

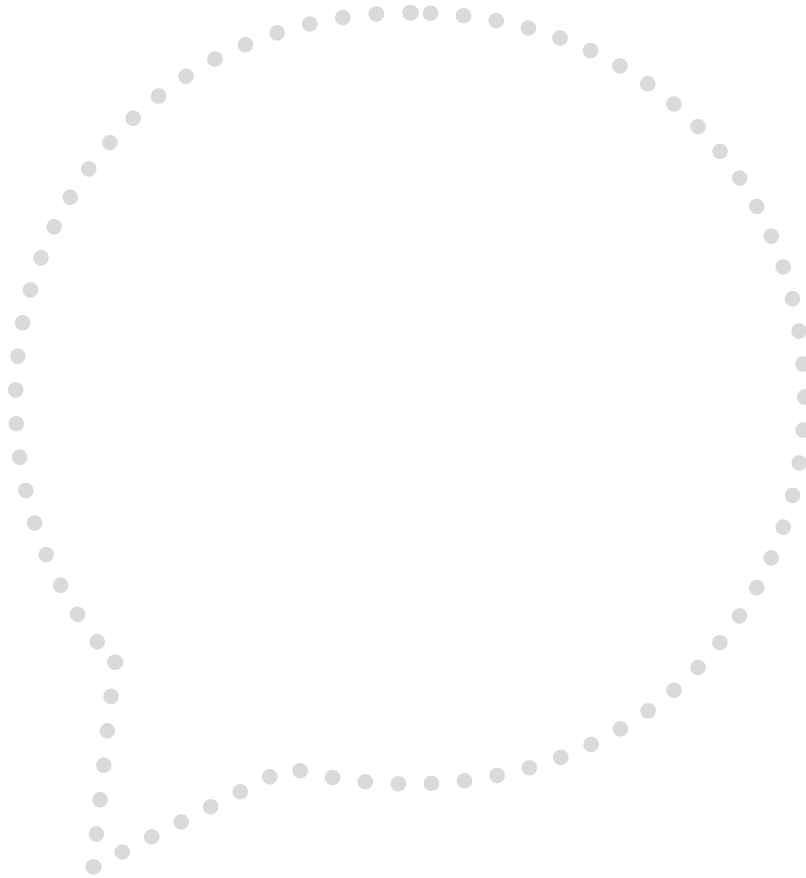
starting point



**A CONVERSATION
ABOUT FAITH**

Andy Stanley
and the Starting Point Team

REVISED, CONDENSED EDITION



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WELCOME

Starting Point is a conversational environment where you can explore faith and experience community. It's a safe place for you to ask questions and to learn about the Bible and Christianity.

You may have questions that you've always wondered about but never felt you could ask at church, legitimate questions that would make many Christians uncomfortable. Ask them. Nothing is off-limits. We want to have conversations about the stuff that really matters to you, even when it's difficult to talk about—especially when it's difficult to talk about.

We believe that God loves you . . . specifically. And we believe he's big enough to handle your toughest questions, darkest moments, and deepest doubts. We want to honor him and you by creating an environment where you can be open, honest, and transparent.

Starting Point is designed for:

SEEKERS: those who are curious about God, Jesus, the Bible, or Christianity

STARTERS: those who have just begun a relationship with Jesus Christ

RETURNERS: those who have some church experience but have been away for a while

Whatever brought you to Starting Point, we're glad you're here. Enjoy the journey.

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START

SECTION ONE:

A STARTING POINT

You had a first day of school, a first date, a first kiss, a first job. While many of our *first* experiences are the first in a series of similar experiences, some of our *firsts* are *starting points*. They represent the first points or steps on a journey. If you are married, that first date was more than a date, wasn't it? It was the starting point of a relationship. That first day of school was a starting point as well. Your career had a starting point. If you have children, your parenting had a starting point. But here's something you may not have considered—*faith has a starting point*.

If you grew up in a non-religious family, your first encounter with religious faith may have occurred at a neighbor's house or in school or it may be occurring right now. You may have been intrigued by the faith of others, or you may not have given it a second thought. Either way, you were aware that their experiences were different from yours.

If your faith began during childhood, you were probably taught some basic religious tenets: *God is good. God rewards good and punishes evil. God hears your prayers. God loves you.* These simple truths made sense in a world where the tooth fairy and Santa Claus made regular house calls. You may have had questions. Perhaps you even doubted

at times. But the adults you trusted seemed confident in their faith, so you remained committed to yours—for the time being.

Fast-forward a few years and you found yourself confronted with adult realities for which childhood faith had not prepared you. You found yourself wrestling with questions such as: If God is *good* and *all-powerful*, why doesn't he do more to prevent the bad things in the world? Why does so much evil go unpunished? Why does prayer seem like such a shot in the dark? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why are some religious people so judgmental and mean? Why don't science and religion line up? Why does it seem that smart people are less religious?

Even as your faith shrank or your doubt solidified, you may have run into some "grownups" that had faith. Strong faith. Faith that didn't resemble a child's belief in the tooth fairy or Santa Claus. They maintained what looked to be an unshakable confidence in God in spite of what they saw or experienced. They didn't pretend to have all the answers. In fact, they didn't pretend at all. They were honest and hopeful. They acknowledged the complexities of the adult world, but their faith remained strong. Perhaps it was their faith that caused you to begin doubting your doubt.

If so, you are in the right place. That’s exactly what this guided conversation is about. It’s why we call these gatherings *Starting Point*. If you grew up without a faith framework or you’ve just begun a relationship with Jesus, this may be a *literal starting point* for you. If you lost faith along the way, you may see our time together as an opportunity to restart your faith. Regardless of where you are, we are honored that you have chosen to participate for the next five weeks as we explore what it looks like to develop faith that doesn’t merely survive the real world but thrives in it.

SECTION ONE:
QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

1

What kind of faith or religion was a part of your upbringing, if any?

5

● Philip Yancey

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

What kind of faith or religion was a part of your upbringing, if any?

5

START

SECTION TWO:

ROOTS OF FAITH

Most Christians grow up being taught that regardless of the question, the answer begins with, “The Bible says.” In childhood, this is enough. If God wrote a book, there is no reason to challenge what it says. But for some of us, “The Bible says” became problematic somewhere north of our eighteenth birthdays. Truth is, for faith to be unshakable, the foundation must be more substantial than a *book of miracles* written thousands of years ago. Right? A storybook may be enough to birth faith in a child. But a storybook is not enough to sustain faith in an adult. But if we dispense with the Bible, where do we go for our starting point? Where does faith begin? The first Christians didn’t use the Bible as a starting point for their faith. For the first two

hundred-plus years of Christianity, Christians did not support their faith with a book. Their starting point was not something *written*; it was something that had *happened*.

As you probably know, the Bible is divided into two parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The New Testament contains the teachings of Jesus along with the narratives surrounding his birth, life, and crucifixion.

There are four accounts of Jesus’ words and works. These ancient documents are referred to as the Gospels. While most agree that the Gospels were written during the years immediately following Jesus’ life, they were not collected and published together until many years later. The term “New Testament” was first used around AD 250 in reference to one of the earliest collections of sacred Christian texts. Despite the fact that there was no Christian Bible, hundreds of thousands of men and women became followers of Jesus in the first three centuries. The starting point of their faith was not “The Bible says” or “The Bible teaches”; it was something else entirely. And we’re convinced that something else serves as an adult starting point for faith in our generation as well.

All truths are easy to understand once they are discovered. The point is to discover them. That takes investigation.

● Galileo

The apostle Paul traveled around the Mediterranean planting churches in the first century. He found himself with some time to kill in Athens. He met a group of

philosophers who gathered on a regular basis to examine new ideas. They were looking for a framework that made sense of the world. They knew more than most, but continued to pursue greater certainty by discussing the latest ideas. Like most people in their culture, they believed in a pantheon of gods. But they willingly acknowledged the gaps in their knowledge. They even erected an altar inscribed “To an unknown God.” They were covering all their bases. If a new god arrived on the scene, they were ready for him. Or her. Or it.

Paul viewed this *just-in-case* altar as an opportunity to introduce his new friends to the central message of Christianity. He couldn’t begin his presentation with “The Bible says” because there was no New Testament. In fact, at this point in history, none of the four Gospels had been written. So Paul drew their attention to the fact that curiosity regarding God was universal. He argued there was something in every

man and woman that wonders, questions, and seeks. He went on to say that God actually wants to be found . . . so much so that he entered creation in the form of a man—*Jesus*. This God-man came to explain what God is like and to reconcile humanity to himself.¹

This was not an easy message for Paul’s skeptical audience to embrace. They had never heard of Jesus. The notion of a single god was difficult enough. The idea that this God had entered creation in the form of a man was outside the realm of possibility for most of Paul’s Athenian audience. But one thing was certain. Paul was not asking them to believe a book. He never mentioned a book. It’s not that the Bible isn’t important, but Paul was challenging them to put their faith in a person. The question he left them with is the question that anyone exploring faith must eventually answer. It is the question that serves as the starting point for the Christian faith. The question is, *Who is Jesus?*

¹ Acts 17:16–34

SECTION TWO:

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1 What are some of your past experiences with the Bible (either first-hand or someone telling you about it)?
- 2 What is one question you wrestle with when you think about God, faith, or religion?

