

The Transformation Series

First Steps With God



Scott Hilborn, Pastor

Banks Presbyterian Church

Marvin, NC

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God has come into your life! I am thrilled for you. You exist to experience life lived in tandem with the God who created you. This booklet is my effort to help you with your necessary first steps in what will be an unending relationship with your heavenly Father.

People find God from a number of circumstances. Some out of terrible guilt. Some out of pain. Some find God when they realize they cannot make life work. You may have searched for God out of a yearning to find the meaning of life. But ultimately God found you. Jesus said, **“You did not choose me. I chose you.”** You responded to God by surrendering your life to Jesus Christ. Whether you used the following words or not, I am sure they express what your heart has found.

“Lord Jesus, thank you for coming into my life. I give myself to you. I trust you. You are the one I want and need more than anything else. You are my savior from sin and you are the Lord of my life. Fill me with yourself. Show me how to follow you.”

You are safe now in Jesus Christ. You will not be lost. Jesus will not let you be separated from Him now that He has come into your life. He said, **“I give my sheep eternal life and they shall never perish. No one can snatch them out of my hand. My father who has given them to me is greater than all. No one can snatch them out of my father’s hand. I and my father are one”** (John 10:25-27).

You are also safe in this life. Yes, you will experience hurt (we all do). But you will not be harmed. “Harm” has to do with destruction. No matter what happens, God will ultimately turn it around for your good because you love Him and have been called by Him (Romans 8:28).

You have entered the kingdom of God. Simultaneously, you now live in two dimensions at once. This earthly dimension and the invisible, heavenly realm of God’s reality known as the kingdom of God. Your “job” is to learn to live more and more from the dimension of heaven while you live on earth. You do this by learning to trust Jesus Christ with everything and by learning to obey Jesus Christ in everything. In other words, you follow Jesus as His disciple.

How do you follow His invisible presence? You learn to recognize His voice on your inside and you discover His personality and ways from reading the Bible, particularly the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. As His follower you begin to take on His lifestyle as well as His point of view on all things.

This booklet will lay out a number of things you will want to begin to put into practice. They do not all have to be done this week! But certainly within the next few months, you will want to be proceeding with all these steps I will mention.

You must be aware that you have an enemy, the devil. He and his evil spirits can no longer “have” you since you now belong to Jesus – but they will certainly try to make life miserable for you, to make you feel discouraged, and to make you doubt the goodness of God towards you. You do not need to be afraid, but you do need to be vigilant. Call out to Jesus for help whenever you need it. You will receive that help. You can trust Jesus!

Begin by asking, “What now, Lord?”

Start each day by declaring, *“Lord Jesus, I am yours. This day is yours. Unfold this day according to your will. Help me trust you and obey you in this day. Help me seek to do not my own will, but yours. Thank you, Lord Jesus! Amen.”* Then, as your day unfolds, pause after you complete each new task or event and say *“What, now Lord? What would you have me be doing now?”* This is how you follow Jesus. After praying “What now, Lord?” act on whatever good and helpful thing comes to your mind. Enter that task peacefully, thanking God inwardly as you do so, and when finished, pause again and ask, “What now, Lord?”

Not everything the Lord will lead you to do involves work. Sometimes He wants you to simply be still in His presence. Sometimes He will lead you to give thanks and praise, or to pray for your needs and the needs of others. Sometimes He will lead you into having fun! Sometimes He will lead you to get a calendar out and do some planning. Sometimes He may lead you to pick up the mess in your room! Or He may lead you to give someone a phone call who might need cheering up. Your job at work is very important to God. Certainly in the stress of your employment, the Lord Jesus knows better than anyone else what type of actions you should take throughout your work day.

You do not need to lay your good sense at the door either. For example, I have never had to ask God whether I should report to work in the morning! Nor have I asked if I should wear clothes or drive recklessly! The reason you develop the habit of inwardly referring your decisions to Jesus is because by nature you are trained to seek and pursue simply what you want or what occurs to your own mind. Since God has come into your life, you are no longer seeking to follow your own inward impulses, private ambitions, or ego-centered satisfactions. Instead, you are learning to lay aside your own will so as to do what Jesus would like you

to do. This most important initial step of growth for you as a disciple is to discover the joy of not having to have your own way! By regularly asking "What now, Lord?" you inwardly strengthen the habit of putting Jesus first. And you will find that things go much better anyway.

When I finish a day in which I have routinely followed what Jesus wanted me to do, I may be tired, but I am not exhausted. On the other hand, on those days in which I rush to try to complete my own "to do" list, I usually finish that day exhausted, frustrated, and feeling distant from God.

Spend time alone with God

You will want to re-arrange your schedule so you can have 30 minutes (more or less) to be alone with God each day. For me, mornings are the only time I can really control. Other people may do best late at night. Whatever works for you is what counts. But you need to find a "sacred" place and time to meet regularly with God. This time alone with God does not make you righteous. It does not make God love you more (though I believe He enjoys that time with you). This sort of spiritual discipline is simply a part of wisdom. You will find that without a daily time alone with God, you will become easily distracted and weak in faith. Time alone with God is like time working out at the gym. You are not a morally superior person for working out. But you are wise to do so.

I like to begin my time alone with God by reading a Psalm. Then I pray. I suggest you pray either "The Lord's Prayer" (Matthew 6:9-13), meditating on each line, or by praying according to the acrostic "**ACTS**" -- **A**doration, **C**onfession, **T**hanksgiving, and **S**upplication. If you have 10 minutes to pray, let 5 of those minutes be spent "adoring" God, telling Him how great He is to you and how much you love Him. Then confess any unconfessed sins you are aware of to God, asking His forgiveness, then **THANKING** Him for that forgiveness. Jesus Christ has already obtained forgiveness for you when He died on the cross, shedding His blood as an atonement for your sins. It is a completed act on His part. So whenever you ask for forgiveness, immediately thank Him for that forgiveness. During this time of confession, tell God by name those persons you forgive who have hurt, angered, or offended you in any way. Ask God if there is anyone to whom He would have you go and make an apology. If He brings someone to mind, be sure that later on you follow-up and humbly ask that person for forgiveness. Then spend time in thanksgiving for all the specific blessings of your life. Food, clean water, a dwelling, a bed, an automobile, a job, a family, friends, and so forth. Finally, "supplication" is that time in which you make your requests

of God, both for yourself and for others. Always include your pastor and congregation in this act of supplication.

