

# START

Welcome to the **Start**.

Your **Start**. The beginning of the rest of your life—and your eternity. You’re reading this because you have acknowledged that God is real and that his son Jesus died on the cross. You may not understand everything about what Jesus did—or who he even is—and that’s perfectly okay—but you know life has much more to offer, and Jesus is the answer.

**Start** is going to walk you through the first few things you need to understand as you START your relationship with Jesus Christ. Don’t worry if you didn’t grow up in church. You don’t have to have a Sunday School background, and you don’t need to know every story in the Bible to start a relationship with God. The earliest Christians didn’t know any of those stories either.

Some of the first questions I get asked from people who begin a new relationship with God is, “**What do I do next?** Where do I start? What is the first thing I do after I tell God that I want to have a relationship with Jesus? Then where do I go?”

I think the simplest place to understand is by answering a different question... Why are you at this point in your life?

You’re at the start because **God pursued you**.

God has pursued you your whole life. God has called you into relationship with Jesus. You’re not here by accident. There are no coincidences in life. God knows you and he has a plan for your life.

You can try to come up with some over-rationalized responses for the “why”, but the truth is, you’re reading this because God wants you to be reading it. He’s been pursuing you your entire life. Even after you’ve accepted Christ, he’s still pursuing you, because he wants a deeper relationship with you.

**No matter how hard you hide in life, God’s still pursuing you.**

I think about this like you’re playing hide and seek. I hope you’ve played it at least once in your life. I played hide and seek last week at my church.

It’s kinda fun.

Fun even when you are a big guy who likes to hide behind small things. I’ll hide behind a small tree from my children, and my kids are like, “Dad, we can see your butt.”

Oops, I forgot about that.

Hide and seek is a children's game. But it's quite possible you have been playing hide and seek with God your whole life. But even though you have tried to avoid God. Even though you have hid from him, he's still pursuing you. He's still looking around corners for you. He's still trying to find you behind that tree.

Some people don't hide from God, they just run away as fast as their feet can carry them.

Is this you? Have you ever tried to hide from God?            YES    NO

If so, what are you hiding?

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**It doesn't matter how fast you run from him. He's still pursuing you.**

You can keep running.

Back when I was a highschool wrestler, I was in the heavyweight class. The little 110 lb guys would mess with me. When I tried to chase them, they'd say, "I run faster and I can get away."

And I'd always respond, "Yes, but eventually you'll slow down. And when you do, I'll catch up, and then you'll be in trouble."

That's kind of what it's like with God. Even if you have spent your entire life trying to sprint away from God, he still pursues you. It's like the Tortoise and the Hare. The Tortoise just keeps moving forward and eventually he catches up with the Hare. That's what God's been doing in your life. No matter how hard and fast you sprinted, God catches up.

Have you ever tried to run from God?            YES    NO

Why are you running?

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Have you run out of steam?                    YES    NO

God doesn't catch up with us to punish us. God pursues you so that he can set you free.

**God wants you to be free.**

He wants you to be free from the life you're living. A life mired in sin. He wants you to be free from sin. God wants you to be free from the shame that comes from sin and, ultimately, to understand your place in his kingdom, because he loves you.

Romans 6:23 (NIV) says, *"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

God wants you to be free from the separation from God. From the spiritual and physical death that comes with living a life that falls outside of the blessing, joy, and fulfillment of God. God wants you to have an eternal relationship with Jesus—which frees us into life.

Christians who love God and have a relationship with him, are **freed into life**.

Is there anything you need to be free from? If so what?

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Real life is experienced with Jesus Christ, in your heart, your mind, and in your soul. It's important to understand that real life is not perfection. The Bible never says, "You're freed into perfection. You're freed into riches. You're freed into a lamborghini." That's never in the Bible.

When we love our creator, we are freed into a higher quality life that has joy at its center.

John 3:16 (ESV) says, *"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."*

This is one of the most famous verses of the Bible. I'm sure if you watch the Super Bowl, someone will hold a sign that reads JOHN 3:16, in the end zone.

The verse is famous because, every person needs to understand that **God loves you**.

Even if you've been playing hide and seek with him. Even if you've been running from him. He's been pursuing you. God wants you to be part of his kingdom and his family.

He loves you.

Romans 5:8 (NIV) tells us, *“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*

The “us” referred to in the verse means YOU. Don’t look around and make excuses for why you think God doesn’t love you.

