

FAITH TRAIL GUIDE

BY MATT WOLF

FIRST STEPS
OF
FOLLOWING
JESUS



ARISE
CHURCH DENVER



WRITTEN BY MATT WOLF

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TAKE A STEP

*FAITH IS TAKING THE FIRST STEP
EVEN WHEN YOU DON'T SEE THE WHOLE STAIRCASE.*

— MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

You just made the best decision of your life! You decided to follow Jesus. Congrats! All other decisions pale in comparison to this one.

You might see a lot of change about your life right away. Or it might seem like most everything around you is the same. Whatever you're experiencing, know that God is working to transform your life into something better.

Jesus declared, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10b). Jesus offers not only eternal life, but he also promises the full, better life now.

Realize that a decision to follow Jesus is like knocking over the first domino. It will begin to impact your personal life, your mental health, your relationships, your work, your thinking, your feelings—one thing after another until everything gets better.

A word of warning: "better" doesn't mean easier. Following Jesus doesn't mean all problems go away or there won't be hard stuff. But it does mean Jesus will work in all things for your good (Romans 8:28). And that he will be with you to strengthen you through it (Isaiah 41:10). Following Jesus can even make some things harder. Some won't understand your decision or may even hate you because of it. That's ok. They haven't experienced what you have (yet). Jesus actually promised us that would happen...and that it would lead to more happiness and reward in the future (Matthew 5:11-12).

So you may be asking yourself: what do I do next? This six day guide will help you over the next week take a number of steps, but first you need to learn this aspect of following Jesus: take the next step. To follow him doesn't mean you'll know all that's coming ahead. You won't ever know what next year or ten years from now, or even tomorrow will bring, but you can see the next step. So whatever the next step for you is: take it. And keep taking the next step and the next step until you make it to the end.



I once went on a hike to see an ancient ruin in Canyonlands National Park in Southeastern Utah. I had never been to the ruin before, but photos of the destination (a cave on the side of a cliff, 600 feet up from the bottom of the canyon, with views of both the Colorado and Green Rivers) looked incredible—I had to go there! There were no signs about where to park. The trail wasn't marked. I was nervous. There was even a point on the hike where it appeared to be a sheer drop off with no path forward. But I made it. How? Someone had gone before me, and I followed in his footsteps. I found a video online where someone had walked the entire trail, step by step. I watched his video multiple times. I even saved it on my phone for a reference. Thus, when I didn't know where to step next, I watched where my "guide" had gone, and took the next step. It was scary at points—especially towards the end when we had to traverse loose rocks on a cliff face. But when we got to the destination, it was totally worth it.



You definitely don't know all the steps ahead of you in your journey of faith. But there's good news—Jesus went ahead of you, so you can follow him. And he left us more than a YouTube video. Jesus went first to show us the way (which you'll discover in Step 2). He invites us to talk to him at any time and get help through prayer (Step 3). He offers us the Bible to show us how to live (Step 4). He challenges us to get into a community that will help encourage us along the way (Step 5). Then he invites us to help others follow him (Step 6). So move on to Step 2 to see the next domino fall—to come one step closer to the ultimate destination—one that will even put Canyonlands to shame.



UNDERSTAND THE GOSPEL

*YOU ARE MORE SINFUL THAN YOU COULD EVER DARE IMAGINE AND YOU ARE MORE LOVED AND
ACCEPTED THAN YOU COULD EVER DARE HOPE—AT THE SAME TIME.*

— TIM KELLER

It was the most important interview of my life up to that point. I had applied for a full tuition scholarship that would make it possible for me to go to seminary and become a pastor. I woke up early to pray and prepare for the phone interview. Then I accidentally fell back asleep .

The vibration of my phone jolted me awake. I fumbled around to find my phone. I answered. But I was out of it. In my grogginess I couldn't think straight. I attempted to respond to the questions for the interviewer. But it was pathetic. I blew it. I was now gonna need to find some way to get tens of thousands of dollars I didn't have to pay for school.

But a couple of weeks later I received a letter in the mail. I got the scholarship. I didn't deserve it. I certainly didn't earn it. In fact, I blew it. Yet still, I received a reward I didn't deserve. It's kind of like that when God saves us.

The Bible makes it clear that “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Romans 10:13) So if you said a prayer to receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior, **YOU ARE SAVED!**

Yet you may be wondering: how does that actually work? The answer: the gospel.

The word “gospel” literally means “good news.” And when you understand the good news of Jesus, everything makes sense.

