



# Next Steps

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# Next Steps



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# What just happened?

**YOU WERE CREATED**  
by a passionate God who relentlessly pursues His children to bring them back to the family.

**Welcome home.**

## Decoding the Language of Faith

New creation.  
Saved.  
Born again.

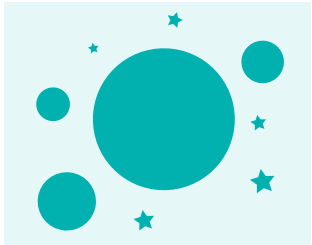
Coming to church can be a little like walking into your local coffeehouse for the first time. What is Venti? Can't I just have a large? Each one has a distinctive culture and a distinctive language that communicates "you belong." It can be a little intimidating to navigate that culture and learn that language, but before long, you are completely comfortable ordering that Quad Grande, Non Fat, Extra Hot Caramel Macchiato Upside Down.

The moment or process by which we make a decision to follow Jesus is called "conversion," and it is our response to the gift of salvation, redemption, and forgiveness that Jesus offers us. Jesus beckoned the disciples "follow me" and explained to Nicodemus that he must be "born again." In addition to those words, there is a lot of other jargon that is used to identify that process: Crossed the line of faith. Made a decision to follow Jesus. Asked Jesus into your heart. Asked Jesus to be your Lord and Savior. Started a faith journey. Came to faith in Christ. Prayed the sinners' prayer. Became a Christian. Became a Christ-follower.

Ultimately, they all mean the same thing: God initiated a relationship with you and offered you a way to experience that relationship. And you responded. That's what has just happened to you. You have turned from your old life and turned toward God. You have pledged allegiance to His rule in your life. You have been freed from sin, made right, rescued from the Enemy, and adopted by God.

The way we experience God’s grace and mercy looks different for different people. For some, it feels like a very sudden experience while others walk through a long process of reasoning. Perhaps it felt as though you turned a corner in life and discovered God right in front of you, or maybe you felt like He chased you down and caught you from behind. Regardless of how you might describe your own journey, all such stories share a few things in common—a change in what you believe, a transfer of loyalty, and a reversal of direction. God forgives, saves, restores, and reconciles.

## Seeing the Big Story



### CREATION

In the beginning, God created. At the sound of His voice, galaxies were hurled into orbit and the molecular structure of the smallest organism was established. Water was pure,

creation was untainted, and life was perfect. Everything existed in its intended form and in perfect harmony with its Creator. God created man and woman separately. Fashioned with His own hands and infused with His own breath, He created Adam and Eve to be in relationship with Him and to be stewards of His creation.

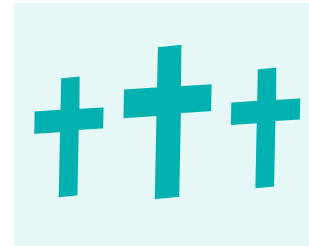


### FALL

Then, the Enemy entered the story. Twisting the words of God and promising a better life, he planted a seed of unbelief in the woman’s heart. Eve doubted the goodness and trustworthiness of God and

reached for the very thing that compromised her relationship with Him. The man and woman believed a lie, turned against

God, and pursued a story of their own making which left them separated from their Creator. Sin had entered the world, and creation fell apart. Violence. War. Dishonesty, Greed. Sickness. The perfect creation became overgrown with evil, chaos, and despair. It was overrun with people who would look for meaning and salvation through selfish ambition. The world needed a Savior. God left Adam and Eve with a promise that redemption was in the works.



### REDEMPTION

For centuries, God pursued His people. He gave them leaders, prophets, and priests to guide them into relationship with Him, but over and over, the people became distracted and turned

their attention to lesser gods. God’s redemption was yet to fully come. In order to reverse the disastrous effects of sin, to free people from the clutches of the Enemy, and to restore people to God, Jesus came to the earth with his eyes on the cross. Fully God, Jesus made the perfect sacrifice to pay the debt of our sin and to cancel the curse of death on our lives. Fully human, Jesus was able to fully represent man before God. Redemption had come. On the third day, Jesus rose from the grave to conquer sin and death once and for all.



### RE-CREATION

But the story did not end at the empty tomb; it had just begun. The great story of God would explode across the globe and change the hearts and lives of men and women. All of creation is

moving towards a great day when everything that is broken will be fixed once and for all. Until then, we live in the land of the “now and not yet”—where He has made us new and is in the process of making us new.

This is the great story of God, and our lives make sense only as we understand them against this backdrop. Jesus came not just to teach moral lessons or to set good examples. He came to liberate, make things right, and start a revolution. That's the story you have been swept into.

In the book *Epic*, John Eldredge says, "For most of us, life seems like a movie we have arrived at 45 minutes late . . . We find ourselves in the middle of a story that is sometimes wonderful, sometimes awful, often a confusing mixture of

## "THE WAY WE EXPERIENCE GOD'S GRACE AND MERCY LOOKS DIFFERENT FOR DIFFERENT PEOPLE."

both, and we haven't a clue how to make sense of it all. It's like we're holding in our hands some pages torn out of a book. These pages are the days of our lives. Fragments of a story. They seem important, or at least we long to know they are, but what does it all mean? If only we could find the book that contains the rest of the story."