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SECTION THREE:

WHO IS JESUS?

The name that was so new to the Athenians is one we have all heard today. Jesus is the central figure of the Christian faith. Interestingly, other faith traditions claim Jesus as one of their own as well. But Jesus' influence goes beyond religion. It is difficult to find anyone anywhere who does not respect Jesus. His teachings have shaped the consciences of nations. This Jewish carpenter, who never traveled more than a hundred miles from his birthplace, never wrote a book, never raised an army, and was a public figure for less than four years before being crucified by Rome, remains the subject of endless conversations, debates, books, movies, and controversies.

Who is he? What makes his life and teachings so unique? What sets him apart? Why do millions of people from cultures all over the world continue to follow him?

It's true that Jesus' teachings represented a radical departure from the established norms of his day. His version of generosity and compassion went head-to-head with the commonly held assumption that it was a waste of time to do anything good for someone who didn't have the means to return the favor. He insisted that his followers pray and give privately while other religious leaders made

a great to-do of praying and giving to be seen. While conventional wisdom said to love your friends and hate your enemies, Jesus taught his followers to love their enemies and to look for opportunities to serve them.

But it wasn't what Jesus said that ensured his teachings would survive the first century. It wasn't his insight, his parables, or even the events surrounding his death that catapulted his fame and renown into the next generation and the generations to follow. In fact, Paul didn't even mention Jesus' teachings to the Athenians. The reason men and women like the apostle Paul risked and eventually sacrificed their lives for Jesus was not what he said before he died but what happened afterward. Three days afterward, to be specific.

Jesus rose from the dead.

**A religion that is
small enough for our
understanding would
not be big enough for
our needs.**

● Corrie ten Boom

SECTION THREE:

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

1 What do you hope to get out of your Starting Point experience?

BOTTOM LINES FOR CHAPTER 1

Faith has a starting point.

The starting point for the Christian faith is a question: *Who is Jesus?*

The Christian faith isn't about what Jesus said before he died. It's about what happened after he died: he rose from the dead.

FOR THE NEXT GROUP MEETING

1 Read Section 1 of Chapter 2.

2 At the next group meeting, we'll discuss the role of rules in a relationship with God. We all have a love/hate relationship with rules. On the one hand, rules can provide structure and predictability. On the other hand, rules are restrictive and we all want to be free to do what we want, when we want. The problem with religious rules is that they usually run contrary to human nature. That makes them really hard to follow. And we assume that when we don't follow rules, God rejects us. But is that really true?

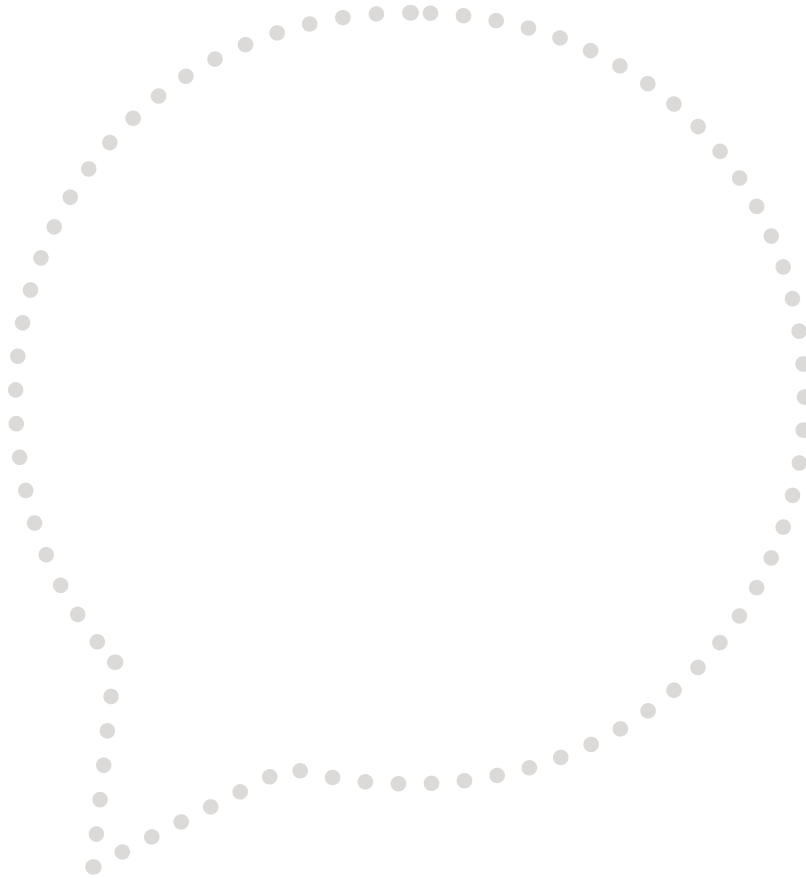
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SECTION ONE:

**RELATIONSHIPS
AND RULES**

If you were raised in a religious home or attended a religious school, it was probably the rules that made you question whether religion had a place in your future. Perhaps the rules associated with the faith tradition you were raised in made you feel judged. A faith community may have even ostracized you. Truth is, most religious rules run contrary to human nature. And being the human that you are, that's a problem. Inconsistency in the way rules were applied and to whom they were applied may have left you with the impression that religion breeds hypocrisy. And, in fact, it does.

Religious people love loopholes. They look for loopholes in their faith systems to avoid the more restrictive rules. So, many

Catholics have found ways to justify the use of birth control. Only a percentage of Muslims pray with their faces to the ground five times a day. Just a small number of Protestants show the type of kindness, love, and forgiveness that Jesus modeled. Religious people are generally better at *believing* than *behaving*. Every major faith tradition teaches some form of the Golden Rule: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*. But we're all guilty of excusing our way around that imperative. So, yes, religion seems to breed hypocrisy. At some level, we are all hypocrites.

In spite of that, all faith systems agree that in order to be in good standing, followers need to keep the rules. Belief and behavior are central in every major religion. Obedience determines whether you are a good Muslim, Christian, Sikh, or Jew. Whether it's the Five Pillars of Islam, the Ten Commandments of ancient Judaism, or Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, rules define proper and improper behavior within a faith system.

But here's something you may not have considered: *Rules always assume a relationship*. If you are a parent, you set rules for *your* kids. Imagine getting a call from a neighbor checking to see if your kids are in bed. None of her business, right? She can't set rules for your kids. They are

**Submission is not about
authority and it is not
obedience; it is all
about relationships of
love and respect.**

● William Paul Young

your kids. An individual’s children are his or her children before the creation of rules. In fact, an individual’s children are his or her children even if there aren’t any rules. Relationship precedes the rules in a *family model*.

Family isn’t the only model. In some cases, one’s willingness to adopt or agree to a set of rules creates the relationship. In this scenario, the rules precede the relationship. Think of this as the *club model*. When you join a health club, hunting club, or country club, you have to sign a contract agreeing to abide by the rules. Agreeing to the rules is how the relationship is established. In this arrangement, breaking the rules can result in the termination of a relationship.

But which of the above models reflects the connection between rules and relationship

in religion? Is it the *family model*, where disobeying the rules will get you punished but not necessarily kicked out? Or is it more like the *club model*, where you have to agree to the rules to get in and if you don’t keep the rules, you’re asked to leave? How you answer this question will determine the way you view God and the way you assume he views you.

Don’t walk behind me; I may not lead. Don’t walk in front of me; I may not follow. Just walk beside me and be my friend.

● Albert Camus

SECTION ONE:
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1
- Which religious rules have “made you question whether religion had a place in your future”?
- 2
- Which of these models describes the churches or religious traditions you’ve been exposed to?
- In the family model, the relationship comes before the rules. Disobeying may get you punished but not kicked out.
 - In the club model, you have to agree with the rules to get in. If you break the rules, you’re kicked out.

RULES

SECTION TWO:

GOD'S RULES

The Ten Commandments is arguably the most famous list of rules ever produced. Just about everyone in Western civilization is familiar with the Ten Commandments. But very few people can name them.

The Ten Commandments were given to ancient Israel about fifteen hundred years before Jesus was born and about twenty-one hundred years before the birth of Muhammad. The most significant thing about the Ten Commandments is not the commandments themselves. In many ways, they are quite ordinary. They prohibit

adultery, murder, and theft. Nothing too surprising. What makes them important for our purposes is *to whom* they were given, *why* they were given, and *when* they were given.

In Chapter 3, we discussed how God promised Abraham that his descendants would become a nation and that the nation would bless the world. Eventually, Abraham and Sarah had a son, Isaac. Isaac had Jacob. Jacob had twelve sons, whose families became large tribes, who became known collectively as the Hebrew people. In order to escape a devastating famine, Jacob's sons and their families migrated to Egypt, where they lived for many years. Eventually, these Hebrews were enslaved by a Pharaoh. For four hundred years, the descendants of Abraham labored under the harsh and cruel treatment of Egyptian taskmasters. Then, around 1446 BC, Moses led what by this time had become the nation of Israel out of Egypt and back to the land of Abraham. It was during their journey back home that God gave Israel the rules.

The Ten Commandments are found in the Old Testament book of Exodus. If the term *exodus* reminds you of the English term *exit*, it should. This ancient document is the story of Israel's *exit* out of Egyptian slavery. About three months after they were

We may not all break the Ten Commandments, but we are certainly all capable of it. Within us lurks the breaker of all laws, ready to spring out at the first real opportunity.

