

A Place to Grow

A Guide to Knowing the Lord, Growing in His
Word, and Finding Your Place at Chesapeake
Baptist Church

Pastor Matt Nettesheim

Chesapeake Baptist Church

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Chesapeake Baptist Church

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KNOW · BELONG · GROW

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Chesapeake Baptist Church

What Is This Book?

This is a pretty good-sized book.

You may be thinking, **“I’m never going to read all of this.”**

That’s okay.

This book is really very simple:

| You have questions. We want you to have answers.

Questions about Chesapeake Baptist Church. Questions about Bible-believing Christianity. Questions about what the Bible says and why we believe what we believe.

Some people will not be interested.

This book is written for the person who is.

You do not have to read it from beginning to end. Find the question you have. Turn to the part that helps.

Think of it as an answer book.

I hope it helps.

Thank You for Being Our Guest

Thank you for visiting Chesapeake Baptist Church.

I remember walking into a church like this years ago. I had been out of church for a long time. I did not know anybody or know the songs. I wondered why everybody seemed to have the same Bible and why the ladies dressed the way they did.

I had a lot of questions.

Looking back, I wish I had a book that helped me find the answers. I know you probably have questions too. That is one reason we wrote this book.

Maybe you are wondering whether you really fit here. Your life may not be where you think it ought to be. Your family may be going through difficulties. You may not know much about the Bible or feel like you have much in common with the people around you.

I want you to know something:

| You are wanted here.

You do not have to get yourself fixed before you come. You do not wait until you are well before you go to the hospital. You go because you need help. Church is much the same way.

We all need the Lord. We need the Bible, and we need people who can help us keep going in the right direction.

If you have a family, we want to help you raise your children for the Lord. We want them to be glad they came to church, learn the Bible, make good friends, and grow up loving God.

Whatever your situation, we are glad you came.

Come back. Ask questions. Hear the Bible. Let people get to know you.

That is what this book is here to help you do: know the Lord, understand His Word, understand this church, strengthen your family, and take another step closer to God.

We really do want you here.

And in time, we would love for Chesapeake Baptist Church to become your church family.

You do not need to understand everything today.

Just keep taking the next step.

I am glad you came.

Pastor Matt Nettesheim

To Our Church Family

It is a wonderful thing to be part of a Bible-believing church. But there is a difference between **attending church** and really sharing in the life of a church family.

I have watched people begin attending Chesapeake who were excited about the Lord. Some had just been saved and baptized. Others moved into the area and were looking for a Bible-believing church. They came faithfully for a while, but after a few months they still did not really know how to become involved.

They were coming to church, but they still felt a little like outsiders.

This book was written to help with that too.

I want you to understand what we believe, why we do what we do, how you can grow, and how you can become part of the life and work of this church family.

The progression is simple.

KNOW the Lord and understand the truth of His Word.

BELONG to a church family where you can be known, helped, and encouraged.

GROW in your own walk with God.

LIVE what you believe at home and through the week.

SERVE by using your life to help other people.

And as you grow, you can begin to **REACH** others with the Gospel and **TEACH** someone else what the Lord has taught you.

This book is not just about learning more about Chesapeake Baptist Church.

It is about becoming part of it.

And one day, I hope you will be the person helping someone else who feels like the outsider you once were.

Pastor Matt Nettesheim

A Little About Me and My Family

I think knowing a little about me and my family will help you understand more about Chesapeake Baptist Church.

When I was growing up, our family attended several different kinds of churches. When I was about eleven, we stopped going to church.

As I got older, I still believed in God, but in reality, **God was not a part of my life.**

There was a battle going on inside of me. I wanted to know God, but I did not really know whether a relationship with Him was possible. On the outside, I was living a rebellious and selfish life.

After high school, I joined the United States Navy. The Navy sent me to electronics school in the Great Lakes area near Chicago.

While I was there, someone invited me to church. A bus picked me up, and I had no idea that my life was about to change.

That church service brought back memories from when I was a boy. Afterward, a man asked me a question:

“If you were to die today, do you know for sure that you would go to Heaven?”

I told him, “I hope so.”

He said, **“Wouldn’t you rather know so?”**

Then he explained something that began changing the direction of my life. **God has given us a Book called the**

Bible. It is God's Word. The Bible not only shows us how we can know that when we die we will go to Heaven, but it also shows us how to live the life God gave us **in a way that pleases Him.**

He opened the Bible with me, and that day I trusted Jesus Christ as my Saviour.

From that point forward, I began learning how to live by the Bible.

The Navy eventually brought me to the Hampton Roads area, where I joined a Bible-believing Baptist church and began getting involved. I served, learned, and grew.

In 2000, I met Mandy.

Mandy grew up in Ada, Oklahoma. She also came from a broken family and, as a young girl, began attending a Bible-believing Baptist church. She trusted Christ as her Saviour and began living for the Lord.

Mandy married young and had three children: Jonathan, Benjamin, and Andrea. Not long after Andrea was born, Mandy's husband was killed in a car accident.

When I met Mandy, she was visiting the church I attended. It did not take long for us to realize the Lord was bringing our lives together.

We were married, and those three children became **our children.**

Mandy and I served together in church. We worked in music, Sunday school, bus ministry, and wherever we could be useful. At the same time, I had to provide for our growing family. I worked in the roofing business and later owned laundromats in the Hampton Roads area.

But down inside, I hoped that someday the Lord might allow me to pastor a church.

In 2009, Chesapeake Baptist Church called me to be its pastor.

At that time, the church was without a pastor and had only fourteen members remaining.

Since then, the Lord has been very good to us.

Our family grew from three children to twelve, ten boys and two girls. And our church family grew too.

We have watched people trust Christ as their Saviour, follow the Lord in baptism, begin reading the Bible, grow in their homes, and learn to live for God.

I have watched people come through the doors discouraged, confused, hurting, or simply unsure where they belonged, and then watched the Lord begin changing their lives.

That is what excites me most about Chesapeake Baptist Church.

The church is not a building. **The church is people.**

As the Lord brought more people, we needed more room. In 2021, we completed our new auditorium.

But the buildings are only tools. What matters is what happens inside them: people hearing the Gospel, learning the Bible, growing in the Lord, and helping somebody else.

God has been very good to my family, and He has been very good to our church family.

Sometimes it is hard for me to separate the two.

I am excited about what the Lord is doing at Chesapeake Baptist Church, and I would love for you to be a part of it.

Pastor Matt Nettesheim

What's in This Book?

COME ↓	Begin here.
KNOW ↓	Know the God who gave you life, and know how you can go to Heaven when you die.
BELONG ↓	Understand the family of God and how you can become part of this church.
GROW ↓	Learn to read your Bible, pray, walk with God, and grow in your Christian life.
LIVE ↓	Don't just go to church. Learn how to live for God in your home, relationships, choices, and everyday life.
SERVE ↓	Use the life God has given you to help other people.
REACH ↓	Learn to give the Gospel to someone who needs Christ.
TEACH	Help someone else learn the truths that have helped you.

All of it flowing from a heart that loves God.

Contents

What Is This Book?

Thank You for Being Our Guest

To Our Church Family

A Little About Me and My Family

What's in This Book?

KNOW | Know the Lord

1. There Is a God

2. God Has Spoken

3. The Bible Way to Heaven

4. Everlasting Life

5. A Heart for God

6. Following the Lord in Believer's Baptism

Where Are You?

My Testimony

Contents

BELONG | Church Family

- 7. Does the Church You Choose Matter?
 - 8. What Is a Church, and Why Does It Exist?
 - 9. Why a Bible-Believing Baptist Church?
 - 10. Why We Gather
 - 11. Why Sunday School Matters
 - 12. Why We Preach the Bible
 - 13. Singing to the Lord
 - 14. Life at Chesapeake
 - 15. How Chesapeake Baptist Church Is Led
 - 16. How the Work Is Supported
 - 17. Understanding the Lord's Supper
 - 18. Why We Use the King James Bible
 - 19. Why We Dress the Way We Do
 - 20. Why Become a Church Member?
 - 21. Problems in the Church
- Is This Your Church Family?

Contents

GROW | Walk with God

22. Your Daily Walk with God

23. Where to Begin Reading Your Bible

24. Understanding and Studying What You Read

25. Learning to Pray

26. Walking in the Spirit

27. Decide Before the Pressure Comes

28. When You Keep Struggling with the Same Sin

29. What Do I Do When I Sin?

Will You Walk with God?

CHAPTERS 1-6

KNOW

Know the Lord

Know the God who gave you life, and know how you can go to Heaven when you die.

God has spoken.

COME

KNOW

BELONG

GROW

LIVE

SERVE

REACH

TEACH

All of it flowing from a heart that loves God.

There Is a God

The Bible does not waste any time getting to the point.
The very first words are:

GENESIS 1:1

“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.”

In the beginning God.

Before the Bible tells us about man, it tells us about God.
Before it tells us how to live, it tells us where everything
came from.

There is a God.

And He made you.

The Bible says:

ACTS 17:25

“...he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;”

Think about that for a minute.

God gave you life.

He gave you the eyes you are using to read these words. He
gave you ears that can hear, a tongue that can taste, hands that
can feel, a mind that can think, and lungs that are breathing
right now.

You did not give yourself life.

God did.

Look around you. Look at the world God created. Look at
the sky. Look at the stars. Look at the tremendous order and
beauty of creation.

David did that.

He wrote:

PSALM 8:3–4

“When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;
What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?”

David looked at the heavens and began thinking about the greatness of God. Then he looked at himself. That is a good thing for every one of us to do.

When I begin to understand how great God is, it changes the way I see myself.

He is God. I am not.

He is the Creator. I am His creation.

He gave me life, breath, and the opportunity to live.

That ought to cause me to ask a very important question:

Why did God give me this life?

The Bible answers that too.

REVELATION 4:11

“Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.”

God created us **for His pleasure**.

That means my life is not simply about what I want to do, what I want to become, how much money I want to make, or how comfortable I can make myself.

God gave me my life, and my life ought to please Him.

That is a very different way to look at life.

But What If I Do Not Believe in God?

There are people who very loudly say that there is no God. We call them atheists.

The Bible addresses that plainly:

PSALM 14:1

“The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.”

The Bible does not begin by suggesting that God needs to prove Himself to us.

It begins:

“In the beginning God...”

We did not come from nothing. The universe did not give itself life. You did not create yourself.

There is a God.

You may have questions about Him. That is understandable. There is much about God that we will never fully comprehend.

But the answer is not to ignore Him.

The answer is to begin where the Bible begins.

There is a God.

We could spend the rest of this book talking about God and still only begin to understand His greatness.

There is much more to learn about who God is, and later in this book we will talk about some of those truths.

The Bible teaches that there is one God. It also teaches us about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Jesus said:

MATTHEW 28:19

“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:”

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are not three gods. There is one God, eternally existing in three Persons. We often use the word Trinity to describe this truth. There is much about God we will never fully understand, but we can believe what He has told us about Himself.

But for now, I want you to see something simple.

There is a God.

He made you.

He gave you life.

And your life ought to be lived for Him.

Once you understand that, there is a question you ought to ask.

In the New Testament there was a man named Saul. He was traveling toward the city of Damascus when he had an encounter with the Lord that completely changed the direction of his life.

Saul suddenly realized that he was not in charge.

God was.

And Saul asked one of the greatest questions a person can ever ask:

ACTS 9:6

“Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?”

That is where a life lived for God begins.

Not with:

What do I want to do?

But:

Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?

You do not yet know everything the Bible teaches. You may have a lot of questions. That is okay. But you can begin right here.

Recognize that there is a God. Recognize that He gave you life. And begin asking:

“Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?”

That leads to another very important question:

How can I know what God wants me to do?

The answer is simple.

God has spoken.

He has given us His Word.

God Has Spoken

Everybody has an opinion.

I have mine.

You have yours.

Your family and friends have opinions. People all around us have ideas about God, life, right and wrong, and what happens when we die.

Some people state their opinions very confidently.

But confidence does not make an opinion true.

So who are we supposed to listen to?

The answer becomes much simpler when we remember what we learned in the last chapter.

There is a God.

He gave us life.

And the God who gave us life has not left us here to figure everything out on our own.

God has spoken.

He has given us His Word.

Jesus said:

MATTHEW 4:4

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.”

We need food to live physically, but we also need the words of God to know how to live the life He has given us.

That is what makes the Bible different from every other voice around us.

The Bible is not simply another man's opinion. It is God's Word.

And if God gave me life, then I ought to care about what God has said.

The Bible describes God's Word this way:

PSALM 119:105

"Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path."

A lamp helps me see where I am. A light helps me see where I am going. That is what the Bible does.

God's Word shows me where I am, and it shows me the way I ought to go.

The problem is that there are a lot of voices competing for our attention. Sometimes the strongest voice is our own.

We think:

This is what I believe.

This is what I want.

This seems right to me.

But the Bible warns us:

PROVERBS 14:12

"There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death."

Something can seem right to me and still be wrong.

Sometimes our biggest problem is that we lift our own opinion above what God has said.

So each of us has a choice to make.

Who am I going to listen to?

Am I going to build my life on what I think? On what somebody else thinks? On whatever the world happens to believe?

Or am I going to listen to the God who gave me life and breath?

Who you choose to listen to will change the direction of your life.

If there is a God, and if God has spoken, then one of the wisest things I can ever learn to ask is:

What does God say?

And there is one question where we especially need to hear what God says:

What happens when I die?

People have plenty of opinions about that too.

But you do not have to guess.

God has spoken.

And in His Word, He shows us how we can know that when we die, we will go to Heaven.

That is where we go next.

The Bible Way to Heaven

A few years ago, I was at Chesapeake General Hospital.

I was coming down the elevator with an older man who had a bandage wrapped around his head. I tried to talk to him, but he was pretty grumpy and did not seem interested in talking.

We got off the elevator and started walking in different directions.

Then he stopped.

He turned around, came back to me, looked me in the eye, and said,

“I just got told I have three months to live.”

His name was Billy.

At that moment, I did not make an appointment to talk with him later. I did not tell him I would come back next week.

I stood there and told Billy the Bible way to Heaven.

The Bible says:

JAMES 4:14

“Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.”

Billy had just been reminded of something that is true for every one of us.

Life is short.

Most of us will never have a doctor tell us exactly how much time we have left. But none of us knows how much time we have.

And when it comes to what happens after we die, we do not need somebody's opinion.

We need to know what God has said.

The Bible first shows us our problem.

ROMANS 3:23

“For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;”

That word **all** includes me.

And it includes you.

We have all sinned.

We may not all commit the same sins, but every one of us has fallen short of God's standard.

Sometimes we compare ourselves to somebody else and say, “I am not as bad as he is.”

But somebody else is not the standard.

God is.

And all of us have come short.

Then the Bible tells us what our sin has earned.

ROMANS 6:23

“For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

A wage is something you earn. If you work a job, you expect to receive a wage for the work you have done. The Bible says that our sin has earned a wage too.

“The wages of sin is death.”

And the Bible is talking about more than our bodies eventually dying.

Near the end of the Bible we read:

REVELATION 20:14

“And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.”

If you were to read the Bible from Genesis all the way through Revelation, you would find that if you and I had to pay for our own sin ourselves, the payment would be death and Hell.

I remember when somebody first explained that to me.

I did not like hearing it.

But whether I liked it or not did not change what God had said.

That is the bad news.

I am a sinner.

My sin has a price.

And if I had to pay for my own sin, I would one day die and go to Hell.

But here is where the Bible gives us some very good news.

Go back to Romans 6:23:

“For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

There is the bad news:

“The wages of sin is death.”

And then there is the good news:

“The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

You do not have to go to Hell.

God made a way for you to go to Heaven.

That way is Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is not merely another man.

Jesus Christ is God in the flesh.

The Bible says:

MATTHEW 1:23

“Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.”

Emmanuel means “God with us.”

Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life. Then He went to the cross. He was not dying for His own sin.

He was dying for ours.

The Bible says:

ROMANS 5:8

“But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

Jesus died in our place.

And He did not stay in the grave.

The Bible says:

1 CORINTHIANS 15:3–4

“...Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures:”

Jesus Christ died for our sins.

He was buried.

And three days later, He rose again from the grave.

That is the Gospel.

Jesus paid the price that you and I could never pay.

When the Bible way to Heaven was first explained to me, it was put very simply.

There are really two choices.

I can pay for my sin myself.

Or I can accept the payment Jesus Christ has already made for me.

Either I pay, or I trust that Jesus paid.

That sounded almost too simple to me.

I had always thought there had to be something I did too.

Maybe Jesus, plus going to church.

Jesus, plus getting baptized.

Jesus, plus trying to be a good person.

But then I was shown these verses:

EPHESIANS 2:8–9

“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:
Not of works, lest any man should boast.”

Salvation is not something you earn.

It is not a reward God gives you because you finally became good enough.

It is a gift.

And notice those words:

“Not of works, lest any man should boast.”

Think about it this way. Imagine that when you died, you went to Heaven because you had been good enough. You would look around and say, “Wow, this is amazing.” And then pretty soon you could begin talking about yourself.

I am glad I went to church.

I am glad I got baptized.

I am glad I lived a good life.

I am glad I did enough to get here.

You would have something to boast about.

But that is not how anybody gets to Heaven.

We do not go to Heaven because of ourselves at all. We go to Heaven because of Jesus Christ.

Someday, when a person who has trusted Christ gets to Heaven, I think he is going to look around and say, “Wow, this is amazing.”

But then he is going to realize something.

If it were not for Jesus, I would not be here.

If Jesus had not died for me, I would have had to pay for my own sin.

And instead of bragging about what I had done, I will bow before Jesus Christ and say,

“Thank You for saving me.”

He gets the glory.

That was what I had to understand.

I believed in Jesus, but I was also trusting in myself.

I thought it was Jesus **plus me**.

But salvation is not Jesus plus me.

It is Jesus alone.

When Jesus Christ died on the cross, He paid for our sin completely.

The Bible says:

ACTS 16:30–31

“...Sirs, what must I do to be saved?

And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved...”

To believe on Jesus Christ is more than simply believing that He existed. It means that I stop trusting myself to get me to Heaven and place my faith in Jesus Christ and what He did for me.

I am not trusting my church.

I am not trusting my baptism.

I am not trusting my good works.

I am not trusting myself.

I am trusting Jesus Christ.

That is what happened to me.

And that is what I wanted Billy to understand standing there in that hospital.

Billy trusted Jesus Christ as his only hope for Heaven, right there in that hospital.

Now let me ask you the same question somebody once asked me:

If you were to die today, do you know for sure that you would go to Heaven?

Maybe your answer is what mine was.

“I hope so.”

But wouldn't you rather **know so**?

You can.

God has given us His Word so that we do not have to guess.

Let me ask you a few simple questions.

Do you realize that you have sinned?

Do you understand that the payment for your sin would be death and Hell?

Do you believe that Jesus Christ died for your sins and rose again from the grave, proving that He is God?

Do you understand that Jesus paid for all of your sins and that He is the only way to Heaven?