For good news to matter, it must mean that things are bad. And they are. You know in your own life you’ve experienced bad things: depression, anger, anxiety. You’ve had bad things happen: hurt, broken relationships, grief, financial hardship, health issues. You’ve seen bad things: conflict, suffering, death. Some of this bad just happens around you. Some of the bad stuff you were a part of, by decisions you made with bad consequences, or doing things that go against your own moral code.

And whether you’ve realized it or not you have sinned, which means to fall short of God’s moral code. And because of all this, you specifically, and our world generally, were separated from God. Romans 3:23 declares, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

That’s the bad news.

The good news is that God wants to make things right, and he did so by sending his Jesus.

God sees all this hurt and loves us. Even when we turn against him, break his moral code, and don’t even care that we do, he still loves us. He cares about you. He wants you. So God sent his own Son to be born in human form—100% human, just like us. This Son of God, Jesus, was born in a small town to otherwise forgettable parents. He grew up and began working a normal job (probably as a stone mason). But when he was about 30 years old, he began to tell others about God’s good news (the gospel): That God wanted to make all things right.



To show God's heart, Jesus loved the poor and hurting, hung out with "sinners," and performed many miracles to prove that God was more than just talk.

Jesus was tempted to do wrong and be selfish. He suffered like the rest of us. Yet he lived a perfect life, fulfilling God's moral code. Still, people were upset with Jesus. He rebuked the religious people who acted like they were better than everyone else. Those religious people arrested him and executed him on a wooden cross. The perfect Son of God was killed..

This was all part of God's plan. For on the Cross, a transaction took place. Jesus, who deserved heavenly reward, was given a hellish punishment. Through that cosmic imbalance, God enables anyone who trusts in Jesus to receive Jesus' heavenly reward. The apostle Paul explained, "[Jesus] Christ never sinned! But God treated him as a sinner, so Christ could make us acceptable to God." (2 Corinthians 5:21). One theologian labeled this the "Wonderful Exchange."

To top it all off, God proved he has the power to free us and give us the better life because on the third day he raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus then appeared to over 500 people over the span of 40 days. They touched his physical body and shared meals with him. Jesus' death makes a way to be right with God and his resurrection proves that it works.

Just like I got a full-tuition scholarship even though I didn't deserve it, God gives us a better life now and eternal life ahead even though we don't deserve it. Opening the letter to find out about my scholarship was such good news. I'm hopeful that reading this will help you understand the even better news, the gospel of Jesus.

Now that you understand this new relationship you have with a God who loves you, move next to Step 3. You'll discover what it means to have this God on your side—because help is always just a phone call prayer away.

DISCOVER PRAYER



*“THE PROPER WAY FOR A MAN TO PRAY”
SAID DEACON LEMUEL KEYES,
“AND THE ONLY PROPER ATTITUDE
IS DOWN UPON HIS KNEES.”
“NAY, I SHOULD SAY THE WAY TO PRAY,”
SAID REVEREND DR. WISE
“IS STANDING STRAIGHT WITH OUTSTRETCHED ARMS
AND RAPT AND UPTURNED EYES.”
“OH, NO, NO, NO.” SAID ELDER SNOW
“SUCH POSTURE IS TOO PROUD
A MAN SHOULD PRAY WITH EYES FAST CLOSED
AND HEAD CONTRITELY BOWED.”
“IT SEEMS TO ME HIS HANDS SHOULD BE
ASTUTELY CLASPED IN FRONT.
WITH BOTH THUMBS A-POINTING TOWARD THE GROUND.”
SAID REVEREND HUNT.
“LAS’ YEAR I FELL IN HODCKINS WELL
HEAD FIRST,” SAID CYRUS BROWN,
“WITH BOTH MY HEELS A-STICKIN’ UP,
MY HEAD A-POINTING DOWN,
AN’ I MADE A PRAYER RIGHT THERE AN’ THEN:
BEST PRAYER I EVER SAID:
THE PRAYINGEST PRAYER I EVER PRAYED,
A-STANDIN ON MY HEAD.”*

– *“THE PRAYER OF CYRUS BROWN” BY SAM WALTER FOSS*

If you ask ten religious people how to pray, they'll give you ten different methods. But praying isn't about how you hold your hands or close your eyes or sit crossed-legged or anything like that. Prayer isn't about the HOW, it's about the WHO.

Prayer is simply communicating with God. You can tell God what you're thinking and feeling. You can tell him you're angry. You can tell him you're angry at him. You can ask him for big things, like someone's cancer getting healed. You can ask him for small things, like finding your lost wallet. You don't need to use fancy words. You don't have to memorize flowery words or recite incantations.

