

the first step

Come to a sincere belief in God, and recognising Jesus as our Saviour and Lord, put all our trust in his sacrifice for our sins, turning away from them and committing our lives to him unconditionally

Christianity should be the most exciting, fulfilling and rewarding experience that this life has to offer. It should be about such things as joy, peace, dynamic service and (above all) love - a passionate, consuming love of God *and* those he has created. Christians are people called to make an *impact* on others, to change lives - and to have their own lives changed beyond anything they could hope or dream.

For some, it's just like that. Yet there are many people in churches who rarely experience the awesome power of God at work in their lives...and some who *never* do.

Most often, all that separates those who enjoy God's best plan for their lives - from those that don't - is simply a matter of *how* they have understood the gospel message. People who have a good grasp of what Jesus has done for them - *and what their response needs to be* - will always be eligible for everything God has for them. The great news is that we can all be people like that - whether we're just starting out as Christians, or we've 'been around' for years. This programme is designed to help Christians achieve that full potential, and so we must begin by laying a 'firm foundation'...by getting some real insight into the gospel message *and* how it will become powerful and effective for us. We start where our relationship with God starts...with *belief!*

'Everything is possible for him who believes.'
Mark 9:23.

Jesus has quite a bit to say about believing, about faith. For instance, in the Gospel of John, he says this: "*I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life*". (John 5:24) That's great news - eternal life - but what exactly does it mean to believe? The question is an important one, because eternal life is *conditional* - it depends on believing God.

Believing God, of course, doesn't just mean believing he exists. As the book of James points out, "*Even the demons believe that - and shudder*". (James 2:19) Believing Jesus is not just believing he is telling the truth - he *is* the truth. But there's more - much more - to a belief that changes everything: It has to be a certain **quality** of belief...

the quality of true belief

True faith, the kind that saves - the kind that empowers - is a gift from God. It's a free gift, **but it should always produce a response.** To put it simply: **What we truly believe - we will act upon.**

If, for example, we believe we are sick, we'll go to the doctor. We'll act upon our belief. How much more, when we truly believe God, will we do what is necessary to obtain all *he* offers?

Of course, there are many reasons why we might be slow to respond to God (though no good ones) *but, if we have real faith, we will surely come to a point when we put all our trust in him.* Let's return to the example of the doctor for a moment. If we are sick, we'll certainly go - but we may not go immediately. We might be frightened of what the doctor will do; we might think the treatment will be too expensive, or perhaps we just want to 'give it a while' to see if we get better on our own. We could even have a poor understanding of what the doctor can offer - but until we place ourselves in the doctor's care, the problems remain, the symptoms remain, and the quality of life is far worse than it should be. God, though, is not a mere doctor. He is infinitely more trustworthy, infinitely more caring and powerful, and he will gladly give us all we need for this life and beyond. We only need to respond to him. Genuine response, though, obviously means we are responding to *something*. There has to be belief first. We don't act in the hope that God is there and will be impressed - if faith without action means nothing, we can be sure that action without faith doesn't work either! So, what do we need to believe? It's time to look at *the gospel message...*

the gospel - in a nutshell

There are really **two** messages in the gospels. The first message is Christ - who he is, and what he has achieved for us. The second message is what we need to do about the first message - it is about our **response**. Before we look at our response (our acting on what we believe) let's remind ourselves of that first message of the gospels - who Christ is, and what he has achieved for us. A very basic outline of *that* message might go something like this...

...unconditional love

Jesus Christ is, by his very nature, God. Through him, all things that exist - or have ever existed - were brought into being. Chief among these creations is humanity, designed expressly for the purpose of enjoying a permanent, loving and joyous relationship with God.

Exercising free-will, humanity chose to rebel against God - severing the relationship by embracing sin. At once a chasm opened, a divide which no person could cross. On one side God in unimaginable glory - perfect in love, justice, holiness and power. On the other, the entire human race - fully deserving the death they had chosen, their now pointless lives marred by sin, sickness and disease.

In unfathomable love and mercy, Christ set aside his glory and came to his creation, to take upon himself the full consequences of our sin - past, present and future. He came as one of us, sharing our vulnerabilities, our temptations, our griefs. His life was without sin.