Jesus Christ died for all of us because—**God is crazy about you.**

He loves you. He wants you in his family. He wants to spend time with you. He wants you to be part of his kingdom.

That was always his plan. It was a drastic step to send his son into the world for you, but it was an ultimate sign of his love. Think about it right now, especially if you are a parent. Think about it this way. If someone took your child, you would go to the end of the world to get them back, right?

That’s what it’s like to God. Sin, has taken hold of God’s children. Stolen them away. And God is doing everything he can to find every child and bring them back home. That’s why we have the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Read the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32.

Can you relate in some way? If so how?

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The son ran away from his father. But even though the prodigal son hurt his father, his father still opened his arms and welcomed him back home.

God does that for you too!

It’s why the Bible talks about lost sheep. Ezekiel 34:11 (NIV) says, *“For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.”*

God is always looking for his sheep. He’s our Shepherd. He’s always trying to herd us and to bring us into safety, because:

## God's pursuing you.

And when you start your relationship with Jesus the thing you need to know is God does not stop pursuing you the day you say, "I believe." He continues to pursue you your whole life. God wants more and more and more for you. You are never finished. God wants you to grow in your faith, to deepen your understanding in him, and be more and more in relationship with him.

Jesus came into this world for lost people. Luke 19:10(NIV) , "*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.*" If you feel like you're lost, he came for you. If you feel like the world is spinning and you don't know where to go, God came for you. It doesn't matter if you think or say things like, "I don't know about God. I believe in Him, but I don't think God will love me." Or, "I'm not good enough. If I look around at all these Christian people, I'm not good enough. I've done too much wrong. I've done too many bad things. There must be some kind of level where God says, 'Enough.'"

## Are you good enough? Have you done too much wrong?

Scripture is clear that there's never a too much for God. Even if **I'm divorced**? Will God even love me? Is that possible?" Even if you are a drunk. Or you are addicted to alcohol or drugs.

We all think we're soooo bad.

But God still loves you.

We all think we're worse than each other. When you start thinking these things, you also end up asking yourself, "**Will God really accept me?** Because of what I've done, or who I am, or the choice that I've made."

It's easy to look at other Christians and think their lives are perfect, and that they must have it together because they're good people. They must've lived happy little lives and just decided to love God. They could have never committed sin or done anything wrong.

But that's all false.

Christians don't have perfect lives. Many people come to Christ after living lost and broken lives—and God still loves them and accepts them. And then—he changes them.

And God will change you too. In our world certain bad acts are considered worse than others. But to God, they are all the same. They carry the same penalty.

People often ask questions like, will God accept if **I've had an abortion**? Will he love me if I'm a **liar or a gossip or a thief**? Will God receive me if I'm in a relationship and I am a **cheater**?

The answer is an emphatic, YES!

God is always looking for his lost children. Matthew 18:12 (NIV) says, *“What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?”*

You can read the entire passage in Matthew 18:10-14.

Have you ever felt lost a lost sheep? Or do you need rescued?

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It doesn't say the Shepherd would evaluate the quality of that sheep, evaluate how much it sinned, and decide from there. The shepherd doesn't say, “Ah, well, I guess Billy is gone. I'll leave him to a wolf.”

That's not what the Bible says.

The Bible tells a story of a shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine happy, healthy sheep and travels as far as he can to find the one lost sheep and return that sheep home. Well, guess what?

**You're that sheep.**

That's you. That's us. It's not the good person down the street. You're the sheep. We're the sheep. We're all the **broken, lustful, adulterous, spiteful, deceitful sheep**. That's all of us. There's no exception. Even though that's all of us, at some point in our lives, **God is still pursuing you**. He wants a relationship with you. He's still pursuing *you*. God desires you up until the point you accept him, and then even after.

That's the plan.

We know this from Scripture. It's not like we're making this up to make you feel better about the things you've done in your past. The Bible's clear it's always worked this way. God is not making an exception to the rule for you. God has always loved people that much.

One example is **Saul** who is later know as **Paul**.

The story of Saul starts in Acts 9:1-2(NIV), *“Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.”*

The Way was the name for what Christians called themselves. Saul wanted to uncover and capture followers of the Way. Once captured, he would take them to Jerusalem, where they would most likely be murdered. So, Saul led a number of believers to their deaths. That’s who he was. That was his past. He wasn’t just a bad guy. He was a *bad* guy. He was the enemy of God. But the story carries on. Saul goes out and has this experience where God confronts him and blinds him and tells him, “No more.” He has this revelation with God.