The Bible is the Story of God, and it's where we find the rest of the story of our lives. It's in those pages that we discover who God is, who He created us to be, and what He has planned, so that's where we will focus.

## Jesus - Man and God

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

Jesus left his rightful place on the throne of heaven and entered the chaos of humanity. In a stone feeding trough for animals, the voice of God was heard in the cry of an infant. He came dressed in the skin of His own creation, subjected Himself to the care of His own creation, and fixed His eyes on the salvation of humanity. He turned water into wine and healed the sick and commanded dead men to walk out of their graves and showed honor to the scum of society.

Jesus came as a man—He was born; He had a physical body and physical limitations; He expressed human emotions; He grew physically, emotionally, relationally. (Matthew 1:18, John 4:6, John 19:28, Luke 2:40, John 11:35). Because He was fully human, He is able to represent us, to pay

## "JESUS LEFT HIS RIGHTFUL PLACE ON THE THRONE OF HEAVEN AND ENTERED THE CHAOS OF HUMANITY."

our penalty, to mediate for us before God, to serve as our example, and to identify with us.

Jesus also came as God. His birth was supernatural. He claimed to be God, God declared Him to be God, and even the demons recognized Him to be God. He displayed attributes of deity such as working miracles and forgiving people of sins (Matthew 1:18, Colossians 2:9, John 8:58, Revelation 22:13). Because He was fully God, He was able to offer a perfect sacrifice.

Jesus came to serve, sacrifice, and save. Romans 5:8 declares, "But God proves His own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us!" He is uniquely designed to represent people to God and God to people.

Because He is fully human, He could offer the sacrifice on our behalf. Because He is fully God, he had the ability to offer the perfect sacrifice.

Becoming a Christian is not about what you do for God; it is about what God has already done for you. Jesus paid our debt, freed us from sin and death, and reconciled us to God and others. Jesus divinely disrupted and reversed the story of humanity:

**Forgiveness** – Jesus paid a debt He did not owe and we could not pay so that the charges of sin are cancelled against us. Through Jesus, we experience forgiveness and cleansing.

“He made the One who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”  
(2 Corinthians 5:21)

**Freedom** – Jesus defeated the power of sin and death on the cross, liberating us from its grip on our lives and granting us eternal life in Him. Through Jesus, we are freed from sin.

“But now, since you have been liberated from sin and have become enslaved to God, you have your fruit, which results in sanctification—and the end is eternal life! For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 6:22-23)

**Relationship** – Jesus removed the wedge between us and God and made a way for us to have relationship with Him. Through Christ, we are reunited with God.

“For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, then how much more, having been reconciled, will we be saved by His life! And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have now received this reconciliation through Him.” (Romans 5:10-11)

Here’s one final observation to help you begin well. Jesus didn’t die on the cross to give us comfort and safety. Some people sell salvation like it’s an insurance plan or a safety net. Unfortunately, we sometimes think that coming to God means that everything will be okay and that life will get better. The reality is that life sometimes gets worse. We aren’t promised that everything will be “okay;” we are promised His presence. He doesn’t promise to keep us safe; rather, He invites us into a dangerous story to be proclaimers of hope in the midst of a very unsafe world.

## Coming Home

Jesus told stories to explain what it looked like to have relationship with Him. In Luke 15:11- 24, one of His most popular stories is recorded:

*A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the estate I have coming to me.’ So he distributed the assets to them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered together all he had and traveled to a distant country, where he squandered his estate in foolish living. After he had spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he had nothing. Then he went to work for one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He longed to eat his fill from the carob pods the pigs were eating, but no one would give him any. When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have more than enough food, and here I am dying of hunger! I’ll get up, go to my father, and say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I’m no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired hands.’ So*

*he got up and went to his father. But while the son was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son.'*

*But the father told his slaves, 'Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then bring the fattened calf and slaughter it, and let's celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' So they began to celebrate.*

The first words preached by Jesus are found in Matthew 4:17 where He said: "Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the kingdom of Heaven is near."

It's also the foundation for the first sermon preached in the early church in the book of Acts when Peter declared: "Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God." (Acts 2:37-38)

When we hear "repent," we think of it primarily as a punitive word with lots of baggage. One that carries with it the idea of bringing punishment or correction. While it is absolutely a strong, tough word, it is also incredibly life giving. It doesn't mean "get your act together" or "clean up your behavior" so much as it means simply to turn around. To turn from sin and turn toward God. Eventually, it results in a complete change of mind, heart, will, and action, but the first step is simply to turn around and see God. It's stopping the direction you are going, turning around, and going in another direction. Maybe the best way to say it is that repentance means turning around and returning home.

The story of the Prodigal Son follows the journey of a man who strays far from home and far from the man he was destined to be. He trusts the character of his father and is confident that he will be accepted back as an employee. So he backs away from his depraved life, turns around, and walks back home.

