

Stage 1: Starting your life with Jesus

Who is this course for?

This course is meant for new followers of Jesus Christ. It will help you to understand, and to take, the first steps into your new life as a believer.

We realise that you may have already looked at some of the topics in this course (e.g. if you have been on an Alpha Course). But we still suggest that you take a fresh look at them. You may find that, now you have decided to follow Jesus, they have much more meaning than before.

What does the course cover?

The course is split into three booklets, each with four sessions:

Starting your life with Jesus

- What following Jesus means
- Baptism in water
- Being Spirit-filled
- The importance of belonging

Growing in your relationship

- Making sense of the Bible
- Talking to God
- Changing your lifestyle
- Handling your resources

Going the distance

- Staying on course
- Getting involved
- Sharing about Jesus with others
- Helping others to grow

How should the course be used?

First Steps is not a course to go through by yourself. You should get together regularly with another, more experienced believer (we will call this person your **mentor** in this course) and discuss each session with them.

If you are already part of a 'small group' in a church, it helps if the mentor is in the same group so you can get to know them. See below for more about small groups.

You may find that one session a week suits you. But you can go through the course more quickly or slowly if you both agree to this. You can go through a session in about 45-60 minutes.

Each session of the course has five parts (which spell '**CLEAR**');

Connect

At the start of each session, you will talk with your mentor about how life has gone since the last session. It's good to share any success stories, as this shows that your life is changing. It's also helpful to share any problems, so your mentor or small group can help you.

Learn

Each session, you will look at what following Jesus means. You will read verses from the Bible together, and there are questions to discuss. As you do this, you'll learn how Jesus wants you to live. There won't be a test on what you know – it's not like being in school! But you will need to be honest and ready to do what God wants.

Express

This is your chance to think deeply about what you have learned and express your thoughts to your mentor and to God. As you pray together, God will help you to know him more closely.

Ask

You may have questions about what you are learning or feeling. We include some questions we think may help you. But feel free to ask your own questions. Your mentor will do their best to help.

Respond

At the end of each session, you should agree with your mentor about practical steps you can take to grow in your life with Jesus.

Making a start

You'll need the following things to make best use of this course:

A Bible

You should get a modern version of the Bible that is easy to read. We recommend the 'New Living Translation' (NLT) or the 'Today's New International Version' (TNIV). If in doubt, ask your mentor which they use.

Throughout the course you will find references to Bible verses or passages. We encourage you to look these up for yourself. However unless you're familiar with Bible references, this can be a bit confusing!

The Bible is a collection of 66 books. Each one is divided into chapters, and each chapter into verses. Bible references are usually written in this order (e.g. John chapter 3 verse 16 is written **John 3:16**).

A notebook

As you go through this course, there will be things that strike you as especially useful or relevant to you. You may also have questions to talk through with your mentor. Keeping a notebook of your progress, the things God is teaching you and things you are unsure about is a great idea.

A small group

In session 4, we will look at how vital it is to be connected to a local church and to a small group. (A 'small group' means a group of believers from the church who meet together during the week. Some churches call these 'house groups' or 'cell groups').

Whilst your growing relationship with your mentor will be a special help, the rest of your small group will also be ready to encourage and support you in any way they can. Please ask for whatever help you need.

A heart ready to hear God and to change

Following Jesus is not about learning facts. It's a journey that leads us closer to God. Expect God to speak to you and to change your life as you go through First Steps. He loves you and has great plans to transform you and the people around you.

Session 1: What following Jesus means

Connect

In this session we will focus on what it means to be a follower of Jesus. This is the starting point for your journey into a relationship with Jesus.

Discuss

Tell each other how and why you decided to follow Jesus (we call this 'sharing a testimony').

Focus on the things that made you realise you needed Jesus. How has the decision changed your life so far?

Learn

Following Jesus involves two things: **what we believe** and **how we respond to God**.

What we believe

Followers of Jesus are called 'believers' because what we believe to be true is a big part of the picture.

We believe that:

- There is one God who made the world and is in charge of everything.
- God made human beings perfect, but able to choose him or reject him. Humanity chose to reject God and is cut off from his love. We call this rejection 'sin' and it leads to evil, suffering and death for all who sin.