Then, as you have time, continue to read in the Bible. If you are brand new to reading the Bible, I suggest that after your initial reading in the Psalms start with the Gospel of Luke and then as the days go by continue reading through the rest of the New Testament, a chapter or two at a time. It is more important for you to read slowly and think about what you read than to try to read rapidly. Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you while you read. When certain passages grab at your heart, write down in a journal what God seemed to be saying to you through those verses. You may want to take a 3 x 5 card, write down a meaningful verse, and memorize it that day.

What kind of Bible should you read?

A visit to a local Christian book store will reveal an overwhelming number of types of Bibles. There are many excellent modern English translations of the Bible (the Bible was written originally in Hebrew and Greek). For normal use, I suggest either the New International Version (NIV), the English Standard Version (ESV), or the New King James Version (NKJV). Another version you might find very helpful is THE MESSAGE translation. It is a paraphrase version of the Bible and a wonderful way to do devotional reading.

I also recommend that you buy a Study Bible. These are Bibles that have explanatory notes at the bottom of each page to help with names, places, events, and interpretation. The NIV Study Bible and the ESV Study Bible are both outstanding.

Live in love towards God

Most of us are called to follow Christ in the context of an active life, not a contemplative life. I have always admired those with a special calling to a monastic life. But that is not my calling and probably it is not yours either. Nevertheless, we can “practice the presence of God” in spite of a busy routine. As we continue to pray, “What now, Lord?” we have the privilege of taking each task and lovingly give it our full attention, serving Jesus Christ in that task. We all have chores we dislike. But as we take those chores and use them as a way to worship God we find that not only does our attitude change, but we will have encountered the presence of God in unexpected ways.

In his book, CHANNELS OF SPIRITUAL POWER, Dr. Frank Laubach, missionary statesman of the early 20th century wrote:

“We are being trained to become master workmen and fellow workers with Christ in His vast enterprise. Our obligation is to do every task before us as well as we can. If we do the next thing well and unselfishly, that is all God expects of us. In fact, our work with God is extremely simple. It is hard, but it is simple. It is keeping open toward God and keeping open toward people and doing the next thing that comes to be done, not worrying about the distant scene but happily doing what we can do for others every day.

We should not care whether our work gets publicity or not. Every kindness is important, and everyone who does a kindness is important, because at that moment he is doing what God most wants him to do. It would be better for us to throw away ninety-nine per cent of our learning and our tangled philosophy and stick to just one simple thing for our daily life—to keep asking God, “Who needs me next, Father?”

It is not necessary to look too far ahead. God is there waiting for us, and we can trust His wisdom. If we are doing something that helps people, it helps and pleases God.”

Live in love towards others

Try not to let your following of Jesus become complicated. My favorite verse in the Bible is Jesus saying, **“Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light”** (Matthew 11:28-30).

The essence of following Jesus is to develop intimacy with Him and do what He instructs you to do. This will result in your fulfilling the two great commandments of the Bible: to love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength – and to love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37-40). As you probably know, it is possible to be very religious and still be mean. The proof that you are following Jesus Christ and not just being “religious” is that you are living in love towards other people.

So what is it to love? To love with God’s kind of love (*agape’* in the Greek language) is to seek the good of others, even when it costs you. This love does not require that you necessarily like the people (though as you persist in treating

people well, you find that your feelings towards them tend to change.) Real love involves sacrifice. When love is flowing, it is patient and kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud, it is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. *Agape'* love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres. This kind of love never fails. (1 Corinthians 13)

You are not called to try to act lovingly. You are called to live in love. There is a big difference. The difference is this. Trying to act lovingly will only result in your getting frustrated and angry and in trying to come up with some legalistic definition of love. *Agape'* love on the other hand is the flow of the life of God in and around you. To live in love is to abide in this flow of God's life. It is to live worshipping Jesus. If you need a mental focus from which to let love flow, try the word "honor." When I get stuck in the area of my feelings with someone to whom I am called to love, I find that the idea of "honoring" them releases appropriate actions. So whether it is holding the door for them or letting them have the last word, honoring comes very close to love. But still, love is greater than just honoring and it comes directly from God. To the extent we live in God we will live in love. And vice-versa.

But by all means, if you have to decide between being religiously mean or being lovingly kind, choose love!

When you fail

Before God came into your life, you probably felt guilty mostly when you got caught. Your conscience now is much more alive because of God. Words and actions that you would not have thought twice about, now trouble you. So you have probably made some sort of vow, determining "I will not do that again." And lo and behold you continued to misbehave! So you renewed your vow and said "This time I really mean it – I will not do that again." And once again you failed. How discouraging! The harder you try, it seems the worse that it gets. What can be done?

You are in good company. Everyone who follows Jesus goes through this at times. Read the experience of the great Apostle Paul in Romans chapter 7. It will sound like yourself. What you are experiencing is what is known as the frustration and discouragement and failure of living according to "the Law." God's law is wonderful and absolutely appropriate. The trouble does not lie with His law but with us. The power of sin is actually stimulated and increases in

strength when we set out to obey the law. So what is to be done? Should we not even try to live a righteous life?

We do intend to live righteously, but that intention must be part of a larger plan, that of following Jesus. The way to fulfill God's law in your life is by walking in the Spirit, following the leading of the Spirit, abiding in the power of the Spirit. You will discover that not only is there ease in doing so, but because your focus is on Jesus, instead of being "patient" (for example), you will surprise yourself with how patient you are able to be. Almost without trying.

