



WHAT
now?

WHAT COMES
AFTER THE PRAYER



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Published by Come About Press
comeaboutpress.com

Paperback: 979-8-9966533-0-0
EPUB: 979-8-9966533-1-7

Cover and interior design by bookwormsdesign.com

Printed in the United States of America

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WHAT
NOW?

What *in the* World Did I Just Do?



You said yes to something.

Maybe you walked an aisle, or prayed a prayer with someone. Maybe it was just you in your car, or your kitchen, or at the end of a hard week, and something shifted. You may not fully know what it was, or what you did, but you know something is different.

However it looked or felt, in that moment you said “Yes” to Jesus. And suddenly you’re wondering, *What Now?*

You may have questions already, or perhaps you think that you *should* have

questions. This book will try to help you answer the questions you have, and the ones that are coming. Underneath that big question is a stack of smaller questions. *Did anything actually happen? Am I supposed to feel different, or feel any sort of way? What am I supposed to do tomorrow morning? Do I have to start going to church? What if I mess this up before I even get started?*

The yes was a moment. The questions follow, and they don't get answered all at once.

This book doesn't try to be a complete answer. It's not the whole road, but an on-ramp to get you going on your new journey.

This is a short book, maybe an evening or two of reading. It's going to tell you what just happened, what's changing, and the four or five things that matter most in the first weeks and months. That's it.

There's more out there when you're ready, and we'll point you toward some of it. But for right now, you don't need a library. You just need enough to stand on.

Likely you were given this by a pastor or a friend. They chose it on purpose. Many

resources for new believers can be long and overwhelming. But you don't need a full theology course yet. You just want to know what's next. This is an easier path into your new life. You've been through much harder things than anything you'll find in here.

If you picked this up yourself, even better. It means you went looking. That counts.

This book is not trying to convert you. Something has already happened, so we are starting there.

It isn't a chore-list either. There are versions of new believer books that hand you a list of disciplines and tell you to start in the morning. That book exhausts you by week two, and you still don't know why you're doing any of it. This one is going to tell you why any of it matters first and let the practices come from there.

It also isn't the whole story. The yes you said opens onto something big. A short book can't carry all of it. What it can do is give you the shape, the beginning practices, and the honest acknowledgment that some of this will still feel weird several months in. That's enough to start. The rest will come in time.

A few things this book leans on without trying to prove.

The Bible is reliable. I'll quote from it through every chapter, and I'm going to assume you'll start reading it for yourself. We have a chapter on how to do that. If you don't have a Bible yet, there are several modern translations that are good. I'd recommend the *New King James Version (NKJV)* or *English Standard Version (ESV)* to start. There's a free app called *YouVersion* that puts it on your phone. You should install the app, but also get a physical Bible so you can hold it and write notes in it.

The Holy Spirit is real and lives in you now. You'll see references to Him throughout. That's not a metaphor or a poetic flourish. We'll get to what that means in the next chapter.

The church matters, even if you've got reasons to be cautious about it. There's a chapter on that too. For now, just hold the question.

Here's something you need to know. You are not a project.

No one is trying to fix you, polish you, or graduate you into someone more presentable. You're not a "before" photo waiting on an "after."

You're a person God loved enough to come rescue.

If you only take one thing from this book, that's the one I want you to hold. Jesus didn't wait for you to clean up. He didn't wait for you to figure out the right things to believe. He came for the version of you that said yes. The one with the history, the doubts, the bad habits, the questions you haven't asked anyone yet.

That's who He came for. That's who is reading this book.

This book has eight chapters, including this one. They're short by design.

The next one tells you what happened when you said yes, inviting Jesus to be your Lord and Savior. There's a story behind it that goes back to the beginning of the Bible, and we'll cover the parts of it you need to know.

Then chapters on the basics of the new life: prayer, the Bible, church, and why it still

feels hard sometimes even though something real happened. A chapter on where to go from here. And some closing thoughts to send you off.

You'll see references like (John 3:16) or (Romans 8:1) throughout. These are pointers to the Bible, by book name, chapter, and verse. You don't have to look any of them up to follow what I'm saying. They're there in case you want to see the specifics for yourself, which I hope you eventually will. We'll cover how to use them when we get to the chapter on Scripture.

Read this at your own pace. Underline things. Argue with it in the margins. Skip something if it's not landing and come back to it. The book is short enough that you can read it several times if you want. Some of what's in here will land right away. Some of it won't make sense until you have more time with it. That's normal.

You're going to have moments in the next few weeks where you wonder if anything really happened.

You've spent years becoming the person you are. It'll take time for any of this to shape you.

You'll feel normal. You'll lose your temper. You'll catch yourself thinking the same thoughts you used to think. You'll wonder if you imagined all of it.

That's not a sign you got it wrong.

What happened to you was real. The next chapter is going to start showing you why.

Take a breath. Turn the page when you're ready.

There's no hurry.



What You Said Yes To



You said yes to Jesus.

That's the part you probably know, but it's worth calling out. Whatever the moment was, you said yes to Him, specifically. Not to a religion. Not to a set of rules. To a person.

What I want to do in this chapter is tell you what was on the table when you said yes. Because most people, the first time, are saying yes to something true but small. They're saying yes to forgiveness. Or to a feeling. Or to a friend who showed them kindness when they needed it. Or to a relief they didn't realize they were carrying. None of that is wrong. It's just a fraction of what was on offer.

What you were offered is much bigger. And the only way to see how big is to back up and start the story from the beginning. From long before your yes.

The Bible tells one long story. Sixty-six books, dozens of authors. It took more than a thousand years to write. And underneath all of it, the story is about two kingdoms.

Not fairy-tale kingdoms with castles. But territory where a particular king rules. If you live in his land, follow his rules, are protected by him, then you're his citizen. Cross the border, and you belong to someone else.

There are two kingdoms in this story. One belongs to God. The other doesn't (Colossians 1:13, Ephesians 2:1-2). You might be thinking the other belongs to Satan, but you'd be wrong. The other kingdom is ruled by death, or the absence of God (Romans 5:17).

That's it. That's the whole frame. Once you see it, most of the Bible starts making more sense than it did before.

The story opens with the first humans in a garden God made for them (Genesis 1-2).

They had everything. They walked with God. The Bible says the breath of God Himself was the thing that made them alive (Genesis 2:7). Not just oxygen. The Spirit of God in them was their actual life source.

Then a serpent showed up.

You've likely heard some version of this story that says, "they ate the wrong fruit and got in trouble." That isn't entirely wrong, but it misses what was really happening. The snake wasn't tempting them with a piece of produce. He was making them an offer.

He told them that if they ate the fruit, they'd become like God (Genesis 3:5). They could run things themselves. They wouldn't need God. They could be their own gods, in their own kingdom, with their own rules, knowing good and evil (Genesis 3:5).

Here's what they didn't know. He wasn't offering them a real alternative. He was recruiting them into a failure he was already living. If he couldn't rule earth, he could at least take what God loved.

And they fell for it.

The moment they ate, something shifted. The Spirit who'd been their life belonged to a

kingdom they'd just walked out of. You can't host the life of one kingdom while pledging yourself to another. So, the Spirit went, not because God yanked Him out, but because they pushed Him out by their choice. The Bible says they "died" that day (Genesis 2:17), and most people read that and think, *but they didn't die, they went on living for hundreds of years.* They kept living physically, but the part of them that was truly alive, the Spirit-given life, was gone. What was left was a body that would keep walking around for a while and then stop (Ephesians 2:1).

That's the death the Bible is talking about. Not the body shutting off. The life source leaving. When it talks about Adam and Eve hiding because of their nakedness, it is talking about humanity feeling the absence of God's presence for the first time.

And every human born after them was born into the same condition. Not because we're all guilty for what they did, but because they stood at the start of humanity, and they passed down what they had, which was a body without the Spirit in it. We were all born citizens of the wrong

kingdom. We didn't choose it. We inherited it (Romans 5:12).

If you've ever felt like something was missing and you couldn't name it, what you felt was real. Something is missing. It's been missing in every human being since the garden.

