



From now on...

First steps for new Christians

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Design by Ben Woodcraft

ISBN: 9781784980870 | Printed in the UK.

I was standing at a bus stop when I became a Christian. It was a grey and drizzly November evening, and as I stood waiting, it suddenly dawned on me: if what I had been hearing at church about Jesus was true, I ought to do something about it.

I'd been told that I should talk honestly to God using a little sequence which spelt A, B, C, D:

- **Admit** that I'd rebelled against God;
- **Believe** that Jesus died so that I could be forgiven;
- **Consider** what it will mean to put Jesus first; and
- **Do something about it**—tell Jesus I intended to be his follower for life.

And so I did. Standing at that bus stop, I spoke to God in the quiet of my heart, and became a Christian. And over the many years since then, through good times and bad, I can honestly say I have never regretted that decision at all. It was the best and most important thing I have ever done in my life.

Maybe you've been given this booklet or picked it up because you have a story like that. You were at a discussion group, or a friend's house, or at church, when it suddenly hit you: *I need to do something about this.*

Or perhaps your story is a longer journey of things slowly falling into place. You can't quite say when, but you've become a Christian almost without realising it.

Whatever your story, however you got here—congratulations. In deciding to follow Jesus, you too have just made the best decision of your life.

So what is it like, being a Christian? What has just happened to you? And what can you expect from now on? These are the questions I want to help you get clear answers on.

One whole book in the Bible is given over to stories of the ways that different people became Christians—and how their lives were changed as a result. *The Acts of the Apostles* has summaries that answer the kinds of questions that may be whirling through your head right now. In this booklet I want to focus on one occasion when Peter, an early Christian leader (or “apostle”), was being questioned about what he believed, and the difference it made to his life. This was his summary:

We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.

Acts 5 v 29-32

There’s a lot of detail here, but if we slow down and look at what Peter says, we can see it contains a simple and clear picture of what Christians believe and how we are called to live.

1. Jesus died for you

The story of Jesus being born, living and teaching, doing wonderful miracles, and then dying on the cross is true—it really happened. It isn’t a story like *Batman*, or *Pride and Prejudice*, or your favourite soap. Jesus died at an actual moment in history, with a real Roman governor called Pontius Pilate in charge.

Some people mock Christians for being deluded: “You believe in a sky pixie”. If you have similar doubts, then remember that the Jesus who really lived in history can be thoroughly investigated—and he checks out. If that’s something that concerns you, there are some resources that will help you at the back of this booklet.

But if you read those words I quoted carefully, you might have found them odd. Peter says that Jesus was...

... killed by [people] hanging him on a tree.

But wasn’t Jesus killed on a cross?

Yes, he was. But in using these words, Peter was adding a crucial *explanation* about Jesus’ death. Much earlier in the Bible, one of God’s laws said that anyone who was hanged on a *tree* was cursed,¹ or punished, by God. By using the unusual picture of Jesus hanging on a “tree”, Peter was connecting Jesus’ death to him experiencing God’s punishment. Peter is giving us good news: because God’s punishment fell on Jesus, it doesn’t fall on us. As another New Testament writer puts it:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.”

Galatians 3 v 13

So you can truly say “Jesus died for me” because he died in your place, as your substitute. Being thankful to God that Jesus died for you is probably the most certain mark that you have understood what it means to be a Christian. It’s a truth we’ll come back to after we have seen the next part of Jesus’ story.

2. Jesus rose from the dead for you

The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree.

There are many consistent eyewitness accounts in the Bible that Jesus did not stay dead—he rose from the grave. They all say that three days after his execution, Jesus was seen alive again, and then on numerous occasions after that—and by hundreds and hundreds of people.²

In these accounts Jesus doesn't come across as someone who has had a brutal near-death experience, dragging himself around, nursing his wounds. Nor is he a vision or a ghost. The witnesses report meeting a healthy flesh-and-blood Jesus, who repeatedly reminded them that his death and resurrection were God's long-term plan to conquer death for everyone who believes in him—so that we can live with him for ever.³

As you grow as a Christian and become more familiar with the Bible story, you'll discover that Jesus, the Son of God, didn't arrive in our world from nowhere, but that God the Father had been preparing the way for Jesus since the dawn of time. There was a long chain of diverse people who believed God's promises about a rescuer—people that Peter here calls “our fathers”. This explains why so much of the Bible that was written after Jesus came (the New Testament) quotes so much of what was written before he came (the Old Testament). That's why Christians read all the Bible, and not just the last part. There are some ideas on how to start reading the Bible for yourself at the end of this booklet.