This is not well understood even by very mature Christians. You will find that it is always easier in one sense to limit yourself to following a certain virtue only, such as trying to be patient or trying to tell the truth, instead of the full-blown surrender involved in following Jesus on a moment-by-moment basis. But the trouble with following the law is that you will not succeed. Neither you nor the law have the power to bring about obedience from the heart. So you will fall into despair and perhaps quit – or – you will subtly excuse yourself from the rigorous demands of the moral law and become a hypocrite. The way to fulfill the law of God is not by trying to fulfill the law! The way to fulfill God's laws is by intimately following Jesus in the power and life of the Holy Spirit. And this intimacy with Jesus takes time and will require deep, inner changes. These inner changes do come about, but after lots of failure. The frustrations the Apostle Paul expressed about his own failures in Romans chapter 7 do not describe a permanent lifestyle. Thankfully, as you mature in Jesus Christ you will find increasing victory over things that right now defeat and discourage you. Still, while we live in this body, there will always be occasions where we find that once again we have failed, and stand in need of forgiveness, repentance, and cleansing.

Be specific about failure. Suppose you just lost your temper with a family member. You yelled, cursed, said things that were hurtful, called him names. Before God came into your life you might have excused your behavior or even felt kind of proud and thought "He had that coming to him." But now you feel awful. You feel terrible that you hurt someone you love, you feel ashamed to have lost control of yourself, especially now that you have been trying to live like a Christian, and worst of all you feel that you have let God down. What do you do now?

One of the secrets to following Jesus is that of keeping "short accounts" with God and others. When you are aware that you have sinned, do not call it a mistake, or call it something that just "happened." Call it for what it was – sin. Then as

quick as you can, confess that behavior to God as sin. Pray along these lines. ***“Lord God, I have sinned in losing my temper and in the bad things I said. Please forgive me. Thank you that you have forgiven me by the shed blood of Jesus on the cross. Cleanse me now from this sin and its guilt. Renew your life within me, Lord. In Jesus’ name, Amen!”*** Whenever you ask God for forgiveness immediately thank Him that He has forgiven you. He forgave you in Jesus Christ 2000 years ago. You receive that forgiveness in this present time as you confess and repent.

Now go to the one you sinned against. Even if it was ninety percent the other’s fault, the follower of Jesus owns up to his part. Do not go expecting the other one to also apologize. Just approach that person humbly and sincerely and ask him to forgive you for what you did and said. Do not say, ***“If I hurt you...”*** or ***“If I offended you...”*** No, simply admit the truth. ***“I lost my temper. I said things I should not have said. Please forgive me.”*** Then give the other person time to sort things out.

Finally, because God has forgiven you through Jesus Christ, you must forgive yourself. Perfectionists tear themselves up inside when they sin. Perfectionism is not a virtue. It is a weakness and sometimes it is a sin. It can be a subtle form of pride. Perfectionists think of themselves, ***“I am not the kind of person who does that sort of thing.”*** Oh, yes you are! At times God permits you to fall in order that you might discover who you really are apart from His grace.

Keep a few things in mind. God did not come into your life because you were a good person. You weren’t. He did not come into your life so that He could get you to work hard for Him. He doesn’t ***“need”*** your work. God did not come into your life on the promise that you would never sin again. He knew better. It has been said, ***“God is not disillusioned with you, because He was never under any illusions about you to begin with!”***

So trust Jesus to forgive you. And forgive yourself. Commit this verse to memory:

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9)

Here is another secret. Not only keep short accounts with God and others (and yourself) but when you fall in sin, do not just lie there. Get back up and keep following Jesus!

Deal with your past

One of the most important things to do now as a new person in Jesus Christ is to turn loose of the sinful ties from your past. This involves letting go of the wrong things you have done and the wrong things done to you. Not only is this important for your mental and emotional health, but it is a necessary step to “closing the door” to the influence of the devil and evil spirits. Since you now belong to Jesus Christ, you have been permanently transferred from the dominion of darkness, where Satan is king, to the dominion of the kingdom of God, where Jesus is king.

But until the doors to evil have been shut, you are still susceptible to torment from evil spirits. The way to close the doors that sin has opened is by confessing the wrongdoing and renouncing your participation in it. The way to close the doors to the harm that wrong-doing from others has caused you is by forgiving the offender and praying God’s blessings over them.

Deal with your own wrongdoing first.

Make a written list of all your remembered sins. This may take a while! Then, courageously confess each situation out loud to Jesus, confessing the wrong doing as sin. If you can do this in the presence of a grace-filled and trusted Christian friend, you are fortunate indeed! But whether with another or by yourself, deliberately ask Jesus to forgive you for each sin, thank Him that His shed blood on the cross atoned for that sin, thank Him that He has forgiven you, and then renounce your activity with that sin. To “renounce” is to declare that you intend to have nothing more to do with it.

Say that you as a teenager you knocked down a neighbor’s mailbox and drove away without paying for or fixing it. Here is an example of how you might pray. ***“Lord Jesus, that time I drove away without taking responsibility for the damage I caused was sin on my part. Please forgive me. Thank you that your shed blood has covered that sin. Thank you that you have already forgiven me. Show me, Lord, if there is some way I can now make restitution. In the mighty name of Jesus I pray! Amen.”***

Restitution is an important part of repentance. As much as is possible, you want to try and repair the damage your sin has caused others. For instance, the teenager would want to go back to the folks who owned the mailbox and admit that he was the one who destroyed it and then offer to fix or pay for it. Or, if it happened years ago and you are now an adult, you still may want to approach that neighbor and share that Jesus has come into your life and you are trying to

own up for past behavior. Even if you and he just have a good laugh together about the foolishness of things when you were kids, you will have set a good example and been a witness to Jesus.

Wisdom is needed here though. The Holy Spirit will tell you whether to go back to make things right or not. Some situations need to be left behind permanently. Other situations still need to be made right. The determining factor is what God wants you to do! You alone have to determine that. If you have uncertainty about what to do, consult your pastor or another mature Christian. But do not proceed until the Holy Spirit says to proceed. Then do so courageously.

Remorse is another important part of repentance. God does not ask that we punish ourselves with guilt. On the other hand, a heart that experiences remorse at wrongdoing is also a heart that will seek to do better. We all know the difference when we receive an apology. We know when the apology is sincere and heartfelt and when it is not. One of the signs that you have been “born from above” is that you no longer want to sin. And when you do sin, there is real remorse and an urgency to find forgiveness and cleansing and the power to overcome the sin.