Jesus said:

JOHN 14:6

“I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”

Do you understand that salvation, or going to Heaven, is a gift that you cannot earn?

If God is offering you the gift of eternal life, **would you be willing to accept it?**

I remember when somebody asked me that question. I struggled with it for a moment because I did not think I deserved a gift like that.

And the truth is:

I didn't.

That is why it is called grace.

I did not deserve eternal life, but Jesus Christ was offering it to me.

And I was willing to receive it.

The Bible says:

ROMANS 10:13

“For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

If you understand what God has said and you are willing to stop trusting yourself and trust Jesus Christ alone, you can call upon Him right now.

You could pray something like this:

Dear Jesus, I know that I'm a sinner and that I deserve Hell. I believe that You died on the cross for my sins and rose three days later, proving You are God. Right now, I'm trusting You as my only hope for Heaven. Lord, save me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

If you have called upon Jesus Christ, trusting Him alone as your only hope for Heaven, then take God at His Word:

“For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Your hope is not in yourself.

Your hope is not in how good you can become.

Your hope is in Jesus Christ.

And if you have trusted Christ as your Saviour, another question may come to your mind:

What happens when I sin again? Can I ever lose the salvation God gave me?

That is what we will look at next.

Everlasting Life

What happens after you trust Christ?

What happens the next time you sin? What if you really mess up? Can you lose the salvation God has given you?

Those are important questions.

I explained it to Billy this way.

“Billy, did you trust Jesus Christ to pay for your sins?”

He said, “Yes.”

I asked him, “How many of your sins did you trust Jesus Christ to pay for? Some of them? Or all of them, past, present, and future?”

He said, “All of them. My past, present, and future.”

So I asked him another question.

“If Jesus Christ has already paid for all of your sins, would it make any sense for you to die and go to Hell and pay for those sins again?”

The answer was obvious.

Of course not.

I asked him, “So if you died today, where would you go?”

“Heaven.”

“Why?”

“Because Jesus paid for all of my sins.”

That is important to understand.

When you trust Jesus Christ as your Saviour, you are not trusting Him to pay for some of your sins.

You are trusting Him to pay for **all of them**.

Your past sins.

Your present sins.

And even the sins you have not committed yet.

Jesus Christ already knew about every one of them when He died on the cross.

The Bible says:

JOHN 10:28

“And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.”

Notice what Jesus said He gives us.

Eternal life.

Not temporary life.

Not life until the next time you fail.

Not life until you commit a really bad sin.

Eternal life.

In another place, the Bible calls it **everlasting life**.

JOHN 5:24

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.”

Notice the word **hath**.

The person who believes on Christ does not have to wait until he dies to receive everlasting life.

He has it now.

And if God gave you everlasting life, how long does everlasting life last?

Forever.

The answer is built right into the word.

Now let us take it a little further.

Suppose ten years from now you commit a terrible sin.

In Billy's case, I might have said, "Billy, suppose a few weeks from now you commit some terrible sin, and in the middle of that sin you suddenly die. You never even had time to ask God to forgive you."

That would be terrible.

I am certainly not saying sin does not matter.

But I would ask:

"Did Jesus already pay for that sin?"

Yes.

"Did you trust Jesus Christ to pay for all of your sins, including your future sins?"

Yes.

"Then would it make any sense for you to die and go to Hell to pay for a sin that Jesus Christ has already paid for?"

Of course not.

You would still go to Heaven.

Why?

Not because the sin did not matter.

Not because God approves of sin.

Not because you somehow lived a perfect Christian life.

You would go to Heaven because Jesus Christ paid for your sin.

Our salvation is based upon Jesus Christ and what He did for us, not upon how perfectly we live after we trust Him. The Bible says:

1 JOHN 5:13

“These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life...”

God wants you to **know**.

You do not have to spend the rest of your life wondering:

Am I still saved?

Did I mess up too badly?

Did God take eternal life away from me?

If God gave you everlasting life, it lasts forever.

But that naturally raises another question.

If I cannot lose my salvation, does that mean I can just live however I want?

No.

And something from my own life helps me explain why.

When I was a boy, my parents went through a divorce. Later my mom remarried, and I was adopted.

I was born Matthew Zezulak. After I was adopted, I became Matthew Nettesheim.

I became part of a family.

Now imagine that one day my dad told me, “Matt, take out the trash.” And I did not do it. I was not sick or too busy. I simply did not want to do what he told me to do. I disobeyed him.

Did I stop being his son?

No.

Did he stop being my dad?

No.

Did he say, “You did not take out the trash, so you are no longer part of this family”?

Of course not.

But that does not mean everything was fine. My dad was not pleased with me. There was a problem between us, and because he was my dad, he corrected me.

The Bible teaches the same thing about our relationship with God.

When you trust Christ, you become part of the family of God.

The Bible says:

JOHN 1:12

“But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:”

The Bible calls this being born again. God gives you new spiritual life, and you become His child.

You are His child.

When one of God’s children sins, God does not throw him out of the family.

But God also does not ignore the sin.

The Bible says:

HEBREWS 12:6

“For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.”

God corrects His children because He loves them.

There is a difference between **relationship** and **fellowship**.

When I disobeyed my dad, I was still his son. That relationship had not changed. But our fellowship was not what it should have been. Something was wrong between us. It is the same way in the Christian life.

Once you have trusted Christ, you belong to God.

But when you sin, it affects your fellowship with Him.

You can lose joy and peace. Sin can bring consequences into your life. And because God loves you as His child, He will correct you.

Everlasting life is not permission to live however you want.

It is the wonderful assurance that your salvation rests in Jesus Christ.

| **Jesus paid for all of your sins.**

And because He paid for them, you do not have to.

That should not make you want to run away from God.

It ought to make you love Him more.

When you begin to understand what Jesus Christ has done for you, there ought to be something inside of you that says, **“Lord, You have been so good to me. I want to live for You.”**

And that brings us to something that is at the heart of the Christian life.

A Heart for God.

A Heart for God

Up to this point, we have learned some very important things.

There is a God.

He gave you life and breath.

God has spoken.

He has given us His Word so that we do not have to live by our own opinions.

And if you have trusted Jesus Christ, you have received the gift of eternal life. You can know that when you die, you are going to Heaven.

Now we come to another very important question.

How should I respond to a God who has done all of that for me?

When I was nineteen years old and first began attending a Bible-believing Baptist church, I had spent most of my life living for myself.

For years, my thinking had pretty much been about **me, myself, and I.**

What did I want?

What did I feel like doing?

What would make me happy?

In reality, I was living a life centered around a love for myself.

Then I trusted Jesus Christ as my Saviour.

For the first time, I began to see **how much God had done for me**. He had given me life. And now I understood that He loved me so much that He had given His Son for me.

I did not deserve salvation.

I did not earn it.

Jesus gave it to me.

And slowly I began to understand something that changed the direction of my life:

| **God's love for me ought to produce a love for Him.**

The Bible says:

| **1 JOHN 4:19**

| "We love him, because he first loved us."

That is one of the simplest and most important truths in the Christian life.

We do not love God so that He will save us.

We love Him because He has saved us.

We do not obey God hoping that He will finally accept us.

We want to obey Him because He has already loved us, saved us, and been so good to us.

Jesus said:

| **MATTHEW 22:37-38**

| "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

| This is the first and great commandment."

God does not simply want a little place somewhere in your life.

He wants your heart.

For me, that meant I had to begin changing the question I was asking.

For most of my life the question had been:

What do I want?

Now I needed to begin asking:

What does God want?

That is a completely different way to live.

And the reason matters.

I do not want to live for God merely because somebody at church told me I am supposed to. I do not read my Bible simply because it is on a checklist. I do not go to church just because somebody expects me to be there.

I want to do those things because I love God.

That does not mean I always feel like doing everything God wants me to do.

Love is more than a feeling.

Love makes a decision.

Jesus said:

JOHN 14:15

“If ye love me, keep my commandments.”

That is where the Christian life begins to change.

I read the Bible because I want to hear from the God I love. I pray because I want to talk with Him. I go to church because I want to worship Him, learn His Word, and be with His people. I begin changing things in my life because I want my life to please Him.

And when God shows me something He wants me to do, my response ought to be:

“Lord, I want to obey You because I love You.”

That is what a heart for God looks like. It does not mean you will be perfect. You are going to have days when you fail. You are going to have things you still need to learn.

But something has changed inside of you.

You are no longer trying to build your whole life around yourself.

You want your life to belong to God.

And when you love the Lord, that love begins to show itself in obedience.

One of the first clear acts of obedience for someone who has trusted Christ is baptism.

Not to earn salvation.

Not to keep salvation.

But because you love the Lord and want to follow Him.

That brings us to the next step:

Following the Lord in Believer's Baptism.

Following the Lord in Believer's Baptism

The night I trusted Jesus Christ as my Saviour, my life began to change. The next morning was Sunday, and I went to church.

I had not been in church regularly for years. It was a large church, I did not know many people, and honestly, I felt a little like an outsider.

At the end of the service, a man came up to me and asked, **“Would you like to get baptized this morning?”**

That caught me off guard.

I told him, “Well, I’ve already been baptized.”

I had been baptized as a baby, and then again when I was young.

So I asked him,

“Why would I need to be baptized again?”

He opened the Bible and showed me something very simple.

In the Bible, baptism comes after salvation.

You do not get baptized in order to be saved.

You get baptized because you have already trusted Christ.

The Bible says:

ACTS 2:41

“Then they that gladly received his word were baptized...”

First they received the Word.

Then they were baptized.

That is why we call it **believer's baptism**.

Baptism is for someone who has personally trusted Jesus Christ.

It does not wash away your sins.

It does not help earn Heaven.

Jesus has already done everything necessary to save you.

Baptism is an act of obedience.

I had just begun learning something very important.

If I love the Lord, I ought to want to obey Him.

And suddenly, the Lord had put something right in front of me.

Would I obey Him?

I will tell you the truth.

I did not really want to get baptized that morning.

It was the first Sunday I had ever attended that church. There were hundreds of people there, and I was not excited about getting in front of all of them and being baptized.

But I knew this was not really about what I wanted.

It was about what the Lord wanted.

So I said,

“If the Lord wants me to get baptized, then I’ll do it.”

I went forward. They took me back to the baptistry. There were a lot of people getting baptized that day.

Then somebody handed me a wet baptism robe. I looked at that thing and thought, *I am not putting that on*. For a moment, I almost backed out.

Finally I said, “I’ll get baptized, but I’m doing it in the clothes I’m wearing.”

The only problem was that I was wearing my dress Navy whites.

So that morning I stepped into the water in my Navy whites and was baptized.

And when I came up out of that water, I had obeyed the Lord. The Bible says:

ROMANS 6:4

“Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead... even so we also should walk in newness of life.”

Baptism is a beautiful picture. When you are lowered under the water, it pictures the death and burial of Jesus Christ. When you are raised back up, it pictures His resurrection. That is why biblical baptism is by immersion.

The Gospel is that Jesus Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again.

Baptism pictures the Gospel you have already believed.

It is a public way of saying,

“I have trusted Jesus Christ, and I want to follow Him.”

That is what baptism is.

It does not save you.

It does not give you everlasting life.

You are baptized because Jesus has already saved you, and now you want to obey Him.

So let me ask you a simple question.

Have you been baptized since you trusted Jesus Christ?

If the answer is no, what is keeping you from taking that step? You do not have to understand everything about the Christian life first.

You do not have to wait until you feel like you are a perfect Christian.

You simply need to know that you have trusted Christ and be willing to obey Him.

If you would like to be baptized at Chesapeake Baptist Church, let me know.

At the end of a church service, you can come forward and simply say,

“Pastor, I would like to be baptized.”

Or when I am shaking hands after the service, stop and tell me. You can also talk to one of our church leaders.

We would be glad to help you take that step.

And yes, we have dry baptism robes now.

If you have trusted Christ, follow Him.

Take that next step of obedience.

Where Are You?

You have covered some important truths in the KNOW section.

For each one, mark the statement that best describes where you are **right now**.

There Is a God

- ☐ **I believe there is a God who created me and gave me life.**
- ☐ I am still unsure whether there is a God.

God Has Spoken

- ☐ **I believe the Bible is God's Word, and I want to know what God has said.**
- ☐ I still have questions about whether the Bible really is God's Word.

The Bible Way to Heaven

- ☐ **Yes. I have personally trusted Jesus Christ as my only hope for Heaven.**
- ☐ I understand what the Bible says about going to Heaven, but I have not personally trusted Jesus Christ.
- ☐ I am still not sure where I would go if I died.

Where Are You? | Continued

Everlasting Life

- ☐ **I understand that Jesus Christ paid for all of my sins and gave me everlasting life. My hope is in Him.**
- ☐ I have trusted Jesus Christ, but I still wonder whether I could lose my salvation.

A Heart for God

- ☐ **I love God, and I want to live my life for Him.**
- ☐ I realize that I have mostly been living for myself, and I need my heart to turn toward God.

Believer's Baptism

- ☐ **I have been baptized by immersion since I personally trusted Jesus Christ.**
- ☐ I have trusted Jesus Christ, but I have not yet been baptized since then.
- ☐ I still have questions about baptism.

Look back at the statements you marked.

Where are you?

If there is something you are unsure about, go back to that chapter or talk with me or one of our church leaders.

Then take the next step.

My Testimony

One of the best things you can do is learn to tell somebody what Jesus Christ has done for you.

Your testimony does not have to be long or complicated.

Simply write down:

What was your life like before you trusted Christ?

How did you hear and understand the Bible way to Heaven?

When did you personally trust Jesus Christ as your only hope for Heaven?

What has changed since then?

You may remember an exact date, or you may not. The important thing is that there was a time when you personally stopped trusting yourself and trusted Jesus Christ.

Use the space below to write your testimony in your own words.

Where do I belong?

BELONG

Church Family

Understand why church matters, what Chesapeake Baptist Church is, why we do what we do, and how you can become part of this church family.

The programs are not the purpose. They serve the purpose.

COME	KNOW	BELONG	GROW	LIVE	SERVE	REACH	TEACH
------	------	--------	------	------	-------	-------	-------

All of it flowing from a heart that loves God.

Does the Church You Choose Matter?

When I was nineteen years old, I did not understand how much the church I chose would affect the direction of my life.

Growing up, my family had attended several different kinds of churches. To me, church was pretty much church.

Then I trusted Jesus Christ and began attending a Bible-believing Baptist church.

Little by little, I began to realize that the church I attended was shaping me.

The preaching was shaping what I believed. The Bible teaching was changing the way I thought. The people around me were influencing the direction of my life.

I was learning how to read the Bible, how to serve the Lord, how to think about my future home and family, and how to make decisions based upon what God had said.

Looking back now, I understand something I did not understand then:

The church you choose matters.

You are not simply choosing where to spend Sunday morning.

You are choosing a church family and a spiritual direction.

I remember a young military family who began attending our church. There was a husband, a wife, and three young children.

They heard the Gospel and trusted Christ.

At first, they seemed to enjoy being part of a Bible-believing church. They liked the family atmosphere. They liked what they saw in the children and young people around them. They could see that many of those children were interested in the Bible and wanted to live for God.

But after they had been here for a while, they began noticing some other things too.

We used the King James Bible. Our music was conservative. The ladies commonly wore dresses and skirts. There were convictions and practices they did not completely understand.

In many ways, **they liked what the church was producing, but they did not understand some of the ingredients that helped produce it.**

Think about making a cake.

You can enjoy the finished cake without knowing much about the recipe.

But if the recipe calls for flour and you decide you would rather substitute powdered sugar, you should not expect the same cake to come out of the oven.

You cannot keep changing the ingredients and expect to keep getting the same result.

That family eventually stopped coming to Chesapeake and began attending a church whose direction was more comfortable to them.

The music was contemporary Christian music, much closer in sound and presentation to the music of the world. The services were more entertainment-driven. Some of the

standards and convictions they had questioned at Chesapeake were simply not emphasized there.

At first, that felt more natural to them.

It fit more closely with what they already enjoyed and were accustomed to.

But over time, they began to notice something.

A church's direction eventually affects the direction of the people in it.

It affects the influences around your family, what your children hear, the friendships they develop, and what slowly becomes normal. Eventually, it affects what they begin to believe is acceptable.

Several years later, that family walked back through the doors of Chesapeake Baptist Church.

I remember the husband talking with me.

He told me that there were things they had not understood before. There were convictions they had disagreed with because they had not yet seen why they mattered.

But with time, they had begun to see the connection between the **ingredients and the outcome.**

They came back.

It was not immediately easy for their children. Several years had passed, and different influences had become part of their lives.

But the Lord began working in their hearts.

It has been wonderful to watch what God has done in that family.

That experience reminded me again:

The church you choose matters.

The Bible says:

1 TIMOTHY 3:15

“But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.”

The church is not simply a religious activity people invented because they wanted something to do on Sunday.

It is **“the church of the living God.”**

Church is God’s idea.

And if church matters to God, it ought to matter to us.

A good church will not be filled with perfect people.

You will never find one of those.

But you should pay attention to its **direction**.

The Bible says:

EPHESIANS 4:14–15

“That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine...

But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ:”

Doctrine simply means **teaching**.

And what you are taught will help determine the direction you go.

So when you are choosing a church, do not ask only:

Do I like the music?

Do I like the building?

Are there people here like me?

Does this feel comfortable?

Ask the more important question:

Where is this church leading me and my family?

Will it teach me to believe the Bible?

Will it give me the Gospel clearly?

Will it help me grow and live for God?

Will it give my children influences that point them toward the Lord?

Will it help me become the Christian God wants me to be?

When I first walked into a Bible-believing Baptist church, a lot of things were unfamiliar to me.

I am thankful I did not walk away just because they were different.

I stayed, asked questions, listened to the preaching, and opened the Bible.

And the Lord used that church to change the direction of my life.

So, **does the church you choose matter?**

Absolutely.

You are choosing more than a place to attend on Sunday.

You are choosing a church family and a spiritual direction.

That raises the next question:

What is a church, and why did God give us one?

What Is a Church, and Why Does It Exist?

Not long ago, our family was on vacation in Tennessee.

As we drove through one town, it seemed like there was a church on every corner. Some were newer buildings. Others looked like they had been standing there for generations.

One of my sons looked out the window and said,

“Look at that old church over there.”

I looked over and saw a beautiful old building with a bell tower. It had probably been there for more than a hundred years.

We all talk that way.

“That is a church.”

But the church is not really the building.

The church is the people.

The building gives the church a place to meet, but without the people it is just a building.

The Bible gives us a simple picture:

ACTS 2:41–42

“Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.

And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.”

People heard the Word of God.

They believed it.

They were baptized.

They were added to the church.

And then they continued together.

That is a church.

Saved, baptized believers gathering together around Jesus Christ and the Word of God.

They learned the Bible, prayed, fellowshiped, worshipped the Lord, and cared for one another. Then they went back into their homes and communities and tried to live what God had taught them.

The Bible says:

COLOSSIANS 1:18

“And he is the head of the body, the church...”

Jesus Christ is the Head of the church.

