



Follow Me

an invitation from God



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God has invited you to follow Him¹. In fact, His invitation is to not only follow Him, but He actually wants to adopt you into His family! In these pages, my hope and prayer is that you will have a better understanding of what this means and how it applies to you. I also hope that you will eagerly accept God's invitation, and that you will understand the joy you will experience once you do.

To better understand what this invitation means for our lives today, take a look at how God's invitation has impacted the lives of others throughout history. The Bible says, "Long ago, even before He made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in His eyes. His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into His own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. And this gave Him great pleasure."²

Imagine being part of God's family. How amazing would that be! That has been God's plan from the beginning of time, even before he created Adam and Eve whom we learn about at the very beginning of the Bible. Unfortunately, even though Adam and Eve had a relationship with God, they decided to follow their own plan instead of God's and it not only cost them, but the consequences of their choices and actions have been felt throughout history. Fortunately, their mistakes didn't change God's plan. He still wants us to be part of His family. We see that God has continually and consistently been inviting people to follow Him and to become part of His family.

God's desire and plan are seen clearly early in the Bible through a man named Abram. He is typically known as Abraham because God later changed his name to better reflect their relationship³. God told him that if he left his father's family and went to a land He had chosen for him (along with his own family) he and his descendant would receive special blessings from God. It sounds like a pretty good deal right? Simply put, God said to Abraham, "If you follow Me, I will bless you." Blessings from God can be financial, relational, happiness and joy, to name a few. At this point Abraham didn't fully understand what the blessing would be, yet he chose to trust God and follow Him.

There was a cost to Abraham for him to receive God's promise. In order for Abraham to receive the blessing God wanted to give him, he had to follow God's plan. This included leaving the comfort of his father's family and land, and go wherever God guided him. Abraham took his family as well as his nephew and his nephew's family to where God had instructed him to go.

Because he chose to follow, God promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation, that he would be famous, and that he would be a blessing to others. God also told him that all the families of the earth would be blessed because of him⁴.

Abraham received great joy because of his decision to follow God. Life didn't become perfect for him, and he still faced many of life's challenges, but overall, his life was changed for the better, and he was greatly blessed as God had planned. The nation of Israel exists today because of Abraham's decision to follow God thousands of years ago.

What does this have to do with you and me? Plenty! There are many examples throughout the Bible of people who followed God and the impact their relationship had on their lives. There are stories about everyone from Kings to prostitutes, and soldiers to fishermen. Ultimately, because of Jesus, everyone is invited to follow God, you and I included. The stories in the Bible are there to show us God's plan, to let us see how His plan worked in the lives of others, and to give us hope

and confidence that if we will follow God, His plan and purpose for our lives will be a blessing too. God hopes that you will discover how much He loves you, and how much He wants for you to become part of His family regardless of what you may have done in your past, or the struggles you may face now or in the future. This probably brings up several questions, such as “Why does God invite people to follow Him?”, “Why should we follow Him?”, “What does it mean to ‘follow’ Him?”, and many others. Some of those questions are briefly answered here, while others we discover over time on our journey with God.

Finding answers

As we begin to answer questions about following God, we need to become more familiar with the Bible. The Bible is what God has provided to help us understand Him and His desire for a relationship with us. It helps us to experience the benefits and blessings of following Him. Perhaps you have never opened a Bible before. Or, perhaps you have read a little, but never got very far, or never understood what you were reading. You may not even be sure if you can trust it to be true or accurate. Before we move on, we need to take a closer look at the Bible since that is the source of what we know about God and His invitation to follow Him.

The word “Bible” comes from a Greek word that means “book”. While the Bible is a book, we find within it a collection of sixty-six smaller “books”. The books were written in a variety of different styles of literature such as poetry, songs, historical documentary, law, personal letters, and even romance. They were written by about forty different authors over a time period of approximately 1,500 years.

While the Bible contains history, it isn’t meant to be a history book. The history it does contain has consistently proven reliable. Often we are merely given snapshots of events so that we can get the big idea of what God is trying to communicate to us. The Bible is meant to guide us toward a closer relationship with God so it isn’t focused on the stories and events themselves. Sometimes we aren’t given all of the details, or even complete stories or events in the Bible, and that can leave us wanting more. God’s desire is that we will want more, and that we will continually search the Bible for answers to the questions we have. While the Bible doesn’t answer every question, or contain every detail of history⁵, it contains exactly what God wants so that we can be equipped to live joy-filled purposeful lives.

The Bible is divided into two parts, the “Old Testament” and the “New Testament.” The word “Testament” literally means “Covenant” or “Contract”. A covenant is a formal agreement you enter into with another person such as marriage, or a contract such as one you would sign to purchase a car or a house. The Old Testament refers primarily to God’s relationship with the nation of Israel through covenants made with Abraham and his descendants, who later include Moses and the Israelites as a nation. There is much we can learn about God and His love for us as we read and study the Old Testament. The New Testament refers to our relationship with God through Jesus by the covenant He established by His death, burial, and resurrection. This relationship is offered to everyone.

Inside the Bible, authors referred to it as the “Scriptures”, “Law”, “The Law and the Prophets”, and the “Psalms.” Today, we typically refer to it as “The Bible”, “The Book”, “God’s Word”, or simply as “The Word.” The books are divided into chapters and verses which are small sentence like segments. The Bible wasn’t written with these markings, and while they don’t affect the content of the Bible, they do help us find particular words and stories more easily and quickly. For example,

to find the reference “John 3:16” you can look for the book “John” in the table of contents and turn to the page where it begins. Then you can turn to chapter “3” and scan down until you see verse “16”. Since the book of John is included with this booklet, go ahead and try to find the chapter and verse and read what it says before continuing. In most Bibles, the chapter numbers are printed larger than the verse numbers to make it clearer. References to multiple verses, often called a “passage”, are often written using a dash between the verse numbers, such as “John 3:16-17”.