Read

Genesis 1:1, 2:4-9, 3:1-13,22-24

Discuss

- *Why did Adam and Eve disobey God?*
- *God told them they would die as soon as they disobeyed. What did he mean?*

- God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to rescue us from sin and death. Jesus took the results of our sin, dying under torture, so that we could be reunited with God and be free from guilt. To prove that he had beaten evil and death, Jesus came

back to life again after three days (we call this ‘resurrection’) and his followers saw him alive! This means that, if Jesus has rescued us, we know that we will also come back to life after we die.

- The only way to escape sin and death is to follow Jesus. We can’t impress God or cure ourselves by trying harder. Following Jesus is our only hope of being rescued.

Read

John 3:16 and Romans 5:6-10

Discuss

Would you be ready to die for a close friend? What about for someone who had made you their enemy?

How we respond to God

Following Jesus means more than agreeing to a list of beliefs. We need to respond to God in two ways:

Agreeing to do what Jesus wants (“repentance”)

Repentance is not just about feeling or saying sorry (though that might happen) but about making a firm decision to change, and to put Jesus’ interests first (make him ‘Lord’ of our lives). It means turning 180 degrees and going the right way.

Although repentance is the way to get on the right road of following Jesus, it’s also something we need to keep doing as a way of life. This doesn’t mean we should feel guilty all the time - God doesn’t want this. Instead, whenever we realise that we’re not thinking or acting as Jesus wants, we can repent and put things right straight away.

Agreeing to trust Jesus with our lives (“faith”)

The fact that Jesus is Lord does not just mean that we do whatever he says. It also means that he is our protector and rescuer. He will look after us and make sure that we are secure.

This doesn’t mean that he will guarantee that only good things happen to us from now on – at times it can seem like the opposite! But we choose to trust that he knows what’s best for us. Even in difficult times, he will make sure that we will eventually win through.

Read

Acts 2:37-38, Romans 10:9

Discuss

- *Have you agreed to do these things?*
- *Are there areas in your life where you need to repent or trust God more than you are already doing? If so, make a decision to put things right with God straight away.*

Express

The fact that Jesus has rescued you from the results of your sin is the best news there is! It's a basic truth that every new believer can handle – but it's also a deep and wonderful topic that we never fully grasp.

The Bible uses several images to describe what it's like to be rescued by Jesus.

Read

A pardoned criminal (Romans 5:16)

A freed slave (Romans 6:17-18)

An adopted child (Ephesians 1:4-6)

A newborn baby (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Discuss

Ask each other these questions:

- *Which of these do you most identify with?*
- *Which was most surprising and why?*

Pray

Spend a short time thanking God for showing us his love through what Jesus has done. Put yourself in the place of these four pictures and expect God to help you relate to each one. Thinking about them deepens our experience of his love.

TIP: Don't try to use formal language when you pray – talk to God simply and honestly. Ask him to help you grow in your relationship with him.

Ask

Q I don't feel any different since becoming a believer. How do I know I really am one?

A Some people feel immediately different when they start to follow Jesus, others do not. In any case, feelings can change quickly and are not a reliable guide. God makes a promise in Romans 10:9 that if we repent (confess that he is

Lord) and put our trust in him, we will be saved – it doesn't depend on our feelings. But ask God to help you experience his love and talk about it with your mentor. God wants us to get to know him. He promises to get close to us if we get close to him.

Q What happens if I sin again after accepting Jesus?

A Jesus died so that all our sins (past and future) could be forgiven. We still commit sins, but we know that God forgives us as soon as we ask him to.

But there are warnings to us in the Bible that if we don't forgive other people, God won't forgive us either (see Matthew 18:23-35).

The fact that God so readily forgives us shouldn't encourage us to sin even more. Sin hurts God and damages us and those around us. The more we grow as believers, the more we should be like God in character and behaviour. Every time we are aware of sin in our lives, we need to repent by asking God to forgive us and by making a commitment to change. He gives us the power to do this.

Respond

Remember: It's important not just to learn about God but to respond by taking practical steps.

Practical steps

If you haven't done so already, get involved in a small group and make every effort to join in with its activities. The more you get involved, the more you'll develop as a believer, since God uses other believers to challenge and encourage us.