During his time as one of us he gave ultimate definition, by his actions, to every known virtue. He modelled perfect humanity for us. By his words, he gave us deep insights into the nature, promises and requirements of our Creator, and he gave us a programme for life - the path of discipleship. His supreme act of love was to take upon himself the torture of the cross, and the unspeakable burden of our sin, in order to open the door of salvation for the helpless human race.

unconditional love...
...conditional relationship

The love of God is not conditional - that is to say, he loves us *whether or not* we respond to him. *But being loved is not the same as being in a relationship.* A relationship with God is conditional - it requires us to respond. We hear the gospel message - and if we believe it, we will act upon it.

Our response begins when we first believe God - when we have our 'conversion experience'. Essentially we are responding to the work of the Holy Spirit, who is enabling us to believe. The Holy Spirit is absolutely central to every aspect of our relationship with God, but here we are only looking at that first moment of belief. The book of Acts (2:14-47) gives us a wonderful account of such a moment. Peter preached the good news at the feast of Pentecost, and the Jews believed. Their first question was this: "*Brothers, what shall we do?*" They realised that a response was required. Peter told them to repent, be baptised and receive. But it didn't stop there...

The 'moment of belief' is a *beginning*, not an end. It is the start of that relationship with God, but only the start. Relationships are never mature or fully functional overnight - and that must be especially true when we consider the relationship between God and someone who has just met him! In that same account from Acts, we also see what the Jews *did* about their new relationship: "*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*" They acted upon what they believed.

Let's cast our minds back to that outline of the gospel message. It tells us a couple of things we need to know - who Jesus is and what he has done. People sometimes hear such a message in a church service or an evangelistic event - in fact, the content is not that much different from that Pentecost sermon. They may make a 'decision' for Christ based on the limited information it contains, but new life is not just about agreeing the gospel is true - it is about fully embracing and acting upon the *implications* of the gospel. For example, one of the clearest messages of the gospel is that the existence of God (and his love for humanity) is by far the most important fact in the universe. The obvious implication of that, is that *he* has to be by far the most important factor in our lives. We need to respond to him in a way that reflects this fact, and there *is* only one way...

unconditional love...
conditional relationship...
and the condition is...
...unconditional surrender!

These two words - *unconditional surrender* - sum up the second part of the gospel message - what our response needs to be. It is the only thing that Christ demands, and it is the only thing that will do. We need to surrender our lives, without precondition, to God - and we do that because of who he is, and what Jesus has already accomplished for us. The bible tells us that, and the price paid tells us that.

Unconditional surrender is not passive - it's *active*. When we surrender to God, we accept his terms, his conditions, and we actively seek to carry out his will. We make it our business to find out all we can about his nature, promises and requirements, and we act upon what we find out. We obey. Jesus never said, 'If you love me, you will follow some of my suggestions' - he commands obedience.

Of course, we can only obey who (or what) we know. At the beginning of our relationship with God, we may know very little. Like the Jews at Pentecost, we need to know more and, also like them, we need to pursue that ever deepening relationship.

a relationship to die for...

Jesus didn't submit to the cross so that he could become our lifestyle accessory. He is not an insurance policy (to be renewed on Sundays) - nor is he a lucky charm, to be invoked in times of need. He went to the cross to allow the possibility of *eternal relationship*. Eternal relationship doesn't begin when we get to heaven - *it begins here and now, or it doesn't begin at all!* What we are called to is a dynamic, joyous, richly fulfilled and deeply significant relationship - *right now!* We are not just called to Christianity, but to friendship and even brother and sisterhood with Christ. We are called to experience, in this life, what it really means to **know** God.

There are costs. Following Jesus may seem demanding at first, though as we draw close to God we will begin to see any sacrifice as small by comparison to what he has done (and continues to do!) for us. *The truth is, God asks nothing of us that's not for our own benefit. He wants us to be able to enjoy the quality of relationship with him that we were designed to have.*

It is a progressive relationship. God is the God of infinite love, infinite power, infinite knowledge and wisdom. There is always *more*. On the path of discipleship, we can expect to experience giving and receiving pure love. We will start to reflect the attitudes of our Saviour, we will enjoy the privilege of *his* service in *his* power, and we will see others through the eyes of Christ. There will be times when we will *know* that we can do anything God tells us we can do, and be anything he tells us to be. Our lives will be transformed as we embrace the real purpose of life, and through it all, we will have an ever-growing passion for Jesus - we will be hopelessly in love. Yet we won't have arrived, because there's always more... but it all has to start with the quality of faith that prompts action.