Most of the Bible after Genesis 3 is the story of God refusing to let that be the end.

He picks one family, makes them a nation, and begins working with them. He gave them laws. He sent prophets (Hebrews 1:1). Because His holiness and the world's brokenness can't share the same room without tearing, He has them build a temple where He can come dwell among them (Exodus 25:8). None of it is the real solution. All of it is the setup for the solution.

This setup runs for thousands of years. The whole time, the Spirit is mostly outside people, not in them. He comes on certain ones for certain jobs (1 Samuel 16:13). He shows up. He speaks. He leaves. There are good kings and prophets and faithful regular people, but none of them ever get the Spirit back the way the first humans had Him.

The whole thing is waiting for someone who could fix what was broken at the root.

Jesus shows up in a small Roman-occupied province in the first century. Born to a young woman in a small town in unimpressive circumstances (Isaiah 7:14, Micah 5:2). He grows up, works as a carpenter, and at thirty starts saying things and doing things nobody else can.

He heals people. He raises the dead (John 11). He confronts the religious authorities. He says things about Himself that, if they aren't true, are crazy. He claims to be the one God has been pointing at for thousands of years (John 14:9, John 8:58).

And then, on purpose, He lets the religious leaders and the Roman government kill Him.

That's the part you most certainly know in some form. Jesus on a cross. Crucified one afternoon outside Jerusalem.

Here's what was actually happening on that cross.

Jesus was the one human who had never said yes to the snake's pitch. He'd never tried to be His own god (John 5:30). He'd never

crossed the border into the wrong kingdom. He was, the entire time, the one human still entirely in the Kingdom of God. So, when He went into death, He went in as a citizen of a kingdom death didn't have authority over. He took the punishment for everyone else's defection (1 Peter 2:24, Isaiah 53:5-6), but death didn't have a real claim on Him. There was nothing to hold Him there.

So, three days later, He walked out (Matthew 28, Luke 24). Death didn't keep Him. It couldn't.

That's the resurrection. It's not a metaphor. It's not a poetic way of saying His ideas lived on. The Bible records that hundreds of people saw Him alive after He'd been dead, and they staked their lives on it being true (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). Many of them ended up dying for saying so. People don't generally die for what they know to be a false story, or one they've made up.

When Jesus died and rose, two things happened. Both matter. Most people, when they talk about the gospel, talk about the first one and skip past the second. The second is the one that changes everything.

The first thing was that the cross paid the debt.

The thing that put us in the wrong kingdom was a choice, or for most of us a chain of choices, that wasn't ours to undo. Someone had to pay the cost of it. Jesus did. The Bible uses words like *ransom* and *redemption* for what He did (Mark 10:45, Ephesians 1:7). Both mean roughly the same thing: He paid the price to buy us out. Every defection, including yours and mine, accounted for in a single afternoon. The bill has been settled (Hebrews 8:12).

But settling a bill doesn't bring a dead person back to life.

This is where most short tellings of the gospel stop, and it's where they get it half-right. A paid debt is real and necessary, but it isn't enough on its own. If the cross had been the whole story, every human Jesus paid for would be forgiven and still dead, still citizens of the wrong kingdom, still without the Spirit, still walking around as bodies without the breath of God in them. Forgiven, but not alive.

The second thing the cross-and-resurrection did was the actual fix.

When Jesus walked out of the tomb, He wasn't just being vindicated for what He'd done on the cross. He was opening a door humanity hadn't been able to walk through since the garden. The Spirit could come back into people. Not on them. Not near them. In them, the way He'd been in the first humans before the snake.

That's what the resurrection actually is. Not a celebration of the cross. A new beginning. A second birth available to anyone who'd say yes. The dead get up.

The New Testament reaches for birth language for what happens when this hits a person, because no other language fits. Jesus tells a religious leader, a man with decades of God's word in him, that he must be "born again" to see His Kingdom (John 3:3). Paul says that anyone in Christ is a "new creation". The old has gone and the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). Peter says we've been "born anew" through the resurrection of Jesus (1 Peter 1:3). The writers of the New Testament aren't being poetic. They're describing what they saw happen in actual people. The dead come alive. The thing

that was missing came back. The body that had been walking around as a corpse on borrowed time got the breath of God put back into it.

The cross dealt with the debt. The resurrection dealt with the death. Both were necessary. Neither was complete on its own.

But none of it was automatic. He paid for everyone. He didn't force everyone to be His. The door was unlocked. Going through that door is still your move to make.

Going through the door was your yes.

When you said yes, two things happened in you at once. The same two things that happened in Jerusalem, only now happening on the inside of one specific human being.

The debt of every defection in your life got wiped clean (2 Corinthians 5:17, Hebrews 8:12). Every time you ran your own kingdom instead of His. Every wrong thing you've done that you remember and every wrong thing you've done that you've forgotten. The legal record is gone. The Bible says it's "as far as the east is from the west" (Psalm 103:12). That's a long way.

And the Spirit came home in you (Ezekiel 36:26-27, Romans 8:9-11, 1 Corinthians 6:19).

That second one is the part most short tellings skip, and it's the part that changes everything. The Spirit didn't visit you. The Spirit didn't come to help you live a better life. The Spirit *is* the new life. The thing the first humans lost in the garden, the breath of God in the lungs of a human being, came back into you. You're not the same person you were, just "patched up". You're a new person, with something in you that wasn't in you before.

That's what the Bible means by *born again*. It's not a churchy phrase. It's biology. You were dead, and now you're alive, because the breath of God is in you. Same as the first humans in the garden, before the snake. Same as Jesus on the morning of the third day. Same Spirit, same kind of life.

You also crossed a border. You walked out of the kingdom of death and into the kingdom of the God who just gave you new life. You're a citizen of a different country now (Colossians 1:13). And because you're a citizen of His Kingdom, you're also a son

or daughter in His household. The standing you have is not something you have to keep earning. It's something you were born into when the Holy Spirit came in.

I'll come back to all of this in the next few chapters. For now, just hold the picture. You didn't pick up a new hobby or join a club. You weren't given a checklist to follow. You were given a new life, the actual kind, the kind that runs on the breath of God, the kind humans haven't had since the garden. That life is in you now.

That's what you said yes to.

You may not feel any of it. That's okay. The next chapter will deal with that directly. But what's true about you doesn't depend on what you feel or even think. The kingdom you belong to has changed. The Spirit you didn't have is now in you. The death that was holding everyone lost its grip, and its claim, on you specifically.

That's a lot to carry on a Tuesday afternoon. Just sit with it for a little while.

When you're ready, turn the page.



FOR REFLECTION

- ❖ When you said yes, what did you think you were saying yes to in the moment? Now that you've read this, has any of that picture changed?
- ❖ The chapter says your yes wasn't a transaction but a change of citizenship. If that's true, what does it mean for the parts of your old life you haven't thought about yet?
- ❖ Write down two or three questions this chapter raised for you that you can't answer yet. You don't need to solve them. It's enough to name them and ask God to help you carry them honestly, and the Spirit will help you begin to understand them.

WORTH READING

- ❖ *Gospel of John* — It's only twenty-one chapters and written by one of Jesus' closest friends. It is the most direct telling of who He is and what He came to do.
- ❖ *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis — the classic for good reason. Adult, intelligent, doesn't condescend, and makes the case for the whole picture this chapter sketches.

Prayer

The last chapter ended with an important idea. When you said yes, the Spirit of God moved in. Not near, but inside you.

This chapter is about what to do with that. Specifically, how to talk with Him.

Prayer is the most ordinary thing Christians do, and the thing most new believers feel awkward or unsure about. So, we'll slow down and cover what prayer really is, why Christians have been doing it for two thousand years, what it looks like day to day, and what to do when you sit down to pray and your mind goes blank or nothing seems to happen.

We'll also keep going on the Spirit, because He's the reason prayer works. The two topics belong together more than most books treat them.

Prayer, very simply, is talking with God. That's it.

Not chanting an incantation. Not earning anything. Not performing for an audience that may or may not be paying attention. Just talking with God, the way you'd talk with anyone. And most importantly, listening to Him talk to you.

