

WELCOME TO GOD'S FAMILY

You're suddenly in a place more life-changing than anything you've ever experienced. That's what happens when you invite Jesus into your life. This is more than believing Jesus is a good guy, a guru, or an enlightened one. It starts by understanding that without Jesus there's no remedy for the sickness of human sin (Romans 6:23). When you realize you're a sinner, you are ready to accept that Jesus died in your place. He took the punishment for the sin you deserve to die for (John 3:16). He lived a sinless life so he could die a completely unjust death—all to take the place of people who do justly deserve death. When you believe this, you say, "Jesus, take my whole life. I ask your forgiveness for my sin and invite you to make me fully who I can become by making me more and more like you."



THE JOURNEY

When you invite Jesus into your life, you start a new journey. Your journey will not be exactly the same as anyone else's journey, but that doesn't mean you will travel it alone. Jesus said that when you believe in him, you're "born again"—spiritually. You're like a new baby who just got put into a new family. You're now a "child of God" and God is your perfect Father. Every child in God's family is on a journey, yet we're all traveling to the same destination—the place our deepest selves have always yearned to be: close to God.

Living in God's family consists of two things: love and trust.

Learning to trust God in more and more ways leads us to experience all of the facets of this astounding new life! Learning to love includes learning how to love God by paying attention to him, and learning to love people (even those you don't like). It's not about following a set of rules. It's about relationship: a relationship of pure love that grows between God and you, and between you and his other children—and with those who aren't his children just yet (Romans 5:6-11).

BELONGING - Salvation & Sin

I don't feel "holy" or "Christian." Do I really belong? In a world where we're told that only our feelings matter, God's family is a place where our feelings are not the test of what's real. It's a relief to know that the Bible says, "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9). It's a done deal—not because of how you feel about it, but because you can count on God to do what he says. He never lies!

It was really a rush at first, but now I don't feel the same. What happened? You might have felt a huge rush of emotion when you joined God's family. But problems in life still happen and your journey won't always be easy. And the exciting feelings may fade. So when you don't feel like God is working in your life, remember that God really has sent his Spirit to work inside you and your life will show progress (John 1:12; 14:25-26).

As your relationships with God and with other Christians grow, you will notice that the way you think, act, feel, and react to situations will begin to change. One thing you're likely to notice is that now you actually want to obey and please God, which may come as a shock (Ecclesiastes 7:20; Romans 7:14-25). Take stock of these new desires. They are evidence that God is working in your life.

What happens when I sin? Is it all over? Don't believe the lie that you're the only one who blows it. Everyone struggles with sin (Romans 3:23-24). When you do sin, it's not the end of your relationship with God. The enemy (Satan) will try to make you doubt God's promise to forgive you (1 John 1:9). But Jesus has already paid the price for your sins. God will forgive all sin—cheating, lying, lusting, greed, whatever! So just own up and confess it to him. Invite God to give you new strategies when you're tempted to sin again. God promises to give you a way to escape doing evil: "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Corinthians 10:13). Ask him to show you the best strategy. Then do it!

BEING CONNECTED - church & Gifts

So why do i need to go to church? How weird would it be to live in a family but never see anyone else, never talk to anyone except your father? What would come down if you totally ignored your brothers and sisters? Answer, nothing good. All Christians are like brothers and sisters in God's family. The word "church" means "called-out ones." When we get together, we acknowledge that we're "called out" from other stuff in this world to be his family. Church is not the building. It's the local bunch of called-out ones. Going to church—or gathering together—is the time and place where we commit to regularly show up to worship God, learn from the Bible, and love, support, pray for, and encourage each other (Hebrews 10:24-25).

God doesn't want you to travel alone. He's given you other Christians to help you along the journey. So get connected. Try joining a Bible study group, prayer group, or have an older Christian mentor you. You'll be amazed at how much you can learn from others who are on the journey too.