Where did the Bible come from and can we trust it?

You may be wondering where the Bible came from. You may also be wondering something like, “If it’s a collection of sixty-six books, how do we know that we have the right ones?” and, “How do we know that we can trust it?” There are a couple of great books in the resource list that will help you find answers to these and other questions you may have about the Bible, but we will summarize a few of the most common questions here.

When we say that the Bible has been “canonized” we are saying that it is complete, contains the correct books, and that there is nothing more to be added. The word “canon” means “rule of law” or “standard”. In other words, the Bible includes all of, and only, the writings that measured up to a standard. For a book to be included in the Bible, and the reason other writings remain excluded, it had to stand up to a multitude of tests. Those tests included having an author who was known by the believing community and its leaders to speak for God. We use the word “inspired” to explain that God wrote the Bible by the power of His Spirit communicating to us through those He chose as authors. The usage of the book by God’s people as having inspiration and authority was another test. The book also had to be consistent in its teaching within itself and with all of the other books of the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments. There couldn’t be contradictions within itself or with the rest of the Bible. Another important test is historical accuracy. History has to have proven that the book is reliable. Events it describes have to have actually occurred as stated.

There have been a multitude of great literary works written before, during, or after some of the books in the Bible which were not included as a part of the Bible because they didn’t measure up to the standard in some way. Throughout history, there have been occasional claims from people or groups that they had received messages from God leading to the writing of a book which are sometimes followed by the launch of a new religion. None of these claims or writings have been accepted as God’s Word outside of the followers of that particular writer, group, or new religion because they don’t measure up in some way.

It is also important to know that the Bible we have today is the same as what the early followers of God had. The discovery of the “Dead Sea Scrolls” (which were found in a cave near the Dead Sea in 1947) shows the consistency of the Bible through history. While not original documents, the scrolls date back to very near the time the books were written. Scholars have been able to compare them to our current Bible and see that what we have today has proven consistent throughout history. This helps us to know that the Bible we have today is accurate and worthy of our trust.

In addition to the accuracy of the writings, historical and scientific accuracy are also important in helping us to know that the Bible is trustworthy. There have been excellent books written by people who set out to disprove the Bible, yet found so much evidence for its truth and reliability that they became followers of Jesus Christ because of it^{6,7}. The Bible has even been used to help archeologists find historical places they thought existed through rumor or other sources, but had

no clues other than the Bible for their location.

What about all the different Bibles that are available?

The Bible we read today is a translation of what was originally written. The Old Testament was written primarily in Hebrew with some parts in Aramaic. The New Testament was written in Greek. Since we typically don't speak these languages, we need a translation to be able to read it and study it for ourselves. A translation converts a document from one language into another. Since there are many languages in the world, and even different languages and dialects within some countries, we need a multitude of translations in order for people to be able to read the Bible for themselves. Translations also need to be updated periodically since the meaning of words can change over time. Terms related to money and their values change over time as well. Reliable translations are written by groups of scholars who gather to translate the Bible and to verify the accuracy of their translation. The various Bible translations produced from their work are often called "versions". Choosing a recent translation will help you to have a Bible that is easier to read. The New Living Translation is a recent, easy to read translation that is used in this booklet.

You may even want to get a study Bible which has additional resources and tools such as maps, word definitions, and notes to help you understand the Bible better. A very good study Bible is the "Life Application Study Bible" which is available in several translations including the New Living Translation. A sales person at a Bible book store can help you find the right Bible for you.

Why should I read the Bible?

The bottom line is that you won't find your answers about God and Jesus without it. Plenty has been written about God and about Jesus, but in the Bible you will find their words, the stories of their interaction with mankind, and the experience of those who have lived for God, and those who have fought against him. As you begin to look to the Bible for answers, it is important to know where it came from, whether or not we can trust it to be the Word of God, and how to read and study it so that you can gain the most benefit from it.

It is important to read the Bible for ourselves and not just listen to others teach it to us. You may ask questions such as "What are we supposed to 'get out of it'?" or, "How do we apply the teachings in it to our lives today?" These are great questions, and you may have others as well. Let's begin with why God gave us the Bible in the first place. In Psalm 19:7-11 it says, "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul... The commands of the Lord are clear, giving insight to life." In 2 Timothy 3:15-17 the Bible says:

You have been taught the Holy Scriptures from childhood, and they have given you the wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.

In Jeremiah 29:11 it says:

"For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for

good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.”

The Bible shows us God’s plan and purpose for our lives and shows us the things we do, or can do, that honor Him and bring us joy. It shows us that God has good things planned for us. It also shows us how to get rid of the things in our lives that fall short of God’s holiness, things that don’t bring honor to God or to our own lives, and that prevent us from receiving or achieving all of the blessings God wants us to have.

The Bible also gives us insight and wisdom for life. It’s amazing how a book written thousands of years ago can lead, guide, and give insight as to how to be a better business owner, builder, parent, or spouse today. In virtually every area of life we can find wisdom and guidance from the Bible beyond the best books available today. The fact that the Bible is as relevant today as it has been throughout history is no surprise. In Hebrews 4:12 it says:

For the Word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires.