Session 3: Being Spirit-filled

Connect

If you have been baptised, you are free from your old sin-filled life. In this session we will look at the power source that you now need to follow Jesus – the Holy Spirit.

Discuss

If you have been baptised in water since the last session, well done! Talk to your mentor about the following things:

- *How did you feel when you were baptised? Did anyone pray for you or give you a special message from God? Can you remember what they said?*
- *How has your life changed since being baptised? Talk about any changes you have noticed.*
- *Have you found things to be difficult? If so, share this with your mentor. Maybe they (or someone else) can help you.*

Talk to your mentor about how much you already know about the Holy Spirit.

Check

If you have not yet been baptised in water, make sure you do so as soon as you can. You cannot move forward in your life with Jesus unless you do this.

Learn

Who is the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit (sometimes written just as ‘the Spirit’) is God himself, in the same way that Jesus is God. Although there is only one God, the Bible talks about three ‘persons’ who are all equally God – the Father, the Son (Jesus) and the Holy Spirit. We use the word ‘Trinity’, which means ‘three-in-one’, to talk about God in this way. It is difficult for us to understand how God can be three separate persons but one at the same time. But the Bible says that each of these persons is God, and that there is only one God.

When believers read and think about the Holy Spirit, they sometimes think that he is a force or power, rather than a person. It is true that, as we will see, the Spirit is ‘poured out’ and ‘fills’ people – and sometimes we compare him to oil, water or fire. But this does not mean that he is just a force! Many times, the Bible shows that the Spirit has a personality.

Read

Matthew 28:18-19, Acts 5:1-4, Ephesians 4:29-32

Discuss

How do we know from these verses that the Holy Spirit is:

- *God; and*
- *A real person?*

What does “being Spirit-filled” mean?

The Holy Spirit lives inside every believer

As soon as you became a follower of Jesus, the Spirit came to live inside you. He is the one who lets us know God and enjoy being with him. The Bible says that the Spirit in us is like having an advance payment on all that God will one day give us.

Have you ever heard people say (usually when they are trying to get fit), “My body is a temple”? This is actually a verse from the Bible, and is not about physical fitness! It says that every believer’s body is a temple for the Holy Spirit to live in.

Read

Romans 8:9-11; 1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19

Discuss

*We need to be a **holy** temple. What does ‘holy’ mean? How would you know that someone is a holy temple?*

The Holy Spirit ‘baptises’ people with power to be witnesses

Read

Acts 1:4-8, 2:1-13, 4:31

Discuss

*Do you think that these people were already believers when they were ‘filled with the Spirit’ in this way? If so, what does this mean for **our** life with Jesus?*

Why do we call this ‘baptism in the Spirit’? How is this like baptism in water?

What happened when these people were ‘filled with the Spirit’?

The Holy Spirit teaches and helps us

The Spirit is like a personal trainer – he helps us understand the Bible and find out what God is like. He also prays for us and supports us when life gets tough.

Read

John 14:25-26; Romans 8:26-27

People who are Spirit-filled have other supernatural 'gifts'

The Holy Spirit also gives people the ability to use supernatural powers. In many cases, we read that Spirit-filled people can speak strange languages. In other cases they can 'prophesy'. These special powers are gifts that the Holy Spirit gives us to help ourselves and others to grow strong.

Read

1 Corinthians 12:4-11

Discuss

- *Why do these verses say (several times) that only one God gives these gifts?*
- *Have you experienced any of these gifts, or have you seen or heard them being used?*

Speaking in tongues

One of the most common gifts is the ability to speak in 'tongues' (different languages). In many cases in the book of Acts where people become Spirit-filled, it is the first outward evidence that something has happened. We will look later on at the other gifts but we will focus on this gift now.

1 Corinthians 14 focuses on speaking in tongues. It says that 'a person who speaks in tongues is strengthened personally in the Lord' (verse 4). It also says that the words are 'mysterious' and that you are 'talking to God, but not to people' (verse 2). Paul, who wrote 1 Corinthians, tells his readers that he wishes they could all speak in tongues (verse 5).