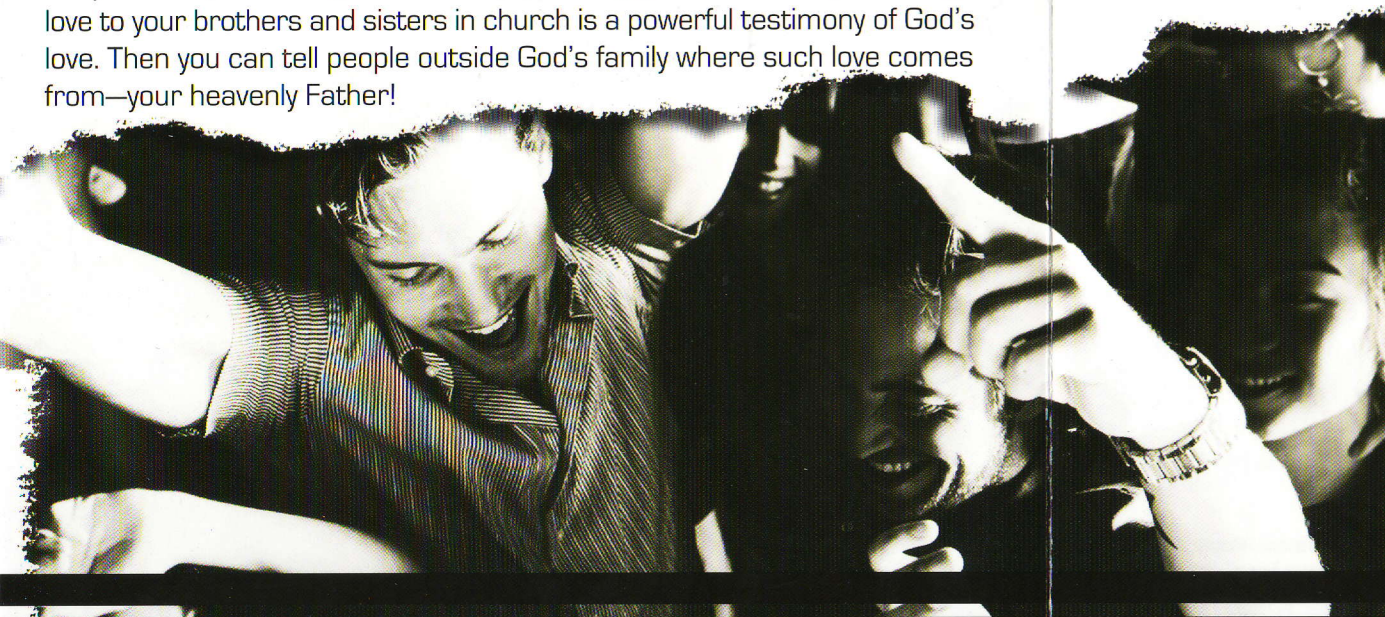
Jesus told his followers to love each other—in fact, he said that this is the way other people would know we are his followers (John 13:34-35). You may not immediately like every other sibling in God's family, but guess what? They're people. Imperfect, like you. "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:2-3). Showing love to your brothers and sisters in church is a powerful testimony of God's love. Then you can tell people outside God's family where such love comes from—your heavenly Father!

What's this thing about giving away my money? God created us to be people who give. We give our time, attention, money, possessions, and love. Jesus started it; he gave his life for us (1 John 3:16-17). He's generous, and he expects us to be too! Giving is a tangible way to show that Jesus is first on our gift list. Start by giving money at the church where you attend. A tenth of your income ("a tithe") is a rule of thumb set up in the Old Testament—but don't stop there! If giving seems tough, ask God to help you (Malachi 3:8-10; Matthew 6:1-4). "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:7-8).

People keep talking about spiritual gifts. Do i get one? Part of living in God's family is using your talents in ways that honor him. God's Spirit gives you gifts and empowers you so that you can help expand God's family. They include things like teaching, encouraging, serving, evangelizing, and many more! There are lists of these gifts in Romans 12:4-8, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4:11-13. Ask God for wisdom as you try different ways of using your spiritual gifts (James 1:5). The Bible says every gift is important and necessary. Whatever gift you discover you have, use it to help the family work together.

BODY PARTS

The Bible describes the church as one body with many parts. Check out 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body... Now the body is not made up of one part but of many.... God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be." Every different body part is needed for a body to function well. Every person in the church is different. We have diverse backgrounds and abilities, but we are all equally important for the church body to function well. God has arranged his church to be full of diversity, yet total unity.



BIBLE VERSES TO MEMORIZE

if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. — **Romans 10:9-10**

if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. — **1 John 1:9**

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. — **Romans 3:23-24**

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything 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. — **Philippians 4:6-7**

consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. — **James 1:2-4**

Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” — **Matthew 22:37-39**

Jesus said: “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**

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. — **Ephesians 2:8-10**

i meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word. — **Psalms 119:15-16**

Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God — **John 1:12**

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. — **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**

TRUSTING - Doubts & Fears

A lot of things scare me. What does the Bible say about fear? Should I fear a natural disaster? Worry over how to get a passing grade? Be afraid my peers won't like me? Let's get some clarity.