The Bible is alive because the Holy Spirit (God in Spirit form) teaches us more and more of it as we grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ. It is amazing that you can read it over and over and learn new things each time because it is the living Word of God⁸.

How can I read the Bible so that I will benefit from it?

There are many resources available to help you read, study, and even memorize the Bible. There is a simple and effective method included here. What matters most is that you make it a priority to spend time every day with God and the Bible. In the busy world we live in, it may seem difficult to find the time to read, study, and reflect on what God wants to teach you through the Bible, but as you make it a high priority in your life, you will discover God’s blessings in your life.

So how do you make time? We make time by giving the Bible the place of value in our lives that it deserves. If God is the one who gives you time, don’t you think that He will help you manage it in a way that enables you to spend time with Him through your time studying the Bible? Do you ever forget to eat? Most likely you don’t forget to eat very often, and if you do it is generally only an occasional meal. The reason that is true is because of two things. First, is that your body will remind you that you need to eat. Second, you have made eating a priority because you know that if you don’t, you will miss the blessings of the nourishment food brings. If you will make God’s Word a priority in your life, you will find the time and remember to take the time to study it. Followers of Christ also have the Holy Spirit living within them to help them receive the blessings of the spiritual nourishment the Bible brings.

What is the time of day when you are most alert and have the greatest ability to focus? This is when you should spend time studying the Bible. It may be early in the morning, late at night, or during a break at work or school. God wants our best. He gave us His best when He gave us Jesus, we certainly should be willing to give Him the best part of our day. It’s okay to start small. Start with fifteen to twenty minutes and grow from there. You’ll quickly discover that you will want more time, so you can expand from there. If you will ask God for His help, He will help you make time with Him a priority. It is amazing that we are always able to find time for what is important to us. Put it into your schedule for each day. It is a divine appointment that you won’t want to miss.

Many people have picked up a Bible, began reading from the beginning, got frustrated, and finally gave up just a short time after starting. This is very common, so if this has happened to you, you are not alone! The best way to overcome this frustration is to have a reading plan to guide you as you read the Bible. The Bible is God's Word, written for you to know Him, and for Him to speak to you through what has been written. With an easy to read Bible, and a reading plan, you will be able to make the most of your Bible reading and study. A reading plan will help you to break down your daily Bible reading into smaller sections so that it is manageable and not so overwhelming. There is even a Bible available called "The One Year Bible" which is already set up for you to read certain Bible passages each day so that you will read the entire Bible in one year's time without feeling overwhelmed at how much there is to read. Some Bibles have a reading plan in the appendix, while there are also many plans available from the Christian book store, or on-line. A great place to begin is to turn to the book of John (Fourth book of the New Testament). Read one chapter (just two or three pages) each day. By following this plan, you will read through the entire book in just twenty-one days.

You will also want to pick up a journal and begin using it to record what God teaches you each day. You may not be in the habit of journaling, or even like the idea of using one, but you will be amazed at how beneficial it is. If you will write the things that God impresses upon your heart like Bible verses and passages that are meaningful to you, and the things that God teaches you through them you will have a record of those encounters with God and be able to refer to them as you need to. As you pray for God's help in applying what you learn and write about the answers to those prayers, before long you'll be able to look back and see how God has been faithful and how you have grown in your relationship with Him. You may hear others refer to your study time as "devotions" because you are taking time to "devote" yourself to God and your relationship with Him.

Use the letters in the word "SOAP" as an acrostic to guide you through a simple process for studying the Bible. The "S" stands for "Scripture". Your reading plan will show you what to read for the day, or just read a chapter, or even a couple of paragraphs or a single story or about a single event. As you read, ask God to speak to you and to impress upon your heart what He wants to tell you or teach you that day. Use a pen, pencil, or highlighter to mark or underline phrases, sentences, verses, or short passages that grab your attention in some way. When you finish reading for this session, look back over what you have marked. Of the items marked, which one seems to be the one that God is speaking to you through? Which one seems to leap off of the page more than the others? Write this down in your journal under the "S" for this study time. Writing the date and reference, such as "John 3:16-17", as a heading will help you to look back over time.

The "O" in SOAP stands for "Observation". Write in your journal what you "observe" about the Scripture that you wrote down. You may even want to write the passage in your own words for it to be clearer in your mind. You may want to sit and meditate on the verse, or verses, you have written. Let it sink in. Give God time to develop in your heart and mind what He wants you to see. You may need to refer to the verses around what you wrote to give you better understanding. This is called the "context". Make note of everything you see, as well as what you think God is teaching you from it.

The "A" in SOAP stands for "Application". Write in your journal what you see and feel that God wants you to do with or about what you have learned from the Scripture you wrote. How does what you observed apply to your current situation or life in general? This might be something

you learned about God to help you in certain situations, an action or behavior that God wants you to do or stop doing, or a promise or principle to help you in your life as a follower of Jesus. Knowledge and application go hand in hand. What you observe should translate into what you do. By the same measure, doing things without understanding the purpose will cause you to miss what God is teaching you.

The “P” in SOAP stands for “Prayer”. Take time to pray about what you have learned, thanking God for teaching you and helping you to see things in the Bible. By writing your prayers in your journal, as well as the answers to those prayers, you will see God’s involvement in your life, and you will be able to take time to reflect on them later. You will want to take time to pray and ask God to help apply and implement what you have learned.

Whatever method you use for Bible study, the most important thing to remember is to take the time to study, reflect on what you learn, and apply what God teaches you.

