driving down the road that night with street lights flashing overhead and houses fading into the distance, fear began to take hold, a fear that I would become tired of being a Christian and lose what I had found - it would "wear off". My experience had told me, it was only a matter of time. But experience or not, I knew I did not want to lose the life I had found in Jesus.

As of writing this today, over 20 years have passed since I first had the thought that at some point following Christ might become dull or lose its charm. I can say with an emphatic, resounding, “Yes”, that I still follow Christ and this adventure is even more exciting today than I ever could have imagined. So, what is it that has got me through to this point and others like me? Is it just that Christ followers who have longevity in their faith are lucky, blessed, or that God is looking out for them in some special way? Is it that my life has just been easy and full of green pastures since finding my way home? What has been the key to finding success and staying faithful to Jesus?

There are a lot of things that have made the difference and none of them were due to being more blessed, lucky, or having greener grass. Actually, if you asked me to boil it down to two things, I would boil it down to God’s Love mingled with my grit (determination despite the odds).

Let me explain with a story. After high school I went to college, graduated, and got a job. I was fairly successful and doing well in ministry, but I had remained single and had moved out to a town that had relatively few young adult single Christians. At the time it felt like I had missed my opportunity to find a spouse. As I continued to learn how to “adult” - I found myself more and more being defined by my singleness. Even now, looking back on those years is a pretty painful thing.

I can remember all too well, dark nights pleading with God to bring someone into my life. I was lonely. I was watching my best friends get married and have kids. While I was going home to an empty house, leaving the TV on for some noise, and waiting for the hours to tick by before I could go back to work and be surrounded by people. To be honest, I had a deep pain in my heart. I had wanted for years to be a husband and a dad - I planned on being great at those things. The very thing I wanted most seemed out of reach. Soon, the hope, joy, and peace I had felt in the early days were starting to feel more like those distant memories. My circumstances were destroying me.

It wasn't all bad. I got to buy motorcycles and big sound systems instead of diapers and baby food. But it wasn't what I wanted. And my heart hurt badly because of it. I was broken for probably about five years during that period. There were times when I was ready to just throw in the towel with God. I couldn't see what He was doing. I couldn't explain why I was alone and others weren't. I couldn't understand why He had put such an intense longing to be with others (I'm an extrovert at heart) and have me experience such intense isolation. I... Wanted... To... Give up...

I have often described my relationship with God during this period of time as being so distant that I was at the point where I wanted to want God. I could have given up. But one thing I've found in my time with Jesus is that He never moves, and He never gives up. His love for you is IMMOVEABLE. His love is able to penetrate deep

inside of you and transform you in ways you can't even imagine yet. But that does not mean that you and me can't move away from His love. I was moving away. He was not.

I was in a bad place.

During this time, I was a youth pastor at a church (and frankly, getting close to quitting because of the internal struggle my life had become). One summer, I took my high school group to a Christian camp. At the camp, the main leader talked to all of the adult sponsors and asked us to read our Bibles that week so the teens would see us doing it. They wanted the teens to know we were spending time in God's Word just like we had asked them to do.

I hadn't read my Bible in weeks except to write sermons. As I opened the pages of my Bible, feeling like a hypocrite, I turned to the one part of the Bible I never got anything out of. A book of prophecy¹³. My thought was, I'll do what I'm supposed to and then when I get home, I will quit my job and figure out what is going on with me.

I turned the pages to the book of Isaiah and began to scan the words with my eyes. As I read the ancient message penned on those pages I began to hear a clarion

¹³ *Prophecy is a type of biblical literature where God used men to carry His message to people to try and bring them back to Him.*

call through the ages. It was God's message for Israel, turned into a message being spoken directly to me. Over and over God was saying to the people of Israel in the book of Isaiah, "if you would come back to me, I would take you back and restore you". But God, I'm angry, I've messed up, I'm... "come back to me." Over and over again. His word, drawing me back to Him. Every syllable dripping with love, bringing salve to my wounds. As the days drew on, I began to not be able to put it down. I was now in a wrestling match with God and I was losing - His words - His love was winning.

After days of this wrestling with God, I did the scariest thing I could think of. With my heart pounding again I repented and came back to Him. Now, you have to know, I don't normally get too nervous getting up in front of a group of people, but on this night at camp, my knees were knocking. I stood up in front of 75 sweaty high school campers that night in the warm humid air of the chapel. And with the sun setting in the background I confessed my sin of apathy and unbelief towards God, I let those sins slip over the horizon with the sun and determined that from that day forward, I would be a different man.

This time, I made a decision to capitalize on the love of God and to stop letting my relationship with God be only a reactive thing, instead I decided from that day on, my relationship with God would be a proactive part of my life. Meaning, I would stop waiting for problems to arise and then seek God. Instead, I would every day, without fail, be a man who sought God - no matter the cost. We

will cover how to do this in the habits section (Trail 10), but just understand, I had gotten to the place I was at because I was not actively seeking God every day. My apathy and unbelief were a result of lazy discipleship.

That day, I began to do something that I have now come to describe as, "Engaging God with Grit". I have a friend who's a rancher (he reminds me of the old cowboy movie star John Wayne). One time my buddy was rounding up cattle in the dry dust of Western Kansas. He was bringing them in to give them their shots. While he was in the cattle pin, a steer got a little unsettled and kicked my rancher friend. The animal knocked him off balance and landed him flat on his back. Without a moment's hesitation my buddy springboarded back up off the ground, cocked his arm back and landed a mean right hook to the jaw of the steer. Now, I'm in no way advocating getting in fist fights with cows or approving of my friend's actions, but you have to admit it takes some kind of grit and determination (and maybe a little crazy) to go toe to toe with a 1,200 pound animal in a confined space. That to me is what it means to engage God with Grit. When I get knocked down, I get up, bare my teeth, and I fight back.

I don't back down, I double down.

I am not willing to let anything get in the way of me following and knowing Jesus better every single day. If life is miserable and full of suffering and pain, I praise Him. If life is amazing and exhilarating, I praise Him. My focus is on Him, not my circumstances.

Thankfully, God is kind and gracious and brought me through that period of loneliness to a place where I am able to honestly seek Him and see Him do things in my life I couldn't imagine. Thankfully, He has reminded me that as long as I hold on to Him, He will give me the grit and determination to follow Him through anything. He led me to a place where I was able to accept my singleness, and then years later He brought an amazing bride into my life. I have been on ups and downs. I've lost loved ones and had children born. The one constant - I engage God with Grit, no matter the circumstances.