● Isadora Duncan

delivered from their oppressors, the nation camped at the foot of Mount Sinai. Moses ascended the mountain and stayed there for over a month. When he returned, he brought with him God’s law for Israel.

The sequence of events is important. It provides us with a valuable insight into the connection between God’s rules *for* the nation and his relationship *with* the nation. Which came first, the relationship or the rules? Was one predicated on the other? If the answer to that question is not clear from the sequence of events, it is certainly clear based on what we find in the commandments themselves.

Most people are surprised to discover that the Ten Commandments do not begin with a command. Here’s the opening line:

And God spoke all these words: “I am the LORD your God.” - Exodus 20:1-2

God declared his relationship with the nation before telling the nation what he required. God gave Israel rules because they belonged to him. He was their God and they

were his people. The Ten Commandments were confirmation of, not a condition of, Israel’s relationship with God. The second part of the statement underscores this:

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” - Exodus 20:2

In other words, *I am the Lord your God who did something significant for you without requiring anything from you*. Three months earlier, they were a nation with no hope and no future. Now they were free. And they had done nothing to deserve it. After defining and affirming their relationship, God issued his first command:

“You shall have no other gods before me.” - Exodus 20:3

After proving himself trustworthy to the nation, God asked the nation to trust him in return—to look to him as their ultimate authority and provider. God did not give Israel rules as a means by which to establish a relationship. From the very beginning, God adopted the *family model*. The people of Israel were his children. He was their Father.

SECTION TWO:
QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

1

What are some of the things you’ve previously assumed or been told about the Ten Commandments?

RULES

SECTION THREE:

YOUR ROLE

God loved Abraham. God loved Israel. But wouldn't it be presumptuous for you to assume God feels the same way about you? Relationship preceded rules with Abraham and Israel, but maybe God plays favorites. Perhaps for everyone else God opted for the *club model*—the “behave, or else” model.

God's ultimate purpose in choosing Abraham through which to create a nation was actually to bless the entire world. In fact, part of God's promise to Abraham was that the entire world would be blessed through him. Later, the prophet Isaiah would echo that idea when he wrote concerning Israel:

“I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”

- Isaiah 49:6

God's plan, beginning with Abraham, always included all the nations of the earth. His plan included you! So, we should not be surprised to discover that when Jesus appeared fifteen hundred years later, he would extend God's offer of salvation beyond the borders of Israel. One of his closest followers, the apostle John, stated Jesus' intent this way:

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. - John 1:12

Did you catch those last three words? “Children of God.” Not “members of the club.” Children.

An infinite God can give all of Himself to each of His children. He does not distribute Himself that each may have a part, but to each one He gives all of Himself as fully as if there were no others.

● A. W. Tozer

SECTION THREE:

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1 How easy or hard is it for you to believe that God wants you to be part of his family more than he wants you to follow his rules?
- 2 What might change if you saw yourself as a member of God's family who would never be kicked out?

BOTTOM LINES FOR CHAPTER 2

- Rules always assume a relationship.
- God's rules didn't establish his relationship with Israel; they were confirmation of his relationship with Israel.
- God's plan, beginning with Abraham, always included us.

FOR THE NEXT GROUP MEETING

- 1 Read Section 1 of Chapter 3.
- 2 At the next group meeting, we'll talk about why we so often feel separated from God. We all have a set of standards that we don't live up to on a consistent basis. We imagine that God's set of standards must be higher than ours. If we can't live up to our own, then we certainly can't live up to his. And when we fail to live up to God's standards, we assume he condemns us. Is that true?

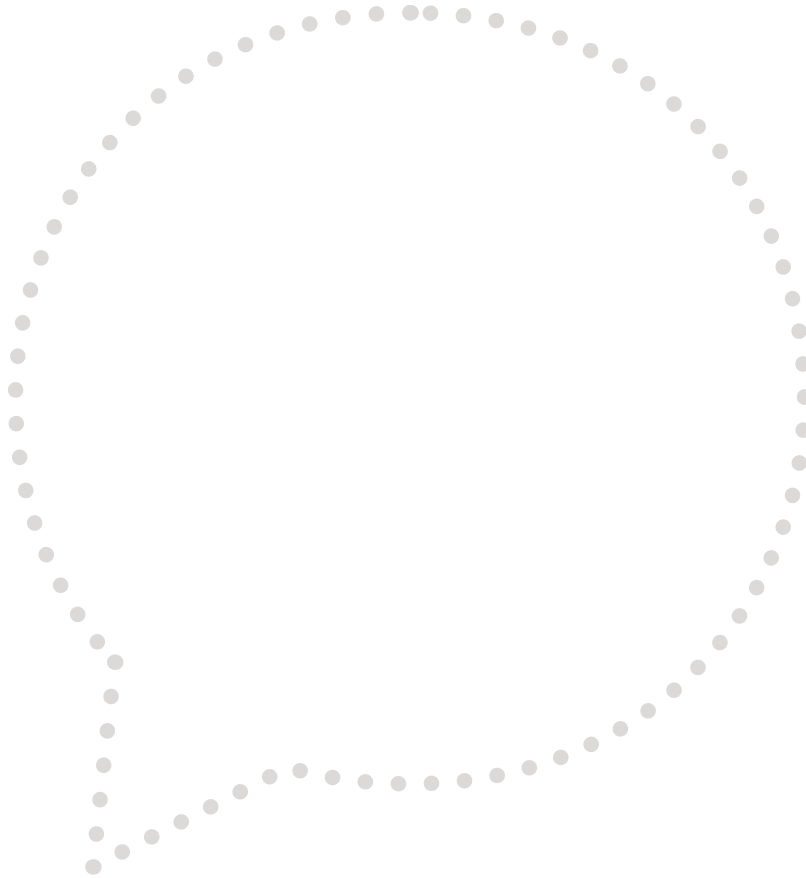
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PROBLEM

SECTION ONE:

IT'S A MISTAKE

During our first week together, we determined that the starting point for the Christian faith is a question: *Who is Jesus?* Traditionally, however, the starting point for the Christian faith is an accusation: “You’re a sinner.”

Big difference.

Sin is an uncomfortable word. It’s so uncomfortable that we’ve pretty much abandoned it. When kids disobey, parents don’t respond with, “You’ve sinned against me.” When an employee is late with a report, managers don’t respond with, “Have a seat. We need to talk about your sins.” Even judges don’t use that term.

But we know we aren’t perfect. So in our efforts to address the tension between our inability to get it right every time and our disdain for being categorized as never getting it right, we’ve adopted a new term that falls somewhere in the middle: *mistake*. We aren’t sinners. But we aren’t perfect. We make *mistakes*.

**Your best teacher is
your last mistake.**

● Ralph Nader

There is a problem with using the term *mistake* to describe all our less-than-perfect decisions and behaviors. The problem is that label doesn’t adequately describe everything we call a mistake.

A mistake is an *error* in action, calculation, opinion, or judgment caused by poor reasoning, carelessness, or insufficient knowledge. Mistakes are *accidental*. A mistake is something a sixth grader makes on a math test. A mistake is something adults make when filing their income tax returns. A mistake is something we learn from so we don’t do it again. However, we’ve expanded that definition to include just about everything.

But sin harms our relationship with God and our relationships with other people. It’s so deeply ingrained in all of us, we can’t stop sinning.

How about a celebrity when it’s discovered that he’s been involved in a multi-year affair? He almost always refers to those recurring rendezvous as *mistakes*. But does *mistake* really capture the magnitude and nature of an affair? Offended spouses say no. Offended spouses feel betrayed. They might even reach back for the old-fashioned term *sin* to describe what their partners did.

Then there's this. Sometimes we make *mistakes* on purpose. Don't we? Don't you? Sometimes we *plan* our mistakes. Think about that. You are guilty of premeditated *mistakes*! What do you call a *mistake* you make on purpose? What's the best term to describe a *mistake* you make on a recurring basis? What do you call a person who plans and carries out the same mistakes over and over? A serial *mistaker*? Last question. What term should we use for a premeditated *mistake* that hurts another person?

Perhaps we've made a *mistake* substituting the term *mistake* for all things less than

perfect. Perhaps we need a new term. Or perhaps we should reach back and resurrect an old term. As uncomfortable and as old-school as the term *sin* may seem, there is a benefit to reintroducing the word into our vocabularies.

Experience enables you to recognize a mistake when you make it again.

● Franklin P. Jones

SECTION ONE:
QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

1 How would you describe your past interactions with Christians?

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PROBLEM

SECTION TWO:

REPEAT OFFENDERS

You may resist being branded as a sinner. That's understandable. But the truth is, it's a brand no honest person can avoid. A sinner is anyone who knows the difference between right and wrong and chooses to do wrong. On purpose. Sound like someone you know?

Perhaps your resistance to being branded a sinner stems from its close association with divine condemnation, alienation, and separation. Listen to the average street preacher and you may conclude that not only does being a sinner condemn you to hell, but also that God is actually looking forward to sending you there!

Jesus had a very different response to those wearing the sinner brand. When you read the Gospels, you can't help noticing that he was attracted to sinners. Never once do we find him threatening them with hell. Not once. In fact, just the opposite is true. Jesus' response to sinners was an offer of restoration. As a result, people who were nothing like Jesus liked Jesus. And he liked 'em back. Self-righteous religious leaders who peddled graceless religion were the only ones Jesus consistently condemned. Jesus had little patience for religious people who considered themselves sinless. He knew better.