Because the language of 'tongues' is mysterious, it is not a language that can be learned in the same way that someone learns French or Spanish. Instead, God gives us words to speak. Most of the time, the person speaking does not understand what they are saying, but God does. And believers everywhere agree that, though they do not understand how, speaking in tongues makes them stronger in their faith.

Express

Talking about being Spirit-filled is no good by itself! God wants all believers to be Spirit-filled and to use spiritual gifts.

Pray

You may have noticed that people in the Bible were often filled with the Spirit when other believers placed their hands on them and prayed. If you have not yet been prayed for like this, ask your mentor to pray with you now.

Ask

While the mentor prays, ask God to fill you with the Holy Spirit in a powerful way.

Step out

Start to pray in tongues – as the Spirit helps you, sounds and words will start to come. For some people, this happens easily; for others, it takes time. Be patient, but ask the Spirit to help you use this gift.

The Spirit sometimes fills us in dramatic ways. Some people lose all strength and may fall over when filled. Others laugh or cry without knowing why. At other times, the experience is more gentle. Do not be afraid of what God is doing, and do not focus on the way it happens but on the person doing the filling.

Ask

Q I have friends who say they are believers but are not Spirit-filled. Is this OK?

A Following Jesus does not depend on our experience of the Spirit. As we said in session 1, being a believer depends on repentance and trusting God to save us. So people who have done this are true believers and fully part of God's family.

However, God wants every believer to experience the Spirit's power. We cannot make this experience happen. But we must not refuse to do what he clearly wants us to do. So every believer should expect and ask God to fill them.

Q I have tried to speak in tongues but nothing has happened. Why is this?

A Lots of people find that it takes time before they start speaking in tongues. For many, it first happens when they are alone. Do not get frustrated, but ask God to help you.

Q I said some words – how do I know that I am not just making them up?

A Many people feel silly when they first speak in tongues. But carry on! Do not be put off by the thought that you are making everything up. What sounds silly to us is precious to God and will make us stronger.

Q Is everyone supposed to speak in tongues? What about other gifts?

A Speaking in tongues is a personal prayer language for you to use when talking to God, on your own or in times of worship with other believers. All of us can benefit from this and we should all expect to do it.

Sometimes, believers speak a message in tongues that (when interpreted) helps other believers, too. It is this gift that the Bible talks about in 1 Corinthians 12:10. Not everyone will use this all of the time, but the Spirit can give this gift to anyone he wants. This is the same for all spiritual gifts – we can all use them, but only as the Spirit gives them out.

Some people become good at using one or two of the gifts in 1 Corinthians 12. But Paul said that we should be keen to use all the gifts at the right time (1 Co 14:1).

Respond

Remember: It's important not just to learn about God but also to respond by taking practical steps.

Practical steps

Being filled with the Spirit is not a once-only event. In Ephesians 5:18, the Bible says we must be 'continually filled and controlled' by the Spirit.

If you have experienced a powerful filling by the Spirit, ask God to help you as you speak in tongues. The more you do so, the easier it will be and the more you'll be able to say.

If you have not yet been filled by the Spirit in this way, keep asking him to do so. He will hear you and will respond to you.

Session 5: Making sense of the Bible

Connect

Reading the Bible is a key way to grow as a follower of Jesus. But the Bible can be confusing for those new to it. In this session we will make sense of the Bible and help you to get the most from it.

Discuss

You have now finished one-third of the First Steps course! This is a good time to think about the sessions so far with your mentor.

- *Over the last four sessions, which things have had a real impact in your life?*
- *Talk about what it is like to be part of a congregation. How easy has it been to 'fit in'?*
- *If you have had to deal with conflict since being part of the congregation, talk about how this happened. What was the result?*

Learn

What is the Bible?

The word 'Bible' comes from a Greek word meaning 'collection of books'. The Bible contains 66 books that were written by around 40 different authors in the period between 1500 BC and 100 AD.

Followers of Jesus believe that, through these books, God speaks to us today. The Bible is the final authority for us (i.e. whatever we believe has to come from or agree with what the Bible says).

Although human authors wrote it, God is the real author of everything the Bible contains. The Bible is not full of contradictions and mistakes, even if some parts are puzzling to the best of experts. It is the true and real message of its divine author. That's why we often describe it as the "Word of God".