I'd lie to you if I said I don't struggle anymore. I do. The difference is, now I know that no matter what my circumstances hold for me, my every day responsibility is to engage God with grit. So, don't give up ever! Dig in your heels, dust yourself off and always be ready to throw the next punch!

REFLECT ON IT:

☆ *What have been some of your worries as you are starting this relationship with God?*

☆ *In what areas of life do you already have grit and determination?*

☆ *What are some things that you could begin doing daily to ensure that you are intentional about seeking God?*

☆ *Here are just a few examples:*

- *Spend time every day turning over your worries and troubles to God.*
- *Spend time studying scripture.*
- *Memorize short passages of the Bible that you find encouraging so you can recall them at any time.*
- *Start a journal to record your prayers to God.*
- *Attend church worship services regularly.*
- *Join a Sunday School or Bible study.*

☆ *Take a few moments to write out a prayer to God. Express any fears that you have and invite Him to have authority in your life, that if you ever begin to choose a way of life that leads you away from Him, that He can do whatever He needs to bring you back:*

TRAIL 7: HOW DO I LIVE FOR GOD?

(The God Step, The Groups Step, The Growing
Step, and the Going Step)

2 Timothy 4:7

*"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept
the faith."*

I have a friend who used to come up to me at the end of church and say, "so... Kent. What do I do with that?" Not exactly what you want to hear after presenting a 30 minute sermon that took you a week of intense study and reflection to prepare. But what I found, after I picked my broken heart up off the floor, was the question she asked was a great question. It actually made my preaching SOOOOO much better. It improved my preaching because I came to the realization that it's great for someone to know the truth, but it's even better for them to know what to do with it.

The apostle Paul, at the end of his life, was able to say, with confidence, about his life, that he fought well, ran well, and kept his faith through the whole experience. It's great to know about Christ and even better to choose to follow Him, but how do you actually do that? I have found that the key to being the kind of person who can say, like Paul, "I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" at the end of your life comes from engaging in what I call, the 4G's: The God Step, The Groups Step, The Growing Step,

The Going Step. I use the word step because I am trying to show you that each of the 4G's should lead you into the next one, they are the steps you take to move forward in your Journey with Jesus. Here is a brief summary of each of the 4G's:

The God Step

Christ Followers realize that their chief aim in this life is to love God. They do this by choosing to be intentional about taking steps toward Him. The practical application of this comes through things like weekly worshipping God at church services, daily time reading the scripture, engaging in prayer, and even singing at the top of your lungs in your car! Remember back to setting your mind on Godly things helping us to get past our sin nature? Yup, that's a practical way of being intentional about the God step every single day!

The Groups Step

You cannot live your life in a vacuum as a Christ Follower. Your mission is directly tied to other people and making a difference in their lives. This means we HAVE to be intentional about our relationships and connecting with others! That's why meeting in smaller groups is a priority in church (see the "Next Steps" section). You need to be cultivating relationships inside and outside the church in order to effectively accomplish our mission! The Groups Step is about finding Godly relationships.

The Growing Step

Jesus loves all of us right where we are. If you take the time to think about it, that's a powerful statement. But He also loves us enough to not leave us there. He wants you to be growing as a Christ Follower, to be engaging in opportunities to learn and develop, to gain knowledge of the scripture and God's character. The Growing Step takes a certain intentionality about joining opportunities like a Sunday School class or going to a conference. It includes studying the Bible daily and purposefully growing closer to Jesus in your knowledge of Him.

The Going Step

During Jesus' ministry on earth He said something peculiar: He said that He "came to serve, not to be served" (Mark 10:45). Think about that for a second. The God of the universe did not come to earth to be served. Do you know very many high powered leaders who would make a statement like that? I believe that the role of a Christ Follower is to, well, follow Jesus and to give our lives for His cause. This means when we spend time with other people, we are always looking for "God Opportunities". It means when we see someone being taken advantage of, we stop to care for them. It means that our whole life is filtered through how we will be used for God. Taking the Going Step means using our talents for the Kingdom of God - taking the gifts God has given you and using them to bring glory to God. The Going Step means recognizing that everything you have, your money (treasure) included, comes from God and being thoughtful and intentional about putting it to use for God's kingdom.

Everything we do as a Christ Follower will boil down into one or more of these 4G's. Learning to evaluate your day by them will make a huge difference. You could, and might I say, "should", spend the rest of your life engaging in becoming a deeper and deeper 4G Christ Follower!

REFLECT ON IT:

☆ Which of the 4G's appeals to you most?

☆ Which one is most difficult?

☆ What are some practical next steps you could take to incorporate the 4G's into your daily life?

☆ Here are a few examples:

- Commit to spending time every day reading the Bible and praying, join a small group or ministry team, get involved in a Bible study or Sunday School, make a commitment to be at church every Sunday, volunteer for a ministry at church, every week bring someone at work a pop - there are a million ways to start incorporating the 4G's into your day to day life. What will you do this week?

TRAIL 8: HOW DO I READ THE BIBLE? ASKED AND ANSWERED

Hebrews 4:12 (NIV)

"For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."

2 Timothy 3:16 (NLT)

"All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right."

In my years of ministry, I have noticed a trend with people who have tried to engage God through reading the scriptures. They quickly become intimidated by the Bible. If you have gone to church your whole life that may seem silly, but the reality is, the Bible can be difficult book to approach. I mean, to be fair, it is a huge book that is a collection of ancient manuscripts all written in different genres, covering thousands of years of events and history. It's no wonder that so many people quickly begin to feel the intimidation of not being good enough or smart enough to understand it.

I totally get it, I felt that way for many years. The good news is that you don't have to feel that way. I was lucky

enough to have some mentors in my life that gave me a solid footing when it came to approaching the Bible and I actually ended up falling in love with the scriptures. I was a teenager and was finding my way back home to God - and reading the Bible became a major part of that journey. As I started to be a little more thoughtful with how I read the text and began asking God to help me understand what I read, I found I began to see things in the scriptures that I had never seen before. I was being challenged in ways I had never been challenged before.

My hope is that you can find a love for the Bible like I did (not while I was a pastor, but while I was a normal person - I like to think I'm still normal but my wife would disagree) and that it will completely revolutionize your life.

Okay, so let's take a minute or two and get really practical about the Bible. Here are some answers to common questions people, new and old to the Bible, have about it and how to use it. These might seem elementary to some, but for others, they will help to demystify how to use God's Word in their lives. Feel free to skip any part of this trail that you've already got a good grasp on.

Here we go:

What are all these numbers and colons about?

When looking up a Bible verses they will be listed in the following manner, "Matthew 1:18-25", Matthew is the book, 1 is the chapter or "big number" in the actual text

of the Bible and the 18-25 refers to the verses (the small numbers inside of the chapter of the Bible).