The pastor is not the head.

The deacons are not the head.

The congregation is not the head.

Jesus Christ is.

The church belongs to Him.

That means He gets to decide what His church is supposed to be and what His church is supposed to do.

And really, its purpose is not complicated.

People need the Gospel.

People need the Word of God.

People need to grow.

And as they grow, they need to become useful in helping somebody else.

That is where an illustration has helped me.

Imagine a rescue ship out on the water. A man is drowning. The crew sees him, throws out a line, pulls him from the water, and brings him safely aboard.

That is what a church should care about first.

People are perishing, and they need Jesus Christ.

But suppose the rescue ship pulls the man aboard and then forgets why it exists.

Instead of strengthening him, teaching him, and eventually training him to help rescue somebody else, they sit him in front of a screen and spend all their time trying to entertain him.

Then one day he looks across the water. There is another ship with brighter lights, louder music, and better entertainment. So he jumps overboard trying to reach it.

The rescue ship failed him.

It rescued him, but it never taught him how to live.

A church can make the same mistake.

A church should not merely reach somebody with the Gospel and then spend the rest of his Christian life trying to keep him entertained.

We want people saved.

Then we want them taught the Bible, growing strong in the Lord, and becoming part of a church family. Eventually, we want them to become people God can use to help somebody else.

At first, you may be the person who needs help.

That is okay.

You may need the Gospel, someone to explain the Bible, or help with your family or your Christian life.

Receive the help.

But our hope is that you will not always be only the person receiving.

The person who was helped can begin helping someone else.

The person who learned the Bible can help someone else understand it.

The person who received the Gospel can tell somebody else about Jesus Christ.

The person who was helped can become someone who helps.

That is why we preach, teach, have Sunday school, run buses, provide nursery care, support missionaries, clean rooms, prepare music, and do all the other work of the church.

The programs are not the purpose. They serve the purpose.

The purpose is people: people hearing the Gospel, learning the Bible, growing, learning to live for God, and becoming useful in helping somebody else.

That is what we want Chesapeake Baptist Church to be.

A church family that believes the Bible and wants to live for God together.

But churches do not all believe the same things, and they do not all go the same direction.

So before we go any further, I want to explain what we mean when we say **Chesapeake Baptist Church is a Bible-believing Baptist church**, and what that means for you.

Why a Bible-Believing Baptist Church?

One day I was out walking when I met a Catholic priest who was out for a walk too. He was friendly, and we began talking.

I told him I was the pastor of **Chesapeake Baptist Church**, and before long our conversation turned to what we believed.

I explained that Chesapeake Baptist Church is a **Bible-believing Baptist church**.

By that I mean something very simple.

We start with the Bible.

What has God said?

Then we want our beliefs, our church, and our lives to agree with what He has said.

The Bible says:

ACTS 17:11

“These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they **received the word** with all readiness of mind, and **sought the scriptures daily**, whether those things were so.”

I love that.

They **received the Word**, and then they **sought the Scriptures daily** to see whether what they were being taught was true.

That is what I want to do.

The priest quickly told me that Catholics believed the Bible too.

So I began asking him some questions.

Why does the Catholic Church baptize babies when the pattern in the Bible is for people to believe and then be baptized?

Why does the Catholic Church teach salvation through a religious process involving the church and works when the Bible teaches that eternal life is the gift of God through Jesus Christ?

As we talked, he explained that he trusted the church fathers. Those men had studied the Bible, and he trusted their understanding of what it taught.

That helped me understand the difference between us.

My answer was simple:

I believe the Bible.

His answer, in essence, was:

I believe the church fathers.

That was really the difference between us.

I do not want a church father, a denomination, a pastor, a tradition, or even my own opinion to have the final word.

I want the Bible to have the final word.

That is what I mean when I say we are **Bible believers**.

We believe the Bible.

We do not correct the Bible.

| We let the Bible correct us.

If something I believe does not agree with the Bible, I need to change what I believe. If a church tradition does not agree with the Bible, the tradition needs to change. If the culture changes, God's Word does not change with it.

And if I have believed something all my life but discover that the Bible teaches differently, I need to be willing to say, **“I was wrong, and the Bible is right.”**

At Chesapeake Baptist Church, **the Bible gets the final word.**

We are not trying to make the Bible agree with us.

We want to agree with the Bible.

That leads naturally to the next word in our name:

Baptist.

We are called **Chesapeake Baptist Church.**

When I say *Baptist*, I mean **Bible believer.**

The name Baptist represents a belief.

We can trace Bible-believing Christianity all the way back to the New Testament.

Jesus said:

MATTHEW 28:19–20

“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:

Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”

Notice the pattern.

People heard the truth.

They trusted Jesus Christ.

Then they were baptized.

Then they were taught to live by what Christ had commanded.

That is Bible-believing Christianity.

From the time of Christ and the apostles until today, there have always been Bible believers.

They have not always been called by the same name.

The connection is not the name. The connection is what they believed.

So where did the name *Baptist* come from?

For centuries, the Roman Catholic Church had tremendous influence throughout Europe. It baptized babies and taught a religious system very different from salvation by faith in Jesus Christ alone.

But there continued to be Bible-believing Christians.

As the Bible became increasingly available to ordinary people, especially after the development of printing, more people could read God's Word for themselves.

They began comparing what they had been taught with what the Bible actually said. They read that salvation was through Jesus Christ and that people believed before they were baptized.

Many had already been baptized as infants. When they later trusted Christ and followed the Bible in believer's baptism, their opponents called them **Anabaptists**, or rebaptizers. But those believers did not believe they were being baptized again.

They believed the ceremony they received as babies was not biblical believer's baptism.

Now they had personally trusted Christ, and now they were being baptized according to the Bible.

Through time, the name **Baptist** became associated with people and churches living out Bible-believing Christianity. But never miss the important part.

The name is not more important than the belief.

A church can put *Baptist* on its sign and stop believing the Bible.

Being called Baptist does not automatically make a church biblical.

What matters is whether the church actually believes and follows God's Word.

When I say we are Baptist, I am talking about Bible convictions.

Salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

A person trusts Christ first and is baptized afterward.

Baptism is by immersion.

Jesus Christ is the Head of the church.

The local church carries out its work under Christ and His Word.

Every believer can come directly to God through Jesus Christ.

And the church has been commanded to give the Gospel to others and teach believers to follow the Lord.

Those beliefs did not begin with Baptists.

They began in the Bible.

That is why I say a Baptist ought simply to be a **Bible believer**.

We do not believe the Bible because we are Baptists.

| **We are Baptists because we believe the Bible.**

That is what **Chesapeake Baptist Church** is.

We are a Bible-believing Baptist church.

We open the Bible.

We believe what it says.

And we try to live by it.

That affects our preaching, our music, how we baptize, how our church is led, what we teach our children, and the way we live.

But underneath all of it is one simple question:

What does the Bible say?

And if we believe the Bible, then what it says about gathering together as a church ought to matter too.

So the next question is:

Why do we gather so faithfully?

Why We Gather

One of the greatest things God gave me after I trusted Christ was a **church family**.

I did not understand how much I needed one.

When I first got saved and baptized, I still had my old life: my habits, my friends, and the things I had always done.

And for a little while, it almost felt like I was living two different lives.

There was my **Sunday church life**.

And then there was my **regular everyday life**.

Some of my friends began noticing that something had changed.

They would ask,

“What happened to you?”

I still liked them. They were my friends.

But they continued living the same way they always had.

They cursed. They drank. They smoked. They were not interested in the things I was beginning to care about.

And I began to feel uncomfortable.

It was almost like oil and water.

I did not seem to be influencing them toward the Lord, and they certainly were not helping me grow in my new Christian life.

I needed something I did not even realize I needed.

I needed a church family.

Not long after I began attending church, I remember the pastor getting up and saying something I had never heard before.

“It takes three to thrive.”

Then he explained what he meant.

Come to church Sunday morning.

Come back Sunday night.

Come Wednesday night.

In essence, he was saying,

“You need your church family, and your church family needs you. You need more than one hour a week. Come and be part of the family.”

So I took his advice.

I began coming Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night.

And looking back, I can tell you:

He was right.

I needed my church family.

The Bible says:

HEBREWS 10:24–25

“And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works:

Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but **exhorting one another:** and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.”

Notice what is happening in those verses.

Consider one another.

Provoke one another unto love and good works.

Assemble together.

Exhort one another.

Church is more than sitting in a chair while somebody preaches.

Church is people helping people follow the Lord.

I needed that. I needed preaching and Christian friends who believed the Bible, people who would encourage me when I was doing right and help me when I started going the wrong direction. I needed to be around people who were trying to live for God too.

And as I became part of that church family, I began to realize something else.

They needed me too.

Every time I come to church, I need the encouragement and help of God's people.

And every time I come to church, there is somebody there I can encourage and help.

Maybe it is a visitor who needs someone to shake his hand and learn his name, or someone carrying a burden who needs prayer. It may be a friend who needs encouragement to keep going, or somebody who simply needs someone to sit beside him.

I need my church family, and my church family needs me.

That is one of the reasons gathering faithfully matters.

We Need the Word of God

All week long, voices are trying to influence us: friends, coworkers, television, the internet, and our own thoughts. The world is constantly telling us how to think and how to live.

We need to keep coming back to the Word of God.

What does God say?

That is why preaching and Bible teaching have such an important place at Chesapeake Baptist Church.

On Sunday morning, we gather around the Word of God.

Sunday is the Lord's Day, and we come back Sunday night for another service, another message from the Bible, and another opportunity to be with our church family.

Then Wednesday night gives us a **midweek family gathering**.

We stop in the middle of a busy week, open the Bible again, pray together, and strengthen one another to keep going in the right direction.

The Bible does not say,

“Thou shalt have a Sunday morning service, a Sunday night service, and a Wednesday night service.”

Those are the regular times our church has chosen to gather.

But the Bible **does** tell God's people to assemble.

And I have found that regularly gathering around **God's Word and God's people** helps keep my life going the right direction.

Church Becomes Part of Your Life

Church can remain somewhere you visit once in a while.

Or your church family can become part of your life.

There is a difference.

When you gather faithfully, you begin knowing people, and people begin knowing you. They rejoice with you when something good happens, pray with you when life becomes difficult, and notice when you are discouraged. They help you, and you begin doing the same for them.

That is family.

Faithfulness does not mean you will never miss a church service. People get sick. Work responsibilities come up. Military duty can interfere. Families face unexpected needs. But gathering with your church family becomes a priority because you understand how much you need it.

Not because somebody is keeping score.

Not merely because it is on the calendar.

Because you need the Word of God.

Because you need your church family.

And because your church family needs you.

So why do we gather so faithfully?

It really is pretty simple.

I need the Word of God.

I need my church family.

And my church family needs me.

I am thankful somebody told a nineteen-year-old sailor,

“It takes three to thrive.”

He was not merely trying to get me inside a church building three times a week.

He was helping me understand that the Christian life was never meant to be lived alone.

And in a church our size, one of the best places to begin knowing people, being known, and growing together around the Bible is **Sunday school**.

So what is Sunday school, and why does it matter?

Why Sunday School Matters

As a pastor, I will often talk with a family after a church service and invite them to come to Sunday school.

I have seen the same look many times.

A little surprise.

A furrowed brow.

“Sunday school?”

And then sometimes they just ask:

“Isn’t Sunday school just for kids?”

No.

We certainly have Sunday school for children, but at Chesapeake Baptist Church, **Sunday school is for everybody.**

Every Sunday morning at 10:00, our church breaks into smaller classes throughout the property.

Some people attend our 8:30 Early-Bird Service and then go to Sunday school at 10:00. Others come to Sunday school at 10:00 and then stay for the 11:00 Mid-Morning Service.

In fact, Sunday school is normally the most attended gathering of our week. There are more people throughout the church property during Sunday school than at any other time during the week.

We have adult, teen, and children’s classes. Even our nursery-age children have Sunday school. We also have Spanish-speaking Sunday school classes.

Why do we put so much emphasis on it?

Because I believe Sunday school is one of the greatest parts of church life.

In a church our size, it is possible to sit in the auditorium with hundreds of people, hear the preaching, shake a few hands, and still not really know many people.

Sunday school helps people get to know one another.

You become part of a smaller group. People learn your name, and you learn theirs. You hear prayer requests, build friendships, and have opportunities to spend time together outside of church. As you become involved, you often begin seeing ways you can help and serve inside the church too.

Most importantly, **you open the Bible together.**

The Bible Is Our Textbook

Sunday school is first of all a place for Bible teaching.

| **The Bible is our textbook.**

Our Sunday school teachers study the Word of God because they want to help people understand it and live it.

Every Sunday school teacher in our church is teaching from the **same Bible lesson.**

Of course, that lesson is taught differently depending on the class.

A little child needs the truth explained in a way he can understand.

A teenager may need to see how that truth applies to the pressures and decisions he is facing.

An adult may apply that same Bible truth to marriage, work, parenting, or another part of the Christian life.

But throughout the church, we are learning the same Bible truth from the same lesson.

I love that.

A family can go home and talk about what they learned.

Mom and Dad, the teenager, and the children all heard the lesson. They heard it taught at different levels and perhaps with different applications, but they were all learning from the **same Word of God**.

That gives a family something worthwhile to talk about together.

Your Sunday School Teacher Can Help You

Sunday school also gives you something that can be harder to find in a large auditorium.

A teacher who knows you.

Your Sunday school teacher is there to teach the Bible, but he is also someone you can go to when you have a question.

Maybe the preaching or this book raises a question. Maybe you are reading your Bible and do not understand something, or something is happening in your family and you need someone to pray with you.

You have someone you can approach and say,

“Can you help me understand this?”

You do not have to work through those questions alone.

You begin knowing when somebody is sick or has a burden. You rejoice when something good happens, notice when somebody has been missing, and pray for one another. And often the friendships that begin in a Sunday school class continue outside the church building.

People eat together, and families spend time together. Someone visits when there is a need or shows up when life gets difficult.

That is part of being a church family.

One of my favorite Sunday school teachers was an older man named Charlie Stallings.

Brother Stallings taught our senior adults.

Usually twenty or thirty senior saints would gather in his class. They would enjoy a cup of coffee, fellowship together, share prayer requests, and then Brother Stallings would open the Bible and teach them the Word of God.

But through the years, Brother Stallings became much more than the man who taught their lesson on Sunday morning.

He knew his people.

And they knew him.

As some of those senior saints became sick and neared the end of their lives, Brother Stallings visited them.

I went with him many times.

Over and over again, I watched him sit beside someone, open his Bible to **Psalm 103**, and read the whole chapter.

It begins:

PSALM 103:1

“Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me,
bless his holy name.”

Then he would keep reading.

He had taught those people the Bible in Sunday school.

Now he was sitting beside them, using that same Bible to strengthen and comfort them as they prepared to meet the Lord.

Years later, Brother Stallings developed cancer.

He was home and only a short time away from going to be with the Lord.

I went to visit him and did for him what I had watched him do for so many others. I opened my Bible to Psalm 103 and read the chapter to him.

He looked at me with a gleam in his eyes and smiled.

I will never forget that.

That is what Sunday school can become.

Yes, it is Bible teaching.

But it is also people learning one another, praying for one another, encouraging one another, and walking through life together.

Find a Class and Become Part of It

If you have been coming to Chesapeake but have not been attending Sunday school, let me encourage you to give it a try.

Find a class and go more than once. Learn some names, and let people learn yours. Bring your Bible, listen, and ask questions. Let your teacher get to know you, and spend some time with the people in your class. As you grow, begin looking for ways you can encourage and help somebody else.

Sunday school gives us a smaller place to learn the Bible, build friendships, and become part of the church family.

That is why Sunday school matters.

And whether you are sitting in a Sunday school classroom or gathered with the whole church in the auditorium, one thing should always have an important place:

the preaching of the Word of God.

So why do we put such an emphasis on Bible preaching?

That is where we go next.

Why We Preach the Bible

Not long after I was saved, I remember sitting in church while my pastor opened the Word of God and began to preach.

I can still remember exactly where I was sitting: near the back of the auditorium, on the right side, under the balcony, about three rows from the back.

He opened the Bible. We read the passage together. Then he began explaining the Bible truth to me.

As he preached, it seemed like the message had been prepared just for me.

I remember thinking,

“How does he know I need this?”

Of course, he did not know everything that was going on inside of me.

But God did.

My heart was tender. I wanted to do the will of God.

At the same time, there was a battle going on inside of me.

I knew what the Bible said was right. I knew I needed to obey it. But that did not mean my flesh liked everything I was hearing.

The Word of God was beginning to mold me and shape me. It showed me what was right and where I was wrong, and then it brought me to a decision:

What am I going to do about what God just showed me?

That is one of the reasons Bible preaching has such an important place at Chesapeake Baptist Church.

The Bible says:

2 TIMOTHY 4:2

“Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

Notice the command:

“Preach the word.”

The preacher's job is not to stand up and give everybody his opinions.

It is not to entertain people.

It is not to find something clever to say.

The preacher is supposed to preach the Word of God.

We open the Bible.

We read what it says.

We explain what it means.

And then we ask:

What should I do because God said this?

That last part is important.

Bible preaching should lead to a decision.

The Bible says:

JAMES 1:22

“But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.”

If the Bible deals with my attitude, I do not merely need to think about my attitude.

I need to decide to change my attitude so that it agrees with what God has said.

If the Bible deals with my marriage, I need to make a decision about my marriage.

If it deals with my words, I need to change the way I speak.

If it deals with my honesty, my giving, my family, my purity, my service, or something else in my life, then I need to decide:

Am I going to keep doing what I want, or am I going to do what God says?

That is application.

The goal is not simply to walk out saying,

“That was a good sermon.”

The question is:

What did God show me, and what am I going to do about it?

Sometimes the Bible encourages and comforts us. Sometimes it teaches us something we did not know, and sometimes it corrects us and tells us something needs to change.

That is what the Word of God does.

The Bible says:

HEBREWS 4:12

“For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword...”

Rarely does a service go by without somebody coming to me afterward and saying,

“Pastor, how did you know I needed that?”

The truth is, many times I had no idea.

But God knew.

His Word can reach something in your heart that the preacher knows nothing about.

That is why the authority in the pulpit is not me.

It is not my personality.

It is not how loudly I preach.

It is not how strongly I feel about something.

The authority is the Bible.

On Sunday mornings and Sunday evenings, **I preach through books of the Bible.**

We work through the passage together. We learn what it says. Then we bring that truth into our lives and ask what God wants us to do with it.

In its simplest form, Bible preaching says:

| Because the Bible says this, I need to do this.

That is what I needed when I was nineteen.

And I still need it today.

Keep Your Bible Open

Do not believe something simply because Pastor Matt said it.

Keep your Bible open.

Follow the passage.

Look at the words.

Ask:

“Is that what the Bible says?”

If something is unclear, ask about it.

A Bible-believing church should never be afraid of somebody opening the Bible and checking the preaching.

That is exactly what the Bereans did.

And that is exactly what we want you to do.