In fact, Jesus railed against people who made prayer too fancy (Matthew 6:5-8). Jesus, God's Son, is right now seated at the right hand of the Father. He is our savior, and he is also our friend (John 15:14). When we pray, he takes our feelings, our wishes, and our complaints to the Father on our behalf.

So if you haven't started doing it, I'd encourage you to start praying everyday. Pick a time that you can keep consistently. Perhaps first thing in the morning, or before a meal. Then just talk to God. Tell him what you're thinking. Ask him to help you with whatever is on your heart. If you know how to talk to a person, you know how to talk to God. God is a person. That's why it's not about the HOW, but about the WHO. Try it for yourself. Even right now.

Once you've tried praying, it's time to move onto Step 4: hearing from God through his Word.



GET IN GOD'S WORD

It's been banned more than any other book in history. It's the most hated book. And it's been burned more than any other book ever. At the same time, it's the most read book in history. It's been translated into the most languages of any book. And it's the bestselling book of all time.

What book am I talking about? The Bible.

The Bible is actually a compilation of 66 books. It was written over a span of 1600 years by 40 different authors on 3 continents and in 3 different languages. It was written by scholars and shepherds, kings and commanders, prophets and poets, farmers and fishermen, businessmen and doctors. It was written in palaces and in prisons, in caves and on ships. And it contains one unified message.

The Bible is God speaking to us. He sometimes speaks to us through our conscience or through other means, but the primary way he speaks is through this book. That's why we call it "God's Word."

So I want to encourage you to get in God's Word.

In Hebrews 4:12 we read that "The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." In other words, The Spirit of God works through the Word of God to transform the people of God. God speaks to us through his Word.

I encourage you to start reading some of the Bible every day. As you read it, you'll find God speaking to you. Sometimes he'll tell you to stop sinning. Sometimes he'll encourage you to do good. He will inspire you and challenge you. He will comfort you and convict you.

Wondering where to start? Try reading through the book of James. James was Jesus' brother, and he wrote a letter to give practical help to followers of Jesus. You can find a 13 day Bible reading plan through the book of James [here](#). Once you finish that, try the book of John, one of the four accounts about Jesus. A 21 day plan for that book is [here](#). Every morning, I immediately reach for my phone. Instead of wasting time on social media, feeling stressed by email, or becoming fearful because of the news, I've made it my habit to immediately open up the YouVersion Bible App and read the Bible. It completely changes how I think, feel, and respond throughout the rest of my day. So get in God's Word...you'll be glad you did.

Try it right now. Take a few minutes and read God's Word. Read it slowly. Ask God to help you understand it before you start. Then ask him to help use it to change your life when you're done. Then, you can move on to Step 5: finding your community.

A background of a topographic map with white contour lines on a light gray background, showing various elevations and valleys.

>>> CHOOSE COMMUNITY

*NO MAN IS AN ISLAND ENTIRE OF ITSELF: EVERY MAN
IS A PIECE OF THE CONTINENT, A PART OF THE MAIN
—JOHN DONNE*

Have you ever heard that you are the average of your five closest friends? Whether it's the size of your house, your income, or even how much you weigh, the community around us impacts us even when we don't think about it.

This can be for your bad or good. On one hand “Bad company corrupts good character” (1 Corinthians 15:33). On the other hand, “Walk with the wise and become wise” (Proverbs 13:20a). The people you surround yourself with will shape who you become, for good or bad. So choose wisely!

A study out of Harvard tracked 724 people for over 85 years and through three generations. Their biggest takeaway? More than a diet or the choice of a career or the amount one exercises, the way to a happier and healthier life is good relationships.

The same is absolutely true for your faith. You cannot follow Jesus on your own. And you were never meant to. Jesus chose his twelve disciples. When he sent them out, he sent them out two-by-two. Even the heroes of our faith needed a buddy. For that reason, you need to choose community.

In a world in which you can work from home and get meals delivered to your home without speaking to another human being, loneliness is an epidemic. Don't be like everyone else. Choose community.

We believe you need two practices in this regard:

1. Worship Weekly. Show up week in and week out to learn, grow, and to be with likeminded people who are imperfectly pursuing Jesus together. Set your alarm right now. Clear your calendar. Make sure you get in-person or online every single Sunday to worship weekly with your church. Subscribe on YouTube or on your favorite podcast app.