Once you have confessed the sins you remember, renounced those sins, and made restitution where possible, then thank God that you are forgiven in Jesus! And forgive yourself. Take that list, light a match to it, and burn it to ashes. It is done. God says in His word, **“I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more”** (Jeremiah 31:34).

If guilty thoughts continue about sins you have confessed and put behind you, that is not God, but the devil. Say out loud, “Get behind me devil! I am forgiven in Jesus Christ!”

However, as the days and weeks go by, the Holy Spirit will bring to your mind other sins and events of your past for you to deal with. He does this so you can be set free. Follow the same process as before: confess, renounce, make restitution where practical, thank Jesus for forgiveness, and forgive yourself.

Renounce the occult

One type of sin in particular must be dealt with plainly and specifically. Any dealings that you have had with “occult” practices must be firmly renounced. This would include any form of witchcraft, Wicca, putting a curse on others, use of astrology, séances, Ouija boards, tarot cards, fortune tellers, psychics and so

on. Even if you got involved with these things “innocently” the harm still happens. These activities open the door to demonic influence. You close the doors by repenting, confessing, receiving forgiveness, renouncing your participation and verbally breaking the evil power of these activities.

Declare out loud with firm resolve, ***“In the name of Jesus Christ, I renounce my past participation in the occult. I confess that activity as sin. I receive forgiveness from God by the shed blood of Jesus Christ on the cross for my sins. I break the power of evil and any curse that my sin has brought to me and my family. I declare that by the blood of Jesus Christ shed for me, evil will have no more power over me or my family. I enforce the victory of Jesus Christ over me and my family by His death, burial, resurrection, ascension, pouring out of the Spirit, and soon return in glory! I receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit over and into every part of me and my family that evil once had hold of. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.”***

If your parents or grandparents were involved in the occult (including Freemasonry) you need to verbally break the power their involvement in evil may have had on you and your family. You may want to meet with your pastor or other experienced Christian leader to pray over this with you.

Forgive those who have sinned against you

Because God has forgiven you, you must also forgive those who have sinned against you. We have all been sinned against by various forms of attack and withdrawal. Some things may have happened to you that are just unspeakable. For you to forgive is to forgive the PERSON who sinned against you – the sin itself can only be forgiven by God. Jesus taught us to pray “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” (Matthew 6:12). It is the offending human being that we are commanded to forgive.

And it is a command. Jesus taught that if we do not forgive those who have sinned against us, God will not forgive our sins!

Forgiveness is a choice. It is an act of your will. It cannot wait until you no longer feel offended. We all must keep short accounts with one another and choose to live in a state of forgiving others. Every day, opportunities to forgive other people come our way. Whether big or small offenses, we must practice living in forgiveness. Here is what it looks like. When hurt, angered, or offended, as quickly as you can, say out loud (as appropriate) ***“Lord Jesus, I forgive (his name) for what he did to me. I release him to you and for your sake I ask that your***

blessing might rest upon him.” As often as the remembrance of his sin comes to your mind, repeat that prayer. It will not be long before the acid pain of that memory has gone.

Two things to keep in mind. First, to forgive someone is not to persuade yourself that what he did was maybe not all that bad. No, it probably was all that bad. You are not diminishing the size of the offense when you forgive. Rather, you acknowledge the size of the offense but for the sake of Jesus you forgive the offender. Again, God must forgive the sin. You forgive the sinner.

Second, to forgive does not mean you must now enter back into a relationship with the offender. Sometimes that would be completely unwise. To forgive someone is to release him from the debt he owes you. Your forgiveness does not release the offender from a debt he still owes to God or to society. But as far as you are concerned, you have let it go.

Now, if the person you have forgiven later wishes to be reconciled to you, the follower of Jesus will be willing to be reconciled, at least on a personal basis. That still does not mean that trust should be assumed. For example, say a business partner stole from you. Over time there has been repentance, restitution, a giving and receiving of forgiveness and even some personal reconciliation. But that still does not mean that you should enter back into business with that partner! The same principle holds true in marriage. Forgiveness and even personal reconciliation does not mean that an abusing spouse should be taken back.

Out of necessity, we all have had to forget many of the offenses committed against us since childhood. Some of those hurts have scarred us and remain untreated within. What can be done? I am certainly in favor of therapy, counseling, and medicine. Pursue counseling with a professional, but find one who is a Christian, or at least one who is sympathetic to your faith.

But there are also ways you can also deal with those hurts in prayer. Ideally with a pastor, or a small group of people trained in inner healing, you can find relief from the torment of your past. Even on your own, there is much you can do through prayer. But you will need significant time to be alone with God.

Allow the churning of your thoughts to slow down. Gently turn your attention to Jesus, living inside you. Ask Him to bring to your mind anyone you need to forgive and the events of your past that He would like to heal. Then as the face of

any person involved in that event surfaces, say out loud, ***“Lord Jesus, I forgive that one and give him over to you. I cancel the debt he owes me. For your sake I ask that your blessing might rest upon him. Heal me Lord of the hurt I received.”*** Repeat this, waiting in prayer and then forgiving as others as long and as often as needed, inviting the Holy Spirit to heal you on the inside. The Holy Spirit is God’s presence in and with you. He is Jesus, present with you invisibly.

You may find to your surprise that Jesus appears in your mind’s eye as you remember the incidents. Often this type of prayer will forth much emotion and tears on your part. We all carry around the burden of many past hurts until we have learned to let them go and find healing in God. And even after we have experienced a breakthrough we will still experience times when those thoughts reappear. When that happens our response is to turn those remembrances right back over to Jesus.

Learn to overcome sinful habits

Because you have been born again by God’s Holy Spirit, your heart is now directed toward trusting and obeying Jesus. But the habits of sin have been formed in your body. You still have “buttons” that are easily pushed! Temptation will come and at certain times you will be weaker than at other times.