How do I find the books of the Bible?

In the front of your Bible there should be an index of the books of the Bible. The Bible is split into two sections, the Old Testament (how God worked in the nation of Israel before Jesus was born) and the New Testament (this makes up the last quarter of the pages of the Bible. The New Testament is the story of Jesus and the beginning of Christianity). The Old Testament has 39 books with all kinds of different literary genres. From poetry, to prophecy¹⁴, law books and even guides for how to build a temple for God (you might not need to do this right now :)). **My suggestion would be to stick with the New Testament until you can say you have read through all of it.**

Since the New Testament is where I think you should spend most of your time to start with, I want to break it down for you a bit.

The order of the first four books of the New Testament (these are really more akin to pamphlets than books - it's just what we call them) are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These books are referred to as "The Gospels" which means "good news" in the Greek language. They

¹⁴ Prophets were men and women who spoke God's word to people to people in order to try and bring their audience back into relationship with God. Reading the prophets can tell you an incredible amount about what the heart of God longs for in those who follow Him.

are where almost all of the life and teachings of Jesus are recorded. One thing you need to know about the Gospels is that they are documented historical accounts from 4 different perspectives¹⁵.

Next comes the book of Acts. Acts was written to describe the establishment of Christianity in the first century world (it is the “Acts” of the church). It basically takes you from the moments directly following Jesus’ crucifixion through to the good news spreading throughout the known world of the time. This book moves fast and has some great stories in it!

Next are the Epistles. The word Epistle is just a big word for personal letters. Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, etc. (again,

¹⁵ *The fact that the Gospels are from the authors’ perspectives means sometimes you will see variances in what is recorded. An example of this is when one author of a Gospel records an event with two people and another author describes only one at the same incident. The difference in the number of people involved in the incident is due to the author’s perspective. Just like when you have two people seeing the same car accident, their perspective on that accident can differ (one person might tell you about the driver of the car that ran into the truck, while the other observer spends most of their time describing the injuries of the people in the truck - both are true descriptions, but very different from one another). So, in the Bible the particular perspective of the author, and what is important to them is what gets highlighted. This is actually a proof of good eyewitness testimony. In other words, if one biblical author describes two people at a particular incident in the Bible, and another says one, it does not mean they are wrong. If there are two people, then there is also one person as well (the author who only records one person is leaving out the second person in their accounting of the scenario). It’s possible that one author is simply giving you an accurate numerical count of the persons on the scene, while the other author is focused on the one person who actually did all the talking.*

look in the index of your Bible). It's important to note that these are letters written from a pastor to a church. Most of the time the pastor identifies himself at the beginning, "I Paul..." These books are answering questions of how you live your life for Christ and they have some very powerful things to say about what it means to be a Christ Follower. You may have noticed that this devotional has been using a lot of passages from the book or letter of Romans. That's because Romans is the letter where Paul explains the way that he personally preaches the good news! It's a powerful discourse and maybe a great place to start in the New Testament!

The books of 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon are written to specific individuals (Timothy and Titus are pastors and Philemon was a Christian who owned a slave¹⁶ that had run away - the book was written to encourage Philemon to take back his slave and treat him with kindness as a Christian brother).

Finally, the book of Revelation - one of the least understood books of the Bible, is a genre called, Apocalyptic or eschatological (both words are just fancy ways of saying: end of the world descriptions) literature. Revelation was not written to be taken completely literal, although many try and take it that way. Instead Revelation includes a heavy dose of symbolism and metaphor to describe events that will occur in association with the physical return of Jesus. Personally, I prefer to think of

¹⁶ *Slavery in these days was much different than American slavery, not nearly as cruel in most instances. Nor was it racially driven.*

Revelation as the Apostle John painting an image he saw using words. You get broad sweeps of events that are happening in the world and universe. Some of the events are repeated and shown from different angles, others are great and terrible and some are incredibly moving and tender. It really is a beautiful picture all leading forward into one purpose: to encourage God's people who are facing difficult times that in the end, God wins. He will be our God, we will be His people, and He will wipe every tear from our face¹⁷.

It is a real shame when people get so caught up in the details of how they think the world might end¹⁸ that they miss the wonder of the fact that God wins - and that's enough. I one time heard a pastor (Larry Osborne) say, we are on the welcoming committee for Jesus, not the planning committee (meaning we don't need to worry about the "how" of Jesus' return as much as we need to focus on being ready for Jesus' return). Revelation, it's in there, it's interesting, but probably not where you should start.

My Bible has some text at the top of the page and some below, which do I read?

If you have a Bible someone gave you that has text written above and below, usually the text above is the

¹⁷ See Revelation 21

¹⁸ There are lots of people with very sophisticated interpretations of Revelation. The important thing to know is that these are interpretations. Even Jesus said the Son of Man (Him) did not know the hour or time He would return (Matthew 24:36).

actual text of the Bible, and below are the “cliff notes” to help you understand what you are reading or to answer questions that are common about those verses. These kind of Bibles can be very helpful - the two most common are the Study Bible and the Life Application Bible. I would suggest looking into investing in one of them.

Ok, I read it, now what?

Am I supposed to have an epiphany?

Learning to ask the right questions makes all the difference in studying the Bible. Try asking these simple questions and see if it helps. Start out by trying to answer these questions each time you study a passage of scripture (some people even like to keep a journal with them and write down thoughts as they go).

1. What did I learn about Jesus or God from this passage that I didn't know or understand before?
2. What is important about this passage (in other words, why was this particular story or idea recorded)?
3. From this passage, what are things that I think God would want me to change in my life, or in our society (how can I apply this to my life?)?

What kind of Bible should I be reading?

I would suggest that you get a version of the Bible that was translated for a more plain English reading, the NIV (New International Version), the NiRV (The International New Readers Version) or the NLT (New Living Translation) - these are translations from the original languages in a way that makes sense with how we speak to one another. If

you try to read from a King James Version - you will probably find yourself getting discouraged right away (unless you are from England in the 1600's). You can also download a free Bible reading app for your phone at www.youversion.com. Again, I would suggest considering investing in a "Study Bible" or "Life Application Bible". The notes they put at the bottom of their pages really do help you better understand the context of what you are reading and how to apply it to your life. One of those Bibles could be an invaluable resource to get started!

Where do I start Reading?

This is a fantastic question! I've already said that I think you need to start in the New Testament, but if it was me, there are two books I would read first, the gospel of John and the book of Romans. After that, I would make it my goal to read through the rest of the New Testament. You can also find Bible reading plans online or via the app YouVersion that will give you a day-by-day plan to read through the scripture.