The thing that makes Christian prayer different from prayer in other religions is what we covered in chapter 2. The Spirit of God lives in you now. So, when you pray, you're not yelling at the sky hoping the message gets routed to the right department. You're talking with Someone Who is closer to you than your own thoughts. He hears the prayer before it leaves your mouth. He's already involved before you begin.

That changes what prayer feels like, even if you can't always tell.

A lot of new believers feel awkward praying because they're still picturing the old setup. God up there somewhere, you down here, prayer as some long-distance signal between you. Under that setup, everything depends on you finding the right words and

getting His attention. So, you stiffen up. You try to sound religious. You repeat the few Christian phrases you've heard other people use. And you hope you're getting it close enough.

You can stop all of that now.

The Bible says God's Spirit "intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Romans 8:26). In other words, when you don't know what to say, He does. When your prayers come out all messed up, He sorts them out. He's not waiting outside the door to evaluate your performance. He's inside the room, helping you.

If you can talk, you can pray. If you can't talk, the Spirit will pray through you.

Jesus prayed constantly, before big decisions, after long days, alone on hillsides, with His disciples, in the garden the night He was arrested. He told His followers to pray, taught them how, and promised the Father would answer when they did. After He rose, His followers kept praying. The book of Acts is full of it. Every generation since has taken up the practice. Through famines, persecutions, plagues, wars, and ordinary Tuesdays.

You're stepping into something that has a very long line behind it.

That matters because there will be days when prayer feels strange or pointless and you'll wonder if you're doing something wrong. You're not. You're doing what people who love Jesus have done since the beginning.

Most teaching on prayer eventually breaks into a few categories. They are not rules, but patterns that show up when you watch how people in the Bible actually prayed.

Praising God. Telling Him Who He is and what He's like. Thanking Him for being good, faithful, kind, and holy. This isn't flattery. It's tuning your own heart to reality. The Psalms are full of this. So is the prayer Jesus taught His disciples, which opens with "Hallowed be Your name" (Matthew 6:9), an old word for honored as holy. The God who indwells is worth naming as such, out loud, and regularly.

Saying you're sorry. Telling God where you have blown it and asking Him to forgive you and help you do better. You don't need

to grovel. You don't need to beg. He already paid for it. But owning what you did keeps the air clear between you. The line in the Lord's Prayer about forgiving debts (Matthew 6:12) is part of the daily rhythm, not a special religious moment.

Saying thank you. Not just for big things. Also, the small things. The fact you woke up, that you have food to eat, that the Spirit is still in you, that the people around you exist. Gratitude tunes you toward what's truly present in your life rather than what you wish were different.

Asking for things. This one shocks people who think they're being too needy when they bring God their needs. Jesus said the opposite. Ask. Keep asking. Ask for daily bread, healing, wisdom, courage, help with the people you love, help with the people you don't.

Paul wrote: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Philippians 4:6). Anxious is the opposite of prayed-up. Bring it. All of it.

You don't have to do all four every time you pray. In fact, you often won't. Sometimes prayer is one sentence of thanks. Sometimes it's a single sentence asking for help. Sometimes it's all of them. The Psalmists didn't keep score and neither does God.

When His disciples asked Him how to pray, Jesus gave them a model. It's short. It covers most of what a person needs to bring before God. It's worth knowing by heart, not because the words are magic, but because the shape of it teaches you how to think about prayer.

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be Your name,
Your kingdom come, Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we have
forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.*

(Matthew 6:9-13, paraphrased)

It opens by naming who God is. It moves to His kingdom and His will, before getting to your needs. Then it asks for what you need today, not tomorrow or next week. Just what you need today. And you'll be back tomorrow for tomorrow's needs. Then it asks for forgiveness and asks for protection from going the wrong way.

That's a complete prayer. You can pray those words exactly. You can pray your way through them in your own language, expanding each line into your own situation. Christians have prayed it both ways for centuries.

If you want a place to start, this is it. Pray the Lord's Prayer slowly, once a day, in your own words. See what comes up.

But don't stay there. The form of this prayer is intended to teach you how to pray your own prayers, in your own words, about what you're actually facing that day.

You will sit down to pray, and your mind will go blank. Or you'll feel awkward. Or you'll start and then forget what you were going to say next. This happens to everyone.

It happened to the disciples (which is likely why they asked Jesus to teach them how to pray in the first place). It happens to pastors. It happens to people who've been praying all their life.

A few things that help.

Pray Scripture. Open a Psalm and pray it back to God. The Psalms cover most of what a human heart can feel. Anger, joy, fear, longing, confusion, gratitude, despair, hope. When you don't have your own words, borrow theirs. Psalm 23 is a good one to start with. So is Psalm 51, Psalm 103, and Psalm 139.

Pray simply. "God, I don't know what to say. Help me." That's a real prayer. He hears it. You don't have to dress it up.

Pray honestly. If you're angry, tell Him you're angry. If you're confused, tell Him. If you don't believe He's listening, tell Him that too. The God who already sees what's in you isn't going to be shocked by the truth coming out of your mouth. Pretending in prayer is the one thing that doesn't really work, because the audience is already inside the room.

Pray the distraction. Sometimes your prayer will be distracted by things you have coming up, or that you need to take care of, or people you haven't thought of in a while. These distractions can pull you out of your prayer focus if you let them. Instead, pivot and say a prayer for the thing that has come to mind, then with your mind freed, return to what you had been praying.

There will be days. Maybe stretches of days. Maybe seasons. You'll pray and feel nothing. You'll wonder if God is listening. You'll wonder if you're wasting your time.

Keep praying.

The feeling of prayer working is not the same as prayer working. People in the Bible felt nothing for long stretches and prayed anyway. So have most Christians who lived long enough to write about it. Mother Teresa, who spent decades in slums caring for the dying, wrote in her later years that she felt completely abandoned by God. She kept praying. She kept serving. The work was real even when the felt sense of God was dim.

Don't measure your prayer life by your feelings. Measure it by the showing up.

You sat down. You opened your mouth. You set the time aside, devoted to God. That counts as prayer, every time. The Spirit who indwells you doesn't grade on emotional warmth.

Here's the part most new believers don't realize at first. Prayer is a conversation, which means God speaks too.

Not always with words. Not usually with audible words. But He speaks.

The most common way is through Scripture. You'll be reading along and a line will land like it was written for you. We'll get into that more in the next chapter. But the way it works is connected to prayer. When you've been talking to Him, you start hearing Him in what you read.

Another common way is through other people. You'll be wrestling with something, and a friend will say something that feels like it came from somewhere bigger than them. They didn't know. The Spirit knew.

Sometimes it's a thought that surfaces during prayer that doesn't quite feel like your own. A name comes to mind;

of someone you should call. A direction to take with a hard situation. A reminder of something you've been ignoring. Christians often call this a prompting, or a leading. It's how the Spirit who lives in you speaks to the part of you that thinks. It usually doesn't feel like a voice from outside. It feels like a thought you didn't manufacture.

Rarely, but really, some Christians experience more dramatic forms. Words that feel *given* rather than thought up. A sense of someone's situation you couldn't have known about. A prayer language that wells up when ordinary words fail. The Bible names those as gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12). They didn't stop two thousand years ago. They show up first, almost always in the privacy of someone's prayer life. You don't need to chase them. You also don't need to be afraid of them. If something like this starts happening when you pray, talk to a Spirit-filled pastor or a believer further down the road. They'll help you sort it out.

The point isn't the dramatic. The point is that the Spirit is not silent. He's in there

with you, speaking in the ways and at the volume you can handle right now.

You'll learn to hear Him better the longer you walk with Him. That's not a special gift. That's just what happens when two people spend time together.

If all of this feels like a lot, start small.

Tomorrow morning, before you check your phone, pray for two minutes. Use the Lord's Prayer if you don't know what else to say. Add one thing you're thankful for. Add one thing you need help with. Sit quietly for a moment and let Him have the floor. Ask Him to help you hear Him throughout the day. Then get up and start your day.

Do that every day for a week.