Read

2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 3:15-16

Discuss

- *What does the word 'inspired' (or 'God-breathed') mean?*
- *What does 2 Peter 3:16 tell us about Paul's letters?*
- *Notice that the 2 Peter verses describe people 'twisting' the message. Reading the Bible must be done carefully so we get to the real meaning.*

Where does the Bible come from?

By the time Jesus was born, the Jewish nation had collected 39 books that together recorded what God had said to them and done for them over thousands of years. These 39 books are still used by modern Jews as their 'bible'.

The early church continued to recognise these books as God's message, but Jesus' life and death had changed the way in which it was understood. Believers called the existing bible the 'Old Testament' (the word 'testament' means a legal agreement between God and humanity). As important people in the church wrote letters to congregations, these were added to a new list of books describing the way God now relates to us through Jesus (the 'New Testament').

The church took about 300 years to produce a final list of 27 books to include, and then translated the whole Bible into Latin.

Our modern English Bibles are produced by looking at copies of the original Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament, and translating these into English. Today there are many different translations to choose from (see below on how to choose a good version).

What is the Bible about?

The Bible is not a single book and you cannot read it from start to end like a novel. It is important to know that there are five main types of writing in the Bible:

History

A large part of the Old Testament and the New Testament is a record of the way God has related to his people. The Bible has an unfolding story of *redemption* (God rescuing and looking after us).

Here is a short version of that history:

*After some shaky beginnings for humanity (recorded in **Genesis 1-11**), God asked a man called Abraham, who was living in modern-day Iraq, to leave his town and travel to a country God would give him (modern-day Israel/Palestine). Abraham did what God said, and God promised to look after his future family in a special way.*

*The **rest of Genesis** describes how Abraham's family formed the new nation of Israel. The nation became slaves in Egypt and the books of **Exodus - Joshua** describe how God rescued them and led them back to Palestine. After another shaky start in **Judges**, Israel became a settled kingdom and **1-2 Samuel** tells the story of their 'golden age' under kings David and Solomon.*

*After King Solomon's death, civil war divided Israel and the nation split into two: 'Israel' (the northern part) and 'Judah' (a smaller, southern part). Both nations forgot God and their kings refused to do what God wanted. **1-2 Kings** tells the unhappy story of how both kingdoms ended up by being invaded by local empires and being taken into exile. But God had not left them entirely! After a change of empire, the southern kingdom Judah was allowed to return to its land and they started to rebuild the nation as told in **Ezra and Nehemiah**. This takes the story up to about 400 years before Jesus' birth.*

*In the New Testament, the Gospels of **Matthew, Mark, Luke and John** give four 'eye-witness' accounts of Jesus' life and teaching. Luke then wrote the book of **Acts** to continue the story of the spread of the early church around the Mediterranean. The Bible's history finishes around 70 AD.*

The history section is very important, as it shows us a lot about God's character and what he wants us to do. Although most followers of Jesus are not ethnic Jews, the Bible makes clear that Abraham is the ancestor of everyone who entrusts themselves to God. So this is our history!

Law

In the middle of the story of the rescue from Egypt are some long books that contain laws for Israel. God gave these laws to Israel's leader, Moses, to help set up the Israelite nation. The laws are very detailed and cover many topics, from personal hygiene to civil law and religious ceremonies. The books of **Leviticus and Numbers** and a large part of **Exodus** contain these laws.

As followers of Jesus, we do not need to follow these laws in their original sense. But they help us to see what God's priorities are, and how he expects us to live in harmony with him and each other.

Poetry and wisdom

The books in the middle of the Old Testament: **Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs** are full of Hebrew poetry or wise sayings.

These books, especially the Psalms, have been precious to believers for centuries. They cover a huge range of human experience; from suffering to romance, from despair to joy. The books help to show how to live wisely, how to relate to God and how to cope with life whether it is boring or challenging.

Prophecy

A big chunk of the Bible (from **Isaiah to Malachi**) contains prophecy. The prophets spoke God's message to Israel or to nearby nations. These prophecies sometimes explain why events have happened from God's point of view. Other times, they predict what will happen because of Israel's choices. A key theme is that, if God's people betray him and follow other gods, he will punish them – but he will not abandon them altogether. In the New Testament, **Revelation** also contains prophecy.