You can discover more about Saul’s amazing conversion in Acts 9:1-19.

So, this guy Saul, who was basically murdering Christians gains this special connection with God. When God revealed himself he also blinded Saul to get his fullest attention. This special revelation transform Saul and he acknowledges his creator as God. Upon dedicating his life to God, Saul is filled with the Holy Spirit, and he eventually ends up changing his name to, Paul.

Acts 13:9 (ESV), *“But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him.”*

If God can do that for Saul and transform him into Paul, can’t he do the same thing for you? If God would reclaim someone who was essentially murdering dozens if not hundreds of early followers of Jesus, wouldn’t he do the same thing for you?

Galatians 1:15-16 (NIV) a letter of Paul says, *“But when God, who set me apart from my mother’s womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being.”*

Paul is basically saying, “I wasn’t an accident on the road. God, from the moment he put me together in my mother’s womb, had a plan for me. He was pursuing me. He was calling me to be part of his kingdom. From the beginning.”

Back when he was Saul, even with his murderous intentions, God still pursued him. As he was hid behind the tree, as he ran as fast as he could, it didn’t matter. God still pursued him. Because he loves him. Just like he loves you. And because of that level of love recorded in scripture, we can also know—

**God also has a plan for you.**

Just like Saul. Maybe some of you need to leave this chapter with a different name. Or at least, a different mindset. An understanding that God has created you as his child and he wants to

move you into what he has planned for you. The life, that when he put you together in your mother's womb, he destined for you. Because God has a plan for you.

### **And it starts with grace.**

God's grace. Grace is **God's favor on the unworthy**. God takes favor and bestows it on people who don't deserve it. I.e. Paul/Saul. Saul did not deserve God's love. Saul ultimately would have deserved death. He spent years trying to kill the people who loved Jesus and followed Jesus the closest. And he was successful at that task. In so doing, he was unworthy of God's love. Just like we're unworthy. But God still loved him and gave him favor anyways.

Grace can also be described as **God's benevolence on the undeserving**.

None of us deserve God's love. You may think you're a pretty good person. You still don't deserve God's love. None of us are that good enough, that special enough, but God loves us anyway. And God **loves us, and pursues us, and seeks us**, because he wants a relationship with us. And his grace allows us to have that relationship.

Grace is an acronym.

**G**od's  
**R**iches  
**A**t  
**C**hrist's  
**E**xpense

We get everything that the Bible promises us as followers of the Lord because Jesus' death, sacrifice, and resurrection. That's what grace means. We don't deserve the kingdom of heaven. But we get it because Jesus died for all of us. He paid the price for all of us. That's what it means.

Isaiah 62:12 (ESV) says, *"And they shall be called The Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord; and you shall be called Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken."*

I love the words *sought out*. Christians are sought out. People are sought out to be part of God's kingdom. We see other examples in Scripture. And it's not just one example. We can read about it over and over and over again.

### JOHN THE BAPTIST

Another perfect example is **John the Baptist**. In Luke 1 the angel Gabriel talks to John the Baptist's father, Zechariah.

Luke 1:13-15 (ESV), *“13 But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.”*”

What he’s saying is, “God has a plan for the baby that’s about to be born. He’s had the plan that John the Baptist is going to be a great man because God has always had a plan for him. God’s made him”.

## JEREMIAH

We even see this same sentiment back in the Old Testament with **Jeremiah**. Jeremiah was a prophet, and God had a plan for him.

In Jeremiah 1:4-8 (ESV) it says, *“Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’ Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.’ But the Lord said to me, ‘Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord.”*”

Jeremiah’s making excuses for why he’s not good enough, but God is saying, “I made you for this. I have a plan. I want you to accomplish the tasks I have for you. You’re someone that I love, that I pursue, that I’m crazy about.”

## DAVID

In the Old Testament, we can read about **David**. If you look at his life, he was an adulterer. He took Uriah’s wife and then sent him to the front lines so he would die in battle. He was essentially a murderer. David was an adulterer and murderer and more. But at one point in Scripture, it calls David a man after God’s own heart. God loved him and pursued him.

Because God can love a man like David, we can rest assured that he not only loves you but he also has a plan for your life.