He knew they knew better as well.

Jesus taught that sin separates us from God, but that God's willingness to forgive reconnects us. So it was important to Jesus that men and women faced and embraced their status as sinners so they would recognize their need for forgiveness. Mistakers don't ask for forgiveness. Mistakers don't need forgiveness. Mistakers just need opportunities to do better next time.

When Jesus talked about sin, he made it so all-inclusive that nobody could escape. He said things like, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."¹ Ouch!

Jesus raised the standard so high that nobody made a passing grade. Then he turned right around and insisted that God was on an endless pursuit to restore his relationship with sinners. The transaction that made this possible was a personal admission of guilt and a request for forgiveness. So, while being branded a sinner is uncomfortable, Jesus taught that it is necessary. Sinners need forgiveness. Forgiveness is the means by which humanity is restored to a right relationship with the heavenly Father.

¹ Matthew 5:27-28

SECTION TWO:

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1 Do you resist the idea of being called a sinner? Why or why not?

2 Page (18) says:

“When you read the Gospels, you can’t help noticing that Jesus was attracted to sinners. Never once do we find him threatening them with hell. In fact, just the opposite is true. Jesus’s response to sinners was an offer of restoration. As a result, people who were nothing like Jesus liked Jesus.”

How does this match the version of Jesus you’ve heard about?

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The difficulty we have in accepting responsibility for our behavior lies in the desire to avoid the pain of the consequences of that behavior.

● M. Scott Peck

PROBLEM

SECTION THREE:

ONLY ONE PERSON

The Gospels record breathtaking events in which Jesus extended forgiveness and restoration to individuals who were considered beyond redemption. One involved a woman caught in adultery. This was not a one-time occurrence. This was not a mistake. It wasn't an accident. She knew better. Jewish law required that she be stoned. Jesus, who taught that the law was good and should be obeyed, invited those who assembled for the stoning to go ahead and commence the punishment . . . but with one interesting caveat.

"Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." - John 8:7

Jesus didn't defend her. Jesus didn't dumb down her sin. Jesus didn't give her any wiggle room. No talk of her desperate plight or her difficult upbringing. She was guilty as charged and deserved to be punished. Again, he invited it. But no one moved. No one threw a stone. Eventually, the crowd dissipated. The oldest members of the mob were the first to leave. Before long, Jesus was alone with the frightened woman. It was only then that he addressed her directly.

"Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

"No one, sir," she said. - John 8:10-11

What he said next is, well, breathtaking.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin." - John 8:11

Jesus, who called people to an impossible standard of behavior, declared this condemned woman uncondemned. This apparent contradiction reflects the essence of Jesus' message and ministry. He did not condone sin. He did not condemn sinners. He called sin, sin. But instead of insisting people get what the law said they had coming, he extended the very thing sinning people deserved least: forgiveness.

Another incident is even more amazing. This one takes place during Jesus' crucifixion. The gospel writer Luke tells us that Jesus was crucified between two criminals. According to Luke, one of the criminals crucified with Jesus hurled insults at him. The other criminal, however, came to Jesus' defense.

But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence?" - Luke 23:40

What came next was shocking.

“We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve.”
- Luke 23:41

That’s quite a statement. The criminal’s behavior was so heinous, he not only believed he deserved to die, he believed he deserved to be crucified—a horrible form of execution in which people often suffered for days before dying. Referring to Jesus, he continues,

“But this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” - Luke 23:41-42

There’s no way, right? He has no opportunity to do “better.” There’s no way to know if he’s sincere. He’s desperate. He would say anything at this point. Wouldn’t you? That’s what makes this story . . . breathtaking.

Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” - Luke 23:43

Just like that, he’s forgiven.

He’s restored.

He’s in.

If life were fair, we’d get treated the way we treat others, and if life were fair, we’d get paid exactly what we are worth. And in the end, we’d all get exactly what we deserve. So, son, maybe it’s better if life isn’t fair. Sometimes I’m thankful that life isn’t fair.

● Mike Williams

SECTION THREE:

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1

Do you think (or have you been told) there is any sin God does not forgive?

2

How easy or hard is it for you to believe that you qualify for the forgiveness Jesus offers?

22

BOTTOM LINES FOR CHAPTER 3



Jesus raised the behavioral standard so high that no one could make a passing grade.



God is on an endless pursuit to restore his relationship with sinners.



Jesus never minimized the seriousness of sin, but he did not condemn sinners.

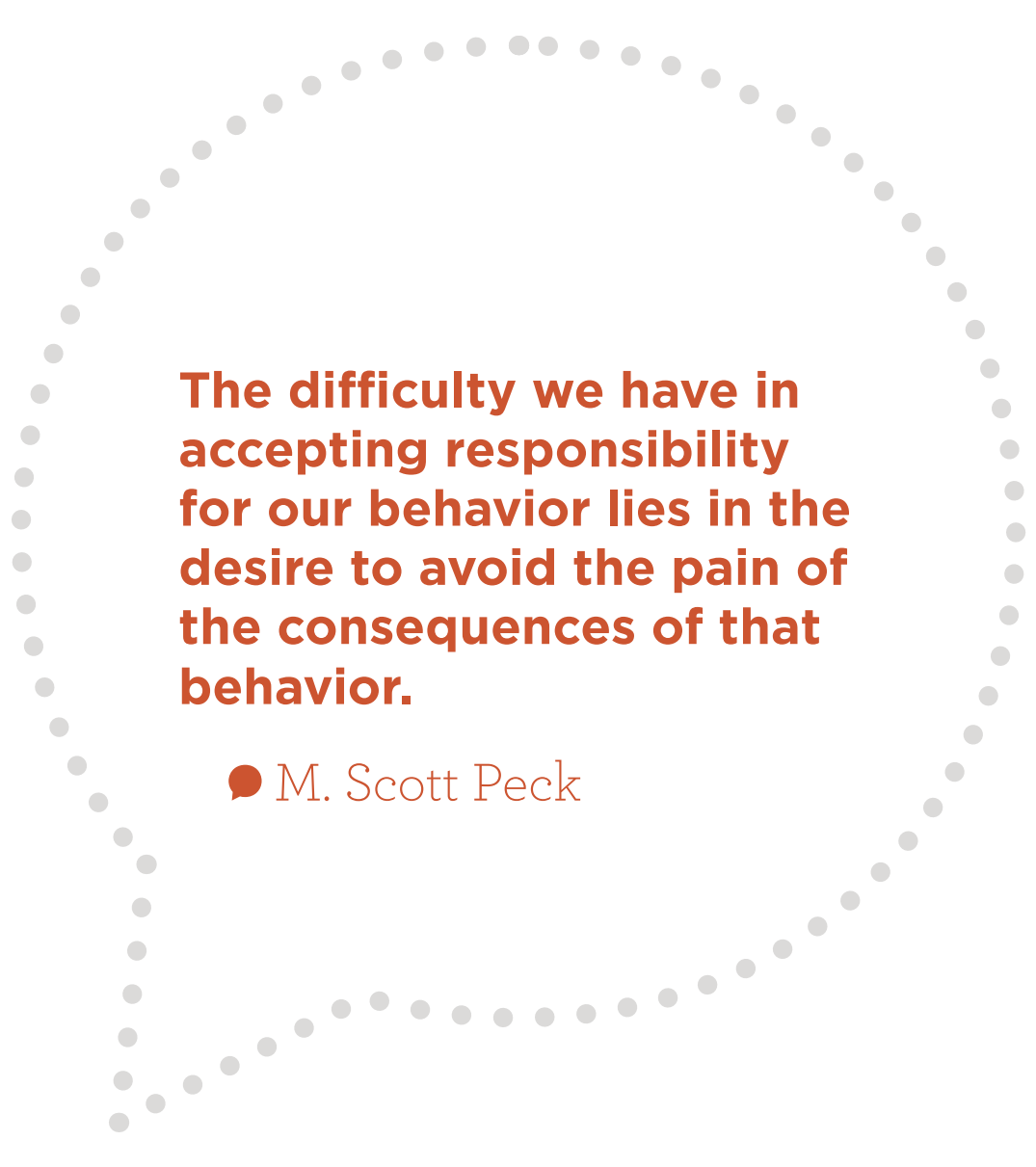
FOR THE NEXT GROUP MEETING

1

Read Section 1 of Chapter 4.

2

At the next group meeting, we will examine grace. In everyday life, grace is radical, because we think life is all about getting what we deserve . . . good or bad. But grace is something different. It's about getting what we don't deserve. And it's key to the way we relate to God.