Clint Eastwood’s character “Dirty Harry” in the movie MAGNUM FORCE frequently repeated the phrase: “A man has got to know his limitations.” That is so true. There are situations in which you may be very susceptible to temptation. Do not go there! The best way to stay out of sin is to stay out of temptation. If you have a problem with alcohol, do you have any business visiting a bar?

The Bible promises that when you are tempted God will provide a way out (1 Corinthians 10:13). The problem is that temptation can press us to the point where we no longer want to find the way out. Anger builds or lust builds and we can reach a point of no return. So not only must we learn to exercise wisdom about avoiding temptation, we must find new habits that counteract those wrong habits. For example, you can use the same inner “cues” that led to indulging in anger or lust to now do something else. When those feelings begin to surface on the inside, use those feelings as signals to begin to pray.

Most bad habits are overcome by developing new habits that replace them. In the words of missionary Frank Laubach, we overcome sin by finding “the

expulsive power of a greater affection.” Some patterns of sin are easier to break than you might think. For example, say that you have had the habit of comforting yourself with ice cream before you go to bed each night. Now you are overweight and feeling ashamed about your lack of self-control. Through prayer ministry you can find relief from past hurts. Through the practice of forgiveness you can let go of old grudges. And through the development of new habits you can overcome the eating addiction. Try a 30 day experiment. Keep track of each night when instead of eating ice cream, you do something else positive instead. When 30 days have elapsed with no ice cream, go and reward yourself with something you have really wanted but could not really justify, say a new dress (or for me, some new back packing equipment!)

Then do the 30 day experiment again. Before long you will have established a whole new set of habits.

Overcoming sinful habits also involves changes on the inside. One of Jesus’ main teachings is that if you make the tree good, the tree will naturally bring forth good fruit. You do not want to obsess over trying to change your behavior (the fruit) and overlook the source of your behavior (making the tree good).

Take losing your temper as an example. A common enough occurrence for most of us. Yes, if there are anger-management techniques that help, by all means, you should use them. But would it not be even better if you could become the kind of person who is just not easily angered?

Or “looking to lust” for example. Certainly you can gain control over where you direct your eyes. But along with the discipline of looking at others appropriately, would it not be even better if you valued others so much that you would not want to use their image as a means of self-stimulation? Again, use the inner stirrings as cues to do something different with your mind. Begin to thank God for making women beautiful, thank Him for the high regard He has for the woman you were thinking about and then pray God’s blessings over her. You will find it almost impossible to lust after someone to whom you are extending the love of God.

This kind of deep inner change is exactly what Jesus will do in your life over time. The Holy Spirit does the changing. Your job is to learn to live by the Spirit. You find out your need for change as your faith is tested under temptation. Frequently you will fail. But the failures will teach you (if are willing to learn) where you are vulnerable and what needs changing. Your failures will also teach

you about the patience and kindness of God towards you. Then as you regularly practice spiritual disciplines, such as solitude, silence, Bible study, acts of service, fasting, worship, small group accountability, scripture memorization, “practicing the presence of God,” and so forth, the changes will begin to happen, sometimes dramatically.

There will be wonderful times when you surprise yourself. You will enter a situation that normally you would have failed at miserably, but now found the inner poise of the Holy Spirit supporting you. You passed the test! And to your delight, you can see that you have grown. And others will see it too.

Learn to overcome addictions

I do not look down my nose at people with addictions. Without the Holy Spirit, I am sure that is exactly where I would be living. My personality is inclined that way.

Addictions are the human solution to ease inner pain. Sweets, tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, pain-killers, pornography, buying new clothes, gambling, and so on are used to comfort ourselves. And these things do provide comfort briefly. But the life of the Holy Spirit is the only real lasting comfort. Inner pain will require inner healing. This may come through divine healing in prayer ministry and/or through professional therapy and medicine. Frankly, some amount of pain will just have to be borne and carried by the strength and grace God provides. Everybody suffers. Everybody can find grace in God to bear with their suffering. But you must seek that grace. And only you can find that grace. Others cannot do it for you.

It is not “the end of the world” that you are in pain. There is nothing surprising about your suffering. One of the big steps into human maturity in general is to accept that your life will involve its share of pain. But praise be God that He takes your pain and redeems it for your eventual good and the glory of Jesus Christ!

A Christian 12-step group can be a wonderful help. I also want to mention fasting. Having a regular schedule of fasting, such as one or two meals a week, will build within you the capacity to say “no” to the demands of your body. Learning to ignore your stomach’s signals for food will give you built-in grace to put up with discomfort in general. So when, for instance, the stress of the day moves your body to reach for alcohol, you will find grace to acknowledge the

discomfort of the stress but also realize that you can bear with it and that you do not have to medicate it.

What about alcohol and marijuana?

No one ever got hurt by not drinking. On the other hand, the Bible does not teach that followers of Jesus cannot drink alcohol. Rather, we must refrain from inebriation. God does not want our judgment impaired. Some people can handle the occasional drink. Others cannot. A man (or woman) must know his own limitations! Here is a standard I like. If after drinking you can no longer pray with a clear conscience, then you have had too much to drink.

Marijuana is still illegal in most states and that should end the discussion for followers of Jesus. Should it become legal, that still does not mean it is beneficial or that it pleases God. Admittedly, the effect of marijuana doesn't seem to be any worse than the effect of alcohol. Still, alcohol makes some people belligerent or promiscuous. Marijuana makes frequent users lazy and apathetic. Neither are helpful. If you smoke marijuana, you would do well to let it go. And if you drink, keep control of yourself and don't be afraid to let it go either. Again, no one ever got hurt by not drinking!

Overcome sexual sin

God is very strict about human sexuality. Though we do not know all His reasons why we at least know that the kind of utter vulnerability expressed in human sexual intimacy deserves the unbreakable covenant of marriage. We also know that God has designed sex to produce the family so that children can be raised, protected, nurtured, and trained in a covenant relationship of love.

If you are sexually involved with someone and you are not married, you need to do one of two things. Either find ways to be celibate around each other or get married. Sexual immorality is not the greatest of sins. Things like pride, cruelty, contempt and lack of mercy are among the greatest of sins. Still, Jesus calls you to sexual fidelity as you follow Him.