Why does God invite us to follow Him?

Why would God want to have a relationship with us? Why would He invite us to not only follow Him, but to actually become part of his family? It does seem odd doesn’t it? Think about it for a moment. The creator of the universe made everything so that he could have a relationship with us.

He didn’t do it because He was lonely. We know that because of all of the angels and other beings and creatures He created even before He created people. He certainly wasn’t alone.

He did it because of who He is, and because of His nature. In 1 John 4:7-8, the Bible says, “Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.” God loves us because it is His nature to love us. While you may love your pet, it isn’t the same type of love that you have for a spouse, or a parent, or a child. God is the same way. While He loves the angels and other beings and creatures (including animals) He created, He loves people more because He made us like himself. It says in Genesis 1:26 that God made people, “in His image” or “like Himself.” That means that we have love in our nature too. We were created with a desire to have loving relationships with other people, and with God.

God loves us, chose us, and has a plan to adopt us into his own family⁹. In John 1:12 the Bible says, “But to all who believed in Him and accepted Him, He gave the right to become children of God.” God loves all people, even those who do wrong and don’t love Him in return. Those who choose to follow God and love Him, He adopts into His family as his children. How amazing is that?! This certainly flies in the face of what we are often taught about God, doesn’t it? We are often taught that God is this judgmental being and even though we try to be good, or do good things, it’s just never enough to please Him. It is important for you to know that God isn’t waiting for us to try to climb up to Him by the things we know or do. He is reaching down to us, in love, and inviting us to follow Him, have a relationship with Him, and for us to be part of His family.

Why should we follow God?

Just because He invites us to follow Him, why should we? Many people are doing just fine without

Him. They are rich, seemingly happy, and have a pretty great life. Some people even say that there is no God, so trying to follow a God that doesn't exist would be pretty foolish. There are plenty of great resources available that address this debate so we won't take space here, but if you are struggling in this area, we would love to discuss your questions with you and guide you to resources to help you study the topic further.

Trusting that God is who the Bible says He is, and that He can give us what it says He can give us is easier said than done isn't it? It's easy for us to say that we believe in God, but it's quite another thing to give up our hopes, dreams, and desires to follow Him and trust that His hopes, dreams, and desires for us are better than what we've imagined for ourselves.

To decide whether or not we should follow God, we need to look at what He has offered us. God has offered us two things really, and within those two things are many other things that are worth investigating.

First, God offers us hope for the future. He offers us eternal life with Him as part of His family¹⁰. That means that we will live forever with Him! This is a difficult concept to grasp, but most of us have some picture of what we think heaven is like. How would you describe it based on what you know? However you describe it, you are most likely significantly underestimating what it will truly be like. It will be far greater than we can possibly imagine. For example, here in this life gold is highly valued, but in heaven, God paves the streets with it!

Second, God offers us joy in this life, even in the midst of trouble and sorrow¹¹. This isn't the same thing as saying that we will be happy all the time. God promises that in spite of anything that happens, good or bad, we can have peace, a true sense of joy deep inside. This is difficult to understand until you experience it, but you will be amazed at how differently you feel in tough situations, even in the midst of great loss.

Why isn't everyone automatically adopted into God's family?

While God wants everyone to follow Him and to become part of His family, because God's love is so great, He leaves the choice to us. He doesn't force us to become part of His family because He knows that we would not truly love Him if he did. It brings joy and pleasure to God when we choose to follow Him. As great as His love for us is, sadly not everyone chooses to follow Him or to become a part of His family.

Since God gives us a choice, we need to also look at the alternative. We need to know what happens if we don't choose to follow Him. The consequences of our choice to make our own decisions and to do things that dishonor God are twofold. First, while we may have periods of happiness, we miss out on the true joy that God offers. Second, we face eternity without God. The Bible calls that "death" and our eternity is spent in a very awful and very real place called hell¹². That's some choice isn't it?

God's desire is for us to choose to follow Him, just as Abraham did, so that His plan to bless our lives and adopt us into His family can be fulfilled. When we sin we are telling God that we are rejecting Him and his plan for our lives. Just as the parents of a child who chooses to disobey are disappointed and saddened, God is disappointed and saddened when we choose not to follow Him. Because of His love for us He lets us make that choice, and allows us to suffer the consequences of our decisions.

When Adam and Eve chose not to follow God's plan by disobeying Him they introduced sin into the world (Genesis 3:1ff). Sin is a term used to describe things we say, do, or think, that fall short of God's holiness and perfection. The term literally means to miss the mark, like an archer shooting an arrow at a target only to have it fall short. The fact is that every person has fallen short of God's holiness and perfection in some way¹³.

God is pure, perfect, and holy, and desires for us to be pure, perfect, and holy as well, yet He knows that we aren't, and won't be, no matter what we do or how hard we try. Because all of us have sinned, God has turned away from us and allows us to suffer the consequences of our choices¹⁴. Our sin has created a gap between us and God and there is nothing we can do to bridge that Gap. It's like looking across the Grand Canyon from one side to the other and wanting to be on the other side. The gap is deep and wide, and there is no bridge.

How do we bridge the gap?

In the laws given to the Israelites to follow, when they broke a law (sinned), there was provision for them to be forgiven. That provision was for blood to be shed by sacrificing an animal in the place of the offender. The problem though is that every time someone sinned they had to make a sacrifice. Even with the sacrifice, they were still separated from God because while their sacrifice erased the guilt of their sin, it couldn't truly make them right with God by eliminating the spiritual consequence of their sin. That's why they had to continue to offer sacrifices whenever they sinned. The sacrifice fulfilled the law, but didn't bridge the gap between them and God.