**The difficulty we have in
accepting responsibility
for our behavior lies in the
desire to avoid the pain of
the consequences of that
behavior.**

● M. Scott Peck

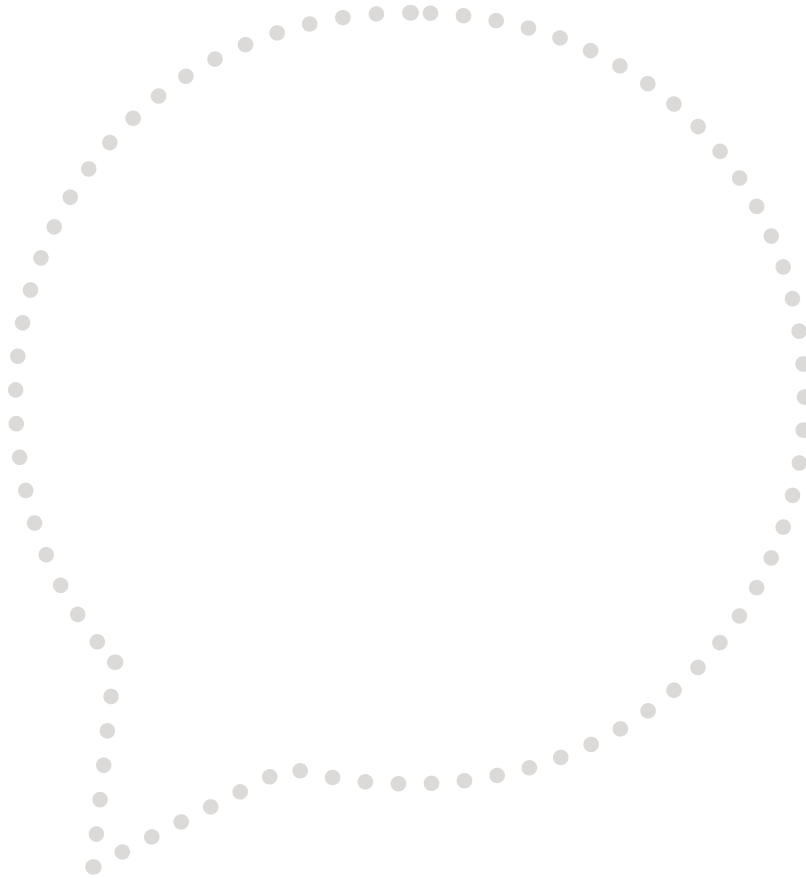
starting point



**A CONVERSATION
ABOUT FAITH**

Andy Stanley
and the Starting Point Team

REVISED, CONDENSED EDITION



**NORTH POINT
RESOURCES**

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GRACE

SECTION ONE:

SYSTEM FAILURE

We live in a world that rewards performance. It's ingrained in us from an early age. Answer the test questions right and you pass. Answer them wrong and you fail. Score the most points and you win. Score one point less than the competition and you lose. Do well in school and you'll get a good job. Do well at work and you'll get a promotion. Granted, it doesn't always work that way. But there's no denying that performance matters.

This performance orientation has the potential to shape our assumptions about God. When you ask people to describe what they think they have to do to *get on* or *stay on* God's good side, you get a list of behaviors—religious performance. Just about every aspect of life works that way. Why wouldn't it be the same with God? After all, if God created the world, shouldn't we assume he created the way the world operates? If that's the case, then isn't the cause-and-effect relationship between our performance and our value a reflection of some divine design?

While it would be easy to make that assumption, there are exceptions to the performance-valuation rule. A student fails an exam by two points, and the professor finds a way to give him a passing grade. A sales associate makes a less-than-stellar

sales presentation, loses an account, and her manager responds by giving her another opportunity. A motorist is rear-ended and upon discovering the challenging circumstances of the careless driver, decides not to make an issue of it. Every once in a while, people get exactly what they don't deserve.

But even when we're the ones being let off the hook, we feel like something is wrong. It's great not to suffer consequences for what we've done, but it also feels like we've violated the system. Shouldn't people get what they deserve? Isn't that just?

Grace is the face that love wears when it meets imperfection.

● Joseph R. Cooke

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

[illegible]

It's not about my performance. It's about Jesus' performance for me. Grace isn't there for some future me but for the real me. The me who struggled. The me who was messy ... He loves me in my mess; he was not waiting until I cleaned myself up.

● Jefferson Bethke

GRACE



SECTION TWO:

UNDESERVED FAVOR

Last week we discussed forgiveness. We discovered that Jesus' death paid for all our sins—past, present, and future. As the apostle Paul stated, through Christ, God

... canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us. - Colossians 2:14

In other words, through Christ, God removed all the barriers to us being adopted into his family. Here is where the confusion often begins for many Christians. Having initiated a relationship with God by faith rather than by performance, their inclination is to manage their relationship with God according to the old system—the performance system. Before they know it, they're making assumptions about God's attitude toward them based on how well they perform. They attempt to earn what he's already given: favor. They quit thinking like family and begin performing like contracted labor. Old habits die hard.

Do you ever bargain with God? You know, "God, if you will [blank], I promise I will [blank]." Or, "God, if you will [blank], I will never [blank]." Think about that. Bargaining is based on two assumptions. First, someone

has something the other party wants or needs. Second, the other party isn't about to do anybody any favors.

Do you believe you have earning potential with God? Do you believe you have something God wants or needs? Seems kind of silly when you stop to think about it. Don't feel bad. Most religious systems foster a bargaining mentality, and understandably so. That's how the world works. But remember, those who knew Jesus best made it remarkably clear ... with God, grace is the rule, not the exception.

We're not the first generation of people to wrestle with this tension. The apostle Paul addressed this issue in several of his letters. To the Christians in the ancient city of Colossae, he wrote:

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord ... - Colossians 2:6

That phrase alone deserves a comment. Based on our previous discussion, how does one receive Christ Jesus? *By faith*. What was it that compelled God to make salvation and forgiveness available to you in the first place? Grace. Undeserved favor. Nothing about you compelled him to. He just wanted to.

Paul continues:

. . . So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him. - Colossians 2:6

His point? Continue the way you started. Your relationship with God was initiated by faith in his gracious, undeserved offer of forgiveness. So, approach God every day from that same vantage point. Your life with Christ began in grace and it should continue in grace. Listen to how he concludes this passage:

. . . rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. - Colossians 2:7

Did you notice what he said about bargaining? No? It's not there, is it? But look again at what he says about thankfulness. The Christian life is characterized by an overflow

of thankfulness. You thank someone for what he's done. You bargain with someone for what you want him to do. God doesn't need anything *from* you, so you have no leverage with him. But he wants something *for* you, so you don't need any leverage.

In his letter to the Christians in Ephesus, Paul wrote:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. - Ephesians 2:8-9

You have been saved “by grace.” God's forgiveness was, or hopefully soon will be, received as a gift. God does not view you through the filter of your performance. He views you through the filter of a father-to-child relationship. You didn't earn your way into God's good graces. You don't have to perform to stay there.

SECTION TWO: QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1 Can you relate to the tendency to bargain with God?

Have you or someone you know walked away from faith because God didn't hold up his end of a bargain?

Page (27) says:

2 “God does not view you through the filter of your performance. You didn't earn your way into God's good graces. You don't have to perform to stay there.”

What's your reaction to this? Does it change how you think God views you?

.....

.....

.....

SECTION THREE:

**THE REASON
FOR OBEDIENCE**

Think back for a moment to a time when someone extended grace to you. Try to remember the most extreme case—an event where you received something so undeserved and unexpected you weren't even sure you could accept it. Have you ever been embarrassed by the gravity or significance of a gift or favor? If so, you can probably remember what you felt. If not, you can imagine what you would feel.

Now imagine if the person who bailed you out, forgave a loan, or gifted you unexpectedly said, "I don't want anything in return. This is a no-strings-attached gift. But if you feel the need to thank me, simply do for someone else to whatever degree you can what I've done for you." Chances are, you would look for an opportunity to do just that.

With that in mind, read how Jesus instructed his closest followers to live:

"As I have loved you, so you must love one another." - John 13:34

Therein lies the basis and motivation for all the New Testament *"thou shalt"* and *"thou shalt not"*. We are to behave out of the overflow of our gratitude for how God

through Christ behaved toward us. We don't obey to gain anything. We obey because of all we have already gained. For Jesus' followers, obedience is not a bargaining chip. It's a voluntary response of gratitude for what's already been given. Paul echoes that same sentiment when he writes:

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. - Ephesians 4:31-32

These imperatives are not presented as means to an end. Paul didn't instruct his readers to be kind and compassionate so that God would be kind and compassionate back. He commanded them to embrace these virtues because God had already exhibited those very things toward them. What comes next is even more extraordinary:

**The knowledge of God
is very far from the love
of Him.**

● Blaise Pascal

Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. - Ephesians 5:1-2

Again, no bargaining. No begging. We are to do for others what God in Christ has already done for us. One hundred percent of the "to dos" related to the Christian faith are a response to what God has "to done" for you. As the apostle John put it:

We love because he first loved us.
- 1 John 4:19

Grace is not a license to sin, but to walk in humility in the sight of God. Grace frees us to be active in the works of God. We are not tied up with how much we have done, or not done, but we learn by the grace of God to rest in His love.