We live in a culture that is convinced that without regular sexual intercourse you live a deprived life. That is just silly. Millions of people live contented, happy lives who are not "sexually active."

Part of dealing with your past also involves renouncing and breaking the "soul ties" from your past sexual relationships. Sex with someone is more than just

“skin on skin.” Not just our bodies, but our souls also link to some extent in sexual intercourse. Like you did with forgiving those who have sinned against you, take time alone with God and bring before Him every person with whom you have had a sexual encounter. To break those soul-ties you will want to pray out loud along these lines. ***“Lord Jesus, I renounce the sexual relationship I had with (their name). Please forgive me for those wrong sexual actions. Thank you that you forgive me. I break the soul-tie that was established through intercourse with the person. And I ask your blessing upon that person. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen!”***

What about masturbation? The Bible actually says not one word about masturbation. So while it is not a sin according to the Bible, it does tend to weigh people down with shame. You will feel stronger and happier as you gain control over yourself. Jesus taught that fantasizing about someone in order to stimulate yourself is not part of life in the kingdom of God. Still, simply having thoughts about sex are not sin any more than having thoughts about food. But those thoughts are better left untended. Otherwise they can obsess you. A wise person once said, “Thoughts may come. But thoughts that are not spoken or put into action die unborn.” That is true.

Pornography in particular must not be touched, even in your thought-life. The images sear into the human brain. The more you access pornography the deeper its hooks sink. It is exceedingly difficult to avoid the enticing sexual images of our media culture. “Semi-pornography” is present almost everywhere. But you must find the ways to avoid what you can avoid. I subscribe to SPORTS ILLUSTRATED magazine. The magazine has an 800 number to call to opt out of their annual “swim suit edition.” So I took them up on it. I know my limitations and don’t want my mind to go in the direction that particular edition would take it. Having a trusted friend to hold you accountable and to pray for you is also important. Limiting your access to the internet may be necessary. Whatever it takes will be worth it. God does not want you to live in shame. And you want to feel clean in mind and conscience.

Find a church

It is essential that you find a church to belong to. It is not the will of God that you try to follow Jesus apart from a Christian congregation of fellow disciples. You need to find a congregation you can feel at home with and not just hop around to various churches. There are wonderful large churches and wonderful small churches. Let me suggest four things to look for in a church. First, does the

pastor regularly refer to the Bible and does he (or she) speak often about Jesus and the Holy Spirit? Second, does the church seem interested in helping people grow in their faith and in reaching out to those without Christ? Third, do the members of the church seem to like each other? In other words, is there an atmosphere of good will and love? And fourth, does the congregation at least accept The Apostles' Creed in terms of their beliefs? Unfortunately there are Christian cults and you need to avoid them. Every true church will at least hold to The Apostles' Creed. It is the basic creed of the Christian Church and dates from within 50 years of the writing of the New Testament.

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:

Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended into hell.

The third day He rose again from the dead.

He ascended into heaven
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,
from whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,*
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.

Amen.

**The word "catholic" means the universal church of the Lord Jesus Christ, not just the Roman Catholic Church.*

Pray and ask God to lead you to the congregation He has for you. It may not necessarily be the church that is the most exciting or even has the best preacher. But it will be the Christian home God has appointed for you. You belong to a church, not just for the sake of going on Sunday morning, but because it is the family of God you are meant to be part of. The point of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ and teach them how to obey everything He taught us. Your finding God's choice of a church for you is extremely important as you grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ!

Receive baptism in water

The first official step in following Jesus is to be baptized. Jesus said, **“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved”** (Mark 16:16). If you have not been baptized that should be a priority. Baptism marks you out in the sight of the visible and invisible world as belonging to Jesus Christ. It is a sign that you are now in an everlasting covenant with the God of the universe. It symbolizes your new life in God, it illustrates the washing away of your sins, and it is a metaphor of an even more important baptism, the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism should be received as part of the ministry of your Christian congregation. In other words, it is not something that you and a Christian buddy do one afternoon at the lake. It is one of the most sacred acts you can make as a new follower of Jesus and under normal circumstances, should be received at the hands of an ordained minister. In the Presbyterian Church, we regard it as one of two Sacraments, the Lord's Supper being the other.

Receive baptism in the Holy Spirit

As Jesus Himself was baptized in the Holy Spirit when He was baptized in water, so too His followers are to be baptized in the Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit baptism is a baptism of divine power so that we might effectively bear witness to Jesus. The Holy Spirit comes to dwell WITHIN the heart of every born-again believer in the new birth. The Holy Spirit baptizes with God's presence so that His power might rest UPON the believer. Or at least that is the possibility. Unfortunately, many believers are not taught that the power of the Holy Spirit upon them for witness and ministry is available to them today. Jesus said though, **“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses”** (Acts 1:8).

We know that in the first centuries of the Church it was customary for those joining the Church to do so at Easter, after a lengthy period of examination and instruction. They were then baptized in water. The elders of the church would anoint them with oil, lay hands upon the converts, and the power of the Spirit would come upon them as they rose from the baptismal pool.

What is important for you is not how it happens, but that the baptism in the Holy Spirit happens. You have been called by God out of darkness to live with and serve Jesus in the kingdom of heaven. The power to do this is from the Holy Spirit alone. Every day, seek more of the Holy Spirit in your life. Ask to be filled. Ask to be empowered. Find a Christian leader who is himself baptized with the Spirit and ask him to lay hands on you for you to be filled with God's power. Each believer has the privilege of experiencing the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

What will you experience? Your experience of being filled with the power of the Spirit may be a gentle and peaceful one. Or it may be a very strong physical manifestation that includes "falling out in the Spirit," or trembling and shaking. It may be a current of spiritual power that feels like electricity in your limbs. Or it may wash over you and fill you with a sense of "liquid love." As you read in the book of Acts and in throughout Church history, the way people have experienced the Spirit's power varies tremendously. But again, what is important is that each disciple of Jesus be empowered by the Holy Spirit.