In Psalm 139:13-16 (NIV), it says, *“For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”*

It's a famous verse. We talk about this a lot in churches, especially with children and babies being born into the world. But what David is saying is God knew you and had a plan for you before you were ever born into this world. God wanted you to be part of his plan, his kingdom, and his masterpiece.

**Just like these men of old, God has a plan for you.**

Do you have a plan for your life? If so, what is it? Is it working out?

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The Bible is full of people who God told he had a plan for since before they were born. And God has a plan for you too. I'm writing this because God has a plan for me when I was knit together in my mother's womb. And I'll be honest, I think God had a plan for me a lot longer before then. God's had a plan for all of us since before time began. At least time as we understand it.

God loves you that much. When you start a journey with Christ the key is you have to know you've been set free from sin and freed into life because of Jesus' grace and that God wants you to have a relationship with him. He's always been pursuing you. And always going to continue pursuing you.

It's important.

For me, one of the reasons I see people leave a relationship with Christ is because they don't realize how important they are to God. They don't feel special to God. They don't feel like they're worthy enough. They may think, "I don't think God really loves me. How can he love me?" And it's the enemy trying to convince someone that they're shamed and guilty and that they shouldn't belong to God.

That is not from God.

That's the world, trying to pull you away from God. That's your enemy trying to pull you away from God.

**What does this mean for you?**

John 4:23 (ESV) says, *"But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him."*

The Bible continues to say that God seeks us. God's pursuing us. We're sought out. It's not just one or two people throughout history. It's every single person. Because the Bible tells us that we're all born children of God. He wants nothing more than for us to be adopted into his family and have a reclaimed relationship with him. Because sin is in the world, we're all lost. But through Jesus we can be restored, we can be reclaimed, and we can be a part of the kingdom.

God is trying to do everything in his power to put you in a position where you'll really, truly know that you're loved that much. That you're pursued that much. That he's always been seeking you.

And there's nothing you can do to earn that love. **You'll have to embrace that you'll never be good enough.**

But God's grace will free you. God still loves you despite all your human faults, issues, and oddities. His grace will free you from sin and into life eternal. Free you into joy.

We live in a world where everyone's so easily offended, and it feels like life just sucks the joy out of everything. Every time you turn on the news, it's like, "Oh, look, the world's a terrible, horrible place to live in." That's not the world God created for us to experience. God wants us to have joy. He can free you into joy if you truly experience his grace and understand your part. Understand that **there's always been a plan for you.**

You have to decide if are **ready to Start.**

Are you ready?      YES              NO              NOT YET

Are you ready to start your journey? Maybe it's today. Maybe you haven't accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. There are no magic words. Back when I accepted Christ, you had to pray a prayer. I prayed it every night at church camp, and one of them stuck. I don't actually know which night. I think I had to pray it six times. I was pretty bad.

There's no magic words. There's no Bible verse to recite or some script to read. You just need to tell God in your heart, "I believe. I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe he died for my sins. And I want to give my life to him."

It's that simple.

As you go through this book, you're going to learn about prayer. What are the basics of prayer? How do you pray? You're going to discover who God is? Learn about the Trinity and how it works? Uncover things that most Christians have known their whole lives and now take for granted.

But none of that matters if we don't understand how much God loves us. How much he's pursued us throughout our lives, how much he's going to continue pursuing you for the rest of your life.

I am so thankful. Because I'm a dummy. I'm so thankful that I have a God who--even though I'm going to make mistakes, and even though I'm going to offend people the rest of my life-- that God is never going to quit pursuing me, and loving me, and calling me deeper into relationship with him.

I hope you're thankful for that too.

A believer is just someone who believes, who has faith in Jesus Christ and confesses it to others. That's what it is. And accepts the grace of God in your life.

Romans 10:10 (NIV) says, *"For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved."*

If you haven't made a decision to follow the Lord, it's simple. You tell God in your heart, in your mind, that you love him, that you believe, and then you have to tell someone else.

If you make that decision. You have to confess it with your mouth by telling others. Tell your spouse. Tell your kids. Tell someone at church or a pastor. Don't be embarrassed. It should never be an embarrassing thing. It's a joyous, wonderful celebration when you've given your heart to Christ.

Who can you tell about your relationship with Jesus? \_\_\_\_\_

Next, find someone to walk through this book with you who will support you in your walk with Christ. You don't have to know everything, and neither do they.

Write down the name of the person who is going to walk through this journey with you.

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For the next six weeks, work through this book together. Ask questions. Dig deeper. And learn more about how you **Start**.