

At last after fourteen years of being a Christian and seven years of ministry this is the only set of professionally produced resources that I've found that successfully translates and applies solid theological teaching into the language and culture of our deprived communities. Mez is one of us and he writes like one of us and this shows as he communicates biblical truths in a way that hits the heart and mind whilst giving a realistic picture of the joy and struggles faced by council-estate Christians.

Ian Williamson

Prison chaplain and pastor of New Life Church, Middlesbrough,
England

If you want a book about the real and daily struggles of following Christ which pulls no punches, dodges no controversy, fudges no issue and gives it to you straight, then here it is. *War* is a great book to give to young Christians. It is also an excellent example of how to teach vital truth in an accessible way. I don't know anyone who wouldn't benefit from reading it. I certainly did.

Steve Timmis

Global Director of Acts 29,
Pastor, The Crowded House, Sheffield, England

Too many believe that Jesus is supposed to take away all of their problems. This book will help me explain to them that the spiritual life is war. Mez keeps it real and speak truth. I love these guys.

Joel Kurtz

Pastor, The Garden, Baltimore

To say that I'm grateful for Mez's ministry and work (especially on this project) would be an understatement. Over the years, I've come to appreciate Mez not just as excellent philosopher and pastor, but as a practitioner. The way that he simply tackles complex truths and make it accessible to an audience that is in desperate need of resources like this is a labor of love that becomes apparent from the first pages. I'm excited about the role this book will play in discipling the very people this book was written for.

John Onwuchekwa

Lead pastor, Cornerstone Church, Atlanta



WAR

WHY DID LIFE JUST GET HARDER?

MEZ MCCONNELL

CHRISTIAN
FOCUS

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PREFACE

I didn't grow up going to church. Christianity was something completely alien to me. I grew up on the street and the only time I went to a church was to bury a friend who died too young. God, in His grace, saved me after I got out of prison. When I first went to church it seemed such a strange place. Now I am a pastor in a poor community called Niddrie in Edinburgh. There are so few helpful books and resources that are relatable to people in my community. That is why we wrote this series of books. Accessible, relatable and interactive workbooks for new Christians living in unchurched and disadvantaged communities. For this book I asked Brian Davis to help me. He is a pastor at the Risen Christ Fellowship in inner-city Philadelphia. I pray that as you study this book you will grow stronger in your faith.

MEZ McCONNELL
Pastor Niddrie Community Church
Director 20schemes

INTRODUCTION

The First Steps series will help equip those from an unchurched background take the first steps in following Jesus. We call this the 'pathway to service' as we believe that every Christian should be equipped to be of service to Christ and His church no matter your background or life experience.

If you are a church leader doing ministry in hard places, use these books as a tool to help grow those who are unfamiliar with the teachings of Jesus into new disciples. These books will equip them to grow in character, knowledge and action.

Or if you yourself are new to the Christian faith, still struggling to make sense of what a Christian is, or what the Bible actually says, then this is an easy to understand guide as you take your first steps as a follower of Jesus.

There are many ways to use these books.

- ✦ They could be used by an individual who simply reads through the content and works through the questions on their own.
- ✦ They could be used in a one-to-one setting, where two people read through the material before they meet and then discuss the questions together.
- ✦ They could be used in a group setting where a leader presents the material as a talk, stopping for group discussion throughout.

Your setting will determine how you best use this resource.

A USER'S KEY:

As you work through the studies you will come across the following symbols...



JOE'S STORY – At the start of each chapter you'll meet Joe and hear something about his story and what's been going on in his life. We want you to take what we've been learning from the Bible and work out what difference it would make in Joe's life. So whenever you see this symbol you'll hear some more about Joe's story.



ILLUSTRATION – Through real-life examples and scenarios, these sections help us to understand the point that's being made.

STOP – When we hit an important or hard point we'll ask you to stop and spend some time thinking or chatting through what we've just learnt. This might be answering some questions, or it might be hearing more of Joe's story.



KEY VERSE – The Bible is God's word to us, and therefore it is the final word to us on everything we are to believe and how we are to behave. Therefore we want to read the Bible first, and we want to read it carefully. So whenever you see this symbol you are to read or listen to the Bible passage three times. If the person you're reading the Bible with feels comfortable, get them to read it at least once.



MEMORY VERSE – At the end of each chapter we'll suggest a Bible verse for memorisation. We have found Bible memorisation to be really effective in our context. The verse (or verses) will be directly related to what we've covered in the chapter.