That's what repentance is. It's homecoming. And when we return home, we do not find a father who is angry, retributive, or eager to say "I told you so." Rather, we see a Father who runs towards us. Jesus doesn't call us to repentance to change our behavior so much as to change where we rest our heads. It's about who or what we are trusting in.

John Chrysostom, a preacher in the 4th century, said, "Like the prodigal, let us also return home . . . no matter how far we have gotten carried away in our journey. Let us go back to our

COMFORT  
 "JESUS DIDN'T DIE ON  
 THE CROSS TO GIVE US

AND SAFETY."



Father's house, not lingering over the length of the journey . . .  
He finds great pleasure in receiving back his children."

The journey home begins with repentance at the cross. God made a promise at the very beginning of time that He would make things right, and that's what the coming of Jesus was about. The greatest plot twist in history was God Himself coming to earth to deal with sin. At the cross, Jesus took all our sin onto Himself and paid the debt, so that we can trade our sin for His righteousness. He freed us from the grip of sin and restored our relationship with God. He paved the way for us to go back home. All we have to do is get on that road.

Who or what are you trusting in? What direction needs to be changed? Do you need to come home? ●

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# Doing life together

**SOMEONE ELSE'S  
MIRACLE** is on the  
other side of your faith,  
sweat, and investment.

**Life is better together.**

## Being the Church

The giant sequoias tower over the national parks of California—massive trees that rise high above the forest floor and every other tree that grows around them. While they reach 300 feet tall, their root systems are very shallow. Most of them are only about 12 feet deep and they can thrive in as little as three feet of soil. Their strength is not found in the depth of their roots but in their interdependence. Their roots intertwine with one another and they share resources. No sequoia grows alone. They require healthy firs, cedars, and pines nearby to provide them with water and protection from erosion. Without an incredibly complex system of interdependence, the giant sequoias wouldn't make it.

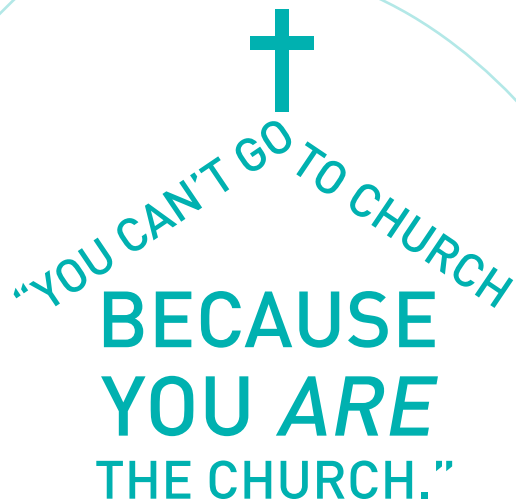
Likewise, God created us to support, encourage, and rely on one another. Following Jesus is not about how deep you are but how deeply connected you are with others.

For 2000 years, followers of Jesus have gathered with one another as “the Church.” We often think of the church as a building, event, or organization, but in the original language of Jesus, the word “church” meant a gathering of a group of people who had a common mission. While we might say that we “go” to church, the first followers of Jesus would have known that was impossible. You can't *go* to church because you *are* the church.

Jesus gave many metaphors to describe what the church was like—including a family (Romans 8:14-16, Ephesians 2:19), a body (Romans 12:4-5, 1 Corinthians 12:12-26), and a temple (Ephesians 2:20-21, 1 Peter 2:5). Each of these pictures gives us a different glimpse of what the church is and what it is about. A family means we love and support one another. A

body means we are the hands and feet of Jesus to the world around us, each in our own unique way. A temple means we take the presence of Christ wherever we go.

When we gather as a church community, it is an opportunity for us to learn about God as His hope is proclaimed; it is a time to experience the presence of God in worship; it is an environment in which we can connect to and support one another; and it is a launching pad for serving one another and the world.



+

“YOU CAN’T GO TO CHURCH  
BECAUSE  
YOU ARE  
THE CHURCH.”

There are lots of different kinds of churches because there are lots of different kinds of people. The name on the church door is not as important as the name above all names. We exist to make His name famous, and we honor and cheer for every church that is preaching Jesus. The ultimate mission of every church is to accomplish the great commission that Jesus gave—to make disciples (help other people follow Jesus). But every church also has a unique God-given DNA

and God-inspired vision. At National Community Church, this is reflected in our three core convictions:

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THE CHURCH  
OUGHT TO BE THE  
**MOST CREATIVE**  
PLACE ON THE PLANET.

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THE CHURCH  
BELONGS IN  
**THE MIDDLE**  
OF THE MARKETPLACE.

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GOD WILL BLESS  
OUR CHURCH IN  
PROPORTION TO HOW WE  
**GIVE TO MISSIONS**  
**AND CARE FOR**  
**THE POOR IN OUR CITY.**

We are more afraid of missing opportunities than making mistakes. If the Kingdom of God had departments, we'd be R&D because we are orthodox in believe but unorthodox in practice. We believe there are ways of doing church that no one has thought of yet.

We want to be known for what we are for and not what we are against.