Some Bible Reading plans want me to read several chapters; I don't have that kind of time...

Actually, Bible chapters are different than normal book chapters; many of them are only a few paragraphs long. My guess is that it will take less than 10 minutes for you to read a couple of chapters and answer the questions I have suggested here.

How much time did you spend on Facebook today, watching TV, or eating donuts? Maybe you can find some

time to read the Bible by managing your time better. Those other things may influence your day, but reading the scripture will revolutionize your life!

A quick note: when studying the bible it's not the quantity you read that matters as much as the quality of time spent studying. What I mean is reading huge chunks of scripture does not necessarily equate to you being more spiritual or a better Christ Follower. In fact, you would be better off to totally devour a paragraph (or even just one sentence) and learn how to apply it to your everyday life, than read page after page only to have forgotten what you had read 15 minutes later.

I want to highlight something in my Bible, but isn't that sacrilegious?

Ha, no, actually writing personal notes and highlighting scripture can be very helpful for some people. I personally highlight and make notes as a tool to help me remember specific passages and to capture the thoughts God is placing inside of me...

There are a lot more questions you can ask, but if you start with these, you'll do great!

One final note...

Knowing the Bible is important. What is even better is having God use His words to infect and influence your life. Each time before you sit down and read the Bible, why not say a prayer asking God to lead you and speak to you in deep places about what He longs for in your life? Jesus

said He was like a shepherd, that means He longs to have input into your life, directing and protecting you! This has personally been one of the most important tools of my own Bible study since those early teenage years. To pray and invite God into my study.

REFLECT ON IT:

☆ *Make a Plan for reading the Bible:*

- *When will you read? (find a time during the day where you can minimize distractions - lunch time, early morning, bed time)*

- *What will you read? (Which book of the Bible do you want to start with? Remember the previous suggestions of John or Romans - whatever it is, PLEASE take my word and start in the New Testament)*

- *How will you engage the scripture? (Maybe you need to get a journal to write your thoughts in, maybe you need to try and find one sentence of scripture each day you are going to meditate and think on, whatever you do, be intentional about engaging what you are reading)*

☆ *Finally, actually execute your plan!*

TRAIL 3: HOW DO I PRAY IN A WAY THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE?

Luke 22:42 (NIV)

*"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me;
yet not my will, but yours be done."*

Matthew 6:9-13 (NIV)

*"This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed
be your name, 10 your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as
it is in heaven. 11 Give us today our daily bread. 12 And forgive us
our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 And lead us not
into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.'"*

I have to be honest with you... For years I struggled with the idea of prayer. The struggle was an intellectual one for me. It went something like this, "If God really knows everything, then why do I need to ask Him for anything? Doesn't He already know before I ask Him." Maybe you've thought the same thing (if not, I hope I didn't just mess you up). Over the years, I have learned that there are problems with this line of thought... The problem is that logic makes two assumptions: the first assumption is that the sole purpose of prayer is "asking God for stuff". Making requests of God is definitely part of

the equation when it comes to prayer, but it is not the whole kit and caboodle. In actuality, petitions (asking for stuff) are only a small part of the whole experience. The second assumption my logic makes is that God is more interested in the question than the asker - what I mean is that this: my logic demotes our prayer to a simple transaction to get what we want out of God - it completely ignores the idea of the cultivating of a relationship with the creator of the cosmos. Read Matthew 7:21-23 to learn more about the relationship God wants to have with you. Here's a hint - it's not as much about religious acts as you might think.

So, what is the purpose of prayer? I will tell you where I am settling more these days when it comes to the meaning and substance of prayer: I believe the purpose of prayer is to turn over my free will to God and allow Him to accomplish His purposes in the world through me. Take a moment to contemplate and chew on this idea. The purpose of prayer is for me to give up my will so God can enact His will through me.

See, I believe God has given you and me the ability to make decisions, direct our own lives, make choices. Most of us have done a mediocre job with this at best. We are getting by, but that's about it. Some of us are doing okay, but none of us are the very image of "perfection".

God also has a will, His will is that everyone would come to know Him (2 Peter 3:9 says, "he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance"). So, how does a loving God who has

chosen to give free will to humanity, still enact His will within mankind without overruling their own personal will? That's a lot of wills if you ask me... This idea of God trying to enact His will without overruling the free will of humanity is a problem isn't it? God could force us to do what He wants, but that doesn't seem very loving. He could just leave us to our own demise, but that isn't loving either. It's another dilemma, another problem for God.

Good thing He's God...

I believe He solves the dilemma through a very special means. I believe He solves it through Christ followers submitting their will to His, just like Jesus did ("Not my will, but yours¹⁹..." is how Jesus said it). He doesn't take our free will from us, we choose to give Him control of it. We choose to believe He will lead our lives in a better fashion than we ourselves could lead. In other words, God works His will in our world by you and me surrendering our will to Him. This allows God to move and work in us and in our lives in whatever way He sees fit. As you explore and think about this concept you will realize that it is really an ingenious solution to the problem!

This is how Paul can say in 2 Corinthians 5:20 that "we are Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal to the world through us." Christ Followers who have surrendered their will to the Father find that through the act of surrender God is using them to enact His very will within this world!

¹⁹ Luke 22:42

Therefore, I believe that our prayer life has to be just as much (or even more) characterized by the willingness to allow God to move and motivate us, as it does to ask Him to give or do anything for us. This means a huge part of effective prayer is simply inviting God to have ownership in your life. To give Him dominion over all areas of your life. Are you going through a crisis? Invite God to use it for His glory. Did you just get a bonus? How does God want you to utilize those funds for the Kingdom of God? What this means is that our prayer life must be characterized by listening to God as much as it is by our time spent talking.

I like to think of my prayer life as a conversation with God. Now, I need you to know that I don't hear voices, but I do have, what I would call, promptings from God's Spirit. I will feel a certain tug to do or say something that lines up with accomplishing God's will in this world (which we have already seen in 2 Peter, is about seeing everyone come to repentance). I have felt a desire to call someone out of the blue and encourage them, I have had my heart tugged on in order to stop and help someone on the side of the road, or to give a stranger at church \$10 without knowing why. I know all of this sounds a little weird, but as you begin to become sensitive to God and explore the idea of surrendering your life to Him, you will find Him moving you to do things differently than what you would naturally do on your own. I will say as a caveat, God will

never call you to do anything that will harm His message in this world or will contradict scripture²⁰.

Enough of me talking! God is waiting to hear from you, to be invited into your world. He longs to bring joy and peace into your life, to fulfill your deepest needs and to be the center of your world! So get on your knees and talk to Him.