But if Jesus came back from the dead, where is he today? Why isn't he here, proving it?

That's a good question, and the answer given by the eyewitnesses⁴ to Jesus' resurrection is that God then took him away, to a new position of authority. As Peter puts it in his summary, "God exalted him at his right hand", meaning that Jesus is today, right at this moment, in heaven. And he's working *for you*.

3. Jesus is your Leader in heaven

God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour...

Right now, Jesus is in a position of authority and power, far beyond what you or I could imagine. He hasn't forgotten about us in his new position but is actively working for our best interests. There are a variety of ways in which the Bible describes our relationship with Jesus at the moment. It tells us that we are "in Christ", and "with Christ", and living "under Christ".⁵

The Bible also tells us that all of God's enemies are under Jesus' feet, and all of our lives are under his control.⁶ Even when things go badly wrong from our perspective, and even when the worst happens and we die, Jesus is supremely powerful and will bring us through to be with him for ever.

That position of authority puts in place the most central element of your new relationship with Jesus: *he is your King, your Lord*, and he is more important to you than anything else. There is no part of your life that is outside his loving rule. Over the years to come, he will constantly challenge you to make him more important than your family, career, leisure time, abilities, money—everything.

⁴ Matthew 28 v 16-20; Luke 24 v 50-53; Acts 1 v 1-11

⁵ Ephesians 2 v 1-6; Ephesians 1 v 22 ⁶ Romans 8 v 37-39

4. Jesus is your Saviour in heaven

God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour...

Let me make you a guarantee. No matter how definitely you know you are forgiven, no matter how delighted now you are to be guilt-free and with a new start in life, at some point, maybe very soon, you're going to slip up. You'll find yourself doing something that you know is wrong, and you'll feel incredibly guilty, and along with that come some concerns.

Isn't it supposed to be different now? Did I really become a Christian at all? You will be tempted to think that perhaps it was all just a clever mind game with no reality to it.

When that happens to you—and it will—remember this: you will need Jesus to be your Saviour for as long as you live, and that is what he has promised he will be.

You will never have a day when you don't need his forgiveness. In fact, the longer you're a Christian, the more you'll realise how much you need him to be your Saviour, not just every day but minute by minute.

A little voice might tell you that you sin because you didn't become a Christian properly, but that's not true. The reality is, you will have a stubborn, rebellious streak for the whole of your life, and you'll need to wrestle with it every day, drawing on the strength that Jesus gives you. But let's take that further...

5. Repentance and forgiveness is a way of life

... to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.

There's a moment when a thought comes into the mind of every Christian which won't quite go away. It says this: *so, if Jesus has*

done everything you say, and I am now forgiven and free, why can't I live the way I'd like, and ask him for forgiveness later?

Put bluntly like that, it seems obviously wrong—because it means treating Jesus as your servant: as someone who will clean up your mess after you. Be aware that, even as a genuine Christian, you can be devious and cunning with yourself. We have a variety of ways to excuse ourselves from being the kind of people Jesus wants us to be. “Repentance” is the word that cuts right through that. You might have heard it when someone explained how to become a Christian in the first place. It means *stop and think again*: change your mind to God’s view of things; straighten out your life and head in a better direction.

It was the word Jesus used to summarise how we should respond to his teaching.⁷ Once we see that to follow Jesus leads to life, growth and our flourishing as people, we change our minds about what we think and how to live.