One of the great blessings from the Spirit of God is the ability to pray in a language from heaven. This is called "speaking in tongues." To pray or speak in tongues is to speak directly to God from your own spirit with a language of the heart that the Holy Spirit gives you. You yourself will not know what you are saying to God. But God knows. And He takes those yearnings of your heart and interprets them so as to bless you and others (see 1 Corinthians chapter 14 to read about the Apostle Paul's own use of this gift). If you want to pray in tongues, ask God for this gift. Seek Him for it. Then, as an act of faith, begin to speak or sing out praise to God in whatever syllables of sound come to you. Do not try to form speech. Instead just speak out the sounds that emerge from your spirit deep within and sing or pray them to God.

Baptism in the Holy Spirit is for empowerment to witness for Jesus. If you want the boldness to speak up for Jesus and the superhuman ability to know what to say, you must be empowered by the Spirit. God is willing to give you His power if you are willing to surrender to do His will. Simply ask God in child-like faith, thank Him, and you will receive.

Learn to recognize the voice of God

Like any good father, God speaks to His children, usually quite tenderly. The most common way He does so is by taking the words of Scripture and deeply impressing them into your mind. God will also speak directly to your spirit, using patterns of thought you can come to recognize. Often people are concerned they might be deceived about the voice of God. They worry over whether the thoughts are from God or from the devil or just simply their own thoughts. This is an important concern. But it is one that is relatively easy to answer.

First of all, thoughts from God (the “inner voice”) will always direct you to do good and helpful things, things that do not bring praise to yourself. So when you experience these good and helpful and humble thoughts, you can be sure it is God and not the devil. The voice of the devil into your thoughts on the other hand will be one that raises fear, anger, worry, and suspicion of others. When you are feeling condemned and worthless and hopeless – or when you are full of self-praise -- that is the influence of the enemy.

The voice of God is a strong, calm, confident, strengthening voice. God simply speaks with authority and does not try to persuade. There is a goodness to His voice even with the firmness. God’s voice is never silly, whining, mocking, or rushed. And the content of His voice is always consistent with what He has already spoken in the Bible. The effect of the voice of God on your heart is that you find yourself wanting to obey. You may still struggle with obeying, but your heart wants to do so.

Here is an example of an inner conversation. You are buying a soft drink at a convenience store and something stirs within you to ask the clerk if there is something you can pray for her about. Is this thought from God? Or is it the devil? Or just your own thoughts? You can pretty easily conclude that it is not the devil since he is not interested in inspiring people to pray for others! So, it is either God or it is your own inclination. But since it is a “good and helpful” thing to do, you conclude that no harm can come even if it is just your own thought.

But say shyness overcomes you and you chicken out. On the way out the door, a sharp thought comes, “What a coward. And you thought you were a Christian! What a hypocrite you are.” That is the voice of the devil. He delights in discouraging. But you get to your car and say to God, “I am sorry, Lord. I walked away from an opportunity to bless that lady.” Then another thought comes, “It is

OK. You will have other opportunities. You can still pray for her.” That is the voice of the Holy Spirit. There is always a fresh beginning with God!

As I have grown more accustomed to hearing the voice of God, I find that it often comes with a feeling of compassion towards someone. I rarely worry now whether it is just me or if it is God. Either way, it turns out for the good. The best way to practice is developing the daily habit of asking “What now, Lord?” Sincerely wanting His guidance is the certain preparation for hearing from God.

Simplify your lifestyle

God wants you to live well within your means so that you have extra money to do good with and to put into savings. What you do with your money is very important. It reflects your real priorities more than almost anything else. God also wants you to be free of debt so as not to be under bondage. He has promised to provide for your financial needs. The way He normally does that is by your working. Christian people should be among the best employees in the work force. The way you do your job is probably your greatest public witness. Getting to work on time, not leaving early, not stealing, being loyal to your boss, treating customers and fellow employees with respect, working hard and doing your job well marks you out as a person of integrity.

“First fruits giving” is the Bible’s way of giving to God. In the agricultural society of the Old Testament, people would give God the first and the best of their crops and livestock. Today, you do this by setting up your budget to reflect that your giving to God is the first priority of your spending. You get to decide how much to give. The Biblical pattern is to give a tenth of your income. This is called “tithing.” God has placed special financial blessings on the tithe (see God’s promises about tithing in Malachi chapter 3). In other words, those who give ten percent of their income to God will in the long run make more money than if they had not tithed. But even if that were not true, is God not worth the sacrifice?

But say that you are reading this and you are seriously in debt. If you have past-due accounts, you should settle those past-due accounts first before you start giving. Money given to God that is already owed to someone else is like giving stolen money.

Depending on how badly you are in debt you may need the help of a Christian financial advisor. You may need to cut up your credit cards and live only on cash and a debit card. Credit cards should only be used if you can pay off the balance

in full each month. A wise advisor once told me that in our society, three things only should be purchased with credit: a house, an automobile, and an education.

Keep track of what you spend. Form a budget placing God first. Spend money on your needs, not your wants. It is a wonderful feeling to live within your means, to be able to pay your bills, to put money aside into long-term savings, and to give to God's work. The 10 – 10 – 80 plan will help you get there. Give ten percent, save ten percent, and determine to live on the eighty percent. God wants this for you and He will help you do it!

Tell others about your experience with God

You now have God in your life, in part because other people told you about Jesus. It may have been your parents or grandparents, a friend, a pastor, a book, something on the radio or TV or internet, but ultimately some human being told you the good news of life in Jesus Christ. You need to do the same for others.

You do not need to be good with words. You simply need to have the courage and love for Jesus and others to tell what has happened to you. Some people may not understand. They may even make fun of you. But if you have shared respectfully and sincerely from your heart, you have performed a great act of love!

Smart cynical people may be able to beat you in a theological argument – but no one can take away your own personal story. It honors Jesus for you to speak up on His behalf. Your personal testimony has three parts: your life before God, how you received Christ, and what your life is like now with God. Authenticity is the key. You do not need to share all the dirty laundry of your life before you met Christ. Nor do you need to make your current life with God overly “glowing.” People know how tough life can be and they wouldn't expect that everything would be perfect for you now. But when you share how God came into your life and what a difference He has made, even if they reject it for themselves, they cannot argue against your own experience.