That's a prayer life. Not a complete one. Not a sophisticated one. But a real one, and a real start. The second half of the conversation is learning to hear Him through His word. And learning to read Him changes how you pray. In the next chapter we'll learn more about that half of the conversation.

I know this can feel like a lot. And to add to it, sometimes you're going to feel

something, and other times you won't. Either way, you're still talking to the God who loves you and who lives in you. He's pleased every time you show up. He'll be there tomorrow when you sit down again, whether you feel Him or not.



FOR REFLECTION

- ❖ What's harder for you to believe: that God hears you when you talk, or that He'd actually have something to say back? Sit with whichever answer comes first.
- ❖ The chapter says prayer is a conversation with someone already in the room. What would change about how you prayed today if you really believed that?
- ❖ What part of prayer feels most awkward to you right now? Is it the words, the silence, the wondering if anyone's listening, or something else? Bring that part to God in the form of a prayer, even if all you can say is "this is the part I'm finding hard."

WORTH READING

- ❖ *Prayer* by Tim Keller — a thorough, accessible book on what prayer is and how to do it, written for people who suspect they've been doing it wrong.
- ❖ *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster — older but still standard. The prayer chapters give you concrete forms to try when "just talk to Him" feels too open-ended.
- ❖ *Praying* by J.I. Packer and Carolyn Nystrom is a sturdy, plainspoken introduction to the practice from two voices who have walked it for a long time.

Scripture

The last chapter said prayer is the conversation. This chapter is about the place where we most reliably hear God.

Most new believers feel two things about the Bible. They are curious. They've heard for years that it matters. And they want to read it, but they're a little afraid of it. They've seen people use it badly. They've heard Christians fight about it. They may have tried opening it before and got stuck fairly quick. They're not sure they will understand it, or worse that someone will come along and tell them they are reading it wrong.

If that's where you are, you're in very normal territory. The Bible is the most read book in human history, and almost everyone who reads it well had to be taught how.

This chapter will do that. It won't make you an expert, but it will give you enough to start. And will help you keep going long enough that the reading itself starts teaching you the rest.

We'll cover what the Bible is, why Christians read it differently than other old books, where to start, what to do when you hit something weird, and the difference between studying it and being formed by it.

The first thing to know is that the Bible isn't really a book. It's a library of several books.

Sixty-six different documents, written by more than forty authors, over a span of about two thousand years, in three different languages, on three different continents. Some of it is history, some poetry, some law, some is letters between specific people and about specific situations. There is also prophecy, and compressed wisdom or proverbs. And there are some straight-up apocalyptic visions.

Treating all of that as if it's the same kind of writing is the single biggest mistake new readers make. You don't read a poem the

way you read a phone bill. The Bible has all those modes inside it, and reading well means knowing which mode you're in.

The library is organized into two main sections: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The word testament basically means *covenant*, an agreement between God and His people. The Old Testament is the longer, older section, written before Jesus arrived. It includes creation, the story of Israel, the law God gave them, the prophets He sent them, the songs and prayers they wrote, and the long setup for a Messiah they had been waiting for. The New Testament is shorter, written after Jesus came. It has four accounts of His life, known as the gospels. It also includes the early history of the church, letters from apostles to specific people, and a final book of visions about the end of the age.

There's one more thing about the Bible's shape that matters before we go further, and it's a frame that will help you a lot when you hit the hard passages.

The Bible was written for you, but most of it was not written to you.

Hold these two ideas together. The first says every word of this library belongs to you, applies to you, is meant to shape you. The second says the original audience was usually somebody other than you. Paul was writing to a specific church in a specific city about specific problems. Moses was writing to a nation that had just walked out of slavery. The Psalms were songs written for ancient worship. None of those people had you in mind. But God did. The library was assembled and preserved across centuries because the Spirit who inspired it knew you'd be reading it eventually.

A phrase worth remembering: *“for me, not always to me”*. This will help a lot of the strangeness become manageable. You stop expecting Leviticus to read like a self-help guide. You start asking what God was doing with the original audience, then asking what He's doing with you through the same words.

There are older religious texts than the Bible. There are also longer ones. So why do Christians treat this library as something different in kind?

Two reasons.

First, Christians believe God spoke through the people who wrote it. Not dictated, like He sat them down and told them what to write. Inspired, in the sense that the Spirit was at work in them as they wrote, so that what came out is what God wanted said. Paul still sounds like Paul. John still sounds like John. David's poetry sounds like David. But underneath all these human voices, there's a single intelligence holding the whole thing together. You can see it in how often the New Testament quotes the Old. Writers who never met, separated by centuries, kept returning to the same passages and treating them as authoritative. The library hangs together as one story even though the writers were spread across centuries and didn't know each other.

The second reason matters more for what you're about to do. The Spirit who inspired the text is the same Spirit who now lives within you. He didn't move into a finished version of you and start handing you instructions. He came in as the life itself, the breath that had been missing since the garden, the

first real breath you've had in your entire life. And you became a new person on the inside. So, when you read Scripture as someone in whom He lives, something happens differently from a non-believer who tries to read the same words. The text becomes, to use the Bible's own phrase, *living and active* (Hebrews 4:12). A verse you've read before now suddenly seems to speak directly to your situation. A passage that always felt dry, now cracks open and becomes alive. That's not your imagination. That's the Spirit working both ends of the line, the One who breathed the words now alive in the one reading those same words.

This is the thing nobody told you when you first picked up the Bible. You're not just reading it. You're being read to by the One who wrote it.

Almost nobody should start with Genesis and try to read straight through. That plan kills more new readers than any other. You'll do fine for a couple of weeks then you'll hit Leviticus and give up. There's a reason Leviticus is a hard wall to hit, it was instructions

for ancient priests in a very specific cultural moment. Someday Leviticus will be informative and interesting to you, but that day is not today.

The best place to start is one of the gospels. These are the four accounts of Jesus' life. They are easy to find, they are the first four books at the start of the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. If you've never read any of them begin with John. It speaks most directly about who Jesus is and is the most personal in tone.

Read it slowly. Don't try to do it all in one sitting. Don't set a distance limit, don't try to read a certain number of chapters. Set aside an amount of time, 15 minutes is enough to start. Read as far as you can in 12 or 13 minutes, then leave the last couple minutes to think about what you've read. Don't worry about how far you get, some days you'll read entire chapters, sometimes only a verse or two. You're not trying to finish. You're trying to learn about someone. The point of the gospels is that you walk away from them knowing Jesus better than you did before.

After John, you have options. The other gospels tell the same story as John, but from different perspectives and for different audiences. The book of Acts picks up where the gospels leave off and tells you how the Spirit went to work in the first generation of Christians. It's a great way to see the new life happening in real time. The letters of Paul (Romans, Ephesians, Philippians, and others) are short, dense, and aimed at exactly the kind of questions a new believer is asking: what does it look like, day to day. The Psalms in the Old Testament are the prayer book of God's people for thousands of years. Reading them will help teach you more about how to pray. Instead of trying to read through Psalms, try adding one or two Psalms to your other reading each day.

Pick one. Read it. If you finish, you can read it again or pick another. If you get stuck or bogged down, move on to another. You can always come back later when you have more foundation and understanding.

Don't try to read the entire Bible in a year. You're not in a hurry. This is going to be a lifetime of reading. You can take a week with a single book, or chapter.

Most new believers default to the wrong mode without realizing it. They open the Bible like it's a textbook. They want to extract information, take notes, figure out what it says, get the right answer. Studying isn't bad. Christians have been studying Scripture for two thousand years and you should learn to do it too. But studying isn't the first path.

The first path is being formed.

It's like the difference between reading a recipe and learning to cook. A recipe gives you information. Learning to cook is what happens as you spend time in the kitchen. You learn how to handle the knife, how to taste as you go, how to season without measuring. All of it changes. You don't have to consult the recipe anymore because the recipe is in you.

Scripture is meant to do that to you. Not in a week. Across your entire life. The way you think, the way you respond when things go wrong, what you assume about God, what you assume about yourself, the words that come out of your mouth before you have time to filter them. All of it gets shaped, slowly, by enough time spent in this library.