The Invitation

At the end of the preaching, we have what we call an **invitation.**

An invitation is simply an opportunity for you to respond to what God has shown you through His Word.

You will notice people come forward and pray. Some need help with salvation. Some want to talk about baptism or membership. Sometimes someone needs another person to

pray with him. And many times people simply come to the altar because God dealt with their heart through the preaching, and they want to talk to Him about it.

I think that is a good habit.

Many times during an invitation I am helping someone, but often I go forward and pray too.

Some of my most precious memories are kneeling there with one of my children. Sometimes I pray. Sometimes I listen as my son or daughter talks to God and pours out his or her heart to Him. Those moments are precious to me.

I once heard someone say something about invitations that has stayed with me:

If God speaks to you through His Word, take time to speak to Him about what He showed you.

And if you sit through the preaching and realize that God does not seem to be speaking to your heart, that may be a good reason to pray too:

“Lord, speak to me. Give me a tender heart toward Your Word.”

The invitation is not about walking an aisle just so somebody can see you come forward.

You can pray where you are.

You can talk with me after the service.

But when God shows you something through His Word, **do not simply walk away from it.**

Respond.

Make the decision.

Talk to the Lord.

And then live out that decision when you leave the church building.

That is what preaching is supposed to do.

Bible preaching is not secondary at Chesapeake Baptist Church.

It is certainly not the only thing we do.

We sing, pray, fellowship, teach, and serve.

But the preaching of God's Word is the climax of the church service.

A church family of Bible believers gathers around an open Bible, hears what God has said, and makes decisions based upon His Word.

So when you come to church, bring your Bible.

Open it.

Listen.

And when God shows you something, respond.

That is why we preach the Bible.

And another part of our services that a visitor often notices immediately is our music.

Why do we sing the way we do?

That is where we go next.

Singing to the Lord

One Sunday morning, a young man rode his motorcycle to our Early-Bird Service. He had found Chesapeake Baptist Church online and decided to visit. He came into the auditorium and sat about halfway back on the right side.

As the service began, the congregation stood to sing.

I was toward the back of the auditorium shaking hands, as I often do before making my way to the platform.

I noticed the young man standing there.

Everyone around him was singing, but he had not picked up a songbook.

His arms were folded across his chest.

He just stood there.

We finished the song and began another one.

A few moments later, he turned around and walked out.

I quickly went down from the platform and asked one of our men to follow him outside and make sure he was okay.

The young man was already at his motorcycle putting on his helmet.

He explained,

“This is not what I expected. I don’t like the music. I was looking for something more contemporary.”

I understand.

If you are accustomed to contemporary church music, the music at Chesapeake Baptist Church probably does sound different.

It is different on purpose.

But before we talk about the difference, I think we need to ask a more basic question:

What is church music supposed to do?

The Bible says:

EPHESIANS 5:18–20

“And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but **be filled with the Spirit;**

Speaking to yourselves in **psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord;**

Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ;”

Notice those words:

“Singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.”

Wow.

Sing to the Lord.

Church music begins with the Lord.

We are not primarily coming to church to listen to somebody else perform music for us.

We are singing to God.

The Bible says:

COLOSSIANS 3:16

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; **teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.**”

There is another purpose.

We sing **to the Lord**, but as we sing, we are also **teaching and admonishing one another**.

The words matter.

We sing about who God is, salvation, the cross, Heaven, faithfulness, surrender, prayer, and the Christian life.

We are putting truth into our hearts while we lift our voices to God.

From Singing to Listening

Music has changed dramatically in our culture.

Years ago, if people wanted music in their home, very often somebody had to make it.

Families sang, people played instruments, and churches gathered and sang together.

Then came radio, records, cassette tapes, and CDs. And now almost any song in the world is available immediately on a phone.

None of those inventions is automatically the problem.

But something changed in the way many of us began thinking about music.

We became consumers.

Instead of asking,

“What should I sing?”

we began asking,

“What do I like to listen to?”

Then that same thinking began coming into churches.

What style do I like?

What sound do I enjoy?

What kind of music makes me feel good?

What kind of performance keeps my attention?

But when I open the Bible, the emphasis is different.

Sing to the Lord.

That changes the question.

Church music is not first about what entertains me.

It is about what honors God, carries truth, and allows God's people to sing together.

I Had to Learn This Too

When I first began attending a Bible-believing Baptist church at nineteen years old, I did not know most of the hymns.

The music was different from what I had been listening to.

At first, it certainly was not my favorite kind of music.

I had to learn the songs.

But something happened as I did.

The words began meaning something to me.

I had trusted Jesus Christ.

Now when I sang about the cross, I understood something about what Christ had done for me.

When I sang about assurance, Heaven, God's faithfulness, or surrendering my life to Him, those were no longer just religious words in an unfamiliar song.

They were truths I believed.

I began learning something I had not really understood before.

I was not just listening to music.

I was singing to the Lord.

And over time, songs that had once sounded strange to me became precious.

The Greatest Singing in Our Church

I am thankful for our choir and orchestra. I enjoy hearing a good solo or quartet, and I am thankful for people who practice and use their musical ability for the Lord.

But I do not think the greatest music in our church is a solo.

It is not a quartet.

It is not even the choir.

The greatest singing in our church is when the congregation lifts its voices together and sings to the Lord.

There is something wonderful about hearing an auditorium full of people singing the same truth together.

Young people, older people, families, visitors who are beginning to learn the hymns, and people who have sung some of those songs for fifty years.

Different voices, but one congregation.

Singing to the Lord.

The Bible says:

PSALM 100:1-2

“Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all ye lands.

Serve the LORD with gladness: **come before his presence with singing.**”

That is what we are trying to do.

Why Does the Music Sound Different?

There is still an obvious question.

Why not take the contemporary sound people already enjoy and simply put Christian words with it?

That question deserves an answer.

At Chesapeake Baptist Church, we believe the **words matter**, but we also believe the **sound and presentation matter**.

We do not believe music is completely neutral.

The way music is presented can support its message or work against it.

That is why our music is deliberately different from the rock and entertainment sound of the world.

We want the melody to be clear, the words to be understood, and the congregation to be able to participate. We want the attention directed toward the Lord rather than toward a performer, and the sound of the music to agree with the truth and holiness of the God we are singing to.

There is more that can be said about that.

Later in this book, when we talk about the influences shaping our hearts, we will look more closely at music in everyday life and why the **words, sound, rhythm, and presentation** all matter.

For now, I want you to understand why the music at Chesapeake sounds different.

We are trying to sing to the Lord.

Pick Up the Hymnbook

If you come to Chesapeake and do not know the songs, that is okay.

I didn't know them either.

Pick up the hymnbook, find the number, and follow the words. Listen to the people around you, learn the melody, and then begin singing.

You do not have to have a beautiful voice.

You do not have to know every song.

Just begin.

Pay attention to what you are singing.

Think about the truth.

And little by little, learn to do something God's people have done for generations:

Sing to the Lord.

That is why we sing the way we do at Chesapeake Baptist Church.

Music is one part of the life of our church family. As you continue coming, you will see Sunday school classes, nursery workers, outreach, buses, revivals, special meetings, and many other things happening throughout the week and year.

So next, let me show you something very practical:

What does life at Chesapeake Baptist Church actually look like?

Life at Chesapeake

There is a lot going on at Chesapeake Baptist Church. I could not put all of it into one chapter, and I do not really want to.

But if you are considering making Chesapeake your church home, I would like to give you a glimpse of what life here is like.

Better yet, **I would like you to come experience it with us.** Sunday begins early.

Around 7:45 in the morning, people begin coming into our fellowship hall for Early-Bird Breakfast.

There is coffee, breakfast sandwiches, music playing, and people talking. Friends catch up. Visitors get acquainted. Families begin coming through the doors.

Then at 8:30 we gather for the Early-Bird Service.

At 10:00, people spread throughout the property for Sunday school. Children, teenagers, adults, and Spanish-speaking classes open the Bible and learn together.

At 11:00, we gather again for our Mid-Morning Service.

Then Sunday evening, the church family comes back together for another service with singing, preaching, and fellowship.

Sunday is the Lord's Day, and it is a big part of the life of our church family.

But church life does not stop when Sunday ends.

On Wednesday evening, we gather again in the middle of the week.

We open the Bible.

We pray.

Our children participate in Patch the Pirate and Pee-Wee, where they learn Bible truths and songs and are encouraged to live for God.

Throughout the week there are also opportunities to reach other people with the Gospel.

Ladies and men go soulwinning. Every Saturday people gather to go out and reach others.

And on the first Saturday of the month, we have **Super Saturday of Soulwinning**.

We begin with breakfast together. Then some go out on buses, while others follow in cars. Some of our senior saints stay behind and write letters. Others stay for training and learn how to give the Gospel to someone.

Everybody may not do exactly the same thing.

But we all ought to care about the same thing:

People need Jesus Christ.

There are special times during the year too.

Every spring we set aside several days for a revival meeting. A guest preacher comes and preaches from Sunday through Wednesday. On Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday we eat together before the service. People invite friends, there is special music, and then we gather around the preaching of God's Word.

Several other times during the year, we have special **Wednesday Revival Nights**.

We eat together beforehand, have a guest preacher, sing, and give a Wednesday evening some of the feel of a short revival meeting.

Our teenagers have special Friday-night gatherings during the year with games, fellowship, preaching, and teenagers from other churches.

The men and boys go camping in June.

They camp, fish, hear preaching, and spend time together.

The ladies normally go to a ladies retreat in November.

Before Thanksgiving, I enjoy having lunch with the senior saints. Mandy makes homemade pies. We eat turkey, give testimonies, and thank the Lord for His goodness.

At Christmas, we turn the auditorium into a large banquet room and enjoy a special evening together as a church family.

And sometimes we simply have fun.

There may be **Sundae Night on Sunday Night** during the summer.

Another Sunday night may end with watermelon.

Harvest Sunday brings food, games, cotton candy, fellowship, and usually a pie-baking contest.

There is a lot more I could tell you.

But I hope you are beginning to see the picture.

Church life is people sharing life together around the Lord.

We hear the Bible, sing and pray, fellowship, and give the Gospel. We rejoice together when God blesses, and we help carry one another when life becomes difficult.

The Bible says:

ACTS 2:42

“And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.”

I like that word:

“continued.”

They did not merely attend a meeting.

They began sharing life together.

And much of what makes that possible happens quietly.

Lessons are prepared, rooms are cleaned, and children are cared for. Music is practiced, buses are driven, and meals are prepared. People pray and arrive early because they want to help somebody else.

At first, you may mostly be receiving that help.

That is good.

Receive the help.

But as you grow and become part of the church family, eventually you begin looking around and thinking,

“I could help too.”

We will talk much more about that later.

For now, remember this:

The programs are not the purpose. They serve the purpose.

The bus, the nursery, the music, and the revival meeting are not the purpose.

People are the purpose.

People need the Gospel, the Word of God, and a church family. And as people grow, they can begin helping somebody else.

That is life at Chesapeake Baptist Church.

There is much more going on than I could fit into one chapter.

So come and be part of it.

Come to church and Sunday school. Stay for fellowship, come to a special meeting, and get acquainted. Little by little, begin sharing life with your church family.

As you do, another question naturally comes up:

Who leads Chesapeake Baptist Church, and how is the church led?

How Chesapeake Baptist Church Is Led

Recently, my family and I were out of town at a church conference.

I do not miss many Sundays, but a couple of times a year we get away. While I was gone, life at Chesapeake Baptist Church continued.

I received a text from one of our deacons.

“Hey Pastor, just wanted to let you know how Brother _____ is doing. He is going through a difficult time. Please pray for him.”

I stopped what I was doing and prayed. I asked the Lord to help him, watch over the situation, and give him what he needed.

Then I thought,

Thank God for the deacons of Chesapeake Baptist Church.

On the first Sunday of each month, about an hour before the evening service, I meet with our deacons. We talk about what is happening in the church and about people who have needs.

Each deacon tells about people he has been praying for, checking on, or trying to encourage.

Then we get down on our knees together and pray. We ask God to help people, give us wisdom, encourage those who are hurting, and continue blessing our church.

Our deacons are not simply men who attend a meeting. **They are servants helping care for people.**

When I first became pastor of Chesapeake Baptist Church in 2009, there were only fourteen members.

I preached. I led the singing. I led the choir. If something needed to be done, there were not very many people to do it. But the Lord began bringing people, and the church began to grow.

I learned very quickly that I could not personally do everything. I could not make every hospital visit, fix every building problem, or personally carry every need.

And I am thankful I do not have to.

God has given us faithful church members, teachers, ministry leaders, and deacons who help carry the work and care for people.

But that raises an important question:

Who is actually in charge of the church?

The answer is not the pastor.

It is not the deacons.

It is not a committee.

Jesus Christ is the Head of the church.

The Bible says:

COLOSSIANS 1:18

“And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.”

Chesapeake Baptist Church belongs to Jesus Christ.

That is where understanding church leadership has to begin.

Christ Is the Head

Sometimes people refer to a church by the name of its pastor. They may say, “Pastor Matt’s church.”

I understand what they mean, but Chesapeake Baptist Church is not my church.

It is the Lord’s church.

Jesus Christ is the Head. He determines what the church believes, what we preach, what our purpose is, and how we are supposed to live and serve.

And He has given us His Word so that we do not have to guess.

Neither the pastor, the deacons, nor the congregation have the right to change the Bible to fit what we want.

All of us are under the authority of God’s Word.

That includes me.

If I am wrong and the Bible is right, I need to change. If a tradition is wrong and the Bible is right, the tradition needs to change. If what is popular disagrees with Scripture, we stay with Scripture.

Jesus Christ is the Head, and His Word gives the church its direction.

The Pastor Leads Under Christ

The Bible gives a pastor a real responsibility to lead.

Peter wrote:

1 PETER 5:2-3

“Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind;
Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.”

There are two thoughts in those verses that help us understand pastoral leadership.

The pastor is to **feed the flock**, and he is to **take the oversight**.

Feeding the flock means teaching and preaching the Word of God.

Taking the oversight means giving direction and accepting responsibility for the leadership of the church.

As pastor, I am responsible to pray, preach, teach, give direction, and lead Chesapeake Baptist Church in doing what God has called us to do.

That is a serious responsibility.

But notice what Peter also says:

“Neither as being lords over God's heritage...”

The people do not belong to the pastor. They belong to God.

Pastoral leadership is not about controlling people. It is about leading people to follow the Lord.

I want you to be able to open your Bible and understand why we believe what we believe. I want the direction of our church to agree with Scripture. And I want to live under the same Bible I preach to you.

The pastor is not above the Bible. The pastor is under the Bible too.

Deacons Help Carry the Care

As our church grew, I began to understand more and more how important faithful servants are.

The book of Acts gives us an early example of men being appointed to help carry practical needs.

The Bible says:

ACTS 6:2-4

“Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables.

Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.

But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.”

There was a real need.

People needed to be cared for, but the apostles could not neglect prayer and the Word in order to personally handle every responsibility.

So faithful men helped carry the work.

That principle still matters.

At Chesapeake, our deacons are servants. They pray, help care for people, give counsel, and help carry practical needs. They also help me know when someone is struggling or when a family needs encouragement.

They are not a governing board over the pastor. They serve alongside the pastor in helping care for the church.

That text message I received while I was away is a good picture of what that looks like.

The pastor was out of town, but the church was still being cared for. Someone saw the need, reached out, prayed, and made sure I knew what was happening.

That is what servants do.

Many People Help Carry the Work

Deacons are not the only people who help.

As Chesapeake has grown, the Lord has given us teachers, ministry leaders, ushers, nursery workers, bus workers, musicians, people who care for our buildings, people who work with children, people who reach others with the Gospel, and many others who quietly help carry the work.

The Bible says:

EPHESIANS 4:11–12

“And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:”

One of the responsibilities of pastoral leadership is to help prepare God’s people for the work of the ministry.

The goal is not for the pastor to do everything.

The goal is for Christians to grow and become useful.

A teacher can help someone understand the Bible. A deacon can encourage a family going through a difficult time. A ministry leader can teach someone how to carry a responsibility. A church member can notice a visitor standing alone and help him feel welcome.

Someone who has been helped can begin helping somebody else.

That is healthy church life.

Leadership is not doing everything yourself. It is helping the church move together in the direction God has given.

We may have different responsibilities, but we all serve the same Lord.

When You Need Help

As a church grows, one of the challenges is making sure people know where to go when they need something.

I never want someone to think,

“I do not know who I am supposed to talk to, so I guess I just will not say anything.”

You do not need to understand the whole organization of the church before asking for help.

Just ask.

If you have an ordinary question about a class, a ministry, or where something is located, your Sunday school teacher, a ministry leader, or an usher can probably help.

If you have a spiritual question or need prayer, talk with your teacher, one of our deacons, or me.

If you or someone in your family is hospitalized, going through a serious difficulty, or carrying a burden that we should know about, please let us know. You can tell me personally, speak with one of our deacons, or contact the church office by phone or email. The office can help get the information to the right person.

Sometimes I find out afterward that somebody went through something very difficult and thought,

“I did not want to bother anybody.”

Please do not think that way.

We may not be able to fix every problem, but we can pray, care, open the Bible together, and sometimes help carry part of the burden.

If you have a serious concern involving me or another leader in the church, you may speak with one of our deacons.

Good leadership should not make it difficult for someone to bring a real concern. We want the truth, we want things handled biblically, and we want people cared for.

We Serve Under the Same Head

I am thankful for the people God has given Chesapeake Baptist Church, including our deacons, teachers, ministry leaders, and the many faithful church members who simply see a need and help.

As our church has grown, I have learned again and again that I cannot personally do everything.

And God never intended for me to.

But none of us owns this church.

Not the pastor.

Not the deacons.

Not the congregation.

Jesus Christ is the Head.

My responsibility as pastor is to lead under Him and under His Word. Our deacons and ministry leaders serve faithfully in the responsibilities God has given them, and the church family works together to care for people and carry out the work of the Lord.

When we remember Who the Head is, leadership becomes much simpler.

We are serving Jesus Christ together.

And as you become part of this church family, there will come a time when you begin to realize that there is work to do, people to reach, and needs you can help carry.

That leads naturally to the next question:

How do we share the work of Chesapeake Baptist Church together?

How the Work Is Supported

A few weeks ago, we had a revival meeting at Chesapeake Baptist Church.

On Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, people began arriving early. At six o'clock we ate together before the service.

There were barbecue sandwiches, hamburgers, chips, sides, coffee, and plenty of people sitting around tables talking and enjoying the fellowship.

Then we cleaned things up, went into the auditorium, sang together, and heard the Word of God preached.

Nobody stood at the door selling meal tickets.

So you might reasonably wonder:

Who pays for all of this?

That is a good question.

The meals cost money. The lights cost money. Buildings have to be heated, cooled, cleaned, repaired, and maintained. Buses need fuel and repairs. Literature gets printed. Staff members give their time to the work of the church. Missionaries are supported. Churches are planted. Ministry costs money.

So how does Chesapeake Baptist Church support all of that? The answer is really pretty simple.