Depending upon your situation, I believe it is always best to let those whom you will be around on a regular basis, such as co-workers, know soon that you are a follower of Jesus Christ. God will give you the opportunity and the words to speak. Obviously, letting this be known puts a responsibility on you to live before them in a way that brings credit to Jesus. One of the best ways to do this is by a sincere apology when necessary. You will not always be consistent in front of

your co-workers. But you can show humility and the desire to improve by making a sincere apology.

What about your old friends?

When I was born-again in my early 20's the changes in my life were pretty dramatic. My plan was to continue to hang out with my old friends but just not do the partying I had been doing with them. Well, that did not work out. Maybe it will for you. What happened to me is that my old "friends" made it clear that I was not welcome around them anymore. That hurt. On the other hand, there were other people I knew who now seemed quite drawn to me. I had the great privilege of leading two people to Christ within just weeks who up until that time had only been acquaintances. And we became close friends.

Here is my advice about your old friends. As long as their behavior does not tempt you into sinning, try to maintain your friendship with them. You are the one in whom Christ dwells for them. Your witness of Jesus may be the very thing that saves them.

Be sensitive to the people you encounter on a regular basis. People you see at gym, or those who work at the gas station, or those at your favorite coffee shop. Introduce yourself. Get to know them as human beings. Be aware that God will give you opportunities to show His love in word and deed to these people. You will not have to force yourself on them. If you are willing to be a cheerful and caring presence to them, you will find many opportunities to bear witness to the love of God.

Be aware too that the Spirit of God within you loves the downtrodden and needy. Do not be afraid to make friends among those who are in a lower position socially or professionally than you. By all means treat those with great dignity who are normally overlooked by "important" people. Jesus said that what we do for one of "the least of these" we do for Him (Matthew 25:40).

What about the music, movies, books, clubs, and entertainment I'm used to enjoying?

It is said that when William Penn was a newly converted Christian, he asked George Fox, the founder of the Quaker movement, what he should do about wearing his sword. As a gentleman in English society, Penn's sword was part of his normal attire. George Fox reportedly said, "Wear it as long as you can." It

was not long before the peaceful and simple ways of Quakerism inspired William Penn to freely lay aside his sword.

The principle here is one I recommend you follow. Don't assume that everything you have enjoyed prior to Jesus coming into your life must be forsaken. Instead, deliberately invite Jesus to participate with you in the entertainments you enjoy. God is not against enjoyment! C.S. Lewis, the great Christian writer, said "The devil has never been able to create a pleasure. Only God can do that. All the devil can do is tempt us to pursue pleasure wrongly."

It would be a mistake to stop something you truly enjoy just because you think "Oh, now that I'm a Christian I guess I can't do this." Granted, if you have been going to strip clubs, you will find it very difficult to invite Jesus into that situation! But things like that aside, do what you have been enjoying, but now do them invoking the presence of Jesus. The Holy Spirit will begin to give you the inner nudge and liberty to let go of some things and to hold on to other things. And as you grow in Christ, you will find that your inner tastes change. You will grow to avoid certain things simply because you know they are not helpful in your goal of drawing closer to Jesus. And you will be drawn to embrace other things that are good and nourishing for your soul.

Pay attention to the effect the arts, culture, and media have on you. Do they refresh, encourage, and lift you? Then whether it is "Christian" or not, enjoy them. But if they depress, disturb, or elicit worry, anger, or lust within you, you are better off to let those things go. Keep in mind your own limitations! Some believers have freedom in areas you do not yet have. As in all things, ask Jesus.

Be clear about the goal of your life

What you will take from this life is the kind of person you have become. The Bible teaches that God's plan for you is to grow increasingly like Jesus Himself. If you cooperate with the Holy Spirit, that is exactly the kind of person you will become. God's plan is for you to become the kind of person He can trust to do what you want into eternity. You are destined to reign with Jesus over this universe. That is why this life can be described as "training for reigning." Your most important training occurs when you suffer. Will you reach out to God and trust and obey Him in the midst of suffering – or will you fall into despair and quit? As you continue to live by faith when you suffer you will develop perseverance. Your perseverance in faith will create godly character within. And the godly character that you have won through your suffering will produce a

sublime joy and hope about your glorious future with God. **“Rejoice always, pray continually, in everything give thanks, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”** (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

Know that you are in good and capable hands

Do not be afraid of difficulties you face in following Jesus. Do not be afraid of those who oppose you or even persecute you. Do not be afraid of suffering for the sake of the kingdom of God. Everybody suffers. Why not let your suffering have a point to it? Those who suffer for the sake of Christ are blessed. Their suffering will ultimately work out for their good and Christ’s glory. When this life is all said and done, will it be the wealth and luxuries you amassed that give you satisfaction? Or will it not be the fact that God used your life to bring honor to Jesus?

Nothing will ever separate you from God. No sin, no opposition, no devil, no failure, no hardship will keep you from God’s loving embrace. He who called you into this life with Jesus is faithful. You and I will at times be utterly unfaithful. But God will remain faithful to you because He cannot be otherwise. God has established an everlasting covenant with you on the basis of His own goodness and character. God refuses to let you be harmed. God refuses to let you be taken away from Him. You can trust Him. You can count on Him. Always!

First steps with God

You have been given the greatest privilege known to human beings: to live your life now in the kingdom of God. You get to live your moments in the presence of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ not only helps you with life, He is life.

To review. Here are your first steps:

- Create sacred times and spaces to be alone with God.
- Meditate often in His written word.
- Practice prayer.
- Keep asking, “What would you have me be doing now, Lord?”
- Love.
- Keep short accounts with sin.

- Keep short accounts with others.
- Find a church.
- Receive baptism in water and baptism in the Holy Spirit.
- Simplify your lifestyle and begin to give.
- Listen for the voice of God.
- Put in a good word for Jesus Christ every time you have an opportunity.
- Practice giving thanks in all circumstances.
- Begin to trust Jesus with everything.

And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the Presence of Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God through Him (Colossians 3:17).

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