First, let's talk about fear. There are two kinds. The first kind is a healthy self-preservation kind of fear, like the fear of getting burned. It's what keeps you from putting your hands on a hot stove. But there's a second kind of fear. It's not so healthy. It doesn't preserve, it destroys. It can also be called worry. It's based on the kind of "what if" thinking that leaves God totally out of the picture. The Bible calls such thoughts "flaming arrows of the evil one" (Ephesians 6:16). The enemy (Satan) uses those kinds of fears to freak you out instead of trusting in God.

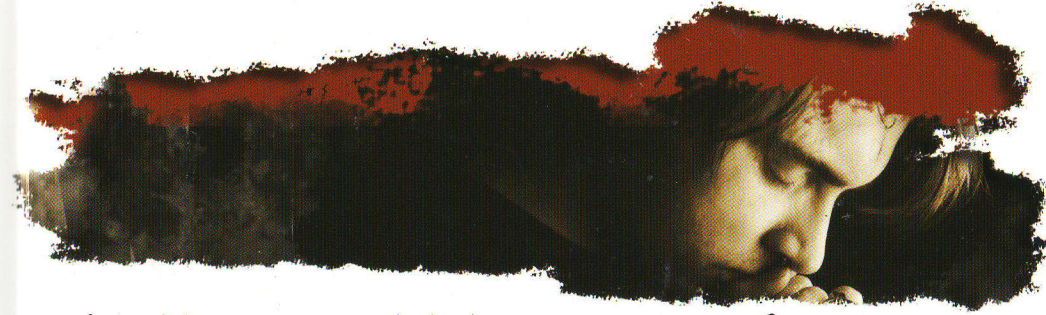
So, how to get from fear to faith? First, ask yourself are you leaving God out of the picture? What would it look like if you asked God to be in charge of it all? (He already is, but he just waits for us to pay attention.)

Second, stop the enemy by learning what God says about himself.

The more you understand God as trustworthy, caring, and all-powerful, the quicker you'll recognize those flaming-arrow thoughts when they come—and put 'em out! Try writing down and memorizing words from the Bible about who God is. Quoting words like these to yourself makes you remember, "O yeah, God is in complete control. He's up to something good!" Thank him for that.

I'm a Christian but I still have doubts. Is that OK? Yes, Christians can have doubts. Doubts and questions can be good; they can keep us thinking and learning. Doubts that lead us to better understand the truth are really stepping-stones! Doubts can arise when you feel hurt, confused or angry. During those times, you may doubt that God exists or that he is really good. You may be tempted to imagine the worst-case scenario and worry that God isn't on your side. But these are misleading feelings, not the truth. Maybe your friends are asking you questions about God that you don't know how to answer. But whatever the source of the doubts, go to the Bible. That ground rule will keep you out of spiritual

danger. Jesus promised his Spirit would guide us into all truth (John 14:16-17). So tell him your doubts and ask him to show you the answers you need. Share your doubts with other people who have been Christians longer. They've probably had the same doubts too. But expect to find the answers because God loves to answer you!



if God loves me, why do bad things happen to me? You embarrass yourself in front of class. Your friend lets you down. You don't get the job. These things can make you feel really bad. They may make you feel like it's hard to believe God is doing what's best (because it isn't what you wanted!). Whenever life makes you feel like this, it's a good time to tell God straight up what you feel. Even if you're angry with him, he wants you to be honest with him. He's big enough to take it! Then remember that God loves and values you. When he does stuff you don't understand it's not because he doesn't love you—it's because he's up to something you can't see the results of yet. So choose to trust that God is bigger, smarter, and more loving than you feel or can imagine right now. To help you focus on who God is and what he has done for you in the past, worship him: sing, pray, journal, and do whatever it takes to put his character and his love for you in the forefront of your mind.

There are also things we witness that are evil: violence, crime, injustice. They break our hearts because they're evidence of the sinful, warped nature of this world. There's only one reason God puts up with evil. It's not because he can't stop it. It's because he is waiting—patiently and lovingly—for people to return to him. A final judgment will come when God will punish evil and make everything right in the end. This is the purpose of his redeeming this whole messy planet in the first place (2 Peter 3:1-10).