Chesapeake Baptist Church is supported through God's people and their tithes and offerings.

God's People Support God's Work

The Bible says:

1 CORINTHIANS 16:2

“Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come.”

God's people have a part in supporting His work.

At Chesapeake, people give regularly through the local church, and those gifts help carry the work we are doing together.

The tithe is the first tenth of our increase.

The Bible says:

PROVERBS 3:9

“Honour the LORD with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase:”

Later in this book, we will spend more time talking personally about giving, why the tithe matters, and how giving can become a joyful part of your walk with God.

Here, I simply want you to understand how the work of Chesapeake Baptist Church is supported.

The regular tithes of our church family help provide for the ordinary work of the church. They help support the pastor and staff, maintain the property, operate ministries, run buses, print materials, teach children, reach people with the Gospel, and meet the many expenses that come with carrying on the work week after week.

No single person carries all of that.

God's people give, and together the work is supported.

Offerings Help Us Do More

There are also needs and opportunities beyond the regular expenses of the church.

The Bible says:

2 CORINTHIANS 9:7

“Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.”

Beyond the tithe, people give offerings as the Lord leads them.

Some offerings help support missionaries.

Some help establish churches.

Some help with buildings or special projects.

Sometimes there is a particular need or an opportunity that God places in front of us.

This is one of the blessings of a church family giving together. One person may not be able to accomplish very much by himself, but many people faithfully doing their part can accomplish a great deal.

A missionary can be supported.

A church can be planted.

A bus can be repaired.

A building can be built.

A meal can be provided before a revival service.

And somebody sitting at that meal may never know the names of the people whose giving helped make it possible.

That is all right.

The purpose is not to be noticed.

The purpose is to help carry the work.

We Try to Handle It Faithfully

When God's people give, we have a responsibility to handle that money carefully.

Each year our church treasurer helps me prepare a budget. We look at the regular expenses of the church, the ministries we support, needs we can see coming, and the direction we believe the Lord is leading us.

Then the budget goes to our deacons.

We sit down together, go through it, ask questions, and make whatever adjustments need to be made.

After that, we have a men's meeting where the men of the church can look over the budget, ask questions, and give their approval.

Then it is presented at a churchwide business meeting.

We do not hold a church vote every time we need to buy a box of paper, repair an air conditioner, or put fuel in a bus. The approved budget gives us a plan for carrying on the regular work of the church, and those responsible for different areas work within that plan.

But there is accountability along the way.

If there is a concern about something, we would rather deal with it early. A question may be settled while we are meeting with the deacons. If something needs more discussion, it can be dealt with at the men's meeting.

By the time the annual budget reaches the churchwide business meeting, the questions have normally already been worked through. In all my years as pastor, I cannot remember taking the budget to that meeting and having a serious problem arise there.

That is not because nobody is allowed to ask questions.

It is because we try to answer the questions along the way.

The purpose is not to create a pile of meetings. It is to handle God's money carefully and responsibly.

There are also expenses during the year that nobody could have put on a calendar.

A bus breaks down.

An air conditioner quits.

A roof leaks.

Something needs to be repaired.

Or an unexpected opportunity opens for us to help someone or advance the work.

We try to use what God's people have given wisely and keep the purpose of the church in front of us.

The Money Is Not the Purpose

It would be easy to talk about budgets, buildings, buses, meals, and expenses and forget why any of it exists.

The money is not the purpose.

And as we said earlier:

The programs are not the purpose. They serve the purpose.

A building gives us a place to preach the Bible.

A bus can bring someone who needs to hear the Gospel.

A Sunday school classroom gives someone a place to learn the Word of God.

A missionary offering helps take the Gospel somewhere we may never personally go.

Even a plate of barbecue before a revival service can help somebody get off work, come straight to church, eat with the

church family, and then sit under the preaching of God's Word.

The money is a tool.

People are the purpose.

We want people to hear the Gospel, learn the Bible, grow in the Lord, and eventually begin helping somebody else.

That is why we care how the work is supported and how the money is used.

A Part in Something Bigger

Go back to that revival meal for a moment.

Someone bought the food. People prepared it and served it. Tables were set up, the meal was cleaned up afterward, and somewhere behind all of it were people who had faithfully given through their church.

They may never have thought about the particular hamburger somebody ate that evening.

They may never have met the visitor sitting across the table.

But they had a part.

That is one of the wonderful things about giving through a local church.

You can have a part in work that reaches farther than you can go by yourself.

Later, we will talk much more personally about giving: why the tithe matters, why offerings matter, and how giving becomes part of a Christian's walk with God.

For now, I simply want you to understand how Chesapeake Baptist Church is supported.

God's people give, and together we carry the work God has given us to do.

There is another important part of church life that does not concern what we give, but what we remember.

Jesus gave His church a special ordinance to help us remember His death for us.

That brings us to the next chapter:

The Lord's Supper.

Understanding the Lord's Supper

Twice a year, the Lord's Supper becomes a special part of the life of our church family.

We normally observe it around Christmas time and again on Resurrection Sunday night.

A few months ago, we gathered on Resurrection Sunday. That morning had been a wonderful celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Then Sunday night our church family came back together for the Lord's Supper.

We sang, and then I preached a message directing our attention to Jesus Christ and what He did for us.

We remembered how much He loved us. He was mocked, spit upon, beaten, bruised for our iniquities, and crucified for our sins. He willingly shed His blood and gave His life for us.

Then, before the service ended, our deacons came forward and we partook of the Lord's Supper together.

There is something very precious about that service.

We are not gathering because there is something special in the bread or the cup themselves.

| We are gathering to remember Jesus Christ.

Paul tells us what Jesus said:

1 CORINTHIANS 11:24–25

“And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: **this do in remembrance of me.**

After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: **this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.**”

That is the heart of the Lord’s Supper:

“This do in remembrance of me.”

We Remember What He Did for Us

The Lord’s Supper is one of the two ordinances Jesus Christ gave His church.

It does not save us.

It does not add anything to our salvation.

And it does not sacrifice Jesus Christ again.

His sacrifice was completed on the cross.

The Lord’s Supper causes us to stop and remember what our salvation cost.

The Bible says:

ISAIAH 53:5

“But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.”

It is possible to know the story of the cross so well that we stop thinking deeply about what happened there.

Jesus Christ suffered for us.

He carried our sins.

He gave Himself in our place.

When we observe the Lord's Supper, we deliberately bring our hearts and minds back to Him.

The Bread and the Cup

The bread we use is unleavened. In Scripture, leaven often pictures sin and corruption, and the unleavened bread is a fitting picture of the sinless body of Jesus Christ given for us.

Jesus said:

“This is my body, which is broken for you.”

The bread does not become His physical body. It pictures His body and reminds us of what He suffered for us.

Then we take the cup.

At Chesapeake Baptist Church, we use grape juice. It pictures the blood Jesus Christ shed for our sins.

The Bible says:

LEVITICUS 17:11

“For the life of the flesh is in the blood...”

Jesus gave His life for ours.

And the Bible says:

1 JOHN 1:7

“...the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.”

The juice does not become the literal blood of Christ. It pictures His blood and reminds us of the price He paid.

When Jesus died on the cross, He said:

JOHN 19:30

“It is finished.”

His sacrifice was complete.

So when we eat the bread and drink the cup, our attention is not really on the bread and juice.

Our attention is on Jesus.

“This do in remembrance of me.”

Examine Yourself

Before we partake of the Lord’s Supper, there is something else the Bible tells us to do.

We examine ourselves.

Paul wrote:

1 CORINTHIANS 11:27–28

“Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.

But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup.”

That does not mean we somehow make ourselves worthy of Jesus Christ.

None of us deserves what He did for us.

The warning concerns the manner in which we partake. The Lord’s Supper is not something to treat carelessly.

That is why, after I preach, we have an invitation.

I encourage our church family to pray and ask the Lord to search our hearts. If there is known sin, confess it. If the Lord has dealt with you about something you have been resisting, get it right. If you have wronged someone and need to make it right, be willing to do that.

The Lord’s Supper is a good time to be very honest with God.

Paul continues:

1 CORINTHIANS 11:29-32

“For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body.

For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.

For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world.”

That is a serious warning.

Some in the Corinthian church were weak and sickly, and some had even died because they had treated the Lord’s Supper wrongly.

But notice what Paul tells the believer to do.

He does not say to run away from the Lord’s Supper.

He says:

“Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat...”

Examine yourself.

Be honest about sin.

Get right with the Lord.

Then remember Him.

Who Should Participate?

The Lord’s Supper is for someone who has personally trusted Jesus Christ as Saviour and followed Him in believer’s baptism by immersion.

We have already seen the biblical order:

ACTS 2:41–42

“Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.

And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.”

They received the Word.

They were baptized.

Then they continued together.

At Chesapeake, we practice what is often called **close communion**.

That means participation is not restricted only to members of Chesapeake Baptist Church. A saved, scripturally baptized believer from a church of like faith and order may participate when he is walking in fellowship with the Lord and understands the ordinance.

Sometimes the Lord’s Supper causes someone to realize, “I have been saved, but I have never followed the Lord in believer’s baptism.”

If that is where you are, let us help you take that step.

Parents should also help their children understand what they are doing. A child should not partake simply because the rest of the family does. He should understand his own salvation, baptism, and what the bread and cup represent.

A Special Time for Our Church Family

After the invitation, our deacons come forward.

The bread is distributed, and together we remember the body Jesus Christ gave for us.

Then the cup is distributed, and we remember the blood He shed for our sins.

Afterward, we sing together.

There is a special closeness in the church during those moments.

We have deliberately examined our hearts and turned our attention together toward the Lord.

For a little while, the normal distractions of life fade into the background as a church family remembers the same Saviour, the same cross, and the same blood that cleanses from sin.

That is what makes the Lord's Supper so precious.

It is not primarily about Chesapeake Baptist Church.

It is not about the pastor or the deacons.

It is not even about the bread and the cup themselves.

It is about Jesus Christ.

He loved us and gave Himself for us.

And He told us:

“This do in remembrance of me.”

That is what we do.

Together, we remember Him.

And as you spend time at Chesapeake, there is another difference you will probably notice very quickly.

Most of us are carrying the same Bible.

Why?

That is where we go next:

Why We Use the King James Bible.

Why We Use the King James Bible

When I first began attending a Bible-believing Baptist church at nineteen years old, one of the things I noticed was that everybody seemed to have the same Bible.

The preacher would ask us to turn to a passage, and the words he read were the same words I saw in the Bible of the person sitting beside me.

That was different from what I had known before.

At first, I did not understand why it mattered. I was just beginning to learn the Bible myself.

But over time I came to understand that there was a conviction behind what I was seeing.

At Chesapeake Baptist Church, **we believe the King James Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God.**

That is why it is the Bible we preach, teach, memorize, and read together.

God Has Given Us His Word

Earlier in this book, we talked about something very important:

God has spoken.

The Bible says:

2 TIMOTHY 3:16

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.”

God gave us His Word.

And I do not believe God inspired His Word and then lost it.

Jesus said:

MATTHEW 24:35

“Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.”

God has preserved His Word.

At Chesapeake Baptist Church, **we believe the King James Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God.**

That conviction affects the way we preach and teach.

When I stand behind the pulpit, I do not want to open the Bible, read a verse, and then spend the next few minutes explaining why the verse should have said something different.

I believe the Bible.

We are Bible believers, not Bible correctors.

We Let the Bible Correct Us

Believing the Bible does not mean we understand every verse the first time we read it.

Sometimes a word is unfamiliar.

Look it up in a good dictionary.

Sometimes a passage is difficult.

Read what comes before and after it. Compare Scripture with Scripture. Ask questions. Study.

There is nothing wrong with trying to understand what the Bible means.

The problem comes when we place ourselves over the Bible and decide that the words God gave us need to be corrected.

That reverses the proper relationship.

I am not the authority over Scripture.

Scripture is the authority over me.

If the Bible disagrees with me, the Bible does not need to change.

I do.

We do not correct the Bible. We let the Bible correct us.

That gives us confidence when we open the Book. We can read it, believe it, study it, and build our lives upon it.

Reading the Bible Together

One of my favorite things about the services at Chesapeake Baptist Church is something very simple.

On Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night, we stand together and read the Bible out loud.

It is hard for me to describe how much I love that sound.

God's people lift their voices together and read the Word of God.

Children, adults, older Christians, and new believers are all reading the same words.

There is something wonderful about that.

Imagine trying to read the Bible aloud together if everybody were using a different version.

One person would say one thing, someone else would say something slightly different, and what should be the clear reading of God's Word would become confusion.

But when I say, "Let us read this verse together," we can actually read it together.

The verse a child learns in Sunday school is the same verse he hears from the pulpit.

The words a teacher reads are the same words the people in the class are following.

The Bible a family takes home is the same Bible we are using at church.

Having one Bible gives our church a wonderful unity.

But the greatest blessing is not simply that we sound unified when we read.

We know what Book we are following.

One Bible We Can Trust

There are many voices telling us what to believe.

Culture changes.

Opinions change.

Popular ideas change.

But God's Word does not.

The Bible says:

PSALM 119:89

"For ever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven."

We need something settled.

A husband and wife building a home need something settled.

Parents teaching their children need something settled.

A Christian trying to decide what is right needs something settled.

And when a preacher says, “The Bible says,” those words ought to mean something.

At Chesapeake, we want one Bible that we can read, believe, memorize, preach, teach, and live.

That is why we use the King James Bible.

If You Have Questions

There is much more that could be said about preservation, translation, manuscripts, and the history of the King James Bible.

Later in this book, we give some additional background for anyone who wants to study those questions further.

For now, if you do not have a King James Bible, ask us. We will be glad to give you one.

Bring it to church.

Follow the preaching.

Read it at home.

Learn what it says.

And most importantly, let it govern your life.

I love hearing Chesapeake Baptist Church read the Bible together.

But what matters even more is what happens after we finish reading out loud.

We take those same words into our homes, our decisions, our relationships, and our everyday lives.

We do not correct the Bible. We let the Bible correct us.

There is another thing visitors often notice about Chesapeake Baptist Church before they understand the reason behind it.

The way people dress is different.

Why?

That is where we go next:

Why We Dress the Way We Do.

Why We Dress the Way We Do

There was a time in America when people dressed up to get on an airplane.

People dressed up to go to a ball game.

They did that because dressing for an occasion was one way of showing respect. The way a person prepared said something about the importance he placed on where he was going and the people he would be around.

Our society has changed.

As our culture has moved farther away from biblical morality, it has also become increasingly centered on self. Instead of asking, “What honors God?” or “How does this affect somebody else?” the question often becomes, “What do I want?” or “What is most comfortable for me?”

I believe that loss of respect and increasing selfishness have helped produce much of the casualness we see around us.

As Christians, we do not have to follow the culture in that direction.

When we come to church, we are gathering with God’s people around the Word of God. **I believe that deserves thoughtful preparation.**

We prepare our hearts.

We bring our Bible.

We come ready to listen and participate.

And when we have the opportunity, part of that preparation is wearing our Sunday best.

That is why you will normally see men at Chesapeake dressed up for church, many of them wearing a dress shirt and tie. It is a simple way of preparing for the occasion and showing respect for the Lord and for others.

Sometimes somebody gets off work and comes straight to church in his work clothes.

Praise God he came.

I would much rather have him come directly from work than stay home because he did not have time to change.

But when we have the opportunity to prepare, I believe we ought to prepare ourselves in a way that shows honor to the Lord and respect for the people with whom we are gathering. That includes the way we dress.

Why Do the Ladies Dress This Way?

A lady who had been visiting Chesapeake Baptist Church stopped by the church one day and asked me a question.

“Pastor, why do the ladies dress this way? Can I come to church Sunday night wearing pants?”

I told her,

“Of course you can come to church Sunday night wearing pants.”

Then I explained something important.

A dress does not save anybody. Only Jesus saves.

But there is a reason the ladies in our church generally wear dresses and skirts.

The Bible gives us principles that should govern the way Christians dress. Two of those principles are **modesty** and **distinction between men and women**.

Modesty

The Bible says:

1 TIMOTHY 2:9–10

“In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works.”

God cares about the way we present ourselves.

Modesty has to do with restraint, dignity, and dressing in a way that agrees with godliness. Our clothing should not be sensual or designed to draw improper attention to the body.

That principle applies to men as well as women.

Instead of asking only, “What do I like?” a Christian ought to be willing to ask,

“Does this please the Lord?”

God Made Men and Women Distinct

The Bible also teaches that God intentionally made men and women different.

GENESIS 1:27

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.”

God made us male and female, and that distinction is good.

Our culture increasingly tries to blur that distinction. We believe Christians should honor what God created rather than allowing society to erase it.

The Bible says:

DEUTERONOMY 22:5

“The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the LORD thy God.”

At Chesapeake Baptist Church, we believe there ought to be a visible distinction between men and women.

That is why we teach our ladies to wear modest dresses and skirts and our men to dress in a modest, recognizably masculine way.

We will discuss modesty and gender distinction more fully later in this book. Here I simply want you to understand why you see a difference when you come to Chesapeake.

We want the Bible to shape the way we live.

Let the Bible Shape Your Thinking

The lady who asked me about wearing pants did something I appreciated.

She asked why.

That is what I would encourage you to do when you see something at Chesapeake that is different from what you are accustomed to.

Ask.

Open the Bible.

Listen to the explanation.

Then decide whether what you are hearing agrees with God's Word.

You may not understand every conviction the first time you walk through the doors. Nobody learns the entire Christian life in a week.

But as the Lord teaches us, we ought to be willing to change.

If gathering with God's people deserves thoughtful preparation, prepare for it.

If the Bible teaches modesty, let that affect the way you dress.

If God created men and women distinct, honor that distinction.

And when you have the opportunity to prepare for church, wear your Sunday best.

Different on Purpose

There are things about Chesapeake Baptist Church that may look different from the culture around us.

Our music is different.

We use the King James Bible.

The way we dress is different.

Those differences come from a larger decision:

We want the Bible, not the culture, to shape the way we live.

Culture changes. God's Word does not.

As society moves farther from biblical morality, Christians should not simply move with it. We ought to keep asking,

“What does the Bible say?”

Then we should be willing to live accordingly.

That includes something as practical and visible as the way we dress.

And that brings us to one of the final questions in BELONG:

Why become a church member?

Why Become a Church Member?

Not long ago, a lady began coming to Chesapeake Baptist Church.

She had attended other churches before, but she had never really understood salvation. Someone opened the Bible with her and showed her the Bible way to Heaven, and she trusted Jesus Christ as her Saviour.

Not long afterward, she followed the Lord in believer's baptism.

Then she kept coming.

She was here Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night. She listened to the preaching, learned the Bible, asked questions, and gradually became acquainted with the people around her.

After one service, she came to me and said something very close to this:

"Pastor, I love this church. I want this to be my church family. Can I join?"

I remember that conversation.

The next Sunday morning, during the invitation, she walked down the aisle. I met her with a handshake, presented her to the church, and asked our church family if they were excited to have her become part of Chesapeake Baptist Church.