²⁰ When I feel God calling me to do something big, I always spend time making sure that I am hearing Him right by continuing to ask Him for more guidance, by sharing with other Christ Followers and asking them to join me in praying and listening. I also spend time searching the scripture to see what God has already said about the issue, if anything. The scripture does say to test the Spirits, so it's important to be wise.

REFLECT ON IT:

☆ *Take a few moments to stop and contemplate God's involvement in your life. Up until now, when you have prayed, have your prayers been mainly focused on asking God for things or for inviting Him to take over your life and use it for His glory?*

☆ *What are some questions you still have about this concept? Who could you ask about those questions?*

☆ *Over the next week, try creating the habit each day of starting your day off by inviting God to have control over your schedule. Stop frequently throughout your day and invite Him to lead you.*

☆ *As you go through this week, take the time to write down ways that you feel God prompting you and what happened when you followed through with it. What do you think God was wanting to accomplish?*

TRAIL 10: HOW DO YOU MAKE GOD A HABIT? IF THAT'S EVEN A THING?

2 Timothy 4:2 (NLT)

"Preach the word of God. Be prepared, whether the time is favorable or not. Patiently correct, rebuke, and encourage your people with good teaching."

Can I paint a picture for you? Imagine me walking through our house. Go ahead and picture me as a mild mannered Clark Kent - dashing good looking, mild, charming, and strong beneath the surface. Okay, none of that really matters, I just wanted to spice things up a little bit. I'm walking through my house, minding my own business when I remember a tool I left out in my garage. I run outside for a minute to get the tool, shutting the door to the house behind me. While I'm rummaging around in the garage, and before I can return to the house, my wife walks by the unlocked back door and with the flick of the wrist locks me out of the house. Every... Single... Time... No joke, she has a sixth sense about unlocked doors. It's as if the tumblers of the lock have a siren call that she cannot ignore. She finds such immense pleasure

in having locked doors that she is willing to leave me out in the cold, literally, just to fulfill her own desires.

One day, I finally asked her about her locking addiction and she said this, "I didn't even realize I do that..." She claims, get this, to have no cognitive recognition that she is locking me, charming Clark Kent (or just plain old "Kent") out of the house. I mean, really, how can you not know that you are locking the sweetest, most kind, loving man out in the cold dark clutches of the night?

There is actually a good reason (like, backed by science reason) my beautiful, intelligent, incredibly thoughtful wife doesn't know she is locking me out. The reason is: my wife is following a habit, plain and simple.

Habits are the things we do without thinking about them. They are routines that we have set to give our lives predictable patterns to follow whenever certain cues are triggered. For my wife, the cue of the unlocked door tells her she needs to lock it. Her brain kicks in the habit without her even knowing it. The reason she does this is the habit gives her a reward at the end of the day, it makes her feel safe and secure. So, her brain continues to follow the pattern.

Our lives are really a series of habits (Cues, Routines, and Rewards²¹). Think about how many times you have driven home from work and not even thought about the stop signs and turns you had to make. You don't have to think about it because your brain is following a habit. Think about how you find yourself staring at the bottom of a tub of ice cream - one moment you were thinking about how tough your day was and the next you are licking off your spoon; the last remnants of ice cream indulgence. The rough day cued the routine, and the reward was a full tummy and a brief feeling of the world being okay (of course, this is all followed by regret - but in the moment, the habit served its purpose).

Our lives are made up of our habits, plan and simple.

What if you could intentionally shape your life with good habits? What if you began to let simple everyday events in your life be triggers and cues to turn you to God? First, let's talk about a few of the habits that are important for you as a Christ Follower to have in your life and then let's follow up that discussion with some common ways to cue those habits daily.

The Habits

The habit of studying God's Word.

²¹ Charles Duhigg wrote a fantastic book about this subject called "The Power of Habits" (it's not a Christian book, but is very intriguing about how habits are formed and how to change them).

Paul told Timothy to be ready to share God's Word at the drop of a hat; when the time was favorable, and when it was not. The only way for you and me to have that kind of preparation is for us to be intentional about devouring God's Word. Putting the scripture in your heart through reading and studying (see the section on reading the Bible) so that you might not sin against God. The author of Hebrews says that the word of God is sharper than any double-edged sword - it's like it's God's scalpel. With His Word He is able to do surgery on your heart. God's Word is powerful and effective. We've talked about how to read it. Now, the question is, will you form a habit around studying it in your life?

The next habit we need to learn to cultivate is the habit of prayer. Prayer is a way for you to engage with God to develop your relationship with Him. The Bible says we are to seek God in prayer constantly. This doesn't mean you are constantly asking God for things (as covered in the previous section), instead, constant prayer is you having a present, in the moment awareness that God is alive and active in your day.

Is the sky beautiful? Tell Him He did a good job today :). Are you feeling tired? Let him know you are worn out and need His energy to make it through the afternoon. Your habit of prayer is about seeking God consistently and building your reliance on Him as you seek to do His will.

Other keystone habits include: solitude (finding time alone with God away from everything else), scripture memory (going deeper than mere study, intentionally placing God's Word in your mind so you have it at beck and call), journaling (the practice of writing out your prayers), and fasting (choosing to not eat for a period of time in order to focus your attention on God. You allow your hunger for food to remind you that you are to be hungering after God). These cover the main habits and practices.

Cueing the Habits

The key to each of these habits is to find a way to cue yourself to do them. Try to find a time everyday and an event or activity that tells you, "now it's time to read the Bible." At first you are going to have to be very conscious about this. But as you continue to seek God in your habits you will find that soon, they begin to become something you do because the habits are who you are.

I have a friend, every day on his way to work he turns off the radio and takes his 30 minute commute to intentionally pray to God about his day. I wake up every morning, get out of bed and go read my Bible. It's the first thing I do in the day. I find that it becomes a bedrock for the rest of my day (I can tell when I've missed that time with God, my heart and mind are focused much more selfishly). My wife gets in bed at night, pulls out her Bible, and begins reading and praying. She finishes her day off with spending time with God reflecting.

There is no right way to do it. The only right thing is to make sure that you are seeking God. Jesus said to remain in Him²². That's the key.

Your habits matter, why not be intentional about cultivating them?

²² John 15

TRAIL 11: WHY DOES IT MATTER IF I GO TO CHURCH?

Hebrews 10:25 (NLT)

"And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near."

Galatians 6:2-3 (NLT)

"Share each other's burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ. 3 If you think you are too important to help someone, you are only fooling yourself. You are not that important."