Let's look back at where we've got to so far. Here's a summary of the concepts we have been considering, together with a few related issues:

1 **Jesus went to the cross to make possible an eternal relationship between God and humanity.** *He offers new life now and everlasting life in the future. We accept both, or reject both. They are not divisible.*

2 **God's love is unconditional.** *Love is God's nature, and that doesn't change -whether or not we choose to experience his love.*

3 **The relationship with God that brings life is conditional.** *It depends on belief and responses consistent with belief - what we truly believe we will act upon.*

4 **The bible tells us, in summary, that the required response to God amounts to unconditional surrender.** *Starting with belief and repentance ,we abandon ourselves to God, allowing him full access to every area of our lives.*

5 **Unconditional surrender to God is active.** *We pursue our relationship with God. We acknowledge him to be the most important factor in our lives, and do all we can to deepen our relationship with him.*

6 **A relationship with God changes our lives.** *New Testament scripture, and the lives it records, reveal that a relationship with God should be dynamic, fulfilling, passionate, progressive and life-changing. We may also note, that the quality of the relationship is directly related to the quality of our response to God.*

This session begins with a look at the first step. The first step is not a matter of life or death - *it's much more important than that*. It has eternal implications. Put simply, it is the 'entry requirement' into an eternal relationship with God. Nothing short of it will do. We cannot know God in any meaningful way unless we have come to this point, nor can we be genuine followers of Jesus. Without this quality of belief and commitment, we could never be effective Christians, because the ability to successfully follow Christ depends on being in relationship with him. Imagine the drudgery of trying to live God's way without God, the inevitable failure and disappointment: That's what many people were doing when Christ came! But we are offered the joys (and challenges) of a dynamic and significant relationship, if we only believe. Let's look again at that first step:

Come to a sincere belief in God, and recognising Jesus as our Saviour and Lord, put all our trust in his sacrifice for our sins, turning away from them and committing our lives to him unconditionally.

The words of the first step may seem familiar. At a glance, it could be a short version of any 'sinner's prayer' - but it is understanding and acting on that last word - *unconditionally* - which can make the difference between defeat and victorious Christian living!

It may be that we are already on the path of discipleship, having responded to God with all our hearts. Perhaps we know the joy of walking with Jesus, growing daily more in love with him, and maybe our Christian life is richly satisfying, joyous and exciting. Well, that's as it should be, but there's always more. Perhaps, though, that isn't the way it's been for us. We might have made a commitment, but we don't see the change. We don't seem to be turning into people like Jesus. We don't have the love, the joy, the power, the peace. Or, there is another possibility: There might be change - slow, painful change. There's occasionally love (of a sort), and there even seem to be moments approaching joy, power or peace. But most often there is frustration, there are frequent lapses into sin and there are times when we wonder if we're ever going to get it right. There may be a sense that we are losing an unequal battle.

The first possibility has an obvious cause. We have believed, and we have acted upon what we have believed - we have taken the first step. We are in a dynamic, life-changing relationship with God. The other two scenarios have an equally obvious cause. If either of them sum up our experience, we have not fully acted upon what we believe. Whether it is because we're not completely trusting Jesus, hanging on to some sin, reserving some right, holding unforgiveness - or whatever else, it has to be dealt with or we can't move on. Unconditional surrender means we hold nothing back and we reserve no rights. As a matter of fact, when we are truly free in Christ we may see our previous 'rights' as nothing more than the chains and shackles of worldliness. For example, the 'right' to retaliate, to bear a grudge - even to be honoured - are all based in *self-love*. Such 'rights' are the 'prison uniform' of those who are still captive to the selfish nature. God has something better for us - the right to be his sons and daughters; to know *real* freedom and *real* love...to enjoy life to the full!

the Big Question

The big question is simply this... *Do we want the relationship God offers more than anything else?* If we do, we need to be ready to trust him completely...with every area of our lives. We also need to be willing to tackle any and all things which stand in the way of that relationship - to turn away from every action and attitude that we know is wrong. That could sound a little tough, but we should remember that God wants us to succeed even more than we do ourselves. Our willingness and application - plus his power - can overcome *any* obstacle, and that power is freely available to all who put Jesus at the centre of their lives!

