

Next Steps

on Your Spiritual Journey



How can I know I'm a Christian?

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“⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – ⁹not by works, so that no one can boast.”

Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV)

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WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

To many people it means no more than being a church-goer. But, even the word Christian, which means belonging to Christ, implies much more than that. A Christian is a person who knows he or she is totally dependent on Jesus Christ and is devoted to following Him. Christians depend on the spiritual relationship they have with Christ, often describing it as a spiritual journey with Him – a pilgrimage along with which one learns obedience and experiences the purpose, freedom and assurance that only He can offer.

If you are reading this, chances are you have recently become a follower of Christ, or at least, are seriously considering it. This booklet is the first in a series of four designed to help you make progress in your spiritual journey by giving you a simple introduction to the “how-to” of following Christ. In this booklet you'll learn how God's grace and the faith He gives gets your spiritual journey started. Booklet two will teach you how to nurture that faith by experiencing Christ's presence through daily personal worship. In booklet three, you'll learn how to appropriate the power of God's Spirit to energize your journey. And finally, booklet four will show you that a spiritual journey with Christ is more like hitting the road with one of those huge motorcycle parades than heading out on a solo ride.

Each booklet also contains a portion of Scripture from Paul's letter to the Romans. To get the most benefit from these booklets we suggest that you

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read a little bit of the Scripture portion every day and take a few minutes to answer the questions in the margin.

It's your spiritual journey. Enjoy it, and make the most of it.

GRACE

The most remarkable thing about your spiritual journey with Christ is that you don't actually take the first step. In fact, if you're under the impression that the Christian life is about stepping up to the plate to do religious things for God, you've got it all wrong. No, Christian living is not about what you can do to please God. It's about what God has done for you through Christ that you could never do for yourself.

The Bible tells us that everyone is born spiritually dead because of sin (Eph 2:1). Because of this, everyone is powerless to do anything to please God or earn His acceptance (John 15:5). But God proved how greatly He loves people by sending His one and only Son, Jesus, to live and die on our behalf (Rom 5:8). He lived in perfect obedience to God in order to fulfill our failed obligation to obey God. Then He died as a sacrifice on our behalf to fulfill God's penalty for sin. Jesus calls people to follow him saying, "Repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15). The good news is that God promises to accept people, no matter how sinful they are, because of what Jesus has accomplished for them. This means that you don't have to "measure up" to earn God's acceptance because Christ has earned it for you.

The real first step in your spiritual journey is God's acceptance purchased for you by Christ. It changes what could have been a frustrating, religious pursuit for God's approval, into a fulfilling, spiritual relationship with a Savior who

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has already won God's approval for you.

Historically speaking, if you are a Christian, the first step in your spiritual journey was taken by God when He offered His Son on your behalf. Personally speaking, the first step was taken by God when He sent His Spirit to awaken your dead heart to the hope that you have in Christ's accomplishments. For, even though you were spiritually dead because of sin, God gave you spiritual life in Christ (Eph 2:5). Furthermore, God's gracious gifts of His Son and Spirit have birthed in you the gift of saving faith. The Apostle Paul said, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph 2:8-9). So you must understand from the outset of your journey that while you get all the benefit of being a follower of Christ, God gets all the credit for making you a follower.

SAVING FAITH

The Bible reminds us that everyone has faith of some kind; even demons believe in God (James 2:19). But their faith doesn't save them, nor does anyone's general belief in God. So then, what kind of faith does save?

First, you should know that saving faith, the kind that is a gift of God, is Christ-centered. It acknowledges that we can do nothing that will earn God's favor, but also that because of Christ, we need do nothing. Saving faith trusts

that Christ has done all that is necessary to earn God's acceptance for us. Saving faith says, "I have nothing to offer God that would please Him, but Jesus has offered all God requires on my behalf." It says, "I don't deserve to be accepted by God, but He accepts me because of what Jesus has done for me."

Secondly, you should know that what we call saving faith doesn't actually save at all. Jesus' work on the cross is what saves us. It is only called saving faith because it trusts God's promise to save us through Christ. You just read from Paul that we are saved by grace through faith. God's grace is the reason we are saved, whereas faith is how we experience salvation. It's a little like receiving a sweater as a Christmas gift. The gift is real and can keep you comfortable through the winter, but you will only experience its warmth if you open the package and put the sweater on. In the same way, faith is how we experience the salvation that God offers to us in Christ. Faith grabs hold of the grace given through Jesus, puts it on and won't let go. It doesn't try to add to grace or improve upon Jesus' accomplishments. It trusts wholly and only in Jesus and, because of that child-like trust, follows Him.

REPENTANCE

Saving faith has a counterpart – repentance. It's impossible to have one without the other—they are inseparable, like two sides of a coin. To truly trust that Jesus has done everything necessary

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to merit God's favor for us is to acknowledge that we can do nothing to merit it ourselves.

The basic idea behind repentance is a change of mind or a change of direction. Let's say you're heading to the mountains for a vacation. The fact that you're heading toward the mountains implies that you're heading away from your home town. That's exactly how faith and repentance work together. Turning toward Jesus by faith, requires a turning away from your sin by repentance. Jesus put it this way: "If anyone would come after me [faith], he must deny himself [repentance] and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34).