Its partner word here is “forgiveness”, and we must never move far from that either. Because the other trap we can fall into is to wonder *why we don't feel forgiven all the time*, or *why old memories keep coming back to make us feel guilty*. Christians with sensitive consciences often wonder whether they have properly turned away from sin at all, or repented “enough”.

Let me be clear about this: *your forgiveness is a gift from God*. You could never say *sorry* enough times or repent sufficiently to earn it. Being a Christian is *never* about trying a bit harder to make God love you more. It's about *receiving regularly* what God wants to give you through Jesus—his forgiveness and love. You are accepted as a child of God, and nothing can change that.

This is why we must never travel far from the cross in our thinking. Because, if we're such a mess that we can't even repent properly, the only safe place to be is where God has promised total, unearned and complete forgiveness for everything wrong we've ever done, or thought.

You may well have something on your mind right now, big or small, recent or from years ago. Take a moment now to stop reading, remember the cross, ask again for Jesus' forgiveness, and then pause to consider this—you *are completely forgiven*.

It may be hard for you to move on, and there may be difficult apologies to make to someone you've hurt, or there may be things you need to do to put things right. But be bold, because you have already been completely forgiven by the God who knows the worst you've ever done, and loves you. He has broken the power of your wrongdoing to control your life.

6. God has given the Holy Spirit to you

... the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.

And one more piece of good news that Peter also explained: *when we submit to Jesus as our Leader and Saviour, he sends his Holy Spirit to live in our lives*. God's Spirit energises and equips us to live for him.⁸ You may not feel anything, but the truth is that you now have a new power to help you to change or "obey" God daily. Remember, this isn't about making God love you more, because he has already loved you enough by sending Jesus. But the Holy Spirit, living in us, gradually changes us, and helps us to *want* to change.

In some areas of your life you might experience a sudden change. Your friends might comment that you've stopped using "Jesus" as a swear word. You may discover a new hunger for the Bible and for meeting with other Christians. You may find yourself suddenly uncomfortable with some ways of living that were always normal and natural for you. That's the Holy Spirit working in you to help you grow more like Jesus.

In other areas you'll battle all your life—winning, losing, going deeper into the problem. In a strange way, our experience of the Christian life is like a yo-yo, going up and down—sinning and saying sorry, sinning and saying sorry—but imagine that the person holding the yo-yo is walking upstairs. There are wonderful ups and distressing downs, but there is also a constant change in a good direction. That is the mark of the Holy Spirit at work in your life.

Another New Testament writer, Paul, puts it like this:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

Galatians 5 v 22-26

We have the Spirit living in us ("we live by the Spirit"), so we must rely on him to help us ("walk by the Spirit"). He will do his work in you ("the fruit of the Spirit"), so you must do your work with his power ("let us not become conceited").

There's more, too. The Holy Spirit will help us pray—to ask for what we need, and to thank and praise God for all he's given

us. Because of him, you can even call the Creator of the cosmos, “Father”.⁹ The Holy Spirit inspired people to write God’s word, the Bible, so we can know who God is and how we can live to please him. The Spirit will always help you understand, love and obey your Lord and Saviour.

7. We are witnesses to these things

And we are witnesses to these things...

The apostle Peter was one of those eyewitnesses of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. He watched as Jesus was lifted to his position of universal authority. So when Peter says, “We are witnesses”, we can trust him. But in one of his letters, later in the Bible, he says that *each of us* is a witness as well. He writes:

In your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.

1 Peter 3 v 15

You might be bubbling over with enthusiasm to tell your friends, colleagues and family about being a Christian. But remember, Peter tells us to speak with “gentleness and respect”.

If you’re a quieter sort of person who feels very timid about telling others what has happened to you, please don’t make the mistake of being a *silent* Christian. When the conversation turns to what people did on Sunday, and you went to church, don’t hide it. When someone wonders how intelligent people can believe in God, remember Peter encouraging us to “make a defence”—give good reasons why you’ve become a believer in Jesus. On the back page are some resources to help you with this.