They were.

At the end of the service, I watched people come by, shake her hand, and welcome her.

She had already been saved.

She had already been baptized.

But now she was making another decision.

“I want this to be my church family.”

That is what I want you to understand about church membership.

Baptism and Membership

For many years, I have looked at Acts 2 and seen the close connection between baptism and being added to the church.

The Bible says:

ACTS 2:41–42

“Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.

And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.”

They received the Word, were baptized, were added, and then continued with the church.

In the New Testament, baptism and identification with the church belonged closely together.

I still believe that.

But there is also a practical reality in our church today.

Sometimes a person comes to Chesapeake, hears the Gospel, trusts Christ, and is ready to be baptized very quickly. That is wonderful. I do not want him waiting months to obey the Lord simply because he has not yet learned everything about our church.

At the same time, he may know very little about Chesapeake Baptist Church.

He may not yet understand our doctrine, our direction, our ministries, or what it means to share the life of this church family.

For that reason, I believe membership should be an intentional decision.

Baptism says, “I want to follow Christ.”

Membership says, “I want this to be my church family.”

Those decisions often belong very close together, but I want you to understand both of them.

This book is intended to help with that.

By the time you have worked through BELONG, you should have a pretty good idea of what Chesapeake Baptist Church is, what we believe, why we do what we do, and the direction we are trying to go.

Then you can make an informed decision:

Do I want this to be my church family?

Why Make That Decision?

You can attend Chesapeake Baptist Church without becoming a member.

You can hear the preaching, attend Sunday school, build friendships, and receive help.

But eventually there is something healthy about putting down roots.

There is a difference between saying,

“I go to Chesapeake Baptist Church,”

and saying,

“Chesapeake Baptist Church is my church.”

When you make that decision, you are choosing a definite church family in which to grow.

People begin to know you, and you begin to know them. When you carry a burden, there are people who know enough about your life to pray with you. When the Lord blesses, there are people who rejoice with you. When you begin struggling, there are people close enough to notice.

That kind of relationship takes time, but it is one of the great blessings of belonging to a church family.

Membership also gives your Christian life a place to take root.

You know where you are going to hear the Bible preached. You have a Sunday school class where relationships can deepen. Your family has people around it who are trying to move in the same spiritual direction. Instead of continually looking for the next church, the next preacher, or the next program, you can settle down and grow.

There is another blessing too.

As you become part of the church family, you begin seeing the church differently.

At first, most of us notice what the church provides for us. We hear the preaching, use the nursery, attend a class, enjoy the music, eat the meal, or receive help when something goes wrong.

But as you grow, you begin noticing the people behind those things. A teacher studied the lesson. Workers prepared the nursery. Somebody drove the bus. People cleaned the building, prepared the music, prayed for needs, gave toward the work, and took time to help others.

Eventually you begin thinking differently.

“I want to have a part in this too.”

That is one of the good things church membership can do. It moves us from merely receiving the life of the church toward sharing responsibility for it.

You begin praying for people you know by name. You give because you want the work to continue. You notice the visitor who looks as uncertain as you once felt. As you grow and are prepared, you begin finding ways to serve.

The church becomes more than the place where you attend services.

It becomes part of your life.

What Am I Saying When I Join?

Joining Chesapeake Baptist Church is not a statement that you have become a perfect Christian.

Nobody here has.

It is a statement about your faith and your direction.

You are saying that you have trusted Jesus Christ as your Saviour and followed Him in believer's baptism.

You are saying that you believe the Bible and agree with the doctrine and direction of this church.

And you are saying something personal:

“I want to grow here. I want these people to be my church family, and I want to have a part in what God is doing here.”

That is a meaningful decision.

How Do I Join?

If you have trusted Christ but have never been baptized by immersion after salvation, I would encourage you to take that step first.

Chapter 6 explains why.

If you have already been scripturally baptized, whether here or in another Bible-believing Baptist church of like faith and practice, and you believe Chesapeake should be your church home, come talk with me.

During the invitation you can simply come forward and say, “Pastor, I would like to join the church.”

You can also speak with me before or after a service if you have questions.

We will talk about your salvation, your baptism, and your understanding of Chesapeake Baptist Church. If your earlier baptism was before salvation, by sprinkling, or connected with a church whose doctrine was substantially different, we will sit down and work through that from the Bible.

The important questions are simple.

Have you trusted Christ?

Have you been baptized by immersion after salvation?

Do you understand the doctrine and direction of Chesapeake Baptist Church well enough to say,

“I want this to be my church family”?

When those things are clear, I will introduce you to the church family, and we will gladly welcome you.

Membership Is a Beginning

The lady I told you about at the beginning of this chapter did not stop growing when she joined. She kept coming.

As she became more comfortable and understood more of the church, she began looking for ways to help. She volunteered. She became involved. Relationships grew.

Now when she is not here, you notice. It feels a little like a member of the family is missing.

That is a long way from the day she first walked through the doors not even understanding how to be saved.

And that is part of what excites me about a church. People come needing help. They hear the Gospel, trust Christ, follow Him, and begin growing through the Word of God.

Then somewhere along the way, they look around and realize, **“These are my people. This is my church family. I want to have a part in this.”**

Maybe you are reaching that place. Perhaps as you have read through BELONG, you have begun to understand why Chesapeake Baptist Church is the way it is. You have seen our direction, heard our convictions, and learned something about the life of this church family.

If you have trusted Christ, followed Him in believer’s baptism, and believe this is the church where you want to grow and serve the Lord, then I would encourage you to make that decision.

Come tell me, **“Pastor, I want Chesapeake Baptist Church to be my church family.”**

I would be very glad to welcome you.

Problems in the Church

About a year after I became pastor of Chesapeake Baptist Church, I was preaching one Sunday and came to the word **“victuals.”**

I struggled with the pronunciation.

I looked at the word and pretty much pronounced it the way it looked to me. There was a little laughter and some awkwardness in the room.

After the service, one of the men in our church came to me. He was a good man and a real stickler for the proper pronunciation of words.

“Pastor, when you have a moment, could I talk to you?”

I told him, “Of course. Give me a few minutes to finish shaking hands, and we will sit down.”

About ten minutes later, we found a place to talk.

He began very kindly.

“Pastor, I think you are doing a good job, and I am glad you are my pastor. But when you came to that word in the Bible today, it bothered me when it was pronounced wrong.”

Whether it should have bothered him is really not the issue.

The fact is, it bothered him.

Rather than carry that irritation around, talk about it to several other people, or allow something small to become much bigger, he came and talked directly to me.

I did not mind him asking, and he was thankful he had a pastor who would listen.

We talked it through, settled it, and went on.

That little conversation illustrates a principle that can save a church family a great deal of unnecessary trouble:

When you have a problem, talk to the right person.

Problems Will Happen

Chesapeake Baptist Church is made up of people.

And people are imperfect.

That includes members, teachers, deacons, ministry leaders, and pastors. It includes me.

Sometimes a problem begins with a misunderstanding.

Someone says something carelessly, forgets something, disappoints you, or handles a situation differently than you expected. At other times there may be a genuine disagreement that needs to be discussed.

And sometimes there is a more serious problem that requires greater care.

A healthy church is not a church where nobody ever has a problem.

A healthy church is one where people learn to handle problems biblically.

The Bible says:

JAMES 1:19–20

“Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath:

For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.”

Those verses give us a good place to begin.

Listen before deciding. Give someone an opportunity to explain, and be careful about assigning a motive you do not actually know.

A short conversation can sometimes settle what several days of private frustration have made much larger.

Go to the Right Person

Jesus gave a very practical instruction:

MATTHEW 18:15

“Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone...”

Notice where Jesus tells you to begin.

With the person involved.

If Brother Smith has offended you, Brother Jones does not need to hear the whole story before Brother Smith does.

Go talk to the person. Explain what happened and listen to the answer.

Many problems never need to go any farther than that.

The man who came to me about the word *victuals* could have gone home irritated and talked about how his new pastor could not pronounce a Bible word correctly.

Instead, he came to me.

I am glad he did.

What If I Have a Question About the Preaching?

You may eventually hear me preach something and think,

“I do not understand that.”

Or perhaps you look at the verse and think,

“I am not sure I see it the same way.”

Come talk to me.

I would much rather you ask than sit for six months wondering what I meant.

Bring your Bible, show me the passage, and tell me what you heard and what you are trying to understand. We can work through it together.

Sometimes I may not have explained something clearly. Sometimes you may have misunderstood what I said. And sometimes I may need to go back and study something more carefully.

The pastor is not above the Bible.

The pastor is under the Bible too.

If I am wrong and the Bible is right, I need to change.

That principle should make questions easier, not harder.

Do Not Build a Case Before You Have a Conversation

One of the easiest ways to make a church problem worse is to begin gathering people to your side before you have spoken to the person involved.

Now the original problem is no longer between two people.

Someone hears one side, another person repeats part of it, and assumptions begin replacing facts. Before long, people who were never involved are upset about something they do not fully understand.

That is not the way to solve a problem.

If there is a real issue, deal with the real issue.

Do not recruit an audience or turn irritation into a campaign.

Talk to the right person and seek the truth.

Sometimes I Am Part of the Problem

Humility also requires us to recognize that the other person may not be entirely at fault.

I may have misunderstood what was said, reacted too quickly, or expected something that was never communicated. I may

even discover that the correction I did not enjoy hearing was true.

The Bible says:

PROVERBS 18:13

“He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him.”

Sometimes the other person needs to apologize.

Sometimes I do.

Sometimes both of us see something we could have handled better.

The goal is not to win an argument.

The goal is to make things right.

What If My Problem Is With the Pastor?

The same principles apply.

If you have a question about something I preached, a decision I made, or the way something was handled, come talk to me.

You are allowed to ask.

I may be able to explain something you did not know, or you may bring something to my attention that I need to consider.

I want the people of Chesapeake Baptist Church to know they can have an honest conversation with their pastor.

If the concern is serious and involves me in a way that makes speaking directly with me difficult or inappropriate, you may speak with one of our deacons.

Good leadership should not make truth difficult to bring forward.

We want things handled biblically and honestly.

Forgive and Move Forward

The Bible says:

EPHESIANS 4:31–32

“Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”

Church problems become especially destructive when an offense is never dealt with and bitterness is allowed to grow. Forgiveness does not mean pretending nothing happened. It means refusing to nurture bitterness and revenge while dealing truthfully with the wrong.

If you need to apologize, do it.

If someone asks your forgiveness, be willing to forgive.

If trust has been damaged, it may take time and faithful conduct to rebuild it.

But do not make a home for bitterness in your heart.

When Someone Leaves the Church

There is another kind of church problem that deserves to be discussed.

People leave churches.

At Chesapeake, that happens regularly for reasons that are not difficult at all.

We are a military church. Families may become deeply involved here for three or four years, and then the Navy transfers them somewhere else.

We do not want them to go, but that is part of our church life.

When the Lord moves a family, we want them to find another faithful Bible-believing church, get involved, and keep growing.

There are other times when a person simply decides he no longer wants Chesapeake Baptist Church to be his church family.

That happens too.

A person has the freedom to make that decision, but it is important to understand what leaving a church means.

Church is not only a preaching service.

It is fellowship. It is relationships. It is people praying, learning, serving, and carrying one another's burdens.

So when someone decides he no longer wants to be part of a church, he is also making a decision about that fellowship.

Sometimes a person no longer wants the doctrine, direction, or accountability of a Bible-believing church but still wants to hold on to the relationships he enjoyed while he was part of it.

That can become a problem when he begins trying to draw other people away from the church family he has chosen to leave.

We need wisdom there.

If someone decides to leave, I am not going to spend weeks preaching about him or keep the church stirred up over someone who no longer wants to be part of Chesapeake Baptist Church.

We have people to love, a Bible to preach, souls to reach, and work to do.

But neither should church members allow themselves to be pulled into a conflict simply because someone wants company in his disagreement.

Listen carefully. Do not accept accusations merely because they are repeated confidently. If there is a legitimate concern, bring it to the right person and deal with it truthfully.

Trying to draw people away from their church family only creates more division.

The Bible says:

ROMANS 16:17

“Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.”

There is a difference between maintaining a friendship with someone and allowing yourself to be pulled into division.

Be kind and pray for people, but guard the unity of your church family and keep following the truth you have learned.

Serious Problems Need Serious Help

Not every church problem is a hurt feeling or misunderstanding.

Abuse, criminal behavior, danger to a child, serious dishonesty, or other significant wrongdoing should not be reduced to an ordinary disagreement.

Those situations may require pastoral involvement, deacons, appropriate witnesses, protection, or civil authorities.

Do not hide serious wrongdoing in the name of protecting the church.

Truth protects the church.

If someone is in immediate danger, get help immediately.

If you are unsure how serious a situation is, bring it to someone who can help you understand what should happen next.

We Are Imperfect People Following a Perfect Book

If you stay in church long enough, somebody will disappoint you.

And if you stay long enough, you will probably disappoint somebody else.

That is part of living among imperfect people.

The answer is not to pretend problems never happen. It is to keep going back to the Word of God, talk to the right person, listen before deciding, tell the truth, forgive, and make things right when you can.

When a problem is serious, get the right help.

We are imperfect people trying to follow a perfect Book.

And when we handle problems biblically, even difficult moments can help us grow in grace, truth, humility, and love.

Is This Your Church Family?

You have now learned quite a bit about Chesapeake Baptist Church. You know what we believe, why we do what we do, how our church is led, and the direction we are trying to go.

So now I want to ask you a simple question: **Could Chesapeake Baptist Church become your church family?**

Maybe when you first came, you were only visiting. Some things were unfamiliar. You may have wondered about the Bible we use, the music, the way people dress, or why we gather so faithfully. That is understandable.

But after you have been here for a while, the question begins to change. It is no longer only, “What is this church like?” It becomes, **“Is this where I want to belong?”**

Joining a church does not mean you understand everything or have reached some level of spiritual perfection. It means you understand the direction of the church well enough to say, “I believe the Bible.” “I want to live for the Lord.” “I want to keep growing.” **“And I want this to be my church family.”**

There is a difference between saying, “I attend Chesapeake Baptist Church,” and saying, **“Chesapeake Baptist Church is my church.”**

When you make that decision, you are choosing the people you want to worship with, grow with, pray with, serve with, and help carry the work with.

If you have trusted Jesus Christ as your Saviour, followed Him in believer’s baptism, and believe the doctrine and direction of Chesapeake Baptist Church agree with the Bible, then I would encourage you to consider becoming a member.

Ask yourself: Do I believe this is where I want to grow? Do I want my family influenced in this direction? Do I want to have a part in the life and work of this church?

If you are not ready, keep coming. Keep learning. Ask questions.

But if you have reached the place where you can honestly say, **“I want Chesapeake Baptist Church to be my church family,”** then take the step.

During the invitation, come forward and tell me. Or stop me after a service and simply say, **“Pastor, I am ready. I want to join the church.”** I would be glad to help you take that step.

There is something special about moving from, “I attend that church,” to, **“That is my church.”** And I hope Chesapeake Baptist Church can become that for you.

My Next Step

Which statement best describes where you are?

- ☐ I am still learning and have questions.
- ☐ I have trusted Christ but still need believer’s baptism.
- ☐ I believe Chesapeake Baptist Church is the church I want to make my church home.
- ☐ I am saved, scripturally baptized, and ready to talk with Pastor Matt about joining.

CHAPTERS 22–29

GROW

Walk with God

A faithful church family can teach, encourage, pray, and help, but no one else can walk with God for you. Growth becomes personal as you open His Word, learn to understand it, pray, depend upon the Holy Spirit, obey what you know, resist temptation, and return honestly when you sin. These chapters will help you begin that daily walk.

COME

KNOW

BELONG

GROW

LIVE

SERVE

REACH

TEACH

All of it flowing from a heart that loves God.

Your Daily Walk with God

Mandy and I have twelve children. Through the years, we have taken them to church, taught them the Bible, led them in prayer, and tried to point their lives toward the Lord.

When children are young, Mom and Dad make a lot of decisions for them. We decide when they go to church. We tell them when it is time to read the Bible. We try to surround them with people and influences that will help them live for God.

But eventually every child reaches a place where his walk with God has to become his own.

I saw that very clearly with my oldest son.

After he graduated from high school, he went away to Bible college. For the first time in his life, Mom and Dad were not there every day helping direct his Christian life.

Those first few months were difficult.

After about four months, he called me and said, “Dad, this just isn’t working.”

He was at Bible college. He was hearing preaching and taking Bible classes. He was surrounded by Christian people. But he was not walking closely with the Lord himself. He came home, and over the next few months I watched something begin to change.

He started getting up and reading his Bible because he wanted to read it. I was not telling him it was time. He began seeking the Lord for himself.

His Christian life was becoming personal.

Today he pastors a church and has a wonderful family of his own. But before any of that, he had to learn something every Christian eventually has to learn:

Your walk with God has to become your own.

Let me ask you a personal question.

Do you walk with God?

You may have grown up in a Christian home, or you may be learning all of this for the first time. Maybe you have attended church for years.

But what is happening between you and the Lord?

The Bible says something very simple about Noah:

GENESIS 6:9

“...and Noah walked with God.”

I like that.

Noah walked with God.

The Bible also says:

2 PETER 3:18

“But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen.”

Growing as a Christian is more than learning more facts about the Bible.

It is knowing the Lord better.

It is walking with Him personally.

And as you walk with Him, you ought to become more like the One you are following.

There is a public part of the Christian life.

We come to church. We hear the Bible preached. We sing. We pray together. We are around Christians who encourage us and help us.

We need that.

But there is also a private walk with God.

There comes a time when nobody is sitting beside you telling you to open your Bible.

You open it because you want to hear from the Lord.

You pray because you want to talk with Him.

You bring a need to Him because you know you need His help.

You obey something He has shown you even when nobody else knows about it.

That private walk with God is what gives strength to the Christian life everybody else sees.

The Bible says:

JAMES 1:22

“But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.”

Suppose you read something in the Bible about the way you speak. Later that day, someone irritates you and you feel like answering sharply.

Now the Bible you read that morning has reached your afternoon.

Will you answer the way you feel like answering, or will you do what God showed you was right?

That is part of walking with God.

The Bible does not stay on the kitchen table.

It goes with you into your home, your work, your relationships, and your decisions.

Sunday's truth belongs in Monday's life.

Sometimes, though, we stop walking as closely with the Lord as we should.

We get busy. We neglect the Bible. We do not pray like we once did. We know something needs to change, but we keep putting it off.

Little by little, there can be distance in our fellowship with God.

The Lord has not moved away from us.

We have moved away from Him.

The Bible says:

JAMES 4:8

“Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you.”

I love that promise.

When you realize you have moved away from the Lord, you do not have to stay there.

Draw nigh to Him.

Open the Bible again.

Pray again.

Do the thing He has already shown you is right.

Take a step closer to God.

That is really what GROW is about.

In the next few chapters, we are going to talk about reading the Bible, understanding what you read, prayer, walking in the Spirit, making biblical decisions, dealing with temptation, and what to do when you sin.