Fortunately, God loves us so much that He paid the penalty of our sin Himself by sending Jesus to die on the cross. Jesus came from heaven and lived a perfect, sinless life. He died on the cross and shed His blood as the perfect sacrifice for our sins¹⁵. Jesus died on the cross on our behalf so that our sin could be forgiven, bridging the gap between man and God for all who accept His forgiveness. Animal sacrifice could never accomplish this.

Not only did Jesus die on the cross, He rose from the dead three days later. This is what we celebrate on Easter. Jesus' resurrection demonstrates not only his power over death, but His power and authority to forgive our sins and to provide the bridge across the gap between us and God. That means that no matter what we have done to fall short of God's perfection, we can receive forgiveness through the blood Jesus shed on the cross.

It is hard for some people to accept God's forgiveness. Some people carry the guilt and shame of their sin to the extent that it has a continual negative impact on their lives. If you are struggling with letting go of guilt and shame in your life please talk to a Pastor or Christian counselor.

What is the relationship between God and Jesus?

There is much evidence within the Bible, archaeology, and history verifying the existence of Jesus as a historical figure. The questions begin when we connect His role in our forgiveness, His humanity, and His relationship with God. Understanding who Jesus is can be difficult. It certainly isn't a simple concept to understand when He is referred to as both God's son, and as God Himself who has come to earth as a man. When you take a complete look at how the Bible describes Jesus His identity becomes clearer.

Jesus is referred to by many names in the Bible including "Christ", "Savior", "Lord", and "the

Word". The variety of names used to describe and identify Him helps us to get a broader and clearer picture of who He is. In the Old Testament, the Prophet Isaiah writes in Isaiah 9:6, "For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And He will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." In fulfillment of this passage, we see in Matthew 1:23, "Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call Him Immanuel, which means 'God is with us.'" This prophecy and its fulfillment show us that Jesus is God who became a man. Just to clear up some immediate confusion, the name "Immanuel" is a description of who He is, what "they will call Him", while His actual name is Jesus¹⁶. In addition to these names, in John 3:16 it says, "For God loved the world so much that He gave His one and only son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life." And in Colossians 2:9 the Bible says, "For in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body." The word "Christ" means Messiah, Deliverer, or Savior all of which are names used for Jesus.

One of the most descriptive passages describing who Jesus is can be found in John 1:1-4:

In the beginning the Word (a descriptive name for Jesus) already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through Him, and nothing was created except through Him. The Word gave life to everything that was created, and His life brought light to everyone.

John also wrote, "So the Word became human and made His home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen His glory, the glory of the Father's one and only son."¹⁷

The Apostle Peter writes, "I am writing to you who share the same precious faith we have. This faith was given to you because of the justice and fairness of Jesus Christ, our God and Savior. May God give you more and more grace and peace as you grow in your knowledge of God and Jesus our Lord"¹⁸.

Hopefully your head isn't spinning in confusion after reading these passages, but it is important to see the names and descriptions of Jesus' identity and the roles He plays. To summarize, God came to earth as a man. We call this an "Incarnation." The form He took was as His son. This doesn't make sense to us that God could be both father and son at the same time. Nor does it make sense to us that He could be God in heaven and God on earth in the form of the man Jesus at the same time. In God's power and ability, which is clearly beyond our comprehension, He is able to be two places, and take on two personas, at the same time. We call this ability "omnipresence." In other words, God can be anywhere and everywhere at once, and He is capable of making Himself known in more than one way at a time.

God did this because of His great love for us, and because of His desire to adopt us into His family. He came as a baby to grow and face the struggles and temptations of life so that we can know that He understands and can identify with us as we face our own struggles and temptations. By living a perfect, sinless life, His blood, and His alone, is pure enough that He could shed it on the cross as the payment for our sin once for all time¹⁹. His blood alone could provide forgiveness for everyone who will accept it. No animal or other person could do that. As you get to know God better and better you will understand this more clearly and be able to accept it as your faith grows as well.

What do we have to do to follow God?

Our belief in Jesus and in what He did for us on the cross is what is required for us to be able to accept the forgiveness and blessings God wants us to have as a part of His family. The Bible says in John 1:12, "But to all who believed in Him and accepted Him, He gave the right to become children of God." This verse mentions our belief, and describes the opportunity that our belief in Jesus provides when we accept what He has offered us. This belief is also described in the Bible as faith.

The belief that the Bible describes isn't just a casual belief that Jesus once lived. That is why the word faith is often used, because it describes something more. We certainly must believe in the historical Jesus who, as a man, walked on the earth over two thousand years ago. But, we must also believe that He is God, and therefore Lord of all creation. We must believe that He died on the cross and rose from the dead for the forgiveness of our sins²⁰. We need to believe it to the extent that we are willing to live for His purposes openly, giving Him control of our lives. This isn't just saying the words; it is saying the words that reflect what we believe in our heart. This may sound impossible, but you will come to understand that following Jesus is a lifelong journey. As you follow Him you will grow in your faith and increase in your ability to trust that there is nothing that you can give up in this life that won't be far surpassed by what God offers and provides in this life and for eternity. Our belief must result in our acceptance of the forgiveness that Jesus paid for and acceptance of the gift of eternal life God has invited us to enjoy²¹.