One night, my neighbor called me at 10pm and told me I had to get over to her house because she was in the middle of an emergency with her brother and needed my help. I had no idea what was going on, or what type of emergency she might be having. But I got out of bed anyway, threw on some clothes and rushed over to her house. When I got there, I saw that she and her brother were sitting in their garage drinking beers.

Emergency, huh?

I walked briskly into the garage and sat down with a "humph" in the lawn chair they had put out in anticipation of my arrival. Trying my best to hold back my obvious consternation with being called out of my warm and cozy

bed to come watch two 60 year olds drink beer, I asked, "so what is so important." My neighbor, beer in hand, said, "my brother, doesn't think he needs to go to church..." Her brother, who had obviously had more than the one beer she had had popped in and said, "That's right, I can get on the back of my horse [he was a cowboy] and have a better church time than I've ever had in a stuffy old building with a bunch of people putting their noses up at me..." I let him talk for a while and tried to take in all that he had to say. Finally, I took a breath (I had started holding my breath the moment he started talking - I was worried I might get drunk just off the fumes coming out of his mouth), and I said, "I think there are two problems with what you are saying. One, you think the church is a building, and you are dead wrong about that. The Bible is clear that the people of God are the actual church." Then I said, "and secondly, you think you're supposed to go to church so you can get something out of it instead of give something to it. *You are as wrong as you are drunk...*" Ok, I didn't say the italicized, but I sure wanted to :).

As we kept talking, I began to explain the reason missing church is such a travesty. You see, when the church gathers together and you're not there, you miss the opportunity to be involved in someone's life that needs YOU. The church misses the encouragement that only you can bring into their world. They miss out because you are being selfish only thinking about what you can get out of the experience - we act as a consumer.

The problem for those of us raised as Americans, is that we have begun to think of our entire lives through a

simple but distorted lens - the lens of being a consumer. For most of us, our first thought when it comes to just about anything is, "what will I get out of this?". This is what my neighbors cowboy brother was saying; there wasn't enough "in" church, for him to want to keep going. This is such a devastating blow to the way God actually views you and your role in His Kingdom. He does not see you as a simple consumer, rather the way God sees you is as a powerful contributor.

I can't tell you how many people I have heard talk about "going to church" in the context of what they get out of it. Now this isn't bad, honestly, as the pastor, I really hope you do "get" something out of it, that's my part in trying to encourage you. But my real hope is that you will come wanting to "give" something to someone. It takes a monstrous change in your mindset to go from a consumer pattern of living to a contributor attitude - but it's so worth it!

Some smarty pants, and maybe that's you, will ask: Does this mean that when life is horrible and everything around you is falling apart that it's not okay for you to come to church to be encouraged yourself? No, not at all! The Bible speaks very clearly about carrying each other's burdens - and inevitably there is going to be a point in your life where the burden that needs to be carried will be yours. Of course if you have given up meeting together with the church, you won't be able to benefit from those who are there to carry your burdens when you need them most. The ideal mentality of a Christ Follower, is to be thinking about who it is that they can be encouraging or

lifting up - again, this goes back to trying to live out God's will in the world. Who around them needs love? If we are all doing that, then even when it's you who needs the encouragement, there will inevitably be someone else to lift your load with you. When one of us is weak the others are strong²³.

When we ALL do this - caring for one another's needs as though they were our own- in that moment, the church becomes the most beautiful gathering of humans on the face of the earth. Beautiful because we are all taking on the responsibility of caring for each other as contributors instead of selfishly consuming. This, by the way, is the same secret to having a healthy marriage - to give 100% of yourself instead of seeking some kind of equilibrium of 50/50%...

So, do me a favor, don't call me at 10pm to talk to your drunk brother. Instead, have him read this section, and then invite him to come and take a God Step with you next week and look for ways he can get going in ministry!

²³ *This is part of the reason the Group step is so vital to the Christ Follower - it puts you in an intentional group of believers who walk with you through life's ups and downs*

REFLECT ON IT:

☆ How could you move from being a consumer to a contributor at church this week?

☆ Here are a few practical ways you can start thinking about being a contributor:

- Play a zone at church. What if you began to think of the zone around the chairs where you sit at church as your responsibility? Could you take it upon yourself to get to know those people? to dig into their lives? to pray with them or for them?
- You could begin simply asking two questions each and every week. The first Question: How are you doing? The Second: Really? We are so conditioned to give a “pat” answer to people who ask us how we are doing, it’s rare for anyone to really care enough to dig a little deeper and see how we are really doing. I oftentimes will stop and just pray with people who I know are really struggling.
- Pray - what if you began to make it a habit to find one person during the church service and to spend time praying for them. Afterwards, just go up and say, “hey, I don’t know you, but I’m praying for you!” (unless of course you do know them :)
- Write an encouraging scripture for someone as a note and then hand it to them at church and just tell them you wanted to brighten their day!
- Join a ministry team on Sunday mornings and start being very intentional about contributing

*(Children's Ministry, 1st Impressions, Worship,
Tech Team, etc.)*

☆ *Each of the previous 5 actions requires you to engage other people, this is part of the process of becoming a contributor - consumers don't even think about others, contributors are constantly thinking about them and engaging with them!*

☆ *Write down the specific thing you are going to do this Sunday to encourage someone at church*

TRAIL 12: HOW DO I INTEGRATE GOD INTO THE REST OF MY LIFE?

Colossians 3:17 (NLT)

"And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father."

1 Corinthians 10:31 (NIV)

"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

As I said earlier, when I first got connected to God through Jesus I was a teenager. I had come out of a pretty messed up lifestyle, all the usuals - partying, drinking, drugs, etc. But I kept one thing as a constant through that part of my life, I loved playing basketball with my friends (I'm not really sure why, I'm not good and I got whooped all the time, but I loved to play all the same). One day, as I was considering my newly found relationship with Jesus I had this thought come to me, "I want to spend all my time doing 'God' stuff." What I meant was, I had found such an amazing life in Christ, that I didn't want to spend my time doing things that didn't help others find their way back home to Him as well.

So, I did what any sane teenager would do, I gave up basketball (and any other activity that wasn't related to church or God). Yup, you got it right, I basically sat in my basement reading the Bible. One day, I was up at my church talking to my youth pastor (the guy who works with teens) and I told him about my decision. He said something that day that has impacted my life ever since. He told me that God didn't want me to give up things like basketball, instead, He wanted me to include Him in those activities.

See, when I played basketball (even as poorly as I played) I had an opportunity to be around people who were far from God and I had an opportunity to be His representative right then and there. It would matter how I talked, how I handled myself. It would matter if I was full of aggression or grace. It would matter if I included the kids that no one else wanted to include - my relationship with God did not need to be segmented off.