Peter's speech gives a clear and simple way we can describe our "hope" to others who ask:

- **Jesus really lived:** Peter and many others were witnesses of those things.
- **Jesus really died:** he was hung on a tree (a cross) so that we could be freed from sin.
- **Jesus really rose:** Peter and many, many others were witnesses, and...
- **Jesus really matters:** he is now our Leader and Saviour, offering forgiveness to you and your friends, for ever.

Memorise those four things, and you have a simple way to give the "reason for the hope that is in you".

8. We are part of a family

There is one final word to notice, because Peter was not on his own. He was standing with other Christian leaders, and he constantly talked about himself with them as a group:

We must obey God ... we are witnesses.

And there was a much larger group of Christians who were nearby. They used to meet together to learn, pray and sing, and help each other in difficulties. They called each other brothers and sisters. They ate together, and shared bread and wine to remember Jesus' death. New Christians marked their fresh start by being plunged in water, or baptised. The word for this gathering of Christians is "church".

God does not intend you to do the Christian life on your own. You need other Christians to encourage you, to teach you and to help you to grow—and they need you too.

You probably have a group like this around you already, but if not, try to find a church that matches the description we've just seen: a church where the Bible is opened, and people learn, sing and pray together. It won't be perfect, because everyone else is a yo-yo Christian too, but it's important for your spiritual health that you get embedded in a church straightaway.

The very first time you go, speak to one of the people in charge; explain that you've just become a Christian, and that you'd like some help in knowing what to do next. Hopefully they will invite you for a cup of coffee and offer you a chance to look at the Bible together—which is exactly what you need!

Once again, I am genuinely thrilled at your decision to become a Christian. Welcome to the family! Will you pray with me?

Dear Father God,

*I've learned so much about your love and goodness,
your promises and plans.*

*Thank you that Jesus died for me so I can be forgiven
for all my sin. Thank you that he is my Leader and
Saviour in heaven. Thank you for sending your Holy
Spirit, to give me a new start, and to help me understand
your word and follow you. Thank you for giving me a
new family to help and encourage me.*

*Please help me to rely on you today with all the
challenges I face, and to be bold in telling others.*

Amen

Resources

The best resource you have are the leaders of your local church. You probably have a load of questions, which they will be delighted to answer. But here are some other helps to get you started.

Reading your Bible

Make sure you have a good, modern translation. I recommend the *New International Version (NIV)*, or the *English Standard Version (ESV)*. Both are widely available. And I would suggest starting with one of the four lives of Jesus, or Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. The best way to start is to read a paragraph or two, and ask what the most important truth about Jesus is in that story. When you've read through one of the Gospels, try a letter: 1 Thessalonians or Philippians are good starting places. Don't forget to have a pencil and notepad nearby to write down your thoughts and your questions.

Prayer

Talking to God is our way of bringing all our needs and concerns, and all our thanks, to him. Jesus gave us the best framework for our praying in what we call "the Lord's Prayer" (Matthew 6 v 9-13). You may have learned it in school and be familiar with the words, but say it slowly, adding your concerns as appropriate,

and you'll find it covers all the areas you need to pray about.

Reasons

Lee Strobel is a Christian writer who was a hardbitten and anti-Christian journalist. He became a Christian because he was persuaded by the evidence. If you are thinking about questions of history, try his book *The Case for Christ*; and if you are worried by other big questions like suffering or other religions, try reading his book *The Case for Faith*.

Am I good enough for God?

If you are troubled with frequent worry about your guilt and goodness, a helpful book is *The Prodigal God*, by Timothy Keller. It looks at Jesus' story about two "prodigal" sons who both related wrongly to their father, and it reveals two mistakes we can make about God. One thought he wasn't good enough for God to love him, and the other assumed he was. The story is deeply encouraging and challenging, for how we think about God and ourselves. You can read it in Luke 15 v 11-32.

What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus Christ—a Christian?

You may have just started out on the Christian life and have many questions whirling around your mind. Or you may still be wondering what being a believer will involve for you.

In this short booklet you will discover helpful answers, practical advice, and sound wisdom and guidance for the journey ahead.

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