It was mentioned earlier that God gives us the choice whether or not we want to follow Him. Like being offered a present. Unless we accept the present, it doesn't become ours does it? That is what God has done. He paid the price for our "present" which includes all that He has promised, including forgiveness, eternal life, and joy in this life, and is offering it to us. In order to receive it, we must believe that He has the ability and authority to give it, and then we must accept it²².

This is a big choice! The decision to accept God's gift means that you are choosing to follow Him; and that you are giving Him control of your life. It means that instead of living for your personal pleasure, goals, and dreams, you are choosing to live to fulfill God's pleasure, goals, and dreams that He has for your life. The great part of that comes when you realize that God's plan and purpose for your life will far surpass anything you could hope for or try to achieve yourself.

While Jesus promises forgiveness, eternal life, and joy in the midst of pain in this life, accepting God's gift does have a cost. Following God's plan for our lives often runs in stark contrast to the way the world tells us that we should live. Giving up our own pursuits for the pursuits of God will generally create a battle with our own nature. That is why Jesus said in Matthew 16:24-26:

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?"

In this passage, Jesus is explaining the cost of following Him. In order to receive the gift that He has offered, you must "turn from your selfish ways." This means that it is imperative, not an option, that we choose to utterly deny our own desires and plans and choose to follow God's desires

and plans. While many of God's plans and desires for our lives may overlap and be the same or similar to what we had planned, some may not be. Choosing God's plan over our own is a lifelong process, and is ultimately the spiritual battleground where Satan and his demons, as well as our own thoughts and desires, will try to trip us up by getting us to focus on what we want to do that bring focus and glory to ourselves and not to God.

For you to "take up your cross" means that you must sacrifice your own plans and purpose for God's regardless of the cost involved. We must believe that His plans are far better than anything that we could hope for on our own. In Jeremiah 29:11 God assures us, "For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord, "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope." In order for God to fulfill His plan and purpose in our lives, nothing can be in the way of Him doing whatever He needs to do to change us or lead us in whatever direction is necessary. When we give up our "selfish ways" and get the focus off of ourselves, we are able to experience more of the joy God wants us to have, not only in this life, but for eternity.

Jesus made a point of making sure that we know what His plans are for us when He said, "My purpose is to give life in all its fullness."²³ We can have great confidence that we will receive far more than we could ever give up as we follow Jesus.

How do we accept God's invitation to follow him?

As Jesus was walking along, He invited people to follow him. In the case of the apostles, that is what they did. They left what they were doing and went with Him. They left their old world behind to follow Jesus, regardless of the cost, or result of their choice.

To accept God's invitation to follow Him, and to accept the gift of forgiveness and eternal life that he has offered you, talk with Him and ask him for the gift that He has offered you. He is anxiously waiting to hear from you. We communicate with God through prayer. Prayer is simply talking with God and having a conversation with Him. You have probably prayed before, or at least heard people pray. Some people are very eloquent with their words, while others are simple. What matters is that we communicate with God. It isn't about the words we say, or whether we are standing, or sitting, or anything formal at all. You can even pray with your eyes open. You might say something like this:

God, thank you for loving me; today I admit and agree that I've sinned against you and I'm sorry. I need the forgiveness only you can provide because of what Jesus did on the cross on my behalf. I ask you to come into my life, forgive my sins, and give me a fresh start with you.

God, I don't understand it all, but as best I know how, from this day forward I give you my life in exchange for the eternal life that Jesus provided. I pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

If you have prayed that prayer either just now or one like it in the past, congratulations, your sins have been forgiven and you have entered into an eternal relationship with God as part of His family!

How can I know for sure that I am part of God's family?

You may not "feel" any different if you prayed to accept God's forgiveness and gift of eternal life. Many people don't. An internal change has occurred in your life more than an external one. It is important for you to know; however, that you have been forgiven, and you have been adopted into God's family. That's why Christians sometimes refer to one another as brothers and sisters.

As a follower of God, you have not only become part of a great family, you have also created some enemies. Satan doesn't like it when we give up our selfishness to follow Jesus. He will try to convince you that nothing really happened and that you still aren't "good enough" to be accepted by God. Sometimes you may encounter people in this world that don't think you are worthy of following God either, or that what you have done doesn't make sense to them. This may even include close friends or family members. What matters is our relationship with God through Jesus.

In 1 John 5:12-13 the Bible says, "So whoever has God's son has life; whoever does not have His son does not have life. I write this to you who believe in the son of God; so that you may know you have eternal life." God wants it to be clear. He doesn't want you to ever wonder whether or not you have been forgiven, or whether or not you are His child, or whether or not you will spend eternity with Him. The only thing that matters is whether or not you have a relationship with Jesus. Your relationship with Him and acceptance of the gift He offered you is what determines your place with God.

We can't earn our entrance into God's family. In Ephesians 2:8-9 it says, "God saved you by his special favor when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it." Salvation is the term often used to describe the forgiveness and eternal life we receive through Jesus. Another term that you may hear is being "born again." What that term really means is that your old life, before your relationship with God, is dead and gone and that you have a new life as part of God's family. Followers of God are often called "Christ followers", "Saints", "Christians", or "Believers".

Many people think that if we are good enough we will go to heaven, but if that were true, what would be the standard of being good enough, and how can we know if we have met it? Others think that if we do enough good deeds we will go to heaven, but who knows how many good deeds are necessary, who knows if a good deed qualifies to be counted, and who counts them? Since we have all fallen short of God's standard, we are reliant on what Jesus did, and not anything we do.