But do not miss what all of those things are supposed to help you do.

They are supposed to help you walk with God.

Not because your parents make you.

Not because your pastor is watching you.

Not because somebody gave you a checklist.

Because you want to know the Lord.

Maybe that is the decision you need to make right now:

I want to walk with God for myself.

You do not have to know everything before you begin.

You simply need to begin.

And one of the first questions people ask me when they want to begin is:

“Pastor, where do I start reading my Bible?”

That is where we go next.

Where to Begin Reading Your Bible

In the last chapter, we talked about having your own personal walk with God.

An important part of that walk is learning to open the Bible for yourself.

I am thankful for preaching. I believe you need to be in church hearing the Word of God preached and taught. But your Bible should not be something you hear only on Sunday or Wednesday when somebody else opens it.

The Bible needs to become part of your own life.

Psalms 1 describes the man whose life is blessed by God:

PSALM 1:2

“But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.”

Notice those last words:

day and night.

That is not a once-a-week relationship with the Word of God. Growing up, I had an older brother who was very good at reading. I knew how to read, but I did not enjoy it very much. Even as a young adult, I was not much of a reader.

Then, when I was nineteen years old, I began attending a Bible-believing church. I believed the preacher when he told me I ought to read the Bible.

The problem was that I looked at that big Book and wondered:

Where do I start?

Years later, a young man came to me after a church service and said,

“Pastor, I want to read the Bible. I just don’t know how.”

I understood exactly what he meant.

So let me give you a simple place to begin.

Start with the book of Proverbs.

Proverbs is a book of wisdom.

And the truth is, I need wisdom.

You need wisdom.

We deal with people. We make decisions. We have families, work, responsibilities, pressures, and choices in front of us every day.

We desperately need wisdom.

Proverbs talks about our words, our work, our money, our friendships, our families, our attitudes, and the decisions we make.

The Bible says:

PROVERBS 2:6

“For the LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding.”

That is why Proverbs is such a good place to begin.

It has thirty-one chapters.

Read the chapter that matches the day of the month.

If today is the first, read Proverbs 1.

If today is the fifteenth, read Proverbs 15.

If today is the twenty-eighth, read Proverbs 28.

At the end of a shorter month, simply finish the remaining chapters.

Then begin again with Proverbs 1 when the next month starts.

You can read Proverbs month after month and keep finding something you need.

I still do.

Most mornings, I wake up early and stagger into the kitchen still half asleep.

I have a Bunn-O-Matic coffee maker that makes a pot of coffee in about three minutes.

I go to the freezer, take out my half-caff coffee, put two scoops into the filter, and start the pot.

Before I read, I usually pray something very simple:

“Lord, I am going to need wisdom today. Please give me something from Your Word that will help me.”

Then, while the coffee is brewing, I walk over to the kitchen island and read the Proverb for that day.

There is nothing complicated about it.

I am waiting for the coffee, and I am asking God to give me wisdom for the day.

That simple routine has helped give Proverbs a regular place in my life.

You need to find that place in yours.

Make time for it.

Along with Proverbs, I would encourage you to begin reading through the New Testament.

Start in Matthew and read one chapter a day.

Then keep going.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell us about Jesus Christ. Acts shows the Gospel spreading and churches being established. The rest of the New Testament continues teaching us how a Christian ought to believe and live.

The New Testament has 260 chapters.

At one chapter a day, you can read through it in about nine months.

That is a very manageable beginning.

If you want to read more, read more.

But one chapter a day will keep you moving through the Bible and help the books and passages become familiar.

Before you read, ask the Lord to help you understand what He has said.

Then read and pay attention.

You are not going to understand everything the first time you read it.

That is all right.

Keep reading.

Write down a question. Ask your Sunday school teacher. Ask me. Bring it to somebody who can help you.

There are also times when listening can help.

On my iPhone, I use an app called **Scourby YouBible**. I enjoy listening to Alexander Scourby read the King James Bible. There are other King James Bible audio apps available, including options for Android phones.

You can listen while driving, walking, or doing something that still allows you to pay attention. You can also listen while following along in your Bible.

For some people, especially those who struggle with reading, listening can be a tremendous help.

However you do it, keep receiving the Word of God.

You should read your Bible every day.

Make it part of your life.

And if you miss a day, do not stay down.

Start again.

As you become more comfortable reading, I hope you will eventually read the whole Bible.

I think about a lady in our church who was in her late forties and had never read the entire Bible through.

She decided to begin.

She kept reading.

When she finally reached the end of Revelation and finished the whole Bible, she told me that tears were streaming down her face.

She had done it.

And it did not end there.

I have lost count of how many times she has read through the Bible since then.

The Word of God became part of her life.

It changed her.

That is what I want for you.

I do not simply want you to finish a reading plan.

I want you to become someone who reads the Bible.

Someone who knows the Book.

Someone who keeps coming back to it because you want to hear from the God you are walking with.

So if you are not reading your Bible, begin today.

As you read, another question is going to come up.

You will read something and think,

“What does this mean?”

That is a good question.

And that is where we go next.

Understanding and Studying What You Read

Shortly after I was saved, my parents gave me a brand-new Cambridge King James Bible for Christmas.

I still remember opening the box.

It was black calfskin leather. I remember the smell of the new Bible and the pages as I began thumbing through them. Some of the thin pages were still sticking together.

I was excited.

Up to that point, I had heard people talk about the Bible. I had heard preaching from the Bible. But now I was beginning to read it for myself.

And as I read, I kept having moments when I would think, “Wow. I didn’t know that was in the Bible.”

Or,

“Wow. That is interesting.”

The more I read, the more I realized how much I did not know.

There were words I did not understand.

There were people and places I knew nothing about.

Sometimes I would finish reading a passage and wonder, “What does that mean?”

If that happens to you, do not get discouraged.

That is part of learning the Bible.

The Bible says:

2 TIMOTHY 2:15

“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”

Bible study takes some work.

But you can learn.

One of the greatest helps to me when I first began reading the Bible was a friend at church.

He was a little older than I was and had been around the Bible much longer.

Every week we would get together, and I would ask him questions.

Some of them were probably very basic questions, but he never made me feel foolish for asking them.

He was patient.

If I did not understand something, we talked about it.

That helped me tremendously.

I think every Christian needs people like that in his life.

You are going to have questions.

Ask them.

Your Sunday school teacher may be able to help you. Your pastor can help you. You may have a mature Christian friend who loves the Bible and is willing to sit down and talk through something with you.

In fact, you can pray and ask the Lord to give you somebody who can help you understand His Word.

That is one of the blessings of being part of a Bible-believing church.

Today it is very easy to type a Bible question into the internet, ask an AI program, or watch a YouTube video.

Those things can sometimes be useful, but be careful.

You can find almost any opinion you want.

One person will explain a verse one way, and another person will explain it completely differently.

Who you learn from will affect the way you understand the Bible.

That is why I am thankful my early help came from somebody who believed the Bible and was part of a Bible-believing church.

Use study tools when they help, but do not be afraid to bring your Bible and your question to somebody you trust who knows the Book.

Another thing that helped me was learning to look up words. There were words in the King James Bible that I had never heard before.

Instead of assuming I knew what they meant, I learned to use a dictionary.

One of the best tools I have found is Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary.

It was written much closer to the time of the King James Bible than our modern dictionaries, and it is very helpful with words whose meaning may be unfamiliar today. Many of the definitions even use Bible verses to show how the word is used.

You can buy a printed copy, or there are Webster's 1828 dictionary apps you can use on a phone.

Thirty years later, I still look words up.

Sometimes I come to a word I know I have looked up before and think,

“I cannot remember exactly what that means.”

So I look it up again.

There is nothing wrong with that.

The goal is not to pretend you understand something.

The goal is to understand what God said.

Another little book that helped me early on was **Halley’s Bible Handbook**.

It gave me a simple overview of the books of the Bible.

If I was reading Isaiah, it helped me understand something about Isaiah.

If I was reading one of Paul’s letters, it helped me understand where I was in the Bible and what was happening.

You do not need a shelf full of study books before you can understand your Bible.

But a good dictionary and a simple Bible handbook can be very useful.

There is another simple habit that may help you more than almost anything else:

Read the verses around the verse you are trying to understand.

The Bible was not originally written as a collection of unrelated sentences.

Read what comes before.

Read what comes after.

Ask:

Who is speaking?

Who is being spoken to?

What are they talking about?

For example, look at these familiar verses:

EPHESIANS 2:8–10

“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:
Not of works, lest any man should boast.
For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”

If you read only verse 10, you might see the words “good works” and misunderstand their place.

But read the verses before it.

Verses 8 and 9 tell us very clearly that salvation is the gift of God.

It is:

“Not of works.”

Then verse 10 tells us that after we are saved, God wants us to live a life of good works.

The order matters.

We are not saved by good works.

We are saved by grace through faith, and then good works should follow.

Reading the passage helps you see that.

Pay attention to the words.

Notice when the Bible says “but,” “therefore,” “for,” or repeats the same word several times.

If you do not understand a word, look it up.

If you do not understand a verse, keep reading around it.

And compare Scripture with Scripture.

Sometimes another passage will help explain the one you are reading.

That is another reason to keep reading the Bible year after year. The more familiar you become with the whole Book, the more you begin seeing how the different parts fit together. And remember that not everything recorded in the Bible is something God is telling you to copy.

The Bible tells the truth about what people did, including when they did wrong.

So ask what the passage is actually teaching.

Then ask one more very important question:

What should I do with what I just read?

The Bible says:

JAMES 1:22

“But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.”

Bible study should do more than fill your head with information.

Maybe the passage shows you a sin to stop, a command to obey, a promise to trust, or something about God that needs to affect the way you live.

If it helps, write down the verse, a question you have, or something you need to do because of what you read.

You do not need a complicated notebook system.

Pay attention to what you are reading and respond to what God shows you.

And when a verse especially helps you, learn it.

The Bible says:

PSALM 119:11

“Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.”

There are verses I learned years ago that still come back to my mind when I need them.

That is one of the blessings of putting God's Word into your heart.

Thirty years after I first opened that new Cambridge Bible, I am still learning.

I still find things that make me think,

"Wow. I never noticed that before."

I still look words up.

I still have questions.

And I still have friends who know the Bible well and help me understand things I am studying.

You never reach a place where you know everything in the Bible.

Keep reading, studying, and asking questions.

Most importantly, keep letting the Bible change you.

As you read God's Word, you hear what He has said. But walking with God also means talking to Him.

That brings us to the next question:

How do I pray?

Learning to Pray

Shortly after I began attending a Bible-believing Baptist church, we sang a hymn called **Sweet Hour of Prayer**.

It is a good song.

But I remember thinking,

“An hour?”

I could not imagine praying for an hour. Just the thought seemed overwhelming.

Maybe you have felt that way.

You hear somebody pray in church, and the words seem to come so naturally. He seems to know what to say, and you think,

“I don’t know how to pray like that.”

Let me help you make prayer much simpler.

Prayer is talking to God.

In the last few chapters, we have talked about opening the Bible and hearing from God through His Word.

Prayer is us talking to Him.

And as you walk with God, you can talk to Him throughout your day.

Jesus gave us a very simple pattern to help us pray.

The Bible says:

MATTHEW 6:9–13

“After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.”

People often call this the Lord’s Prayer, but Jesus said,

“After this manner therefore pray ye.”

He was giving us a pattern.

I use that pattern almost every day of my life.

I begin with:

“Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.”

I stop and think about who I am talking to.

“God, You are holy. You are righteous. You are powerful.

Thank You for giving me life and breath. Thank You for saving me. I am just a sinner saved by grace, and I need You.”

Prayer begins by remembering who God is and humbling ourselves before Him.

Then I come to:

“Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.”

“God, I give my life back to You today. I want my words to please You. I want my decisions to please You. I want Your will done in my life today.”

There are things that are going to happen today that I do not know anything about yet.

So I pray,

“God, I need wisdom today. I need Your strength today. Guide me. Help me make the right decisions. Help me live this day for You.”

Then Jesus said:

“Give us this day our daily bread.”

Now I begin bringing needs to God.

“Lord, please help Mandy today.”

I pray for my children.

I pray about needs in our family, the church, finances, people who are hurting, and whatever else the Lord has put in front of me.

Your needs will be different from mine.

Just talk to God about them.

You do not need impressive words.

Tell Him what you need.

Then Jesus said:

“And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

This is an important part of daily prayer because it helps keep us from getting very far away from the Lord.

Every day there are things we say, think, or do that are not right.

When you know you have sinned, deal with it.

“Lord, I was wrong. Please forgive me.”

Do not let days and weeks go by while you hold on to something you know is wrong.

And while you are asking God to forgive you, make sure you are willing to forgive other people too.

Maybe somebody hurt you yesterday.

Maybe you are still angry about something somebody said.

Bring that to the Lord.

“God, help me forgive them. Help me have the right heart.”

Daily prayer gives us an opportunity to keep things right with God and right with people.

We will talk more about what to do when we sin later in this section, but for now, learn to deal with sin honestly when the Lord brings it to your attention.

Then Jesus said:

“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

You do not know everything you are going to face today.

So ask God for help before you get there.

“Lord, help me control my words today.”

“Help me keep my thoughts right.”

“Help me say no when I am tempted.”

“Help me make the right decision when I am under pressure.”

Again, prayer is admitting something very important:

God, I need You.

And then the prayer ends:

“For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.”

“Lord, thank You for allowing me to serve You. There is nothing better than being in the center of Your will. There is nothing better than living for You.”

I finish by thanking Him for the privilege of living for Him and serving Him.

That simple pattern can help you begin praying.

You do not have to repeat the exact same words every day.
Let the words Jesus gave us guide your conversation with God.

But prayer does not stop when your regular prayer time ends.
The Bible says:

1 THESSALONIANS 5:17

“Pray without ceasing.”

That does not mean you spend every second of the day with your eyes closed.

It means you keep talking to God as you walk through the day.

You are driving and see an accident on the side of the road.
You may not know who was hurt or what happened, but you can pray,

“Lord, please help those people.”

You are about to have a difficult conversation.

“Lord, help me say what is right.”

Your thoughts begin going in the wrong direction.

The Bible says:

PSALM 19:14

“Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.”

You can pray that verse right back to God.

“Lord, let my thoughts and my words please You.”

You have a decision to make.

“God, give me wisdom.”

Someone comes to your mind who is hurting.

“Lord, please help them.”

Something good happens.

“Thank You, Lord.”

That is part of walking with God.

You talk to Him throughout the day because you need Him throughout the day.

There is one more very simple habit I want to encourage you to develop.

Thank God for your food.

Jesus did.

The Bible says:

JOHN 6:11

“And Jesus took the loaves; and when he had given thanks, he distributed to the disciples...”

Before you eat, stop and thank God for what He has provided.

Do it at home.

Do it when you are eating out.

It does not need to be long or complicated.

Just thank Him.

Prayer really is not complicated.

You are talking to your Father.

You are thanking Him.

You are bringing Him your needs.

You are keeping things right with Him.

You are asking for wisdom and strength.

And throughout all of it, you are admitting,

“God, I need You.”

Thirty years into the Christian life, I still need Him.

I still need His wisdom.

I still need His strength.

And I still use the simple pattern Jesus gave us in Matthew 6.

You learn to pray by praying.

Begin your day talking to God.

Then keep talking to Him as you walk through it.

And that leads naturally to the next part of our walk with God.

Living for the Lord takes more than good intentions.

We need His strength.

That is where we go next:

Walking in the Spirit.

Walking in the Spirit

Several years after I was saved, before I was a pastor, a man visited our church who had written a song in our songbook.

It was a song I loved.

My pastor asked me if I would like to go golfing with him and this man.

I was excited.

We went out to Stumpy Lake Golf Course in Virginia Beach. We came to a long par five with trees on both sides and water in front of us.

The man stepped up and swung.

It was a terrible shot.

The ball went deep into the trees, back toward the swamp. If you know Stumpy Lake, that is not the kind of place you are eager to go looking for a golf ball. There are water moccasins back there.

As soon as he hit the ball, he got so angry. He said a few choice words, threw his club, and hit a post so hard that the driver broke in half.

I was shocked.

Here was a man who had written a Christian song I loved, and suddenly he was so controlled by anger that he broke his golf club.

At first I looked at him.

Then I began looking at myself.

I realized I was not so different.

There are times I have said something and later thought,
“Why did I say that?”

There have been thoughts that came into my mind and I wondered,

“Where did that come from?”

There have been times I knew what was right and still struggled to do it.

For years I wished there were a switch somewhere in the Christian life that I could flip one time and never struggle with my flesh again.

The Apostle Paul understood that struggle.

He wrote:

ROMANS 7:19

“For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.”

Then he said:

ROMANS 7:24

“O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?”

Paul was saved, but he still understood the battle with the flesh.

So do I.

And if you are saved, you are going to understand it too.

When you trusted Jesus Christ as your Saviour, the Holy Spirit came to dwell in you.

The Holy Spirit is God. He is not a feeling, an influence, or some spiritual force. He is a Person.

The Bible says:

EPHESIANS 1:13

“In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise,”

When you believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit. You do not receive Him again every morning. He already lives in you.

But you still have a flesh.

Several years after I was saved, I picked up a book called *Moral Failure*. The first part was difficult to read because it told about men who had fallen into serious sin and the damage that followed.

But the second part helped me tremendously.

It dealt with preventing that kind of failure and pointed me to Galatians chapter 5.

I read these words:

GALATIANS 5:16

“This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.”

Something clicked.

“Walk in the Spirit.”

I had been wishing for a switch.

The Bible gave me a walk.

Walking is not something you do once.

You keep walking.

And right there in the same chapter, Paul shows us what happens in both directions.

First, he describes the works of the flesh:

GALATIANS 5:19–21

“Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like...”

Then look at the contrast:

GALATIANS 5:22–23

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.”

Those are two very different directions.

When I yield to my flesh, the works of the flesh begin showing up.

When I walk in the Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit begins showing up.

What is controlling the inside eventually shows on the outside.

Walking in the Spirit is not one decision you make twenty years ago and never have to think about again.

It is a decision for today.

And sometimes it is a decision you have to make again an hour later.

Will I yield to my flesh, or will I yield myself to God?

The Bible says:

EPHESIANS 5:18

“And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit;”

That verse helped me understand something important about being filled with the Spirit.

A person who is drunk allows alcohol to affect the way he thinks, talks, decides, and acts.

Paul says,

“but be filled with the Spirit.”

Instead of allowing something else to control us, we are to yield ourselves to the Spirit of God.

The issue is not whether the Holy Spirit is present.

If you are saved, He lives in you.

The question is:

What am I yielding to?

I remember talking with a man in our church who struggled with alcohol.

He was very honest with me.

He said,

“Pastor, I like it.”

He liked the feeling alcohol gave him.

What he did not like was what happened when it controlled him.

When he got drunk, he made decisions that hurt his children and hurt his family.

Alcohol was controlling areas of his life.

Over time, he began making different decisions. He began learning to walk with God instead of continuing to yield to the desires of his flesh.