As a follower of Jesus, do you need to go to church? No. But you do need to *be* the church. You are a part of the family of God: take your place at the table. You are a member of the body of Christ: play your role. You are a part of His temple: when you walk out of a church service, you don't leave the presence of Christ; you take the presence of Christ wherever you go.

## Stepping into Baptism

For 2,000 years, baptism has been the defining mark of the follower of Christ and the first step of obedience to Him. Jesus bookended his ministry with baptism. Matthew 3 records that Jesus started His ministry by being baptized. In Matthew 28, Jesus challenged His followers to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them . . ." Jesus modeled and encouraged baptism for His followers.

So what is it, exactly?

Baptism is a public confession of faith. It's the moment we declare to the world who we are and, most important, *whose* we are. We declare that we are people who are free from our past and filled with hope for our future. It's the affirmation that we are no longer clinging to the edges of an old, broken life, but we are going all-in in new life in Christ.

Baptism is also a picture of change as it immerses us into the story of Jesus. When we go under the water, it symbolizes that our old life is buried, and when we come out of the water, it symbolizes that we are raised in the power of Jesus' resurrection and a new life has begun.

"This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!"  
(2 Corinthians 5:17)

Baptism is also a sacred marker of your decision to follow Jesus. It is a reminder of the forgiveness, freedom, and relationship He initiated with you. On some days, it is hard to really believe we are still forgiven. Some days, we find ourselves wrestling with old hurts, habits, and hang-ups. Some days, we just don't feel like Jesus is very close. Those are the days when we can cling to that moment of baptism to remember that it's not about what we've done for Jesus but what Jesus has done for us.

If you have not been baptized since making a decision to follow Jesus and want to take that step, please email [baptism@theaterchurch.com](mailto:baptism@theaterchurch.com).

## Joining a Group

Life is better together. Every person needs a tribe, a team, a group. Andy Stanley said, "Your friends will determine the quality and direction of your life."

In John 17, Jesus prayed, "I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me."

Throughout the New Testament, we see about three dozen commands that cannot be obeyed outside the context of community. They are the “one another” commands—love one another, serve one another, encourage one another, confess to one another, forgive one another, etc.

Jesus hoped that His followers would not try to do life alone but would face it together in the context of community. At NCC, the primary way we experience community is through small groups.

Our groups exist to make friends, make disciples, and make a difference.

We want people to find friends. Those might be friends for a season or friends for life.

We want to make disciples. We want to grow to look more like Jesus and help others do the same.

And we want to make a difference. The last thing we need is another meeting on our calendars. We want to make a difference in the lives of one another and the world around us through prayer, serving, and spreading hope.

You will find lots of different kinds of groups at NCC, and that’s because we believe that there are lots of different kinds of people and one-size-fits-all doesn’t work. There are Bible studies, book clubs, service groups, and interest groups. We have groups for men, women, teenagers, young adults, couples, families, Hill staffers, entrepreneurs, and moms. ●

## Here are a few to get you started.

### Alpha\*\*

For seekers and skeptics, Alpha is centered around a meal, a talk, and a small group discussion. These discussions are focused on open and honest dialogue regarding questions about faith and what it means to our everyday lives. Differing viewpoints are welcome. No doubt is too big or question too small.

### Freshmen of the City\*\*

Freshmen of the City is a semester-long experience designed to engage those 18 to 30 years old who are new to DC and want what they do to matter. Discussions are centered around a meal and led by mentors.

### Celebrate Recovery

When we come to Christ, we still have past hurts, habits, and hang-ups we need to deal with. Celebrate Recovery is a community of people who have recognized they are powerless to change themselves and are seeking freedom in Christ together. This group runs year-round, and you can join at any time.

### The Story

From Garden to City. From Genesis to Revelation. In The Story you can encounter the Bible like never before by exploring the chronological story against the backdrop of its cultural and historical context. This group is offered in January.

\*\* *Not necessarily offered each semester.*

Find a group that’s right for you at [theaterchurch.com/groups](http://theaterchurch.com/groups)

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# Following Jesus

**DOING** what  
Jesus did and  
doing it the  
way He did it.

Jesus said, "Follow me." Seems simple enough. But unlike those first disciples, we can't simply trail behind the physical footsteps of Jesus. So what does it look like to follow Him? Religion is often focused on what we've done wrong and driven by a list of rules for right behavior. Following Jesus is focused on what He's done right and motivated by a desire to know Him more. Ultimately, following Jesus simply means doing what Jesus did the way He did it.

## The Character of Jesus

*Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned. But if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted! When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father. (John 15:5-8)*

Jesus tells his disciples to bear fruit and to bear much fruit. In fact, He establishes fruit production as a key identifier of His followers. He says that true disciples will bear much fruit and He will cut off branches that aren't bearing fruit. He says that productivity is so important that He will shear the most productive of us so that we can be even more fruitful.

What is this fruit? It's found in Galatians 5:22-23: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Jesus says we produce it if we are following Him. How

different would we be and what difference would we make in the world if these were the words that best described how we respond to others? However, we don't produce it by working really hard, we produce it by remaining.