Because we don't do anything to earn our salvation, there isn't anything we can do to lose it either. You may have accepted Christ a long time ago, but you have been living for yourself and not for Him. While God is certainly disappointed when we sin, and when we don't rely on Him, he doesn't kick us out of His family. Like an adopted child, once we are part of the family, we are part of the family for eternity.

What does a follower of Jesus do?

Once you choose to follow God you will want to know what expectations He has for you. You will want to know if there is something you need to do and if there are things you will have to change. As with anything we learn about God, the Bible is the first and most important source for us to discover God's plans for us, and to help us better understand our relationship with Him. There are also plenty of wonderful books and other resources available that can help you better understand

your life as part of God's family. There are whole sections in Christian book stores with categories such as "Christian Living" or "Bible Study Resources." There are myriads of internet tools as well. Bible study resources are also available which can help you understand words, historical events, and cultural customs.

Before getting into all of the wonderful resources available to help you grow in your relationship with God, begin by getting to know Him through the Bible. Always keep the Bible as your primary source for guidance and growth in your relationship with God. As you learn things from other sources you can check them against what the Bible says to see if what they say falls in line with what God has already said. You might even hear well meaning Christians telling you what you should or shouldn't do, or even who you should be friends with, or causes you should join or avoid. In every instance, spend time in prayer and study the Bible to see what it says. Ask God for guidance and wisdom.

There are three specific areas to focus on which will help you in your relationship with God. Your focus in these areas will help you to discover the joy and blessings God has planned for your life. First, God wants us to know Him. Second, God wants us to grow in our relationship with Him and in our relationship with the church. Third, God wants us to go do what He created us to do.

Know God

When you begin a relationship with someone, it makes sense that you would want to get to know them better. At first you learn basic things like their name, where they're from, about their job, hobbies, and family. From there you move on to broader things and in time, you delve into deeper issues in their life and in yours. Our relationship with God is no different. He wants us to spend time with Him. He wants us to get to know Him and communicate with Him. As you get to know Him you will begin to understand His nature and you will see more clearly just how much He loves you. You will also see that He has created you with special gifts and abilities as part of His family for helping others.

In John 17:3 Jesus says, "And this is the way to have eternal life - to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to earth." Knowing God goes far beyond how we know a neighbor, co-worker, or even a family member. God has revealed so much about Himself in the Bible. As we read and study the Bible we get to know Him through the stories of His interaction with His people as well as with His enemies.

God not only invites us to get to know Him through the Bible, He wants us to communicate with Him through prayer as well. Prayer is talking with God. As we learn to quietly listen, we will hear Him speak to us as well. You may not hear Him audibly, but you will sense His presence, and see Him at work through events, circumstances, and other people in your life. That's why prayer is meant to be a conversation, and not just one way communication.

Two areas that God especially invites us to communicate with Him about are our need for wisdom and the areas in our lives that cause us worry. In James 1:5 it says, "If you need wisdom - if you want to know what God wants you to do - ask Him, and he will gladly tell you. He will not resent your asking." God is the best source for wisdom. His guidance is best because He not only knows us, He knows our situation and He knows our future. He also cares about our worries. In 1 Peter 5:7 it says to, "Give all your worries and cares to God, for He cares about you." No matter what it is, He wants us to share it with Him, like a concerned and loving parent. In Philippians 4:6 it says,

“Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank Him for all He has done.” God wants us to communicate with Him about everything. As we see how God interacts with us, communicates with us, and meets our needs, we should also express our gratitude to Him.

As you get to know God you will begin to recognize His involvement in your life. You will begin to notice more often the wonder of creation and you will see how He meets the needs of people in unexpected ways.

Grow in your relationship with God and his church

As you get to know God, you will gain a sense of His desire for us to grow in Him. Growing in your relationship with God means becoming more and more like Him. You have probably seen couples who have been married for a long time who become so much like each other. As they get to know, honor, and serve one another, they begin to have more and more thoughts and mannerisms in common. As we spend time getting to know God, and as we honor, and serve Him, we will become more and more like Him as well. The Bible goes so far as to say that we will be “transformed” as we become more and more like Him²⁴. Growing to become more like God is often called “spiritual maturity.” Just as we expect a child to grow toward maturity, so too should we expect to become more mature as we grow in our spiritual life.

One way to show that we are becoming more like Jesus is to do what He did and do what He asks us to do. The first thing Jesus wants us to do as His follower is to get baptized. Baptism is God’s way of helping us to picture what He has done for us in our lives. The apostle Paul explained it in Romans 6:3-4:

Or have you forgotten that when we were joined with Christ Jesus in baptism, we joined Him in His death? For, we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives.

Baptism is a symbol that God gave us to illustrate what Jesus did when He died, was buried, and then rose from the grave to forgive our sins. It is also a picture of our own transformation from living for ourselves to living for God. This is why when you are baptized, you will be put all the way under the water and then brought back out again. Being baptized is an important first step to take as a follower of Christ and is something that Jesus Himself specifically told all of His followers to do (See Matthew 28:18-20).

He wants us to not only grow in our relationship with Him, but to grow in our relationships with other people as well. As we grow in character and in spiritual maturity we also become better examples of his love to others. We begin to do things that bring honor and glory to God, and we find more joy in fulfilling His plan and purpose in our lives than we did when we were living for ourselves. John 10:10 confirms Jesus’ desire for us to live a joy filled life. He says, “The thief’s purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life.” This means that Jesus brings us joy and peace in the good times and in the bad. As we get to know Him and begin doing things like Him, we learn how serving Him and others brings honor to Him. To help us understand and apply what we learn about Jesus, He gave us the Church.