But notice what's really doing the shaping. It isn't the book. It isn't your willpower or your reading habits. The Spirit who is now alive in you is the one doing the work. Scripture is the means He uses, how He speaks to you, but He's the one using it in you. That's why a verse can sit in front of you for years without doing much and then suddenly come alive one morning when you weren't expecting it. He's the one in you doing the slow remaking. It's His words, and He knows you, so now that you allow it he can bring the two together to reshape you.

The way you do this is not complicated. You read. You read regularly. You read with an open posture. You ask the Spirit, before you start, to show you what He wants you to see. You read slowly enough that something has time to land. When something lands, you stop, and you sit with it, and you let it talk to you. You ask what it says about God, what it says about you, what it might be asking of you today. And you ask the Spirit to bring these ideas to your thoughts as you go throughout your day.

Most days you won't have a big moment. That's fine. The cumulative effect is the

point, not the daily fireworks. Christians who've been doing this for decades will tell you the same thing: the verse that saves your life on a Tuesday in your fifties is one you read a hundred times before without it catching your notice in any significant way. The Spirit was working on it the entire time.

Sooner or later, you'll read a story in the Old Testament where God tells someone to do something that sounds harsh. You'll read a passage that seems to contradict another. You'll read a verse that seems to say one thing in your translation and a different thing in another. You'll read something a particular Christian on the internet has built their entire identity around being angry about.

A few things to know.

You don't have to figure it out alone. Christians have been reading this library for two thousand years and almost every hard passage has been worked over thoroughly by people who love the Bible and have spent decades thinking about it. A good study Bible will give you a paragraph of context on most

of the hard parts. A pastor or mature believer can talk you through more. You don't have to land an answer on every difficult passage by yourself, and you definitely don't have to land one tonight.

You don't have to pretend it doesn't bother you. The Bible has hard passages. Saying so out loud is not a failure of faith. It's honesty, and the Spirit can work with honesty. He can't work with you faking it.

And one more thing. The Bible is not flattering to its own heroes. Almost every major figure in the story does something terrible at some point, and the text doesn't soften it. Abraham lies about his wife. David commits adultery and arranges a murder. Peter denies Jesus to a servant girl after swearing he'd die before he'd do such a thing. The Bible is not a book about people who got it all right. It's a book about a God who keeps reaching for people who keep getting it wrong. That's part of the design. When you read a passage where someone in the story behaves badly, the question is rarely "is this God endorsing this." The answer is almost always "No, the text is showing

you what people do, and what God does in response.”

The Bible is not your relationship with God. It's one of the main places you meet Him, and it's how you learn to recognize His voice. But it isn't a substitute for Him. You can read it every day for forty years and miss Him entirely if you only ever treat it as a book.

You also can't read it to earn anything. Reading is not how you stay His. You're His because He came and got you, and He put His Spirit in you. That's done and settled. The reading isn't payment. It's how the life that's already in you grows into what it already is. A child doesn't eat to become human, they already are one. They eat to grow and become the healthy adult they are destined to become. Scripture is that kind of food.

Read it expecting to meet Him. Read it expecting Him to speak. Read it knowing that the Spirit who lives in you is the same Spirit who breathed these words, and He hasn't stopped working with them.

Tomorrow, before you do anything else, open to John 1 and read the first chapter. Slowly. Stop when something catches you.

Sit with it for a minute. Pray about it before you move on. Then read another chapter the next day.

Do that for a week and you will be amazed by what happens.

In the next chapter we'll talk about the church, because reading the Bible by yourself is a beginning, but it isn't where the new life finally lives. The new life lives in a room with other people who said yes too.



FOR REFLECTION

- ❖ This chapter draws a line between *studying* the Bible and being *formed* by it. Which one have you been more drawn to so far? Which one are you more afraid of?
- ❖ What's your honest feeling about reading the Bible? Curious, intimidated, suspicious, indifferent? Whatever it is, name it. The Spirit can work with whatever you bring as long as it's honest.

- ❖ What do you think will be harder for you, sitting still long enough to read or letting it actually change you? Both are real. The honest answer points at where the work begins.

WORTH READING

- ❖ *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart — the standard accessible primer for forty years, and still a great starting place.
- ❖ For a starter Bible, the New King James Study Bible or the ESV Study Bible are both excellent. Either one will give you readable text plus enough notes to keep you from getting stranded on the hard parts.

Church



The last chapter ended with you alone in your kitchen, opening a Bible. This one widens the lens. Most of the new life happens in a room with other people in it.

I know, that's a hard sentence for some of you. Church is the part of Christianity that has hurt the most people. If you're flinching at the word, you're not alone, and I'm not going to pretend the flinch isn't earned. We'll get to that. But I have to start somewhere true, so here it is: when Jesus saved you, He didn't save you into a private spirituality. He saved you into a family. The whole shape of the new life assumes you're part of one. So, we have to talk about it.

This chapter is going to do three simple things. It's going to tell you what church is and isn't. It's going to acknowledge the

baggage without dwelling on it. And it's going to give you enough to walk into one and know what you're looking for.

Most of what people argue about when they argue about church comes down to confusion on three points. I'm going to name them up front, so the rest of the chapter has somewhere to stand.

Church isn't optional. I know how that sounds, like something your grandmother would say. But it's not me trying to scare you into a pew. The Christian life is built, top to bottom, on the assumption that you're connected to other Christians. The metaphors in the New Testament are all bodies and families and households and cities. None of them work alone. A foot doesn't function detached from the leg. A child doesn't grow up by themselves. The Spirit forms you in part *through other people*, and there are things He'll do in you in the company of believers that He won't do when you're alone in your kitchen, no matter how earnest you are. You can be a Christian without being in a church the way you can be alive without

breathing. It works for a few minutes. Then it gets serious.

Church isn't the building. When the Bible uses the word, it doesn't mean a building or a service or a denomination. The Greek word is *ekklesia*, which just means *the called-out ones*, the gathered people. The Church is the people. The church building is where they meet. The service is what happens when they meet. Those are useful and good, but if every church building burned down tomorrow the church would still exist, and it would meet in living rooms and schools and anywhere else by the following weekend. This matters because most people's church baggage is really baggage with a particular building, a particular pastor, a particular service style, a particular tradition. None of that is the church itself. The church is bigger and older than any one expression of it.

Bad churches don't disprove the concept. If you've seen a church do harm, you've seen something real. I'm not going to wave it away. But a counterfeit doesn't prove the real thing doesn't exist. In truth, counterfeits only exist because there is

something real to counterfeit. There are churches that are doing damage right now. There are also, on the same Sunday, in the same town, churches quietly doing the work they were made for: feeding the hungry, walking with the dying, raising children, sitting with the broken, showing up over and over for people who have nothing to offer in return. Both are happening. The fact that one happens doesn't cancel out the other. Don't let the worst examples tell you what the whole thing is.

So, if church is the gathered body of believers, what does it actually do?

A few things all at once, every time it meets, whether you notice or not.

It worships. The gathered people declare out loud that Jesus is worth what He says He's worth. That's what worship is. It's not a music style. It's not an emotional experience. It's a body of people speaking the truth about who God is, together, where everyone can hear it. You're going to be tempted, especially early on, to evaluate worship like a consumer. *Did the songs hit?*

Did I feel something? Did the band sound good? Try to resist the consumer reflex. The right question on Sunday isn't *did that move me*, it's *did I tell Him the truth about who He is*. Worship is something you do, not something done to you.

It opens the Bible together. Someone, usually a pastor, walks the gathered people through what a passage says and what it means. Some weeks it'll land directly on you. Some weeks it won't, because it was for someone else in the room, and that's okay. It doesn't mean it hasn't had impact on you, just because you weren't aware of it.

We talked in chapter 4 about reading the Bible alone. Hearing it taught with other believers is the other half. Both are part of being formed by Scripture, not just learning about it. They're not interchangeable. You need both.

It eats together and lives together. The actual relationships with the actual people. Conversations after the service. A meal during the week. The text when someone heard you'd had a hard day. The phone call when somebody's kid is in the hospital. Most

of what God does in your life happens in this layer, almost no new believer expects that. They show up for the service and miss the body. The body forms in the in-between.