Jesus commands and expects that we live productive lives. But He doesn't say, "Try harder." He says, "Come closer."

It's not about the branches trying to be productive on their own. It's about ensuring that there is a good connection to the vine. Jesus describes himself as the vine and His Father as the Gardener. They do all the work. In biological terms, the Gardener ensures that the environment is right for growth—that the soil is good, the water is plentiful, the light is sufficient. The vine pumps the water and nutrients to the vines. As long as the vines are connected, fruit happens. Jesus uses this metaphor to describe our life in Him. We just stay connected to Jesus and we get to bear the fruit. It's like the first time a dad takes his kid fishing. He baits the hook, throws out the line, pulls the rod when the bobber goes under, reels it in . . . and then hands the kid the pole to "catch" their first fish. Then he unhooks it, puts it on ice, cleans it, fries it, and lets the kid eat their first catch. This is what our Father does. We just stay with Him and He makes us look awesome.

Our focus should be on our connection, not on our production.

It's about the input, not the output.

It's about resting, not striving.

**“JESUS COMMANDS AND EXPECTS THAT WE LIVE PRODUCTIVE LIVES. BUT HE DOESN'T SAY, ‘TRY HARDER.’ HE SAYS, ‘COME CLOSER.’”**

"Try harder" faith is about me and my good works. "Come closer" faith is about God and the work He has already done and the work He is doing in me.

"Try harder" faith is about leaning into my ability.  
"Come closer" faith is about leaning into God's ability.

Jesus calls us to fruitfulness and expects obedience. But the path is not "try harder." The path is "come closer." It's not about what we can do for God but embracing what God has already done for us.

How do we come closer to God? Two of the best ways to get close to Jesus are talking with Him through prayer and learning about His words and ways through His story in the Bible.

## Hitting Your Knees

Reading the Bible is like eating and praying is like breathing. Newborn babies often have labored and erratic breathing. Over time, however, the breathing of babies regulates. When you are just starting out in prayer, it's going to be uncomfortable and difficult. You may wonder if you are doing it correctly. That's okay.

Learning to pray is also a lot like learning a new language. When you are first learning to speak a language that is not your own, you have to focus intently on new sounds, new patterns, new grammatical rules, and new vocabulary. You have to think about what you say and how you say it. After lots of practice over lots of time, you begin to speak fluently and naturally. You may need to think about what you say, but you no longer have to concentrate on the mechanics of how you say it. Prayer is the same way. In the beginning, it is awkward, feels weird, and seems foreign. That's okay and normal. Keep practicing and you will become fluent.



At its core, prayer is simply talking to God. It's pretty amazing that the Creator of the Universe would want to have relationship with us. It's not about what we *have* to do; it's about what we *get* to do. God wants to hear what's on your heart and mind, and He wants to share His thoughts with you, as well.

**If you've never prayed before, here's a 4-point prayer to get you started.**

- 1 Greet God** – Remember, you are talking to a person. How might you address God? God. Father. Daddy. Friend. Almighty. Holy. Savior. Redeemer. You may address Him differently depending on what you want to talk to Him about.
- 2 Express Gratitude** – Tell Him what you are thankful for.
- 3 Request Help** – Tell Him what you are concerned about. Remember, the simple phrase “help me” is sometimes the most powerful and honest prayer you can pray.
- 4 Listen** – Jesus said that He is the great shepherd and His sheep hear His voice. He wants to talk to you! Prayer should never be a one-way monologue but an on-going conversation, and that means we have to pause long enough to listen. While His voice is often inaudible, it comes to us in unmistakable ways—first and foremost in the Bible but also in feelings deep in our gut and the voices of friends who follow Him.

## Exploring the Bible

The Bible. The best-selling book of all time, and yet it sits with un-cracked spines on many shelves. It begins with God and ends with God, and we find ourselves somewhere in the middle. If we understand how the story starts, and most importantly, *Who* it begins with, then we can make sense of our lives. We understand that we were created by someone bigger than us for a story larger than our own. I don't know what comes to your mind when you hear the word Bible, but most of us probably equate it with a big religious rule book. Or just a collection of morality tales. Maybe you think it's an ancient text that has very little bearing on our lives today. At its core, the Bible is a story about a passionate God on a relentless pursuit of those He loves.

It isn't one book but a collection of 66 books written by 40 different authors over the course of about 1400 years. It was written by fishermen, tax collectors, shepherds, kings, doctors, political prisoners and political advisers, farmers, and poets. Genesis through Deuteronomy was probably written in the wilderness; Jeremiah wrote from a dungeon; Paul wrote his letters from prison; Luke wrote Acts while traveling through Asia Minor and Europe; and John recorded Revelation while exiled on an island. Different portions were written in Africa, Asia, and Europe.

To explore your Bible, you need to make a plan, mark it up, and do it.

**“FAILING TO PLAN IS PLANNING TO FAIL. YOU NEVER HIT A GOAL THAT YOU DON'T SET.”**

There are many different translations of the Bible. The New International Version (NIV) and the New Living Translation (NLT) are great at preserving accuracy while providing readability.