● Curt McComis

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

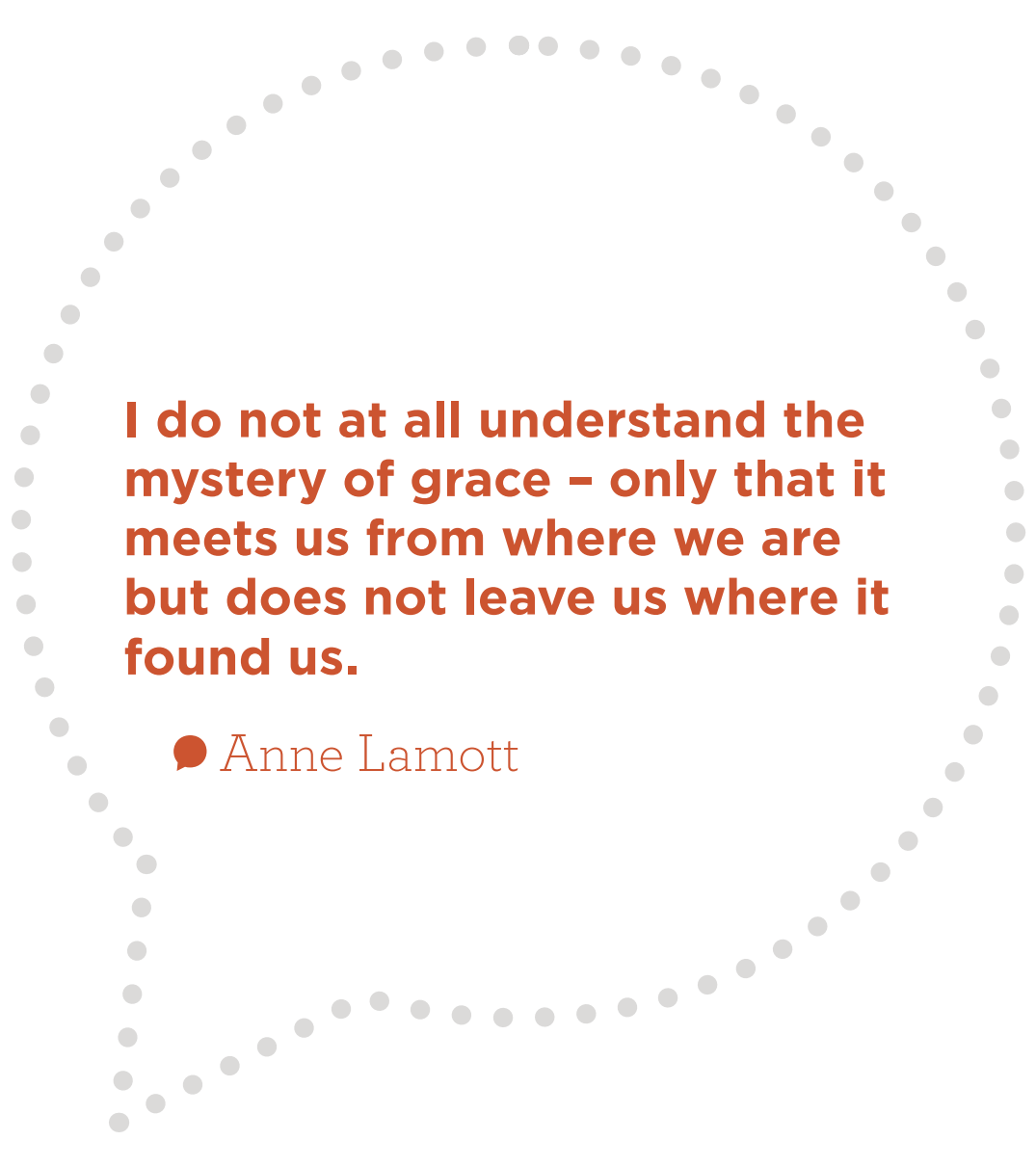
- 1 Can you think of a time when you experienced God's grace—his unearned, undeserved favor?

BOTTOM LINES FOR CHAPTER 4

- People often relate to God on a performance basis.
- With God, grace is the rule, not the exception.
- One hundred percent of the “to dos” in the Christian faith are responses to what God has “to done” for us.

FOR THE NEXT GROUP MEETING

- 1 Read Section 1 of Chapter 5.
- 2 Starting Point is about exploring your faith. At the next group meeting, we'll talk about what faith is. Most people assume that having religious faith equates to holding certain beliefs about God. But it isn't quite that simple.



**I do not at all understand the
mystery of grace – only that it
meets us from where we are
but does not leave us where it
found us.**

● Anne Lamott

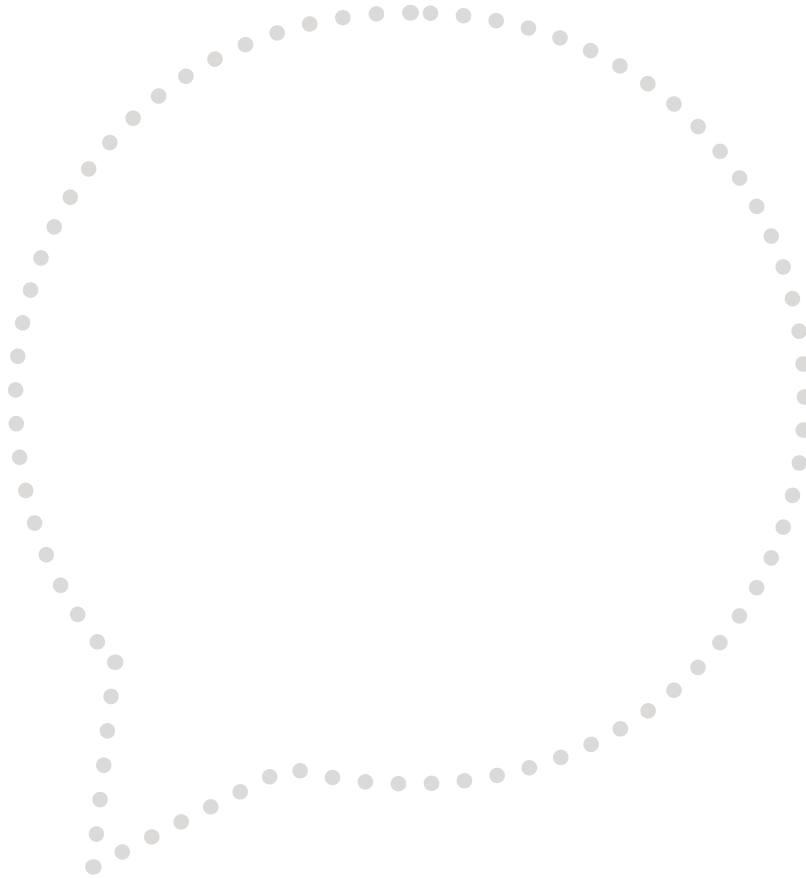
starting point



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SECTION ONE:

EVERYDAY FAITH

Faith is not a religious concept. It's a *human* concept. It's arguably the most powerful tool we have. The ability to believe something and act on it has launched everything from life-saving medical developments to genocide. Faith—or belief—fuels good and evil every day in every segment of the population. Everything that has been done, for good or bad, was done because somebody believed it could be and should be done. Every problem that has been solved was solved because somebody believed. Mountains have been moved by faith—medical mountains, scientific mountains, financial mountains.

Belief fuels anticipation and imagination. It enables us to picture a preferred future for us and the people around us. For all these reasons, and more, it is impossible to imagine life without faith.

Our ability to believe can work for us or against us. We all have a propensity to look for evidence to support what we already believe. It's easier for us to see that propensity in others, but we're all guilty. The problem is that when we adopt a belief that isn't true or isn't helpful, that propensity makes it difficult to change

course. It can even cause us to actively resist what is true and helpful.

We're more open to data that substantiates what we already believe than information that conflicts with our viewpoints. Have you noticed how quickly you become defensive when information that contradicts your beliefs is presented? You may have experienced a bit of that during this study. Most participants do.

**We are born believing.
A man bears beliefs as a
tree bears apples.**

● Ralph Waldo Emerson

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

Have you ever changed your mind about something? What happened to make you think differently?

This image shows a full page of white paper with horizontal dashed lines, typical of primary-ruled notebook paper. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

● Alfred A. Montapert

SECTION TWO:

**BELIEF THAT
VS. TRUST IN**

Religious belief has the potential to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Gather enough people who believe the same thing about anything and the next thing you know you have a movement. Or a new religion. Put a persuasive leader out front and the next thing you know, the world begins to change. This dynamic explains the rise of most popular religious movements. But it does not explain the rise of Christianity.

Throughout history, when leaders of popular movements died, their followers would band together to keep their messages and their missions alive. This was the case with the prophet Muhammad, who died of natural causes in AD 623. This was the case with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was assassinated for his beliefs in 1968. But when Jesus was crucified, the movement he began came to a screeching halt. The mission died with him because he *was* the mission. Jesus did not launch his movement around a new list of *believe that's*. At the center of his teaching was a single *believe in*. Jesus called upon his followers to believe in him. Not his ideas. *Him*. This theme is reflected in what is arguably the most popular statement in the

New Testament:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever *believes in him* shall not perish but have eternal life. - John 3:16

Toward the end of his life, it was evident to everyone that Jesus was claiming to be one with God. He even said as much.

"I and the Father are one." - John 10:30
"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." - John 14:9

Statements like these gave his enemies grounds to convict him of blasphemy. But many of Jesus' followers believed he was exactly who he claimed to be. When Jesus questioned his disciples regarding his identity, Peter blurted out,

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." - Matthew 16:16

Jesus' response?