Letters

Most of the New Testament (**Romans to Jude**) contains letters from church leaders to congregations or individuals. The letters explain what Jesus' followers should believe and how they should behave. These are very important for believers today for that reason.

The Bible is all about Jesus

Read

Luke 24:25-27, John 5:39

Discuss

- *What do these verses say the Bible is about?*
- *John 5:40 should act as a warning to us. How should this verse affect the way we read the Bible?*

Whenever you read the Bible, ask God to show you what the part you are reading says about Jesus.

Express

Because God is alive, the Bible's message is alive. Most followers of Jesus have at some time read a part of the Bible that suddenly gets their attention. Some describe the words "jumping out from the page"; others feel as if they have been spoken to by a voice meant just for them.

Read

Hebrews 4:12, Luke 24:32

Reflect

Think about these two verses and what they tell us about the Bible's power. What can we expect to happen when we read the Bible? Has this happened to you already?

Pray

With your mentor, ask God to help you understand his Word as you read the Bible. Thank him for the things he's already shown you in the past.

If the Bible has made you realise that you need to change your attitudes, relationships or lifestyle, tell God that you commit to do so. Ask him to help you make a lasting change in your life that others will see.

Ask

Q How do I start to read the Bible?

A Knowing how to get the most out of the Bible is a big subject! You will spend the rest of your life getting better at understanding the Bible's message. But every journey needs to start somewhere. Here are some tips to getting started.

Focus on the basics

It's a good idea to start with one of the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke or John) and be introduced to the subject of the whole Bible straight away. Maybe then read Acts (the sequel to Luke) to read about the early church, and pick one of Paul's letters such as Philippians.

More experienced readers should still spend most time on the parts of the Bible that most fully develop its central message. Though it's all important, some parts are more important than others. Always try to understand difficult passages by looking at those easy to understand.

Try different versions

In the Introduction, we suggested that you use the New Living Translation or the Today's New International Version. These are good for general reading. Another popular version is The Message. This is much less accurate in the words it uses, but is very easy to read and can bring the Bible to life in a fresh way. Because the Bible wasn't written in English, no translation is perfect – but using several can help.

Use reading guides

These guides or booklets focus on a different verse or short passage each day. They are helpful to many for personal devotion but do not help to understand the Bible as a whole, since they do not stick to one book or passage at a time.

Read aloud or listen to Bible tapes

Listening to the Bible is sometimes even better than reading it. Different emphasis can come through the spoken word that is missing on the printed page. Try reading to yourself and to others.

Q How do I make sure I get the right message?

A You can do several things to properly understand the Bible:

Ask God to help you

Reading the Bible is different to other books – God can help any believer understand his message and he wants to help you.

Think about the type of writing and the context

The Bible is made up of different styles of writing. Some passages relate the facts of a story, some are poetic, some are symbolic and some are for teaching. Whenever you try to understand a verse, think about this. You wouldn't read poetry as if it was history, for example.

The context for a verse is the bigger passage that it comes from. Don't take individual verses without reading the wider context, or you can easily misunderstand what the verse means.

Get help from other books and other believers

It's an important truth that the Bible does not need outside sources to explain itself. However, that doesn't mean that we shouldn't draw on help from books (such as Bible Dictionaries) or other believers in our search to get the most from it. Don't keep any difficulties to yourself - ask for help! Similarly, share with others anything you find that excites you.

Q I want to get better at studying the Bible – how can I get the most out of it?

A If you are keen to read more deeply, try some (or all) of these ways of reading:

Character studies

This method focuses on a Bible character and can often be done together with a study guide. Character studies can be extremely helpful in learning from others' successes and failures with God and other people. They also can help to understand Bible history, as this usually focuses around key individuals.

Book studies

Studying a single book, looking at its overall message and place in the Bible is also highly useful in getting to grips with the whole. It helps to avoid taking verses out of context and can help future study in this way.

Respond

As always, it's important not just to learn about God but also to respond by taking practical steps.

Practical steps

If you have not really started to read the Bible, make a plan to do so. Make a sensible plan – don't commit to reading huge amounts each day. You'll never do it!

Start with one of the Gospels and read some each day, asking God to speak to you through what you read.