### Make a Plan

Failing to plan is planning to fail. You never hit a goal that you don't set. We wouldn't recommend that you try to read through the whole Bible at once, and don't try to read it cover to cover—it wasn't written that way and wasn't necessarily meant to be read that way. Here are some ideas to get you started.

- **The Bible App** – Check out the Bible App for dozens of free reading plans that you can engage right on your computer or phone.
- **Proverbs** – Read one Proverb a day and you will complete the book in a month.
- **Psalms** – Read 5 Psalms a day and you will complete the book in a month (just be sure to carve out a little extra time for the day you hit Psalm 119!)
- **Mark** – His book gives an eyewitness account of the life of Jesus.
- **Genesis** – Learn how it all began and who it began with.
- **Ephesians** – This letter tells us who we are in Christ, the importance of community, and how to live in the power of God.
- **Philippians** – This letter shows us how to live with joy even when the circumstances around us are difficult.

In the back of this book, you will find 10 passages of Scripture with questions for you to consider.

### Mark It Up

You don't want to simply read the Bible. You want to capture it and let it captivate your heart. Benjamin Franklin said, "The shortest pencil is longer than the longest memory." Get a Bible you can write in or keep a journal. Here are some ideas to capture:

- **God's Attributes** – underline, mark, or highlight any time you see a name, title, or attribute of God's character. His character will shout to us from the pages of Scripture.
- **God's Works** – what does God do? When we take note of His faithfulness in the past, it builds faith in us for the future.
- **God's Words** – what does God say? Reading the Bible is the easiest way to hear the voice of God. In His words we find promises, encouragement, and guidance.

### Do It

If we simply read the Bible but don't let it change us, then we are missing the point. Being educated beyond our level of obedience can turn us into self-righteous and annoying people. Every time you come to the end of a Bible reading, ask yourself two questions:

What did the Holy Spirit reveal to me?

What am I going to do about it?

As you read and capture your thoughts, here are some categories to consider. Look for a SPECK . . .

- Sin to confess
- Promise to keep
- Example to follow
- Command to obey
- Knowledge to believe

## The Promise, Person, and Power of the Holy Spirit

In John 16:7, Jesus told His disciples, "It is best for you that I go away." That sounds dumb. I mean, if I had my choice right now of Jesus here—physically present right here—or gone,

I think I'm choosing that Jesus stay. What could possibly be better than having Jesus present in person? He goes on: "But in fact, it is best for you that I go away, because if I don't, the Advocate won't come. If I do go away, then I will send him to you."

"Advocate" in the Greek is "Paraclete" and means Comforter, Counselor, Encourager, Helper. "It is good that I go away so that He will come." Now, Scripture does not record their reaction to this, but I'm guessing they probably weren't too excited. They were probably pretty comfortable with the way things were—Jesus right by their side. Jesus—the one who had walked with them, calmed their storms, healed the sick, taught them about God. The one who told them to leave everything behind to follow Him was now leaving them. If they had their choice between Jesus and this other person they didn't really know anything about, I'm sure they would have picked Jesus.

But Jesus keeps talking about this new person who would be coming after Him. After the crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus says in Acts 1:4-8: "Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you the gift he promised, as I told you before. John baptized with water, but in just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

Though He is referred to as the Holy Spirit, He is not a "what" but a "who." Just like God the Father and Jesus the Son, the Holy Spirit is fully God. And Jesus refers to Him as a "gift." Here are a few things that the Holy Spirit does:

- **He adopts us into God's family.** Romans 8:14-17: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. So you should not be like cowering, fearful slaves. You should behave instead like God's very own children, adopted into his family—calling him "Father, dear Father." For his Holy Spirit speaks to us deep in our hearts and tells us that we are God's children."

- **He helps us look more like Jesus.** Galatians 5:22-23: "But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."
- **He helps us understand the Bible.** John 16:13-14: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not be presenting his own ideas; he will be telling you what he has heard. He will tell you about the future. He will bring me glory by revealing to you whatever he receives from me."

In John 14, we learn that the Spirit brings us comfort and peace when we are hurting. In John 15, we discover that the Holy Spirit will give us wisdom and ability to serve others and share our faith. In John 16, Jesus tells us that the Spirit is our counselor who will guide us in day-to-day life. In Romans 8, we read that the Spirit helps us overcome sins, habits, and hang-ups in our lives. In 1 Corinthians 12, we find the gifts that the Holy Spirit gives.

Ephesians 5:18 instructs us to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Don't miss out on the incredible blessings He brings to your life. Every morning, ask the Holy Spirit to fill you and guide you that day. Every time you pray or read the Bible, ask the Holy Spirit to fill you with understanding. Every time you are faced with a hard decision, difficult circumstance, or challenging relationship, ask the Holy Spirit to fill you with peace, His fruit, and His powerful gifts. ●

# JOURNAL

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin teal border, occupying most of the page. It is intended for journaling or writing.

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# Living with purpose

We want you to be a part of the story God is writing at NCC, and we want to be a part of the story God is writing in your own life.