Let's consider a prayer of commitment. It will be read out at the first session, but we need to think about the implications of praying like this, because it is a prayer of total submission. We should be absolutely sure that what we are saying to God is what we honestly mean. There is an element of repentance in the prayer, the details of which would be for us to deal with privately. If previous commitments have been broken to any degree, they should also be included in personal repentance. But whatever commitments we have made in the past, *the one that matters is the one we act on*. We'll be looking to put this prayer into practice through the programme, and to really enjoy a quality relationship with God. We will be invited to make the prayer in the group, but should only do so if we are ready for the life God offers:

A prayer of commitment

Heavenly Father,

I believe in you, and I believe Jesus gave his life so that I could have that relationship with you for which I was created. I humbly acknowledge his sacrifice for me on the cross, paying the price of my sin. I am sorry for all my sin - everything I have ever thought, said or done that was not worthy of you, to this very moment. I repent and turn away from all of it, asking for your forgiveness. I surrender my life - everything I am - to you. I hold nothing back, reserve no rights, and make no conditions. I ask you to be the centre of my life, and the whole of my life.

I am determined to pursue an ever-deeper relationship with you, and to love you with all of my heart. I will do this whatever my circumstances, whatever it takes. I invite your Holy Spirit to work powerfully within in me, so that he may enable me to live out these commitments I make to you today.

I thank you in the name of Jesus, Amen.

If we have prayed this and meant it, we have taken the first step. We have new life, we are in a precious, eternal relationship with our creator. After the next session, the rest of the programme is about how today's decision works in practice. - how we become *everything* God intends us to be. Let's enjoy it!

Comments and questions for the group meeting

We all have a contribution to make in the group, and we can all benefit from considering each other's views and questions. Perhaps something about the first step has made a particular impact, or maybe you feel it would be helpful to discuss some aspect of it. If so, jot it down here and share it with the rest of us!

it's self-assessment time!

Let's take a few moments to consider our relationship with God *up until today*. It may be that we already had the quality of relationship that Christ gave his life for. We may have fully accepted the gift of faith and be continually acting upon it and enjoying its fruits. If that is our situation today we can rejoice, be grateful and eagerly anticipate what more the Lord has for us. If our situation is other than that - for whatever reason - then that can change.... but it's up to us!

We've looked at the life God offers, and we've looked at how we can have that life. Now it's self-assessment time! How have we really been doing - up to now - in our walk with God? The questions below will give us a good understanding of how our relationship with God has progressed. Nobody else need see our answers (they are for ourselves alone) but we will return to them towards the end of the programme, to give us an indication of how far we've come.

1 - 10's

On a scale of one to ten, where one is very little and ten is lots, how do you honestly rate yourself in the following aspects of Christianity?

	Score
1 <i>You and God</i>	
a) How aware are you of God's presence in your life?	-----
b) How aware are you of God's actions in your life?	-----
2 <i>How active are you in...</i>	
a) Prayer?	-----
b) Worship?	-----
c) Bible study?	-----
d) Evangelism?	-----

3 *Service*

- a) To what extent is God using your life for His purposes? -----
- b) How active are you in church life? -----
- c) In supporting other Christians? -----
- d) In your community? -----

4 *You and others*

- a) How effectively do you resist temptations? -----
- b) To what extent are you able to love others as Christ loves you? -----
- c) How easy do you find it to forgive other people? -----

5 *The 'fruit of the Spirit'. (Galatians 5:22-23)*

On the same scale (1-10) to what extent do you see the following attributes in your life?