The church is described by various metaphors in the Bible such as the “Body of Christ²⁵”, the

“Bride of Christ²⁶”, God’s “House²⁷”, God’s “Family²⁸”, and as simply, the “Church²⁹”. The church is a group of people who are following God together, seeking to know God better, and applying what they learn about Him to their lives. People in the church are seeking to grow, and seeking to encourage each other to grow, in their relationship with God through knowing Jesus Christ. In Hebrews 10:24 it says, “Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works.”

The Pastors and other leaders in the church are there to equip you in your understanding and application of the Bible and to encourage you as you grow to become more like Christ³⁰. Each church is different and unique just as each family is different and unique. It is important to attend a church that focuses on helping you to study and apply the Bible to your life. It should be a place where you can be encouraged as you grow, have questions answered, and where you can find support as you endure the struggles of life. You should attend a church where you can also encourage others living to fulfill God’s plan in their lives. We encourage others by finding a place to serve God and others in the church.

Many churches have groups of about 6-12 people who meet in homes during the week. Churches use a variety of names for these groups such as “Small Groups” or “Home Teams”. In a small group you can connect with others and build relationships of mutual caring and encouragement. You can challenge others, and be challenged, to continually study the Bible, answer each others’ questions, and grow together in Christ. We also serve together to help the church care for others. In Romans 12:4-5 it says, “Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ’s body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.” As we face the challenges of life together we are better able to encourage each other as we become more and more like Jesus. Serving God and caring for others are great ways to show that we are becoming more like Jesus.

While there isn’t anything we can do to earn our salvation, that doesn’t mean that God doesn’t want us to live good lives or to do good deeds. Of course He does, but He wants us to do them because of our love for Him, not so that we can be loved by Him. When we become part of God’s family, we also gain God’s power to change the areas of our lives that don’t honor Him. He has promised that He will give us the ability to accomplish all that He has planned for us. The power we receive as Christians comes from the Holy Spirit. He is God’s Spirit who comes to live within us. Just as Jesus and God are one, so too are God and the Holy Spirit. While Jesus is God in human form, the Holy Spirit is God in Spirit form. In fact, you will hear Christians speak of the “Trinity” which is a simple way to speak of the fact that Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and God are all one. As confusing as that may be at this point, what is important to know is that God will help you face the challenges of life and empower you to do all that He has planned for you. You will learn more about the Holy Spirit as you study the Bible and take advantage of other growth opportunities.

Go do what God created you to do

God wants His love for us to overflow into the lives of others. In Matthew 5:16 Jesus said, “In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.” As we do things which honor God, people will be drawn to Him.

In Ephesians 2:10 it says, “For, we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things He planned for us long ago.” Good things aren’t what make us right with God, but they do show others that we have a relationship with Him. God wants us to

help others to see the joy of following Him. As we go about our lives, we should seek opportunities to tell others what God has done for us. Jesus himself spoke about this when he said in Matthew 28:18-20:

Jesus came and told his disciples, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

He leaves it to us to make more disciples. A disciple is a follower of Christ who has accepted the gift of forgiveness and eternal life that God has offered. A disciple uses the gifts, desires, experiences, talent, hurts, and abilities that God has given Him or her to proclaim the joy they have received because they are His child. Because of who we are as God's children we have an ability to find joy in the midst of sorrow, and peace in the midst of pain. When we experience the happy times, our joy is magnified. It is this joy that God wants us to share with others.

The joy we share because of what Jesus did for us on the cross is called the "Good News." God wants us to share this message with others who don't know him so that they can follow Him and become part of His family too³¹.

Final Thoughts

As you grow in your understanding and relationship with God, don't hesitate to ask questions! Ask God, ask a Pastor, or ask those who are growing with you. When you read something in the Bible, or experience something you don't understand, don't hesitate to ask for wisdom or guidance. The Apostle Paul wrote what expresses our prayer for you in Colossians 1:9-10:

So we have not stopped praying for you since we first heard about you. We ask God to give you complete knowledge of His will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding. Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit. All the while, you will grow as you learn to know God better and better.

Footnotes

1. Pronouns such as “He”, “Him”, and “His” are capitalized when they refer to God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit because they represent the higher importance of who God is.
2. Ephesians 1:4-5
3. You can read his story in beginning in Genesis 11:27
4. Genesis 12:1-5
5. John 21:25
6. Evidence that Demands a Verdict - Josh McDowell
7. The Case for Faith - Lee Strobel
8. Hebrews 4:12
9. Ephesians 1:4-5
10. John 3:16, Ephesians 1:4-5
11. John 10:10, John 15:11, 1 Peter 1:8
12. Matthew 25:41, Mark 9:43, 2 Thessalonians 1:9, Revelation 14:10-11
13. Romans 3:23
14. Isaiah 59:2
15. Hebrews 10:10
16. Luke 1:30-33
17. John 1:14
18. 2 Peter 1:1-2
19. Hebrews 10:10
20. Romans 10:9-10
21. Romans 6:23
22. John 1:12
23. John 10:10
24. Ephesians 1:22-23, Colossians 1:18
25. Ephesians 5:25-27, Revelation 19:6-8
26. 1 Timothy 3:15, Hebrews 3:6
27. John 1:12-13, Ephesians 1:4-5
28. Acts 20:28, Romans 16:5
29. Romans 12:1-2, Galatians 6:14-16
30. Ephesians 4:11-12
31. 1 Peter 3:15

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