2. Get in a Group. The large “crowd” of the church is fun and reminds us of our connection to the bigger whole, but a small group of 5 to 20 people helps us develop the friendships we need for life. We have several group types available at Arise, so pick one and show up. If it’s not the right fit, try a different one. You need those friends to encourage and challenge you. Or even if you don’t at any given moment, there’s someone in that group who needs you. Don’t deprive them! So sign up for a group at arisedenver.com/groups.

Studies have shown that choosing a church community through these two practices is able to make your life better. It has been found that being a regular at church leads to a better immune system, lower blood pressure, less substance abuse, higher GPAs for kids, less poverty, less mental illness, stronger marriages, better sex, less loneliness, and overall longer and happier lives. After reviewing the research, one Harvard Epidemiologist even declared in a USA Today column, “Religion may be a miracle drug.”

So please, choose community! Don’t delay...your better life depends on it!

There’s only one more step left in this short guide. So when you’re ready, move on to Step 6: share your story.



SHARE YOUR STORY >>>>>>

CHRISTIANITY IS JUST ONE BEGGAR TELLING ANOTHER BEGGAR WHERE TO FIND BREAD.

—D.T. NILES

I was nervous the first time I shared my faith journey with a friend, Tim, who wasn't a follower of Jesus. Would he think I was a weirdo? Would he stop being my friend? However, when I shared my story it resonated with Tim. A few weeks later Tim decided to follow Jesus himself.

You tell people about your favorite coffee shop. You take a photo of “the best burger ever!!!!” and post it to social media to share it with your friends. You tell someone who is hurting about the doctor who helped you. We are all “evangelists” about the things that matter to us. How much more so should we be evangelists of the actual “evangel”? (Evangel is Latin for “good news”)? If Jesus helped you, wouldn't you want to share about him to help others?

We often get worried that we won't know what to say in case someone asks tricky questions about faith. But when Jesus healed a blind man, that man answered with the simple truth of his own story. When people asked him whether Jesus was a sinner, he didn't know the answer. So the blind man replied honestly, “Whether he is a sinner or not, I do not know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!” (John 9:25b). What did the blind man do? He shared his story.

Notice how the blind man's story contained three parts:

1. Before: "I was blind." First, you share what your life was like before Jesus: depressed, unfulfilled, guilt-ridden, angry, thinking you would get to heaven because you were a good person, etc.
2. Who: He referenced Jesus in his answer: the one who healed his blindness and saved him. When you share your story, the second thing you should do is point to the one who saved you. Don't say: "I cleaned up my act." or "I became a better person." Point to who saved you: Jesus.
3. After: "But now I see!" Jesus transforms our lives in so many ways.

Not everything becomes perfect, and we certainly continue to sin, but he has changed us. Tell them what is new after finding Jesus: you feel peace now, have new hope, know you're forgiven, etc.

So will you boldly share your story to begin helping others follow Jesus? That's our mission. We are saved to help others become saved. We follow Jesus to help others follow Jesus. We get to be a part of seeing other people's lives transformed around us.

Practically speaking, we want you to hear your story. Please follow this [link](#). It will give you a sample template so you can write out your story.

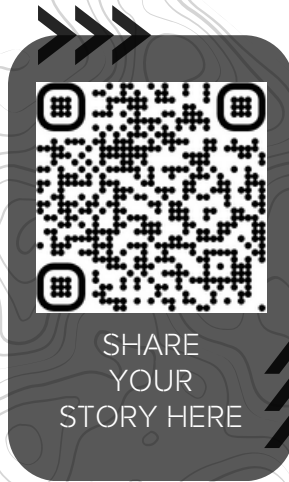
Then please go and share your story with someone you know.

As part of sharing your story, we want you to take the step to get baptized. Jesus commanded that all who follow him should go public with their faith through baptism. According to the Bible, baptism is going down into the water and coming up out of it. The water represents your sins being washed away. Going down represents dying to sin. Coming up out of the water represents being raised to new life.

At Arise, we believe that everyone who follows Jesus should make the decision to be baptized. If you were baptized as a baby, we ask you to now make the decision for yourself. Even Jesus got baptized as a grown man. This is your step of faith. If you fill out the form at the QR below, make sure to check the box for "I want to get baptized" and we'll follow up with you.

This is the final step in this Faith Trail Guide. I hope it helped you. We want to continue to help you grow in your faith, so join us Sunday to Worship Weekly in-person or online, keep taking steps of faith, and look for our GROW class to continue moving forward in the better life.

Questions? Concerns? Feel free to email me (mwolf@arisedenver.com) and I would be happy to help!





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