SUMMARY – Also, at the end of each chapter we've included a short summary of the content of that chapter. If you're working your way through the book with another person, this might be useful to revisit when picking up from a previous week.

MEET JOE

THE EARLY YEARS

Joe has never ventured far from where he was born in downtown Baltimore. He doesn't know his dad who ended up in prison when he was a baby and died before Joe was eighteen. His Mom is an alcoholic and gambling addict. They haven't spoken much since he moved in with his Gran when he was a young boy at elementary school. Growing up in poverty in the inner city meant that Joe had to grow up fast. He didn't do well at school, not because he isn't capable but because he never tried. He served two separate jail terms for stealing cars in his twenties.

LIFE NOW

Now in his late forties, Joe has lived a life of petty crime, never holding down a real job for very long, drinking too much, and hooked on heroin. He loves playing basketball with the guys in the park and he is popular and well known in the community. He has three kids and lives with the mother of his youngest daughter. He is in an on and off again relationship with his wife. Joe has slept around but always comes back home to her. His two sons have left home and have their own run-in's with the law and trouble with drugs. His daughter is sixteen and lives with Joe and her mother. Joe will do anything for her.

Joe's Gran took him to church as a kid but it was never a big part of his life. He went to church camps and he always felt good in church but didn't see it as a place where he belonged. He had only really gone to church for the funerals of his good friends who died young.

It was at one of those funerals that Joe began to really think hard about life and death. The Preacher seemed to be shouting at him

from the pulpit telling him that if he does not repent then he would go to Hell, but Jesus, the Son of God, has come to take away his sins if he would turn to Him. At the time it made no sense at all, but Joe became unsettled about death, Hell and Jesus. He couldn't stop thinking about it. Not long after, he and his wife went to church with his Gran and that is where Joe hears the Gospel, believes in Jesus, and repents of his sin. He becomes a Christian but no one prepared him for just how hard things were about to become.

This is Joe's story...

WHAT'S THE POINT?

When we are
saved by Jesus
we enter a
lifelong spiritual
war.



1. WELCOME TO THE WAR!



JOE'S STORY

It's been a couple of months since Joe made a profession of faith in Jesus. Initially, he was really excited about his new-found faith. He felt like the weight of the world had been lifted off his shoulders. He told everybody he could think of: his family, his neighbours, his friends and even associates from his drug-dealing days. The response was mixed. Some people were happy for him. Others were confused by what he was saying. A few people laughed at him and told him he'd grow out of it. Very few opposed him publicly but, recently, he has discovered that some people, including family members, were mocking him on social media.

He is very upset and angry. He's not used to people treating him like this. People used to have respect for him. They used to fear him. He doesn't know how to act. He doesn't know what's going on. He feels so confused. One minute he is on top of the world and the next he is really depressed. One minute he is sure of God and the next he is full of doubts. Why are his friends and family being so dismissive of his new-found faith? Why can't they be happy that he is trying to get his life in order? What's happening to him?

STOP

Q: What do you think is going on in Joe's life? Why do you think the people around him are acting like this?

**ILLUSTRATION**

During the first Gulf War in 1990, retreating Iraqi forces engaged in a 'scorched earth' policy of setting fire to as many Kuwaiti oil wells as they could. They had lost the war but still wanted to cause as much damage they could to hamper the progress of the coalition forces as they moved back in. Their aim was merely to frustrate the advancing army in a final act of desperation.

This is exactly what is going on in Joe's life right now. Colossians 2:14-15 teaches us that when Jesus went to the cross, *'He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.'* In other words, Jesus has fully and finally defeated the devil. All that the devil is doing now is engaging in his own scorched earth policy with his army of demons. Joe is now experiencing first hand the reality of the spiritual battle that every person becomes involved in once they hand their lives over to Jesus Christ.

This is part of what it means to *'count the cost'* of being a Christian.

Joe needs to learn that now, and for the rest of his life, he is in an all out, no holds barred, spiritual war.

Some people think that Christianity is a way to an easier, happier life. *They assume that since someone is right with God that all will be fine with their world.*

Of course, it is true that when people, by faith, repent of their sins and look to Jesus for forgiveness, life does get better. At least, spiritually speaking.

It is true that

eternal life is far better than eternal death.

It is true that

heaven is better than hell.

It is false that

life gets easier when we become a Christian.

It is true that

when people come to Jesus for new life they are at the same time leaving their old life behind.