## Discovering Your Unique Design

Ephesians 2:10 declares that “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.”

You are God’s masterpiece. There never has been and never will be anyone like you. That’s not a testament to you; it’s a testament to the God who created you. Your uniqueness is God’s gift to you. What you do with that uniqueness is your gift back to God. Maturity does not equal conformity. You owe it to yourself to be yourself. But more important, you owe it to the One who designed you and destined you.

You are destined to do something only you can do. 1 Corinthians 12 lists various gifts given to followers of Jesus and the different parts of the body of Christ that we represent. The more we learn about God, the more we learn about ourselves. The more we understand the story of God, the more we understand the story we were created to live.

What makes you pound your fist on the table in anger? What makes you cry? What brings you great joy? These are all clues to the way God designed your heart to uniquely reflect His heart.

At NCC, we believe it’s never too late to be who you might have been. What is your dream? Share your dream with us and let us be a part of it.

We believe that everything is an experiment. Do you have an idea for making disciples or spreading hope or helping others? We are willing to experiment.

Jesus didn't save us just so we will be able to be with Him in eternity. He saved us to be on mission with Him and to join Him in His work around the world right now! The primary ways you can experiment with, explore, and invest your unique design at NCC is through ministry and missions.

## Jumping into Ministry

We have two goals for every NCCer—jump into a small group and jump into a ministry or mission. Our weekend services require hundreds of volunteers to make our church gatherings welcoming, engaging, and excellent. Here are some of the ways you can get involved.

### Worship

*Global revival through personal worship*

Our worship teams lead us in musical worship at weekend gatherings and special events throughout the week.

### Family Ministry

*Partnering with families to invest in the next generation*

Crosswalk Kids is designed for kids from infants through 5th grade. We believe each child is created to have a relationship with God and with unique talents and abilities to influence their world and community. It is our hope that NCC kids will grow to be fully devoted followers of Christ, with a passion for His Word, excitement about His church, and a commitment to serving His people.

Uprising is a gathering of middle school and high

school students around the DC metro area. We believe our students are not just the future church; they are the church now.

### Production

*Setting the stage for intimate worship and accessible truth*

Our production teams ensure that the message is seen, heard, and understood. From mixing audio and lighting the stage to displaying media and setting up, this team brings helpful technical and creative excellence to our services.

### First Impressions

(includes Hospitality, Connections, Utility, and Safety Teams)

*You are seen, you are valuable, we love you exactly where you are, you belong here.*

Our First Impressions team creates safe places for people to encounter the life-changing message and community of Jesus. Whether handing out bulletins, setting up chairs, helping people find seats, or distributing coffee, this team creates a welcoming environment for all who gather at NCC.

### Prayer

*Creating safe places for people to encounter the love of God through prayer*

Our prayer teams broker hope, one person and one prayer at a time. They meet before services to pray for our pastors, the weekend gathering, and all who will hear the message of Jesus. And they are available to

pray one-on-one with people after the service. There are also numerous ways to engage with prayer ministry throughout the week.

**“AT NCC, WE BELIEVE IT’S NEVER TOO LATE TO BE WHO YOU MIGHT HAVE BEEN. WHAT IS YOUR DREAM? SHARE YOUR DREAM WITH US AND LET US BE A PART OF IT.”**

## Being on Mission

The goal of every follower of Christ is to live on mission every day.

We have a saying around NCC: “*A church that stays within its four walls is no church at all.*” Perhaps you’ve experienced a kind of Christianity that seems to be focused inward, more interested in condemning others than caring for them. But we believe at the center of a transformed life is a call to action; faith becomes offensive in posture. We’re called to “co-mission” with God to help repair and restore a hurting and broken world.

At NCC, A1:8 is our missions initiative, and it’s fused into everything we do. It’s based on a verse found in the book of Acts, which is a book about how the Church is formed and flourishes.

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria,

and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

Paraphrased, we are *ordinary people, empowered by the Holy Spirit, doing what Jesus did, wherever we are.*

Interestingly, those are Jesus’ final words to us before He ascends into Heaven. So that means they must be important. And His final words have become our call to action. The scriptures say when we commit our lives to Jesus, the Holy Spirit takes up residence in our hearts. The Spirit is with us and becomes our counselor and guide on our journey in life. Our call to action isn’t done on our own, but with the help of the Holy Spirit to do what Jesus did.

Which begs the next question: what did Jesus do?

We looked at the last words of Jesus as our call to action. Now we’ll look at His first words as He began His mission.

About 70 miles northwest of Jerusalem in the Judean foothills was a small town where Jesus grew up called Nazareth. This is where He was raised and where He began His three years of ministry. One day, Jesus stood up in the synagogue and read a passage from Isaiah, at that time a 750-year-old book from the Jewish Scriptures (we know them today as the “Old Testament”) foretelling the mission of the one who would come and redeem the world. And in that passage, it addressed both the *problems* and the *solutions* that remain relevant to us today.

We call it ACT.

He addressed poverty by **assisting the poor and oppressed.**

He addressed suffering by **caring for the sick and sorrowful.**

He addressed brokenness by **transforming through reconciliation.**

That was His mission, and that's our mission.