"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven." - Matthew 16:17

Jesus allowed others to bestow upon him the title "Son of God." He did not resist John the Baptist's description of him as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"¹ When his friend Lazarus died, Jesus

¹ John 1:29

announced to the dead man's sisters,

*"I am the resurrection and the life.
The one who believes in me will live,
even though they die." - John 11:25*

Jesus didn't claim to know the truth about resurrection. He claimed to be *the* resurrection. He didn't ask Mary and Martha to believe a *that*. He asked them to trust *in* him.

From start to finish, the mission of Jesus was *Jesus*. He did not come to leave his followers with a collection of insights and parables to pass on to the next generation. He went too far for that to be the case. He claimed too much. So it should come as no surprise that when his disciples watched him die, they watched the movement die with him. Messiahs don't die. Sons of God can't be killed. It's impossible to crucify "the resurrection and the life." But there he was. Nailed to a Roman cross. And there he died.

When Jesus died, no one believed he was who he claimed to be.

When Jesus died, there were no Christians.

His followers fled. There was no discussion about how to keep his teaching alive. There was nothing to discuss. His life and his teaching were inseparable, and he was dead. His followers were left to choose between two explanations. Either he was confused or they had been duped. Yet, these were the very people who would later sacrifice their lives for their crucified leader.

This is where the story of Christianity parts ways with every other religious tradition and institution. This is where the story becomes both unexplainable and undeniable. It's unexplainable because there is no good

explanation as to why Jesus' disciples later risked their lives to reengage. It's undeniable because here we are about two thousand years later discussing it. What's most important for our purposes is to understand that the hinge, the thing that made all the difference, was not something Jesus *taught*. It was something Jesus *did*.

He came back to life.²

Jesus rose from the dead and nobody was outside his tomb waiting. Not even his most loyal followers believed Jesus had come back to life until they saw him. And upon seeing him, they *believed*. They *trusted*. In a moment, they went from unbelief to belief.

Luke, who wrote both the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, records what happened in Jerusalem when Jesus' followers went into the streets proclaiming his resurrection. Thousands gathered to hear the news. Peter was the appointed spokesman. His message was painfully direct. He didn't call to mind the teachings of Jesus. He didn't repeat his parables. Instead, he pointed into the crowd and summarized:

*You killed him.
God raised him.
We've seen him.
Say you're sorry.³*

Peter's willingness to stare down the very people who supported Jesus' trial and execution is impossible to explain apart from his own explanation. He had seen, touched, and conversed with his risen Messiah and Lord. With the resurrection of Jesus, there was a resurrection of faith.

² Luke 24:6
³ Acts 2-3

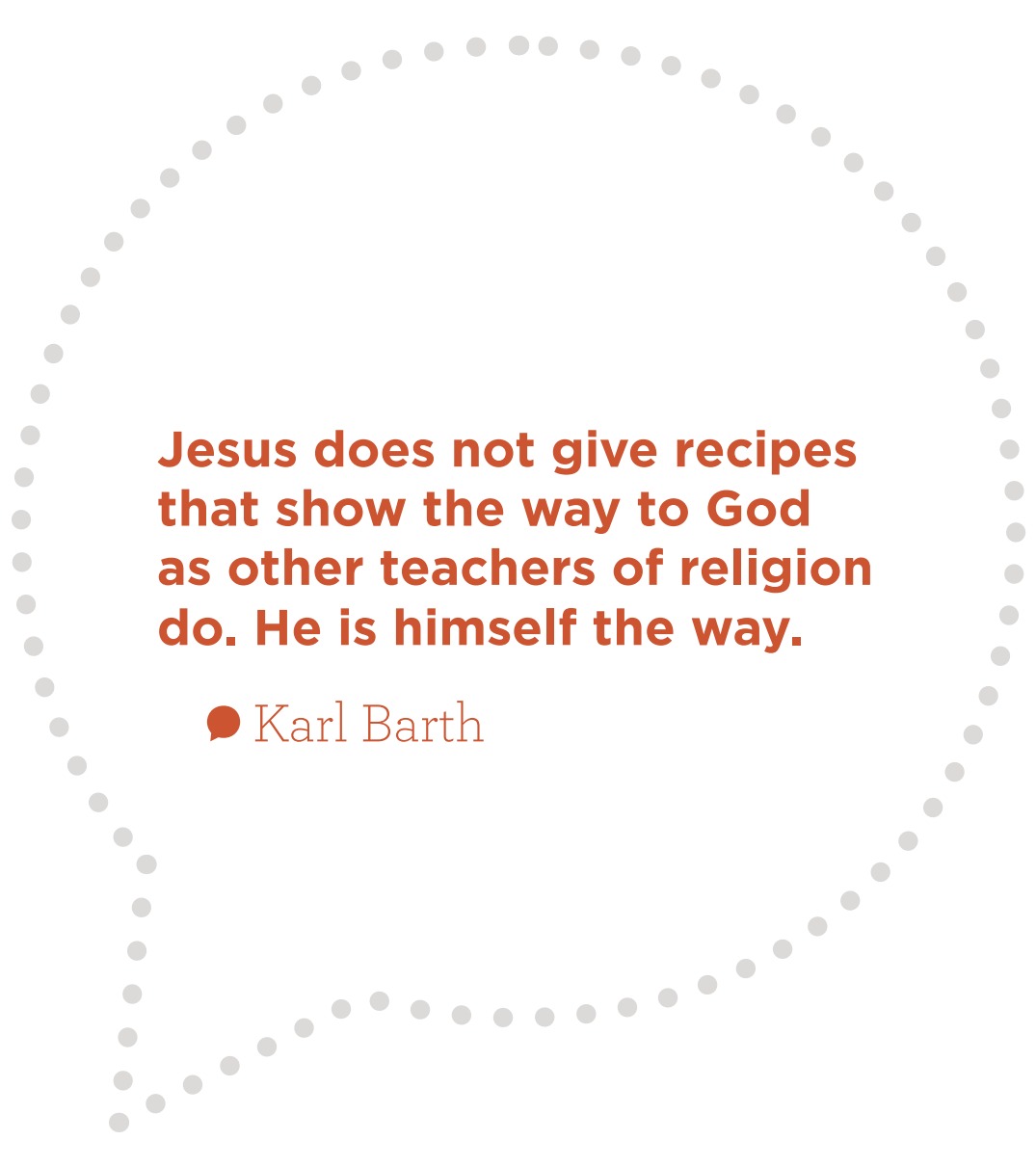
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Right after Jesus died, no one—not even his closest friends and family—believed he was the Son of God. Yet they later risked their lives saying he was.

Page (34) says:

“Jesus did not launch his movement around a new list of ‘believe thats.’ At the center of his teaching was a single ‘believe in.’ Jesus called upon his followers to believe in him. Not his ideas—him.”

How does this match the way Christianity has been presented to you in the past?



**Jesus does not give recipes
that show the way to God
as other teachers of religion
do. He is himself the way.**

● Karl Barth

SECTION THREE:

FAITH ISN'T BLIND

Following Jesus requires faith. Specifically, it requires one to place his or her trust in Jesus. Not the teachings of Jesus—the person of Jesus. Christianity does not require blind faith. Christianity is an informed faith. At the center is an event attested to by eyewitnesses who, by their own accounts, lost faith when Jesus died, but regained it when he rose from the dead. The foundation of Christianity is not a list of *believe thats*. It is a single *trust in*.

Christians don't believe Jesus rose from the dead because the Bible says so. Christians believe Jesus rose from the dead because Matthew and John, eyewitnesses, said so. Christians believe because Luke, a first-century doctor, claimed to have thoroughly investigated the events surrounding the life and crucifixion of Jesus and concluded that Jesus rose from the dead. Luke spent the second half of his life traveling throughout the Roman Empire telling that story. We believe Jesus rose from the dead because Peter believed he did. Peter, who on the night of Jesus' arrest denied knowing him, became the leader of the church in Jerusalem, the city where these events took place. Christians believe Jesus rose from the dead because James, the brother of Jesus, claims it was true.

James trusted in his brother as his Savior.

Christians believe because Mark, a friend and companion of Peter, testified to the truth of Jesus' resurrection. Last, and by his own account least, Christians believe because the apostle Paul believed. Paul, who stepped into history as a persecutor of Christians, came to believe Jesus was the Son of God and that he physically rose from the dead.

These witnesses paid a high price for their faith. Most were martyred. Throughout history, courageous men and women have given their lives for what they believed. This group was different. They gave up their lives for what they said they saw—the *resurrected Jesus*.




Like every religion, Christianity requires faith. Specifically, Christianity requires faith in a person. This is why for anyone investigating Christianity, the first question that must be answered is, *Who is Jesus?*

SECTION THREE:

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1 What, if anything, is still confusing or hard to believe about the story and significance of Jesus's resurrection?
- 2 What will you take away from this Starting Point experience?
- 3 What next step do you think you might take to continue exploring faith?

BOTTOM LINES FOR CHAPTER 5

-  Faith is one of the most powerful tools at humanity's disposal.
-  The thing that makes Jesus different from other religious leaders isn't something he taught; it's something he did. He died and came back to life.
-  Christianity requires faith in a person. This is why for anyone investigating Christianity, the first question that must be answered is, *Who is Jesus?*

AFTER YOUR GROUP ENDS

- 1 Read the Conclusion page (40) and preview the Reading Guide page (42).
- 2 Celebrate both the journey on which you have been and the journey on which you are embarking.
- 3 Connect with a small group where you can continue to explore faith and experience community.