It sends people out. The church doesn't gather just for itself. The point of Sunday isn't Sunday. The point is to send you back into Monday, into your job, your neighborhood, your family, with the Spirit at work in you, doing the things in those places only you can do. Your pastor is not going to meet your coworker, or your classmate. You will. The gathering equips. The week is where the work happens.

You don't need to consciously track all of this. It happens whether you're paying attention or not. What matters is being there enough for it to do its work in you.

Some of you are reading this with a story in your head I haven't named yet.

Maybe you grew up in a church that was cold or controlling or strange. Maybe you watched a pastor abuse his power or a congregation tear someone apart. Maybe you asked the wrong question, or just wore the

wrong thing, and got the silent treatment until you stopped coming. Maybe you sat through years of service and never felt anything and assumed something was broken in you. Maybe nothing dramatic happened and the whole thing just felt fake.

I'm sorry. I truly mean that. The church has hurt a lot of people, and pretending otherwise wouldn't be honest. Some of those wounds were caused by individuals doing things Jesus would have flipped tables over. Some were caused by whole systems, by churches that drifted so far from what they were supposed to be that they started causing harm in His name.

Here's what I want to say to you, gently. The hurt is real, and it deserves space and time and probably the help of someone wise to walk you through it. None of that goes away by reading a chapter in a book. It also doesn't go away by avoiding church. What I'd ask is this: don't let the worst church you've known be the only church you'll ever try. There are other rooms. The Spirit is moving in some of them, in ways that would heal parts of you the last room hurt. Walking

back in is brave. It's also, for most people, necessary. Find someone you trust to walk in with you the first few times, if you can. Go in eyes open, not naive. But go in.

I have some hard news for you. There's no perfect church and looking for one will get you nowhere. What you want is a *good enough* church. That's not a cop-out, or an excuse. It just means to find one actually doing the things this chapter has been describing. Here's a short list of what to look for and what to be wary of.

Look for these. A church that takes the Bible seriously and teaches it directly, not as a prop for the pastor's opinions. A pastor who points to Jesus more than at himself. People who know each other and are willing to know you. A clear sense that the gospel is the center, not politics or personality. Some kind of regular practice of communion and baptism. Room for the Spirit to move, in whatever form that takes in their tradition. A track record of caring for the poor and the vulnerable in their actual neighborhood.

Be wary of these. A pastor who can't be questioned. Leadership that's secretive about money. A culture where you feel pressure to dress, vote, or behave a particular way to belong. Constant emphasis on what this church has that other churches don't. Sermons that are mostly about success, prosperity, or your best life. A sense that the gospel is something you've graduated from in favor of more advanced teaching. People who seem performed at, not loved.

These lists are not exhaustive. Trust your gut a little. The Spirit is in you now, and one of the things He does is alert you when something is off.

A few practical notes. Don't try one church and decide all of them are like that. Try a few. Give each one a few weeks before deciding. Sit somewhere visible enough that someone can introduce themselves. If no one does, don't assume they don't care. Approach someone and introduce yourself. Stay for coffee after. Ask a real question of a real person. The best churches in the world are slightly awkward to walk into the first time, because every existing community has

its own rhythms you haven't learned yet. That's normal. Push through the awkward. It's worth it.

Before I close, I have to say something about two practices, because you'll see them happening and you should know what you're looking at. Different traditions use different words. Some call them *sacraments*, some *ordinances*. The fight over the words isn't worth your time right now. What matters is what they are.

Baptism is the public sign that you've changed kingdoms, declared a new allegiance. You go under the water and come up out of it, and the picture is of dying and rising again, the same shape as the gospel itself. The old you, buried. The new you, raised up. It's the closest thing the Christian life has to a citizenship ceremony. If you said yes recently and haven't been baptized, this is one of the first things to ask your pastor about.

If you were baptized as an infant, you should consider being baptized again now. Not because the previous one wasn't meaningful. It was. Your family was declaring

something on your behalf, and that mattered. But baptism in the New Testament is a personal declaration. You go under the water as someone who has said yes, in front of people, on your own. That's the act Jesus modeled when He was baptized as an adult, and the act He told His followers to repeat when He sent them out. An infant can't make that declaration. You can.

Communion is what most churches do regularly, sometimes weekly, sometimes monthly. A small piece of bread, a small cup of juice. The bread represents His body being broken for you. The cup represents His blood, poured out for you. He told His followers to keep doing this until He comes back, as a way of remembering what He did and what they belong to. Different churches understand this practice in different ways, and again, that fight isn't yours to settle right now. When the bread and cup come around, you're being invited into an ancient practice to remember what He did for you, to receive what He's still giving, and to declare you belong to Him in front of everyone in the room. Take it slow. Don't rush past it.

Both of these go deeper than I can take them in a chapter this short. When you're ready to know more, ask the pastor at whatever church you land in. They've been waiting for somebody to ask.

One more thing. Both practices are important. Do them. But understand what they are and what they aren't. They don't save you. That happened when you said yes, when the Spirit came in and made you a brand-new creation. Baptism and communion are how you declare what's already true, and how you keep being reminded of it. They're meant to mark a real thing, not to make it real.

A lot of new believers tell themselves they'll find a church eventually. After they get their lives a little more together. After they figure a few more things out. After the season calms down. After they're sure of what they believe.

That's exactly backwards. You wouldn't wait until you were in shape before you joined a gym. Likewise, you don't get yourself together and then go find your people. You go find your people so they can help you get yourself together. And you them.

The church isn't a reward for advanced Christians. It's the workshop where Christians are built up.

You said yes. The Spirit is in you. Now go find the room where the rest of them are.



FOR REFLECTION

- ❖ When you consider walking into church for the first time what is the feeling that surfaces? Dread, hope, embarrassment, longing, something else? Tell God what you're feeling.
- ❖ What's your honest history with church? Not the version you'd give a pastor. The actual one. Where it formed you, where it hurt you, where it just left you cold. Naming it clearly is the first step to walking back in with eyes open.
- ❖ If you don't have a church yet, what would it actually take to walk into one this week? If you do, when's the last time someone there knew you well enough to notice if you stopped coming?

WORTH READING

- ❖ *Redeeming Power* by Diane Langberg — psychologist with decades of work on trauma and spiritual abuse.
- ❖ For a fuller treatment of baptism and communion when you're ready, your pastor will have better local recommendations than I can give from here.

Why *It* Still Feels Hard



The last chapter sent you to go find the room. Some of you have already started looking. Some of you read it and felt something tighten in your chest, because you've been in rooms before and it didn't go well, or because what's hardest in your life right now isn't a room you walk into. It's something happening inside you that no Sunday service is going to fix.

Either way, this chapter is specifically for you.

You recently said yes and something real happened. You felt it. You may still

be feeling it. But somewhere in the first stretch of this new life, you ran into a wall you weren't expecting. An unexpected bill showed up. The marriage is still strained. The voice in your head that called you worthless before said it again last night, in the same tone, with the same evidence. The depression didn't lift. The grief didn't go away. The argument with your sibling went the way it always does.

And somewhere in all of it a question formed. *If something real happened, why does it still feel like this?*

That question is the reason for this chapter. The answer is going to take more than one move, because there's more than one reason what is hard is still there. But the first thing you need to hear is that the hardness is not evidence that the yes didn't take. It's evidence that you're a citizen of a new kingdom, living in territory the old kingdom hasn't fully released yet. That's what the rest of your life is going to be, on this side of things. Hard does not mean wrong.

Let me walk through three of the most common reasons the new life feels hard early on, and what to do about each.

The first reason is the simplest and the one most believers overlook initially.

The yes changed you. It did not change the world around you. Your job is still your job. Your body is still your body, with whatever it's carrying. The economy has not changed. People have not changed. The thing that was breaking your heart on Monday will still break you on Tuesday. And the fact you said yes between them doesn't mean Tuesday won't hurt.