- a) Love? -----
- b) Joy? -----
- c) Peace? -----
- d) Patience? -----
- e) Kindness? -----
- f) Goodness? -----
- g) Faithfulness? -----
- h) Gentleness? -----
- i) Self-control? -----

6 *Trust.*

To what extent have you been trusting in God? -----

7 *Response.*

To what extent have you been responding to God? -----

8 *Understanding.*

How well do you understand what it means to follow Christ? -----

How did you do?

Perhaps you achieved a 'perfect' score. If so, stick around - you'll be a great encouragement to everyone else! If not, you're part of the vast majority of Christians whose experience is, to some degree, less than God wants to give them. This programme is all about the dynamic, authentic Christian experience. It's available, but we've got to want it - *and we've got to want it more than we want anything else.*

introducing...the daily journal

We want our relationship with God to be a *quality* relationship - to experience the joy, power and fulfilment of Christ living within us. The journal is created to give our relationship with God a significant boost for a small investment of time. It will help us to keep him uppermost in our minds *through each day*, so that we can also develop as Christians during all the time which *isn't* spent in church. The journal includes prayers, short readings and points to ponder, all designed to help us know God - and perhaps ourselves - better. Some of the content never varies - for example, it is always right to start each day by thanking God for it, and committing the day to him. As the programme progresses and our relationship with God deepens, so we may see a greater depth develop in our daily responses to him. Always, though, the journal will be geared to where we are on the programme. There are no unachievable goals here - because the *only* goal is to get into the habit of thinking about life, its events and ourselves from a Christian perspective. Even those of us with a complete aversion to writing can benefit from considering the questions raised, though there is particular value in taking the thought (and small amount of time) for a brief written response. 'Day One' of the journal is always the day *after* each session, and there is a 'mini-review' on the *sixth* day - the day before the next session.

today... and every day!

Morning Prayer

Before doing anything else, a short time of prayer containing the following elements: Thanks to God for who He is, what Jesus has done, and for His love and provision (including the new day). Commit the day to Him, asking for His protection and presence.

Through the day

Involve God in your daily life, seeking His guidance in situations as they arise, and endeavour to respond to people as you believe Jesus would.

In the evening

Set aside a little time, every evening, to pray, complete the journal and consider the readings. Prayer should include thanksgiving, repentance, prayer for others and for yourself - particularly that God's perfect will should be completely fulfilled in your life. Pray for each member of your group (by name). Matters arising through the day, personal situations or difficulties should also be brought before God. Invite the Holy Spirit to guide you in your prayers, and be open to his leading.

Week One – Day One

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible Reading - John 3:16-18

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about.... *What we truly believe, we will act upon*

Day Two

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible Reading - Ephesians 1:13-14

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about... *The only reasonable and meaningful response to Christ is unconditional surrender*

Day Three

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible Reading - Ephesians 2:1-5

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about... *The quality of our relationship with God is directly related to our response to Him*

Day Four

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible Reading - Galatians 5:19-22

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about... *The work of the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential to the Christian - and not just for the 'fruit of the Spirit'. From belief and new birth, through empowerment to live as real disciples - even as our guarantee of eternal life, we are entirely dependent on the Spirit of God. Let's not just give Him a free hand in our lives, let's welcome Him*

Day Five

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible Reading - 1 Peter 1:13-15

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about... *There is no limit to what we can do - and what we can be - in Christ, unless we impose a limit on what he can do in our lives*

Day Six

The weekly review

In your relationship with God, what has been the highlight of the week?

What have you found most challenging or difficult?

Have you been aware of God's care for you this week?

Has God intervened in your life - answers to prayer etc.?

Have you been able to pray consistently throughout the week?

Can you think of any areas in your relationship with God that could be improved and, if so, how are you going to tackle them?

In times of trouble or temptation, how easy is it for you to seek the help of

- a) God?
- b) other Christians?

What has been the most encouraging aspect of this past week?

The 'weekly review' is intended to bring our relationship with God into focus, and perhaps give us a little encouragement. Though it is for 'our eyes only', we can share aspects of it in the group - if we feel it might be beneficial to ourselves or others.

PREPARATION FOR THE SECOND SESSION.

Please prepare for the second session by *prayerfully* reading the next chapter, noting down any comments or questions that you'd like to bring up in the group.