It is true that

they have ‘switched sides’ on the spiritual battle going on for the souls of men, women and children around the globe.

It is true that

King Jesus is far superior to the ruler they used to have in their life.

It is false that

this old ruler is going to go down without a fight.

It is true that

the devil is very angry and hostile to Jesus and is the sworn enemy of every Christian.



ILLUSTRATION

There used to be a children’s game called ‘*King of the Hill*’. After locating a fairly climbable hill or pile of dirt, someone would climb to the top of the hill and be declared the ‘*King of the Hill*’.

The easy part was climbing up the hill quickly. The difficult part was staying on top as the designated 'King'. All the other players would constantly climb the hill and try to throw, pull and push the present 'King' off the top of the hill so that they themselves could be crowned the 'King' in their place. Depending on who was playing, the game could get quite rough fairly quickly!

In a similar way, now that we have crowned Jesus as the King of our lives,

all the enemies of God are violently opposed to us.

Not only do they

seek to tear us away from Jesus.

But they

want one of His enemies to reign over us in His place.

From the first moment we are saved in Christ, war has been declared against us by those who want us to give up on Christ and go back to our old way of living.

Unlike a game that comes to an end within hours, they will try and oppose our commitment to Jesus until the day we die.

Now Joe, much like the rest of the world, had no idea that after coming to Jesus he would have to battle the devil and a load of demons! That seems a little bit weird and also terrifying at the same time. But, it is important for Joe to know the full story of the spiritual battle that he has now signed up for.

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (Eph. 6:12, NIV)

STOP

Q: Why is it so important for Joe to understand that he is now involved in a spiritual battle?

These truths will help Joe to see that what he is experiencing is not new. It is not unique to him. Every single Christian in history has been through it. *Every single Christian in the world is battling the enemy every single day of their lives.* Joe needs to understand that this swirl of emotions he is caught in is a perfectly natural reaction to what is going on in his life.

In fact, Joe is fighting a coalition of evil. There is ‘Satan’, his old ruler, and his tag-team partners in crime, ‘*the flesh*’ and ‘*the world*’. Together, these forces of darkness are seeking to kill Joe’s faith.

These three have one job and one job only.

They are thieves seeking to steal away Joe’s newfound joy in Jesus.



JOE

But why is this happening to me now? Why didn’t the devil attack me when I was doing heroin or breaking into cars? Where was he then?

The problem for Joe, as it is for all unbelievers, is that before Jesus saved him he was dead in his sins. That means he had no clue that he was under the control of the devil and the dark forces of evil. This is how the Apostle Paul puts it in **Ephesians 2:1-3**:

'And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience – among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.'

Joe needs to know several things about himself and the devil from these verses.

Firstly, before coming to faith in Christ, we clearly see that *we were dead in our trespasses and sins*. We weren't merely in bad shape, but dead shape. Not only were we spiritually dead, we were *'following the course of this world'*. (We are going to find out more about this phrase in chapter 2.)

Secondly, we see that this 'world' has a ruler. In fact, before Jesus saved us we all followed the *prince of the power of the air*. He is also known as *'the spirit now at work in the sons of disobedience'*.

This prince, we are told, is leading the world, and all those in it, in complete disobedience to God.

Now who is this 'prince' leading people to do evil? Who is this father of the sons of disobedience? It is the devil himself.



JOE

Hang on, says Joe. I thought the Bible taught that we are all God's children. Are you saying my friends and family are all children of the devil? Do they belong to the Devil?

Yes! That is exactly what the Bible is teaching. Many people wrongly say that we are all God's children but this is *never something Jesus communicates*. He actually says the complete

opposite! When Jesus was responding to people who refused to obey His word, who rejected His teaching, He plainly tells them that they are not the children of God and explains why they do not believe Him. *‘For you are the children of your father the devil, and you love to do the evil things he does’* (John 8:44, NLT). **Jesus always tells it like it is.** (We are going to look at the devil in more detail in chapter 4.)

Thirdly, not only are we dead in our sins and under the influence of the world, and the devil, **we love to disobey God.** It’s what we naturally long to do. **We desire to be disobedient!** That’s what Paul means when he tells us that before Jesus saved us, *‘We all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind’.* (We are going to look at this in more detail in chapter 3.) The point is simply this:

We can’t claim that the world and the devil make us sin because it’s something we deeply desire to do on our own as well.



JOE

This all sounds a bit hardcore. What’s the point of trying to be a Christian if I’ve got to go through this for the rest of my life? I might as well give up now, right?