That day, what I learned is that God is not looking to create more limitations in your life, He is looking for a complete integration! Do you get it? God, Himself, wants to be integrated into every area of your life. Your business life, your family life, your friendships, your hobbies, when you eat and drink, when you lie down and get up. God wants to be fully integrated into you. This is a powerful concept, to think that even eating and drinking can be to the glory of God.

CAVEAT: it is important to say that I am speaking of "sin-neutral" activities. In other words, activities that are

not inherently sinful. Obviously, you could try and include God all you wanted in a lurid extramarital affair and it would not bring any glory to Him, whatsoever. Because... It's wrong.

REFLECT ON IT:

☆ *Take time today to inventory your life. How much of your day is spent doing things without consciously involving God?*

☆ *What are three things you could do to begin to engage Him in your day-to-day life?*

TRAIL 13: WHAT COULD I HAVE TO OFFER GOD?

(contributing my spiritual
gifts and natural gifting)

1 Corinthian 12:7-11 (NLT)

"7 A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other. 8 To one person the Spirit gives the ability to give wise advice; to another the same Spirit gives a message of special knowledge. 9 The same Spirit gives great faith to another, and to someone else the one Spirit gives the gift of healing. 10 He gives one person the power to perform miracles, and another the ability to prophesy. He gives someone else the ability to discern whether a message is from the Spirit of God or from another spirit. Still another person is given the ability to speak in unknown languages, while another is given the ability to interpret what is being said. 11 It is the one and only Spirit who distributes all these gifts. He alone decides which gift each person should have."

I have a friend who holds a very high position in his organization. He's the kind of guy who wields tremendous influence and power. When I lived closer to him we would often times get together for lunch to talk about life and leadership. One day, as we were chatting, I was surprised to learn that my friend thought he had very little to offer to the church or to God's Kingdom. Now, if you knew him, you would have been surprised (as I was) by his confession. He was successful, thoughtful, caring, intelligent, a hard worker, gifted in multiple areas and thought outside of the box. But none of that mattered because, when he looked at himself all he saw was

someone who had a lot to offer the business world, but nothing to offer in the spiritual realm. I was flabbergasted. Not only was my friend feeling like a spiritual failure, but he was also missing out on how deeply rewarding it is to be using your giftedness to help other people find their way back home to God!

Maybe you are looking at your own life and thinking, “I know I’m good at some things, but I just don’t see how God would ever use what I can do for His kingdom...”

Paul, in 1 Corinthians tells us that each of us is given “Spiritual Gifts”. I’m not going to list all of them out for you, but for our purposes, what should matter most to you right now, is that God gives these gifts for one reason - did you see it in vs. 7? “so we can help each other...”

God gifts you and me at various times in order that we might build up the “body²⁴” of Christ. In other words, if there is someone hurting in your church, you better believe that God has gifted someone around that person to make a difference in their lives. There will be someone who is an encourager or full of mercy. It will be the natural overflow of how God created them to use that gift to make a difference in God’s body - the Church.

So, we know that you are gifted, and we know that God wants to use you, but how do you go about actually

²⁴ *The use of body language is a way that early Christians talked about the Church - it was a way of communicating the idea, “you may be a finger or a toe, but you are still a part of this entire body and you matter”*

taking the gifts God has given you putting them into practical use? How do you, like my friend, go from sitting on the sideline feeling like you don't know how to play the game, to being an actual player on the field - making a difference?

There are two things I think matter most as you seek to discover your Spiritual giftedness and how God can use you:

1. Look for people who are experiencing trials, tragedy, transition, or temptation
2. Ask God how He would like to use you to make a difference in their situation

I know it seems like it should be more difficult than that, but it really is that simple. There are tests that people have created which you can take to give you an idea of what your spiritual gifts are, and these are good resources. But really, knowing how you are gifted matters very little if you are unwilling to humbly serve others. Starting with serving and trying to make a difference in others' lives seems to produce more results that help people find their way back home to God than taking a test and only having a simple working knowledge of where you are gifted. Ultimately as you serve and make a difference you will find that your spiritual gifts surface and almost become obvious because you will find the most success when living in your giftedness.

My friend not only had tremendous spiritual gifting that he was completely unaware of, he also had natural

gifts that could make a huge difference in the church. Are you good with numbers? Join the finance team. What about caring for kids? Impact a child's life by teaching in the children's ministry. Do you love to play sports? Why not coach a kids sports team and through your relationships impact people for Christ? Maybe you are a baker at heart. There have been a lot people who have been impacted by someone just baking them cookies and dropping them off with an encouraging note.

There is a way for each of your natural abilities to be used to make a significant impact in the Kingdom of God! But most people don't take the time to critically think about how their particular gift could make a difference. What about you?

My buddy ended up getting involved in an initiative I was leading at church. He became integral in the decision making process and helping that ministry become successful. Without his understanding of people and leadership we would have been in a world of hurt. This is why none of us should ever be content to sit on the sideline of ministry. Every single Christ Follower is called to do what Jesus did, get involved in ministry and help others find their way back home to God!

REFLECT ON IT:

☆ *Who around you right now is experiencing trials, tragedy, transition, or temptation?*

☆ *Take a few moments to pray for them and ask God if there is a way he would like you to make a difference. It could be as simple as writing them a card, praying for them, or helping them out financially. Let God be your guide. Write down what you are feeling prompted to do.*

☆ *What are things you enjoy doing or are good at? Start praying about how those gifts could be used in a church or to spread the Good News?*

TRAIL 14: SHOULD KNOWING GOD AFFECT MY FINANCES?

2 Corinthians 9:6-10 (NLT)

"6 Remember this—a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. 7 You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. For God loves a person who gives cheerfully. 8 And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others. 9 As the Scriptures say, They share freely and give generously to the poor.

Their good deeds will be remembered forever.

10 For God is the one who provides seed for the farmer and then bread to eat. In the same way, he will provide and increase your resources and then produce a great harvest of generosity in you."

Matthew 6:25-33 (NIV)

"25 Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? 27 Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life"

One of the surest ways to find out what matters to you most is to look at your bank statement. We invest our money in things that matter to us, don't we? This is why we feed our kids and put shoes on their feet - because our

children matter deeply to us. This is why we pay for internet and cable TV, we want to be entertained. This is why we purchase TVs, cars, boats, make investments, and so much more. Because each of those things matters to us in one way or another. When I found my way back home to God, I found something that mattered more to me than anything else in this world - a relationship with Christ! Finding my way back home to Him has been, and continues to be, the most significant and important thing in my life.