That is exactly the contrast in Ephesians 5:18.

“Be not drunk with wine...but be filled with the Spirit.”

Something is going to influence the way I respond.

My flesh has plenty of ideas.
My flesh can get angry.
My flesh can be selfish.
My flesh can be proud.
My flesh can lust.
My flesh wants what it wants when it wants it.
But I do not have to let my flesh control me.
I can walk in the Spirit.
And when I do, the fruit of the Spirit begins to show.
That makes walking in the Spirit very practical.
It is not just something we talk about at church.
It shows up at home.
Someone says something that irritates you.
Your flesh immediately has an answer.
But you stop.
“Lord, help me.”
You remember what the Bible says.
And instead of giving the answer your flesh wanted to give,
you yield yourself to God.
A wrong thought comes into your mind.
You do not have to keep thinking it.
“Lord, help me get my mind right.”
You are tempted to do something you know is wrong.
“God, give me strength. I want to please You.”
You begin getting angry.
Stop.
Talk to God.
Yield yourself to Him again.

This is one reason the things we have talked about in the last few chapters matter so much.

Start your day in the Word of God.

Pray.

Give the day to the Lord.

“God, I need Your wisdom today. I need Your strength today. Help me live for You.”

Then carry that dependence on God into the rest of the day.

Walking in the Spirit does not mean you never struggle.

It does not mean you never feel angry.

It does not mean a wrong thought never comes.

It means those things do not have to control you.

Your feelings do not have to control you.

Your emotions do not have to control you.

Your flesh does not have to control you.

You can yield yourself to God and ask Him for the strength to do what is right.

And when you fail, deal with it.

Do not wait several days.

If you lose your temper, get it right.

If you say something you should not have said, get it right.

If you allow your mind to go somewhere it should not go, confess it to God.

Then get back up and keep walking.

The Christian life is a walk.

I’ve been saved for over thirty years now, and I still have a flesh.

I still need God’s help.

There are still times when I can say something I should not say.

There are still moments when I have to stop and say,
“Lord, help me.”

I have not found a switch that makes the battle disappear.
But I have learned that I do not have to obey my flesh.

The Bible says:

“Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.”

So tomorrow morning I will need to walk in the Spirit again.
And throughout the day, I will need to make that choice again
and again.

So will you.

Walking in the Spirit does not mean sitting back and waiting
for God to make every decision for us.

He has given us His Word.

He gives us strength.

And then we have to choose to do what is right.

That is where we go next:

Decide Before the Pressure Comes.

Decide Before the Pressure Comes

When Mandy and I began talking seriously about marriage, we talked about the kind of home and life we wanted to build together.

By that time, both of us had learned that church mattered. We did not want church to be somewhere we occasionally attended. We wanted a church family to become part of our life.

So before we were married, we settled something.

We were going to gather faithfully with our church family. Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night, and revival meetings when our church had them, we wanted to be there. We also wanted to become part of the life and work of the church, not simply come in for a service and leave.

That decision was made a long time ago.

Through the years, there have been plenty of Sundays when I was tired.

There have been times when staying home would have been easier.

But Mandy and I do not wake up on Sunday morning and ask, “Do we feel like going to church today?”

That decision was made a long time ago.

I have watched many Christians live differently.

They enjoy church when they come. They are glad to see people. They enjoy the preaching and the fellowship.

But every Sunday morning becomes a new decision.

Sometimes the wife comes by herself.

I ask,

“Where is your husband?”

“He was tired.”

Another week the husband comes alone.

“Where is your wife?”

“She stayed up too late last night and couldn’t get up.”

Then sometimes neither one comes.

I may call because I wonder if something is wrong.

“No, Pastor. We’re doing fine.”

Then I find out there was an airshow that morning, or something else they really wanted to do because they might not get another opportunity.

There is nothing wrong with going to an airshow.

That is not the point.

The problem is that every Sunday morning the decision is being made all over again.

If they are tired, tiredness decides.

If something sounds more exciting, excitement decides.

If they are discouraged, discouragement decides.

Their feelings are deciding something that should have been settled before the pressure came.

That principle reaches much farther than church.

There are some decisions in the Christian life that are better made before the difficult moment arrives.

The Bible says:

JAMES 4:17

“Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.”

There are times when we honestly do not know what is right. That is why we read the Bible, ask questions, pray, and keep learning.

But as we learn the Word of God, He makes many things clear.

Then the question changes.

It is no longer,

“What does God want me to do?”

Now it is,

“Will I do what I know is right?”

Suppose you have settled that you are going to tell the truth. Then one day you make a mistake, and one little lie could save you from embarrassment.

That is not the time to decide whether honesty matters.

The decision has already been made.

The same is true in marriage. Faithfulness should be settled before temptation ever comes.

That is what a biblical conviction is.

A preference is something I like. A conviction rests on something God has said.

My feelings may change.

God’s Word does not.

That is why decisions based on the Bible can carry us through moments when our feelings are pulling another direction.

It is also why becoming part of a church family matters so much.

When church is only somewhere you attend, it is easy to treat it like one option among many.

But when your church family becomes part of your life, you begin thinking differently.

You know people, and they know you. You pray for them. They pray for you. You receive help, and you begin helping somebody else.

You realize,

“I need my church family, and my church family needs me.”

Of course, there will be legitimate reasons to miss a service. People get sick. Work and military responsibilities come up. Families face unexpected needs.

The point is not that you never miss.

The point is that convenience and emotion are not making your spiritual decisions for you.

When God makes something clear in His Word, do not merely agree with it.

Settle it.

Then when the pressure comes, ask God for the strength to do what you already know is right.

We need the Spirit of God. We talked about that in the last chapter.

But walking in the Spirit does not mean God makes every decision for us.

He gives us His Word.

He gives us His strength.

And we choose to obey Him.

The pressure will still come.

Sometimes temptation will be much stronger than being tired on a Sunday morning. Sometimes a sinful desire can become a repeated struggle that begins controlling part of your life.

What do you do then?

That is where we go next.

When You Keep Struggling with the Same Sin

When I was growing up, my family went to church on Sunday mornings.

As we got older, we eventually got out of church, but there were still some things I had been taught from a young age. One of them was to be careful with my mouth.

I remember saying something I should not have said when I was a little boy, and my dad literally washed my mouth out with a bar of soap.

I learned very quickly that there were certain words I was not supposed to say.

Through elementary school and into middle school, I was pretty guarded about cursing.

Then I went into public high school.

Cursing seemed to be part of the language around me.

Everybody seemed to talk that way, and I wanted to fit in.

I actually remember getting by myself and practicing curse words.

That sounds strange now, but I wanted them to come out naturally. I wanted to be able to talk the way everybody else seemed to talk.

And eventually I could.

What I practiced became part of the way I lived.

After high school, I joined the Navy.

You have probably heard the expression,
“Cuss like a sailor.”

By then I fit the description pretty well.

I could curse and hardly even realize I had done it. When something went wrong or I became frustrated, those words could come out almost automatically.

Then, when I was nineteen years old, I began attending a Bible-believing Baptist church. I heard the Gospel and trusted Jesus Christ as my Saviour.

My life began changing.

I started reading the Bible.

I listened to preaching.

I wanted to please God.

But I had developed a habit with my mouth that did not disappear overnight.

Maybe you understand that.

Your struggle may not be cursing.

It may be anger that keeps getting the best of you.

It may be bitterness you keep going back to.

It may be a habit or a sinful desire that seems to keep pulling you in the same direction.

You know it is wrong.

You have told yourself,

“I am not doing that again.”

And then you find yourself doing it again.

The Bible uses an interesting phrase:

HEBREWS 12:1

“...let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us...”

There can be a sin that seems to trip us more easily than others.

That does not excuse it.

But it does mean we need to recognize where the battle is.

For me, one of those battles was my mouth.

The Bible helped me understand what was happening.

The devil is real, and he wants to draw us away from God, but his influence does not remove our responsibility for the choices we make.

JAMES 1:13–15

“Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man:

But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed.

Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.”

Other people had certainly influenced me.

I had heard the language around me.

I had wanted to fit in.

But eventually I had to be honest.

Nobody made me get by myself and practice those words.

I had chosen to do that.

That was important for me to understand.

When we keep struggling with the same sin, it is easy to spend all our time explaining why we are tempted.

Someone hurt me.

Everybody around me does it.

That is the way I grew up.

I was angry.

I was tired.

I was under pressure.

Those things may help explain the temptation, but they do not make the decision for us.

James says we are drawn away of our **“own lust, and enticed.”**

I needed to stop excusing what I was doing and deal honestly with it.

Then I had to learn something else.

God gives us a way to escape.

The Bible says:

1 CORINTHIANS 10:13

“There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.”

I love those words:

“a way to escape.”

For me, part of that escape was learning a different response.

I had practiced the wrong words until they came naturally.

Now I needed to practice responding differently.

Before the pressure came, I needed to think about what I was going to say.

When something went wrong, I did not have to use the words I had trained myself to use for years.

I could stop.

I could ask the Lord for help.

I could choose a different response.

That connects directly with what we talked about in the last chapter.

Decide before the pressure comes.

If you already know where you tend to fall, do not wait until you are right in the middle of the temptation to begin thinking about what you should do.

Look for the escape God has provided.

Sometimes that means walking away from something.

Sometimes it means changing access to something that continually pulls you back toward sin.

Sometimes it means deciding beforehand what you are going to do when that same temptation comes again.

The important thing is that when God gives you a way out, take it.

There was something else I learned too.

I did not need to fight every battle by myself.

The Bible says:

GALATIANS 6:1–2

“Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.

Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.”

I love that word:

restore.

When somebody is struggling, God’s desire is not that we humiliate him.

It is that we help him get back where he needs to be.

The church became a tremendous help to me.

I had people around me who believed the Bible, prayed for me, encouraged me, and helped me grow.

I did not have to pretend that I never struggled.

And neither do you.

One of the most dangerous things you can do when you keep returning to the same sin is hide.

You fail.

You feel ashamed.

You tell yourself you will never do it again.

Then you fail again.

After a while, you do not want anybody to know.

But hiding often makes the struggle stronger.

If you keep losing the same battle, find someone who can help you.

You do not need to tell everybody your private business.

But you may need to sit down with your pastor or a mature Christian who loves you, believes the Bible, and wants to help you do right.

Let somebody pray with you.

Let somebody ask you how you are doing.

Let somebody help you recognize where you keep getting pulled back into the same pattern.

Your struggle may be different from mine, but I learned something important from my struggle with my mouth.

I had practiced the wrong words until they became natural.

Now, by God's help, I needed to learn a different way to respond.

And the Lord did help me change.

Something that had once been such a normal part of my language no longer had to control me.

That is what I want you to understand.

If there is a sin that keeps tripping you, do not simply decide,
“This is just the way I am.”

Be honest about the struggle.

Take the way of escape God gives you.

And if you keep losing the same battle, let somebody help
you.

There is hope.

But even as we grow, there will still be times when we sin.

What do we do then?

What do I do when I sin?

That is where we go next.

What Do I Do When I Sin?

Years ago, I received a phone call from a young man who wanted a ride to church.

On Sunday morning, I drove to a house off Military Highway where several young men in their twenties were living. He got into my car, and as we started toward church, I began asking him about his life.

“Tell me your story. Where did you come from?”

He told me that his dad had been an assistant pastor. He had grown up in a Bible-believing church and had even gone to Bible college.

Then I noticed an ankle bracelet around his leg.

“What are you doing here?”

He began telling me what had happened.

As a teenager, he had gotten involved in a secret sin.

Nobody knew about it.

At first, it did not seem like that big of a deal. He took a step away from the Lord, and nothing terrible happened immediately.

So he took another step.

The sin continued.

He graduated from high school and went to Bible college, a place where he was supposed to be preparing to serve the Lord, but he was still carrying sin that had never really been dealt with.

One step became another.

Eventually, he made decisions that got him kicked out of Bible college and later landed him in jail.

Now he was sitting in my car wearing an ankle bracelet.

As he told me his story, he could look backward and see something very clearly.

He had not planned to end up where he was.

It had happened one step at a time.

That first secret sin had not seemed like it would destroy his life. But because it was never dealt with, one step away from God led to another, and another, until he was much farther from the Lord than he ever intended to go.

That is one of the dangers of sin.

The Bible says:

GALATIANS 6:8

“For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.”

Sin has consequences.

Sometimes those consequences do not show up immediately, and that is part of what makes sin so deceptive.

You can do something wrong and think,

“Nothing happened.”

So you do it again.

Your heart gets a little harder. Something that once bothered you begins bothering you less.

Before long, one step has become several.

That is why what you do after you sin matters so much.

When you know you have taken a step away from God, do not take another one.

The Bible says:

1 JOHN 1:8-9

“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

God does not tell Christians to pretend that we never sin.

He tells us what to do when we do.

Confess it.

That means we become honest with God.

Do not call something a mistake when you know it was sin.

Do not spend all your time explaining why you did it.

If you lied, tell the Lord,

“God, I lied. I was wrong.”

If you lost your temper and said something you should not have said, admit it.

If you went back to something you already knew was wrong, tell God the truth.

He already knows.

Confession is agreeing with Him about what you did.

And look again at the promise:

“He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

That is one reason the daily prayer we talked about earlier is so important.

Jesus taught us to pray,

“And forgive us our debts...”

We do not need to let sin sit in our lives for days, weeks, or months.

When the Lord shows us that something is wrong, we can deal with it.

Get it right.

Do not let one step away become another.

There was another danger in that young man's story.

By the time I met him, he had done things he deeply regretted. He knew some of the decisions he had made had brought terrible consequences into his life.

But instead of those consequences driving him back to God, he seemed almost defeated by them.

Over the following months, I watched him struggle. It was almost as though he thought,

"I have already messed things up this badly. What difference does it make now?"

That is another lie of sin.

You have already sinned, so you might as well keep sinning.

You have already gone this far, so what difference would another step make?

But another step always matters.

And God's mercy has not disappeared.

David learned that.

The Bible calls David a man after God's own heart, yet there came a time when David got terribly far from God.

He committed adultery with Bathsheba.

Then he tried to cover what he had done.

That led to more sin and eventually to the death of Uriah.

David did not get that far in one moment.

Sin kept leading to more sin.

Then the prophet Nathan confronted him and said,

"Thou art the man."

David had a choice.

He could keep covering what he had done, or he could finally agree with God.

The Bible says:

2 SAMUEL 12:13

“And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the LORD.”

He called it what it was.

Sin.

Psalm 51 lets us hear David talking to God afterward.

He prayed:

PSALM 51:1

“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.”

Later he said:

PSALM 51:12

“Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit.”

Notice what David asked for.

“Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation.”

He did not need to be saved again.

He needed his fellowship with God restored.

We talked about that earlier in this book. When you trust Christ, you become God’s child. When you sin, you do not need another salvation.

You need to get right with your Father.

And sometimes getting right with God also means making something right with another person.

If you lied to someone, you may need to tell the truth.

If you said something cruel, you may need to apologize.

If you took something that did not belong to you, you may need to return it.

Forgiveness does not mean every consequence disappears.

David was forgiven, but his sin still brought painful consequences.

The young man riding in my car could get right with God, but getting right with God would not make the ankle bracelet disappear that afternoon.

Sin can leave consequences behind.

But consequences are not a reason to keep running from God.

The Bible says:

LAMENTATIONS 3:22–23

“It is of the LORD’S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not.

They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness.”

I love those words:

“His compassions fail not.”

Maybe there is something in your life right now that you know is not right.

Maybe nobody else knows about it.

Maybe it does not seem like it has caused much damage yet.

Do not wait to see how far it can take you.

Get it right now.

And maybe you are reading this after going much farther than you ever thought you would.

You knew better.

You made decisions you deeply regret.

Do not let shame convince you that the answer is to keep walking away from God.

His mercy has not run out.

Confess your sin.

Receive the forgiveness He promises.

Make right what needs to be made right.

Then get back up.

The Christian life is a walk.

We began this section talking about learning to walk with God for yourself.

There will be times when you stumble.

When you do, do not take another step away from Him.

Turn around.

Get right with God.

And keep walking with Him.

Will You Walk with God?

We began this section with a simple truth:

Your walk with God has to become your own.

A church family can teach you, encourage you, pray for you, and help you. But nobody else can open your Bible for you, pray for you, walk in the Spirit for you, obey for you, or get right with God for you.

You have to make that decision yourself.

So before we go any farther, let me ask you:

Do you want to walk with God?

- ☐ **Yes. I want to walk with God for myself.** I want His Word to have a regular place in my life. I want to pray, walk in the Spirit, obey what God shows me, and get right with Him when I sin.
- ☐ **I am still trying to understand what a personal walk with God looks like, and I would like someone to help me.**

Where Do You Need to Grow?

There is no score here. These questions are simply meant to help you recognize where you are and what your next step may be.

Are you reading your Bible and learning to understand what you read?

- ☐ Yes. The Bible is becoming a regular part of my daily life.
- ☐ I have started, but I am still inconsistent.
- ☐ I need help knowing where to begin or understanding what I read.

Are you learning to pray?

- ☐ Yes. I am learning to talk to God at a regular time and throughout my day.
- ☐ I pray, but I need to become more consistent.
- ☐ I am still unsure how to pray and would like help.

Are you learning to walk in the Spirit?

- ☐ Yes. I understand that I still have a flesh, and I am learning to yield myself to God and depend upon His strength.
- ☐ I understand the battle, but I often let my feelings, emotions, or flesh control my response.
- ☐ I still need help understanding what it means to walk in the Spirit.

Is there something God has shown you that you need to settle before the pressure comes?

- ☐ As far as I know, I am obeying what God has shown me.
- ☐ Yes. There is something I know is right, and I need to make a settled decision about it.
- ☐ I am still trying to understand what the Bible teaches about a decision I am facing.

Is there a sin you keep struggling with?

- ☐ There is no particular repeated struggle I need help with right now.
- ☐ Yes. I recognize where I keep getting tripped up, and I know a step I need to take.
- ☐ Yes. I have been hiding the struggle, and I need to let someone help me.

Is there something you need to get right with God right now?

- ☐ As far as I know, I am walking in fellowship with the Lord.
- ☐ Yes. There is a sin I need to confess and get right with God.
- ☐ Yes. There is also something I need to make right with another person.

My Next Step

You do not have to fix your entire Christian life today.
But you can take the next step.

The next step I need to take in my walk with God is:

Is there someone who could help you take that step?

Growth does not mean reaching a place where you no longer need the Lord. It means learning to walk with Him day by day. Keep opening His Word and learning what He has said. Keep talking to Him in prayer. Walk in the Spirit. Settle what God shows you before the pressure comes. When temptation comes, take the way of escape, and when you sin, get right with God and keep walking.

Now that walk with God needs to reach into the rest of your life. It should affect your home, your relationships, your decisions, and the way you use the life God has given you. That is where we go next:

Future Chapters to Come

LIVE — Live for Him

SERVE — Serve Others

REACH — Give the Gospel

TEACH — Help Others Grow