This is going to sound obvious when you read it. It's much less obvious when you're inside it. Most of us, in the first weeks after saying yes, expect some kind of buffer. We don't always know we expect it. But somewhere underneath, we're hoping that being a Christian now means the rough edges of life will be a little softer. That God owes us, at minimum, a couple months off.

He doesn't, and He won't. The new life doesn't spare you from suffering. But it does change who you are inside the suffering. That's a different and better thing, but it takes some time to feel like it. In the meantime, expect that the same kinds of hard

things you always faced are going to keep showing up. Cancer. Layoffs. Fights you didn't see coming. The weight of loving people who are hard to love or actively resist it. None of it is a sign your faith failed. It's a sign you are alive.

What helps in this kind of hard is what's already been quietly forming in you across the last few chapters. You pray, even when prayer feels like talking into a room with the lights turned off. You stay in Scripture, especially the Psalms, where people who loved God said honest things about hard things and didn't get rebuked for it. You stay in the room with other believers, who can carry what you can't carry alone. You don't isolate. And you don't make permanent decisions about your faith in the middle of a hard season, because the version of you that's reading the situation in the dark is not the version of you that's going to read it in the morning.

That last one is worth writing on a card and putting on your bathroom mirror.

The second reason it feels hard is closer to home, and more surprising to new believers.

When you said yes, the Spirit moved in and you became someone new. That isn't poetry. It's what the Bible means when it says you've been *born again*. The Spirit's presence in you isn't an upgrade bolted on to the old you. It's a new kind of life, given by birth. The you who's been quietly orienting toward Jesus since you said yes is the real you now.

But the version of you that lived without Him before does not disappear overnight. He's still there, in habit and reflex. He's been writing your scripts your whole life. He knows your weaknesses, your old comforts, your favorite escape routes. And he hasn't accepted the eviction notice.

Most new believers find that for the first stretch after the yes, the old voice gets *louder*, not quieter. That's normal, and there are reasons for it. You're paying attention to your inner life now in a way you weren't before. Things you used to ignore, you can hear. Habits you used to feed without thinking, you're now trying to interrupt, which means they push back. The Spirit in you is sensitive to things you used to be numb to, which means more of your own life shows up to you with its volume turned up.

So, the old voice keeps showing up at the door. He knows your name. He runs your old scripts. He says the things you've always believed about yourself, in the same tone you've always believed them in. *You're not really any different. You always go back. Look at what you just did. This isn't going to last.*

Two small things to know about that voice.

The first is that it's not you. There's a tendency in the first months after the yes to assume that whatever shows up in your head is the real you, and the parts that want to follow Jesus are some kind of performance laid on top. It's the other way around. The real you, the one God made new, is the one quietly orienting toward Him. The voice that keeps trying to drag you back is a former occupant who hasn't moved his stuff out yet. He'll keep showing up at the door. He doesn't have keys anymore.

The second thing is that you don't have to argue with him. This is the move that costs people years of progress. They hear the voice and they think the right Christian thing is to engage. Match every accusation

with a counter. Debate every doubt to a draw. Sometimes that is the right move, especially if you know your Bible well enough to recognize what's being twisted. But for most of us, most of the time, what actually works is reorientation. You turn your face toward Jesus. The conversation is still open. The Bible is still there. The friends are still down the hall in the room you just found. You pray. You open the Word. You call somebody. You worship in the car. You move. You stop standing in the kitchen at 11pm having a long conversation with someone who has nothing to say that you need to hear.

The old voice loses his volume when he loses his audience. Not because you won the debate. Because you stopped showing up for it.

The third reason is the most unexpected.

When the Spirit moved in, He didn't only bring comfort. He brought awareness. You're more alive to your own sin than you were before. You can feel things in your relationships you used to be able to ignore.

You walk into rooms and notice things. You're sometimes overwhelmed by tenderness in moments that used to leave you cold; and sometimes overwhelmed by grief in moments you used to walk past. Your inner life has more bandwidth now, which means more is coming through it. Some of what's coming through is beautiful. Some of it is painful. All of it is louder than it was.

This is one of those things almost no one warns new believers about. The new life is not always more comfortable than the old life. In some ways it's less comfortable, at least at first. You traded numb for awake, and awake includes everything. The same Spirit who comforts you when you grieve is the one who makes you grieve more honestly than you used to. The same Spirit who brings peace is the one who shows you the parts of your life that are not yet at peace.

The good news is that this part of the hardness is doing something. The discomfort of becoming a more awake person is the discomfort of becoming. There isn't a way to be remade without feeling some of the remaking. You'll find that the things the Spirit is

showing you are also the things He's quietly working on, sometimes faster than you can keep up with, sometimes slower than you'd like. Both are normal. Neither means you got something wrong.

I should say one more thing before this chapter closes, because I'd rather you read it before you need it than after.

You're going to fail. You're going to do something, in the next few weeks or months, that you said yes to leave behind. It might be a thing you've struggled with for years. It might be the thing you most hoped you were finally done with. And when it happens, the old voice will be right there saying, "See? Nothing actually changed."

He'll be wrong, but he'll sound right in the moment.

What I want you to know in advance is what's true about what just happened. Falling does not undo what God did. Your citizenship is not dependent on your perfection. It's not revoked the first time you revert to the ways of the old country. The "Yes" you said is what put you in His family.

Acting like the family you came from doesn't kick you out of the family you were adopted into. Sons and daughters who do something wrong are corrected but are still sons and daughters. They might need a hard conversation. They don't need to be re-adopted.

The move when you fall is the same move it was the first time. You stop. You turn around. The Bible has a word for it: *repent*, which can sound heavier than it is. Repent just means to *turn back*. You acknowledge what happened, honestly, not with a list of excuses. You agree with God that it was what He says it was. You ask Him to forgive you, knowing He already paid for it. And knowing that the new life He gave you on the other side of the cross didn't get revoked by what you just did. You're not less alive today than you were yesterday. You keep walking in the right direction.

You don't have to retrace your steps back to the point of failure. You make the correction, turn to face the right direction, and keep moving forward.

The temptation in that moment is going to be to hide. That's the oldest move in the

book. Back in Genesis, Adam and Eve heard God walking in the garden after they ate the fruit, and they hid in the trees. Don't do that. Walk out from behind the tree. He's not surprised by what He sees. He knows what you did, and He has the answer for it. He didn't go through the cross to lose you over the thing you just did.

One more thing on this. If you find yourself falling into the same thing again and again, that's a sign you need a person. A real human, ideally a pastor or someone in the room you trust, who can pray with you and ask you the hard questions. Someone who can stand with you in the long work, keeping you accountable. Some patterns don't break in private. They need light, and witnesses, and people who refuse to let you fight them alone.

I want to leave you with three things hardness doesn't mean.

It doesn't mean you got it wrong. The Spirit doesn't withdraw because life got hard. The Christians who have walked with God the longest will tell you that the

hardest seasons are not absences of God, even when they feel like absences of God. He's there. He's quiet sometimes. But He's not gone. There are dozens of Psalms that describe this.

There's a lot more to be said about why God is sometimes quiet, and people much wiser than me have written entire books on it. This isn't the book for that, and now isn't the moment for it. Trust that He's there for now. When you're ready, the conversation is bigger than what I can fit here.

It doesn't mean you have to figure it out alone. Almost everything I've described in this chapter is meant to be carried in the company of other believers. The room is not optional. The Bible is not optional. The conversation with God, even the silent ones, is not optional. None of it works alone. All of it works together.

And it doesn't mean it stays this hard forever. The Christian life is not a smooth ascent, but it is going somewhere good. The same Spirit who is in you right now is the one who will still be in you twenty years from now, having quietly done a

great deal of work without your knowing. Some seasons feel almost effortless. Some feel like you are crawling. Both are normal. Both are formation. The morning is coming. The darkness will lift. Eventually.

For now, you keep walking.

You stay in the room. You stay in the Word. You keep talking to the Person who's in the room with you. And when you fall, you get back up, and you turn around, and you keep walking.

That's the whole of it.