You can ACT locally and globally.

Three ways to get involved on mission at NCC are engaging in service projects around our city on Second Saturday, addressing critical causes, and joining a missions team. All opportunities can be found at [www.aoneeight.org](http://www.aoneeight.org).

### Second Saturday

Second Saturday Serve is a monthly opportunity for people to be the hands and feet of Jesus, serving on various projects and with different organizations throughout the DC/NOVA area with no strings attached. We just want to show the love of Jesus in a practical way.

### Causes

Every location at NCC is committed to critical causes that impact their neighborhoods. These include homelessness, HIV/AIDS, foster care/adoption, anti-slavery/exploitation, racial reconciliation, and much more.

### Missions Teams

As students, not saviors, we are active in short-term missions, coming alongside ministries and bearing witness to the resurrected power of Christ around the world. Every year, hundreds of NCCers join a short-term missions team to take the message and mission of Jesus across our country and around the world.

Some of the areas we focus on include anti-trafficking, child advocacy, evangelism, community development, homelessness, education, HIV/AIDS, and poverty.

As we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, we believe God has uniquely wired every person with a divine mandate to share His love in a practical way. Pay attention to what makes you pound your fist on the table and what makes you cry. That

might be an indication of how your heart reflects the heart of God and where you need to get involved. We want to be a part of the dream God has given you. ●

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## JOURNAL





# Devotionals

Read these Bible passages. Use the questions that follow to guide you in understanding and application.

**50**.....Psalm 23

**52**.....Luke 10:25-37

**54**.....Ephesians 2:1-10

**56**.....Genesis 1:26-28

**58**.....1 Corinthians 13:4-7

**60**.....Lamentations 3:22-23

**62**.....Luke 9:10-17

**64**.....Galatians 5:22-23

**66**.....Proverbs 3:5-6

**68**.....Philippians 4:4-9

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## Psalm 23

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The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

**List some of the ways God cares for us.**

**Which of these blessings do you need and value most in your life right now?**

**What is one way God has demonstrated His goodness and love to you?**

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## Luke 10:25-37

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On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

He answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

**How can you practically love God with your heart, soul, mind, and strength this week?**

**It’s important to understand some cultural/historical background to fully appreciate this story. The Jewish people and Samaritans hated one another. According to Jesus’ characterization of “neighbor,” who are some of your neighbors?**

**What is one way you can practically love one of your neighbors this week?**

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## Ephesians 2:1-10

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As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

**List some of the adjectives used to describe God in this passage.**

**What are some of the things God does for us according to this passage?**

**What are “grace” and “faith” and how do they apply in your life?**

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## Genesis 1:26-28

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Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

**What was God's purpose in creating mankind?**

**What do you think it means to be created in God's image?  
How does that change the way you view yourself? The way  
you view others?**

**Do you view your job as a blessing and calling from God?  
How would it change the way you work if you did?**

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## 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

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Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

**List all the dimensions of love included in this passage.**

**In which of these areas do you need to grow?**

**How is this definition of love similar to our cultural understandings of love? How is it different?**

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## Lamentations 3:22-23

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Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

**What is consuming your thoughts, emotions, and time right now?**

**Some of the characteristics of God listed in this passage include great love, unfailing compassion, and great faithfulness. How have you seen these at work in your own life? In the lives of others?**

**Turn these verses into a prayer to pray every morning for the next week.**



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## Luke 9:10-17

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When the apostles returned, they reported to Jesus what they had done. Then he took them with him and they withdrew by themselves to a town called Bethsaida, but the crowds learned about it and followed him. He welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed healing. Late in the afternoon the Twelve came to him and said, “Send the crowd away so they can go to the surrounding villages and countryside and find food and lodging, because we are in a remote place here.” He replied, “You give them something to eat.” They answered, “We have only five loaves of bread and two fish—unless we go and buy food for all this crowd.” (About five thousand men were there.) But he said to his disciples, “Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each.” The disciples did so, and everyone sat down. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke them. Then he gave them to the disciples to distribute to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.

**What do we learn about the character of Jesus in this story?**

**Jesus takes what we have—however insignificant it may seem—and multiplies it for His purposes. What are some talents or resources that you would like to offer to Jesus?**

**Someone else’s miracle might be on the other side of what you give. What are you currently giving to Jesus? What would you like to give?**

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## Galatians 5:22-23

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But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

**What fruit of the Spirit is most abundant in your life?**

**What fruit of the Spirit is least abundant in your life?**

**Read this passage along with John 15:1-5. How can you grow in fruitfulness?**

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## Proverbs 3:5-6

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Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

**Are you able to trust the Lord? Why or why not?**

**How can you increase your trust in Him?**

**What does it practically look like to submit your ways to the Lord?**

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## Philippians 4:4-9

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Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

**List some things you are anxious about that you should present to God in prayer.**

**What is currently consuming your thoughts? Our focus changes our perspective. How can you practically focus on what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable?**

**God is associated with peace twice in this passage. Where are some areas that you need to experience the peace of God?**













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