In the Old Testament, there is a concept called tithing. It means giving 10% of your income to God. I know a lot of people who have been Christians for a long time who seem to think that's a lot of money, but when I became a Christ Follower, I was surprised that it was so little, "God only wants 10% and He lets me use 90%?" - I wanted to give everything!

As we talk about our finances, percentages, giving and generosity - I feel as though I need to say that I do not believe God to be a "hard liner" as far as what percentage of our income we give. Now, this is not a concept which is new with me, that God is not a legalist about how much we give. But I must warn you, what I mean by God not being a "hard liner" is very different than what most people mean by it. See, most people say something like, "God doesn't care how much you give, just the heart you give it with," as an excuse to give less to God... They will make their grand statement about how God views giving and then proceed to leave less in the offering plate than they left as a tip for their waiter the night before.

No, I'm kind of the opposite of those folks. You see, I say I don't believe God is legalistic about percentages and amounts because I don't want a percentage or amount to limit what I am willing to give to God. I personally think 10% is a great place to start on a journey of generosity. My wife and I, as of the writing of this devotional, are giving 15% of our income to the kingdom of God. I don't share our percentage to try and show off or to hold ourselves up as something special. Instead, I am sharing our personal details because, honestly, the way we view our money is that 100% of our income is totally God's²⁵ and we choose to give a percentage back to Him. He generously allows us to use a portion for ourselves. My money is ALL His, and we give as we feel led. Often times above the 15% mark.

Here is how Jenni and I personally structure our giving: we always start with tithing 10% (which we take off the top before any bills, groceries or expenses are paid) to our local church²⁶. After our tithe we add an additional 5% to give as an offering to God above and beyond our tithe to other ministry initiatives (sponsor a child in another

²⁵ *If I were to follow the trail back to where all of my money comes from, it would ultimately lead me back to one source, God (I didn't choose to be born in America - God chose that for me, ultimately, every resource and opportunity that I have is a result of that one event.).*

²⁶ *It is the local church that God uses to help reach those who are lost and far from Him and bring them home to God. Local churches are a means of synergy for God's Kingdom. As we all pool our resources together in the church, we are able to see those dollars used to impact lives in ways they could not if they were not being used together in one force under the guidance and care of Godly church leadership.*

country, help a Christian radio station, give to a missionary, buy food for a family or some other "God" endeavor). The other 85% we use for our bills and expenses. But we do not stop there, we have on occasions felt compelled by God's Spirit to give out of the 85%. We never even hesitate any more. When God calls us to give out of what He has given us we don't worry about it because He is the provider, not us.

I have found, in my own life, that I simply cannot out give God. Whatever I give to Him, He finds a way to bless me back (not always materially) beyond what I could have asked.

How does the way Jenni and I do our finances strike you? For some it might come off weird. For others, inspiring. And still others it might get your heart beating because you aren't sure you could EVER do something like that. You're asking yourself, "what would happen at the end when we run out of money?"

I think, somewhere along the line, people got confused about where their money comes from. Somehow they began to think that their money was actually "their" money, and it was "theirs" alone. They missed the biblical principle of Stewardship. Stewardship is the idea that God takes some of His resources and gives them to you, his steward, to invest in various ventures. He invites you to invest in this Kingdom initiative and that Kingdom endeavor. But the best part is, as His steward, He lets you skim some of His resources off the top for your own needs - to provide for your family, needs and wants.

Stewardship is a complete shift in understanding of what you have and where it comes from.

Until you understand the biblical principle of stewardship, you will always hold your cash tightly because you believe that you were the one who produced it, "I worked hard for it, so I'm going to hardly ever let go of it." A steward realizes that, "yes, I may have worked hard, but it wasn't mine from the beginning, and the one who gave it to me has vaults full of the stuff. He can always give me more...." Learning you are steward, forces you to place your trust in the one who gives the money instead of the money itself (Jesus says in Matthew 6:24, that you can't serve both God and money - it's because you can't claim to trust God and then live in a way that only trusts your own ability to provide through your financial resources).

I heard a pastor one time tell a story about giving his children some french fries when they were at a fast food restaurant. He then asked them to give him back a french fry. He said, "My kids had a choice at that moment whether to give me the fry or not to. I knew that they were really my fries, I paid for them, I gave them - but I wanted them to chose to give to me because they wanted to be generous. I didn't even need the fries, I could have bought \$1000 worth of fries. But my kids would never learn to be generous without the opportunity to give." In the same way, I believe God wants us to learn to be generous givers, as Paul says, "planting generously so we can have a generous crop."

For me and my family, we have decided that God matters, and being generous matters, I could show you our bank statement if you didn't believe me, but I'm guessing you do. What about you? What is the story your bank statement tells?

REFLECT ON IT:

- ☆ *What have been your perceptions about giving to churches in the past? (If you have had negative experiences or perceptions, why not talk to someone in leadership and ask them for their perspective?)*

- ☆ *If everything you own or possess is ultimately a result of God's blessing in your life, how would it change the way you make purchases and spend your money?*

- ☆ *Getting practical: have you ever created a budget? One of the things my family does is to give our tithe off the top of our income (when we left it to the end we found there was never any money left). We do this by budgeting our money and making the tithe the first item in the budget.*

- ☆ *Invite God to have control over your finances today. Take some time to pray and acknowledge with Him that your finances are actually His - invite Him to lead you to do whatever He wants with them.*

- ☆ *How will you start to become a generous Christ Follower this week?*

TRAIL 15: WHERE DO I GO FROM HERE?

Romans 12:1-2 (NLT)

"And so, dear brothers and sisters,[a] I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him.[b] 2 Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect."

There are some movies where you get the end and you just want more... You almost wish you could join in the adventure and never have it go away. I think that's probably the most exciting part of following Christ, the story has not all been written yet. You have an opportunity to participate actively in the writing of history. There are people all around you every day who are far from God, and you and me have an opportunity to make a difference in their lives and help them find their way back home to God! What an honor, what a privilege to participate with God in this manner. You will literally find yourself living out the 4Gs (The God Step, The Groups Step, The Growing Step, The Going Step) for the rest of your life and just getting better and better and going deeper and deeper into what it means to follow Christ and how that's lived out!

REFLECT ON IT:

☆ *What is your plan for where to go from here?*

☆ *What book of the Bible will you read?*

☆ *What's your plan to get into a Small Group?*

☆ *Where are you planning to contribute in the church?*

☆ *Are there any Christian books you are interested in reading?*

☆ *What spiritual topic do you need to study next?*

Be an active self-leader and start today with planning out your next step as a Christ Follower!