FOR REFLECTION

- ❖ What's been the hardest part of the last few weeks since you said yes?
- ❖ Think back to the last time the old voice was loudest in your head. What was it telling you about who you are? Now ask: which kingdom did that voice belong to?
- ❖ If you're in the middle of a stretch where nothing seems to be happening between

you and God, what would it take to just keep showing up anyway? Not because you feel like it. Because He's still in the room.

WORTH READING

- ❖ *A Grief Observed* by C.S. Lewis — short and honest, written from inside the loss of his wife, for anyone trying to keep speaking to God in the dark.
- ❖ *The Psalms* — start with chapters 13, 22, 42, 88, and 130 to find the prayers Christians have been using for thousands of years when the hard feels bigger than the hope.
- ❖ *Romans 6 - 8* — read slowly, more than once, for what the New Testament says about the old self that won't leave quietly.
- ❖ *1 John 1 & 2* — short, direct, and exactly about what to do when you fall.

Where to Go from Here



The last chapter ended on a sentence that's basically the whole of it. *You keep walking.* If you remember nothing else from this book, that one is enough. This chapter is about what walking looks like in practice, between now and the rest of your life.

The next chapter is the last thing in this book. A kind of benediction. This chapter must do the real send-off. Two things to leave you with: the shape of growth, and the foundation that carries the weight. Then you close the book and go live the life.

The thing that derails more new believers than almost anything else is the expectation

that growth in this faith should look like a steady upward line.

You said yes. The Spirit moved in. You start praying and reading and showing up at a church, and the trajectory should bend up and keep bending up. Holier this month than last. More peace. Less of the old stuff.

That's not how it works. It's never how it's worked. The actual shape of growth is more like weather than like a graph. Sudden changes that come out of nowhere. Long plateaus where nothing seems to be happening. Stretches of regression where old patterns resurface and you wonder whether anything has truly changed.

The plateaus are the part that messes people up. You're praying. You're reading. You're going to church. And nothing dramatic is happening. The temptation is to assume you're doing something wrong, or that the whole thing has gone cold.

It hasn't. Plateaus are where the consolidation happens. The visible growth spurts are real, but most of the actual work of being formed into a different kind of person happens in seasons where it looks like nothing is happening. You can't watch a tree grow.

You walk past it for years and one day you notice it's twice the size, and you can't point to the day it changed.

Two more things about the long shape of this.

First, you will see your remaining failures more clearly than the people around you do. They see how different you are. You see how much further you have to go. Both views are accurate. Neither one is the whole picture. If you've been a believer for six months and someone who knew you before says you seem like a different person, believe them. Their view from the outside is real. Yours from the inside is real too. The two won't always match.

Second, the thing we're after is direction, not perfection. Are you facing the right way? Are you, on the whole, walking toward Him rather than away? That's the question. You won't arrive in this life. What you can do is keep facing the right way and keep putting one foot in front of the other.

The comparison thing will be a problem if you let it. Other believers will seem to be growing faster than you, or hearing God more clearly, or having experiences you're

not having. Some of that is real. Some of it is performance. None of it is your timeline. Your job is the path you're on, not the path next to you.

And the last chapter already gave you the falling map, so I won't redo it here. The only thing worth adding is this: don't let one fall keep you from the practices that keep you walking. The path back is the same path forward.

So, what do you do once you put this book down?

The honest answer is not as much as you might think.

You don't need a program. You don't need to find the perfect church on the first try. You don't need to memorize a verse a week or read through the Bible in a year or pray for an hour every morning. Those things are good and you can grow into them, but none of them is the thing underneath. The foundation is three things, and they're the same three things every Christian for two thousand years has been pointed back to.

Pray. Not perfectly. Not eloquently. Honestly, daily, in your own words, expecting

Him to be there because He is. If you can give it ten minutes in the morning and a few sentences before bed, you'll have a real prayer life inside a month.

Read the Bible. Start in the gospel of John. Read slowly. Stop when something hits you. Let the story do its work. You don't need to understand all of it to be formed by it.

Find a church and stay. Not just attend. Establish roots. Talk to the people. Let them know your name. Tell the pastor you're new. Let them help you with baptism and communion and the things this short book didn't have room to fully cover. The local church is where the rest of your formation will happen. There's no version of this life that works without it.

That's it. The foundation. If you do those three things imperfectly for the next year, you'll be in shape for whatever comes next. If you neglect them, no amount of bonus material will help you.

A few last things before we close.

This book was an on ramp. It's not the entire road. There are longer treatments

of everything in here, and more beyond this. Your pastor can help you find the ones that best fit where you are on your journey. So will the believers in the room you're going to find. There's plenty of good material out there when you're ready for more. There's also no rush.

You can also re-read this book. It's short on purpose. The book you finished today is not the same book you'll find when you come back to it later. You'll be a different reader.

And if you want to set it down and not pick anything else up for a while, that's fine. The Spirit isn't in a hurry. The new life isn't a curriculum. The intent was never to make you a better reader of Christian books. The book was the start of the conversation. He's the one continuing it.

Go live the life. Pray badly. Read slowly. Show up at the church. Trust that the One who started this in you has every intention of finishing it.



FOR REFLECTION

- ❖ Of the three foundations, prayer, Scripture, church, which is the one you most need to start this week? Not in theory. This week.
- ❖ If you imagine yourself a year from now still walking this out, what's the smallest version of these three practices you can picture yourself sustaining for that long?
- ❖ Picture yourself reading this same chapter twenty years from now. What do you hope is still true of you? What are you afraid won't be?

WORTH READING

- ❖ *Renovation of the Heart* by Dallas Willard — for the question of how the Christian life is shaped over time, from a philosopher who spent his life on the question.

Before You Go



I want to say something to you before you close this book.

You said yes to Jesus, and I don't know how that yes happened or what it cost you to say it. I don't know what room you were in or who was there or what you'd been carrying that finally broke open. I don't know what you're walking back into. Maybe a marriage that doesn't share what just happened to you. Maybe a job that won't change. Maybe a body that still hurts, a memory that still bites, a phone full of people who knew the old you and don't know yet that there's a new one.

Whatever's on the other side of this last page, I want you to hear a few things.

You are not alone.

The Holy Spirit Who moved in when you said yes has not gone anywhere, and He is not going to. He'll be there in your kitchen tomorrow morning. He'll be there at work on Monday. He'll be there in the silence you weren't expecting and in the conversations you didn't think you needed. You have not been left to figure this out by yourself. You never will be.

You are not behind.

There is no schedule you're failing to keep up with. There is no bar set by other Christians that you must clear. The Spirit is not in a hurry, and the people He has formed the most deeply over two thousand years all started exactly where you are, with not much understanding and a lot of questions and a "Yes" they didn't entirely know the weight of. He has done it before. He will do it with you.

You are not what you were.

Whatever the mirror tells you when you brush your teeth tomorrow, the truer thing about you is the One who lives inside you now. You belong to a different country than you used to. You are loved by someone

whose love does not run out. You are being made into someone you can't yet see, by hands that have been doing this kind of work for a very long time.

So, go. Read the book of John tonight. Pray clumsily on the drive to work. Show up somewhere on Sunday. Find your one real person. Live the small, ordinary, faithful day in front of you. The Spirit will meet you there. He always does.

The grace of the Lord Jesus, the love of God, and the company of the Holy Spirit be with you, today and tomorrow and every day after.

Welcome home.



Resources

Bibles

- *New King James Version of the Bible*
(© 1982 Thomas Nelson)
- *Living Bible*
(© 1971 Tyndale House)
- *Amplified Bible CLASSIC EDITION*
(© 1987 Zondervan)

Books

What You Said Yes To

- C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

Prayer

- Tim Keller, *Prayer*
- Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*
- J.I. Packer and Carolyn Nystrom,
Praying

WHAT NOW?

Scripture

- Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth*

Church

- Diane Langberg, *Redeeming Power*

Why It Still Feels Hard

- C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

Where To Go From Here

- Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*

Continue Your Journey

If this book has helped you take your first steps with Jesus, visit:

whatnowbook.org

There you'll find:

- Next steps for new believers
- Recommended reading
- Answers to common questions
- Resources for finding a local church
- Additional Bible study materials