Now, does this mean you have to clean up your moral life first before you can become a Christian? Far from it! In reality, repentance is a change of mind and of direction: (1) admitting to the sin, (2) being remorseful for the sin, and (3) going back to the outstretched arms of the Father acknowledging that His love is enough. Changing behavior is what God does gradually in Christ's followers. It isn't something you have to achieve in order to qualify to be His follower in the first place.

ASSURANCE

Now, this raises an interesting question. If there really is nothing you must do to qualify to become a follower of Christ, then how do you know whether you are one or not? Another way to put that question is: How do you know if you have

God's complete acceptance? How can you be assured that God will welcome you into eternity with open arms?

Many people think the answer to this question is found in a past religious experience: "I prayed to ask Jesus into my heart, so I know I'll be okay when I die." It is important to intentionally invite Jesus to come into our lives, but we may also need to ask ourselves, "Is this answer consistent with what you've learned about how grace takes the first step, while faith and repentance follow together?"

Think of it like this: If you're married, did you fall in love with your spouse on your wedding day? Did your wedding ceremony somehow create the love you have for your spouse? Of course not. The ceremony didn't create the love; it only acknowledged and sealed the love that was already there. In the same way, asking Jesus into your heart doesn't make you a follower of Christ; it only demonstrates the repentance and faith that God has already worked in your heart. And so, since it doesn't start the spiritual journey, it can't be a reliable indicator of whether you're actually walking with Christ today.

Others ground their assurance of God's acceptance on their present feelings: "I just feel like God is with me" or, "I feel God's love in my heart." Of course you shouldn't dismiss the importance emotion can play in your spiritual journey, but the shortcoming of emotions is that they are subjective. One person may experience

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a tremendous rush of emotion at every turn in their journey, while another does not. Are their individual emotions any indication of whether these people are walking with Christ? No. Another problem with emotions is that they are so subject to change. Do you really want to ground your hope of heaven on how you feel about God at any given moment?

Well, if the question of assurance isn't settled by a past prayer or present feelings, what is the answer? Put simply, biblical assurance of God's acceptance is based on three things, only one of which actually involves you.

These are:

- God's timeless promises
- Christ's past work on the cross
- The Spirit's present work in your life

God is not a liar. What He promises, He will do. For your assurance and encouragement, He promises to save those who cast their lives on Christ. The Bible says that God gives His promise to you to provide you with "...an anchor for the soul, firm and secure" (Hebrews 6:19). His promise to save you is confirmed by Christ's work on the cross. Remember that God took the first step of your spiritual journey by offering Christ on your behalf to do what you could not – to break down the spiritual wall of sin that separated you from God.

So, when you consider where your hope of heaven lies, your first thought should be on God's promise and Christ's work. You can be assured of God's acceptance because He promises to accept

you on the basis of Christ's work on the cross. But then you can also experience assurance because of the Spirit's present work in your life. You may recall that God brings about gradual life change in Christ's followers. He does this by sending His Spirit to live in us, empowering us to grow more and more like the Savior we follow. Over time, you should expect to see gradual changes in your priorities, attitudes and behaviors. And as you do, this change becomes an encouraging, biblical ground for assurance.

To summarize, biblical assurance of God's acceptance isn't based on a past religious experience or even present emotions. If you are Christ's follower your assurance rests on His promise, on His cross and on His work in your life. You can say, "I know God accepts me because He promised to accept His Son's sacrifice for me, and I can see that He is slowly making me more like Jesus." You may not always have a strong inner (emotional) sense of this assurance, but as you walk faithfully with Jesus this sense will tend to grow and become more constant.

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Now, see for yourself whether the Bible teaches this understanding of grace, faith, repentance and assurance as you begin reading the Apostle Paul' letter to the Romans.

ROMANS 1

Greeting

¹Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ²which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, ³concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, ⁶including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

⁷To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Longing to Go to Rome

⁸First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. ⁹For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you ¹⁰always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. ¹¹For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— ¹²that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. ¹³I want you to know, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of

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Why was Paul so anxious to go to Rome?

the Gentiles. ¹⁴I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish.

¹⁵So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

The Righteous Shall Live by Faith

¹⁶For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

God's Wrath on Unrighteousness

¹⁸For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

¹⁹For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

²²Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

²⁴Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed

forever! Amen.

²⁶For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; ²⁷and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

²⁸And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³²Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

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Do all people have an opportunity to know this God of truth?

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How does Paul characterize the moral condition of the human race?

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What does God intend to use as a means of getting sinners to turn from their sin?

ROMANS 2**God's Righteous Judgment**

¹Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. ²We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who do such things. ³Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? ⁴Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? ⁵But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

⁶He will render to each one according to his works: ⁷to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; ⁸but for those who are self-seeking[f] and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. ⁹There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. ¹¹For God shows no partiality.

God's Judgment and the Law

¹²For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. ¹³For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God,

but the doers of the law who will be justified. ¹⁴For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them ¹⁶on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

¹⁷But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God ¹⁸and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; ¹⁹and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, ²⁰an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— ²¹you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? ²²You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. ²⁴For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”

²⁵For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. ²⁶So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? ²⁷Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. ²⁸For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision

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What does the human race deserve because of its moral condition?

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Why did the Jews think they were better off than the Gentiles? Why were they not better off?

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Does any ethnic group have a moral advantage over another?

outward and physical. ²⁹But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

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What does Paul mean by being a Jew "inwardly"?

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