TROUBLESHOOTING – Reasons to Believe & Other Religions

How do i know the Bible is reliable? Amazing History: Even if you come at it from a completely “neutral nonbeliever” view, the Bible is truly unlike any other “holy book.” The Bible was written by more than 40 authors over the span of about 1,600 years—but God is the one author behind it all! The Bible itself points out that God worked through these authors as they wrote. Second Timothy 3:16 describes the process this way: “All Scripture is God-breathed.” And 2 Peter 1:21 says that the writers were “carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Also, other history sources as well as archaeology confirm the accuracy of the Bible’s descriptions of cities, rulers, and battles. For example, scholars once dismissed the Hittites (described in Joshua 1:1-4) as fictional. But now archaeologists have extensive evidence of the Hittite kingdom. The Bible was shown to be correct after all!

Accurate preservation: Before printing presses existed, biblical texts were copied by hand. The people who did this work did so only within an intricate system of checking and double-checking. Scholars have confirmed time and again that the Bible’s text is more perfectly preserved than many other ancient texts, such as the writings of Plato and Aristotle. When the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in the 1940s, some scholars expected these ancient copies of the Bible to prove that the Bible we have today is inaccurate. But what they found was that the biblical portions of the Dead Sea Scrolls matched what we have now with astounding accuracy!

“God uses suffering to call us into the peace of his presence. if God could not use pain and suffering for our good, then he would not allow such things to remain in the world . . . God has no joy in our pain, but he sometimes uses pain and suffering as bitter medicines for the treatment of souls.” —Sundar Singh, Early 20th century Christian from India who gave up all his earthly possessions to go and tell people about Jesus in some of the most dangerous areas in Asia.

is there evidence that Jesus really died and rose from death?

Some say Jesus merely fainted on the cross, so his “resurrection” was just him waking up. But the Roman soldiers who executed him were satisfied that he was dead. They were experts. And you don’t bury people who faint!


Over 500 people, during the next 40 days, saw the risen Jesus and even touched him. He walked, talked and ate in front of them (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). Anyone who argues that the people who saw him “hallucinated” has to believe that there were over 500 separate hallucinations that all matched in content! A better explanation is that Jesus really did rise from the dead. Then there’s the reaction of his followers. After Jesus’ resurrection, Jesus’ friends suddenly turned from hiding in fear to proclaiming Jesus boldly in the face of persecution. Many were willing to die for preaching about Jesus’ resurrection (Acts 4:1-22; 12:1-3). What could explain this except that they really did see Jesus alive!

So why does it matter? Jesus’ resurrection proves he is God. Coming back to life from death showed the penalty for sin (that’s death) is paid. And it proves that the new life Jesus offers is the real thing! “Praise be to God...he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3).



AS YOU TRAVEL

As you're on this journey with Jesus and God's family, always remember your purpose. First up, God created you for himself. You're not a random anything. He made you on purpose. You are a real flesh-and-blood expression of God's love. The Bible says that God is like the potter and you are like the clay (Isaiah 64:8). He formed you and knew you before you were born (Jeremiah 1:5). He gave you special qualities and talents and shaped your background (Psalm 139; Ephesians 2:10). He even uses painful situations of your past to shape you and make you better. You have a unique role to fulfill in his family.



Isn't Christianity the same as any other religion? Is Jesus the only way to be saved? The world is full of religions. And within other religions, some people are sincere and "good." So is it enough to be a sincere, good person? Won't God make an exception?

Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and energy and then, to love your neighbor (that's other people) as yourself (Matthew 22:37-39).

This journey is about knowing you're loved, loving God in return, and then living out his kind of love!

Here's what Jesus said: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). There aren't a bunch of paths to reach God. There's one Way to God the Father—it's Jesus. And he's ready to put anyone on that path who wants to go!

Being "religious" or merely trying to be a sincere, good person and follow what you think is right is totally deceiving. It makes you think you're OK when you're actually in danger. We all have sin in our lives, but the answer is not following a set of man-made rules to make you feel better about yourself. The answer is forgiveness. The Bible says, "For it is by grace [God's undeserved love] you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works [good deeds], so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Our good is never good enough—but God's grace is always big enough to save anyone who will come to him!

Your life is an example of God's forgiveness and love. God is doing great things in your life for everyone to see. So when someone asks you, "What's up with you and Jesus?" tell them what God is doing in your life. Your story is worth telling! And it's OK if you don't know all the answers to their questions. Just invite them to join God's family and to start on this amazing journey! Even if people don't seem to listen, treat them with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15; Colossians 4:6). God's Spirit turns even the most unlikely people into children of God. And it's a blast to be part of God's global revolution—one person at a time!