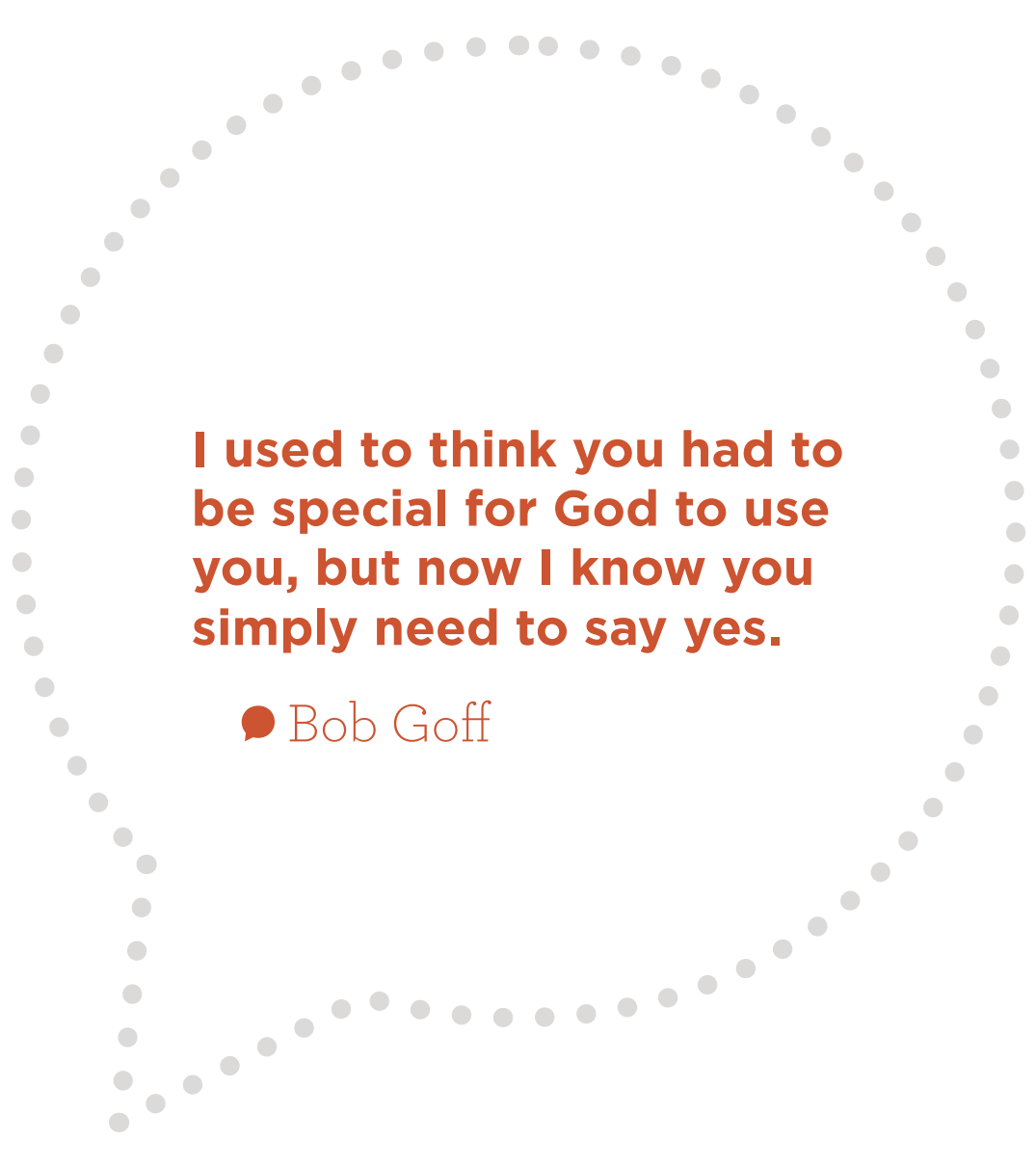


CONCLUSION

We've come to the end of the beginning. You've begun a dynamic conversation that we hope will last a lifetime—a conversation that connects you with God and with others. We designed Starting Point to be a safe place to ask questions about God and faith. Just because your group has ended doesn't mean all of your questions have been answered. In fact, as you continue to investigate and experience God, more questions will surface. That's okay.

We hope you'll not only be comfortable searching for the answers yourself, but that you will continue to seek a deeper relationship with God and healthy relationships with those on the same journey. Through your Starting Point conversations, you've learned more about God, others, and yourself. We encourage you to continue conversations about faith through a community setting.

We've talked about a lot of important things. One of the most important is who Jesus is and what he did for you. You may or may not be ready to put your faith in Jesus Christ. Wherever you are on your faith journey, we pray you will continue it. God loves *you*. God desires a growing relationship with *you*. He's reaching toward *you*. What is your next step in this journey?



**I used to think you had to
be special for God to use
you, but now I know you
simply need to say yes.**

● Bob Goff



READING GUIDE

If you're interested in reading the Bible, you don't have to start at the beginning and read to the very end. In fact, that's probably not the best way to get started. So, we've put together a few options that make reading the Bible enjoyable and helpful. Whichever option you choose, it's a good idea to ask yourself the following questions as you read. These questions will help you better understand what you're reading and how it applies to your life:

1 What does the passage say?

2 How does it apply to my life?

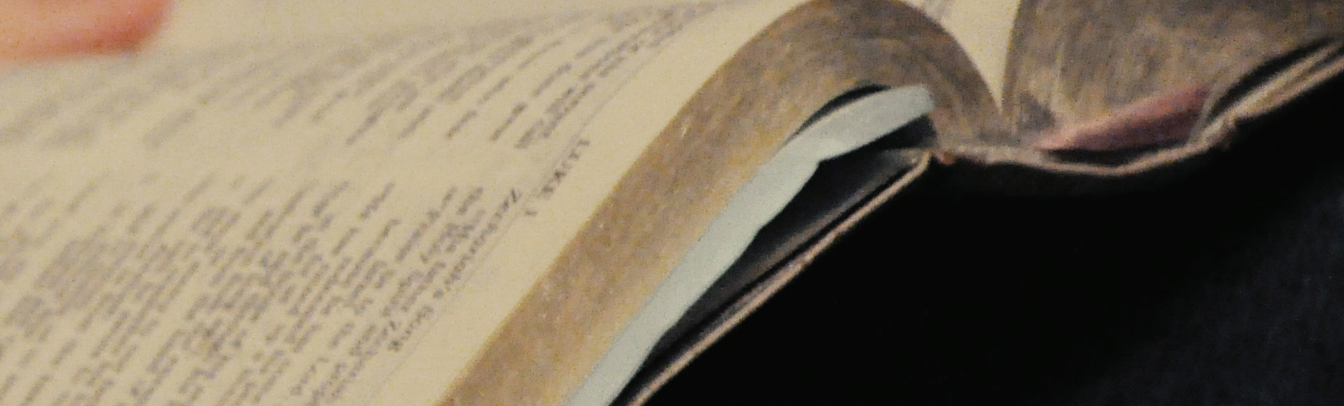
42

EXPLORING JESUS IN 21 DAYS

The Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John—are four different accounts of Jesus' life. This reading plan explores two of them: Luke and John.

- ☐ Day 1: Luke 1-2
- ☐ Day 2: Luke 3-4
- ☐ Day 3: Luke 5-6
- ☐ Day 4: Luke 7-8
- ☐ Day 5: Luke 9-10
- ☐ Day 6: Luke 11-12
- ☐ Day 7: Luke 13-15
- ☐ Day 8: Luke 16-18
- ☐ Day 9: Luke 19-20
- ☐ Day 10: Luke 21-22
- ☐ Day 11: Luke 23-24

- ☐ Day 12: John 1-2
- ☐ Day 13: John 3-4
- ☐ Day 14: John 5-6
- ☐ Day 15: John 7-8
- ☐ Day 16: John 9-10
- ☐ Day 17: John 11-12
- ☐ Day 18: John 13-15
- ☐ Day 19: John 16-17
- ☐ Day 20: John 18-19
- ☐ Day 21: John 20-21



SAMPLING SCRIPTURE IN TEN WEEKS

This reading plan includes entire books or significant portions of books spanning different time periods and literary genres in the biblical story. As you read this plan, you'll experience historical narrative, songs, prophetic messages, travel accounts, and personal letters. You'll also read the well-known stories of creation, the exodus, and the early Christian movement. You'll meet biblical figures such as King David, the prophet Jonah, and Jesus. The purpose of this reading plan is to expose you to the grand redemptive storyline of the Bible.

- ☐ Week 1: Genesis 1-25
- ☐ Week 2: Exodus 1-20; Ruth
- ☐ Week 3: 1 Samuel 16-31, 2 Samuel 1-7
- ☐ Week 4: Psalms 1-41
- ☐ Week 5: Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah
- ☐ Week 6: Esther, Ezra
- ☐ Week 7: Mark
- ☐ Week 8: Acts 1-12, 1 Peter
- ☐ Week 9: Acts 13-28
- ☐ Week 10: Romans, Ephesians

I am blown away that my God, who could do this all by Himself, would choose to let me be a little part of it.

● Katie J. Davis

This image shows a full page of white paper with horizontal dotted lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, providing a guide for handwriting practice. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the page.