The short answer to Joe’s question is no! We could be tempted into thinking that it would be better to go back to our old way of life instead of face the trials and temptations of living for Jesus. But God has got plans for all of His people *and those plans are, ultimately, good for us.*

‘And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose’ (Rom. 8:28).

*Even in the midst of our spiritual battles, God is working for our good. If God has given us a way to be forgiven in Jesus, don't you think He would give us a way to be victorious in our warfare through Jesus? Of course He does! While we war, we do not go to battle unsure of our victory. We are to be entirely confident and assured that we will be victorious in our warfare. *The same faith that was needed to initially trust God for salvation, will be continually needed to stand strong in our relationship with the Lord – even in the face of opposition.* Here are merely three (of many!) reasons we can have such confidence.*

We are well protected. Jesus secured our protection in His prayer for us to His Father, 'I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one' (John 17:15). Jesus has pledged God's protection to us through His prayers for us. This is more than just protection from the devil, but also protection from our sin. He has prayed for us so that our faith would not fail. This is why in the Bible Christians are referred to as, '*...those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ*' (Jude 1).

We are well empowered. When thinking about the spiritual battles we are facing we may be tempted to despair. They seem to be massively strong influences and Joe is concerned if he will be strong enough to fight them. It's one thing to think about a fist fight, one on one, man-to-man. But this? How can he even begin to fight a spiritual battle against such strong enemies? Well Joe is right to question, but wrong to be concerned. The Bible tells us something amazing about God's power working in us. Like a grown man doesn't need to fear the strength of a toddler, so a Christian doesn't need to fear the strength of our enemies... because God has given us His strength through His spirit! '*...for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world*' (1 John 4:4).

We are well equipped. God has not left us to fend for ourselves in coming up with a battle plan. Just as it is with our salvation, God has richly provided us with everything we need for life and godliness. This means that everything we need to be godly and growing in our relationship with God has been given to us, including what we need to be found victorious in our spiritual war. For instance, we are told that God has given weapons with which to wage war. He didn't give us rocket launchers with our Bibles, or physical swords when we finally understood the gospel. We don't have flesh-and-blood enemies for the most part, but spiritual enemies. So understandably, the weapons He gave us are spiritual. *'For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds'* (2 Cor. 10:3-4).

There are many ways that God protects, empowers and equips us to be victorious in our lifelong war against sin. He has secured our victory over the three-headed enemy called *'the world, the flesh and the devil'*. There is always a war for our souls, and we must always be involved in the fight. The mere act of God giving us weapons should communicate strongly to us that we should be fighting with them. But Joe doesn't know where to begin.

So he should begin where all warriors begin – dressing themselves for battle.



ILLUSTRATION

Imagine going to a funeral dressed in shorts and flip flops. What about turning up to a job interview in ripped jeans and a stained tee-shirt? What if the President or Prime Minister turned up to a cabinet meeting in his pyjamas? Would that be appropriate? Probably not. How we dress should reflect the situation we find ourselves in or the occasion we are attending. We all know that there is a dress code for different situations. We wouldn't dream of

going out to war in a pair of swimming trunks! No self-respecting soldier would go out to battle without remembering to put on his body armour. Wearing the wrong outfit to a formal party could be embarrassing at most, whereas wearing the wrong, or no, armour in war could be fatal.

The Bible has clear instructions on how Christians ought to clothe themselves for the battle of their lives. In fact, it is the book of Ephesians, yet again, that points us to some of the soberest and most helpful instruction about arming ourselves for spiritual warfare.

*‘Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore, **take up the whole armour of God**, that you may **be able to withstand** in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm’ (Eph. 6:10-13).*

Here we are told to ready ourselves for battle and clothe ourselves with appropriate attire. He doesn’t call us to go grab the bulletproof vests or hazmat suits. We are called to be clothed in the whole armour of God. But Ephesians 6 doesn’t stop there. It continues in verses 14-17:

Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (NIV).

Notice, the language used in these verses.

Belt of truth.

Breastplate of righteousness.

Shield of faith.

The helmet of salvation.

The sword of the Spirit.

Even our shoes should be tightly tied with the *'gospel of peace'* as we prepare ourselves for action. Without this clothing we will not be able to *extinguish the flaming darts of the evil one*. Unless we dress for war then *we will fail to keep alert and we will fail to stand in the face of the onslaught from the evil one*.



MEMORY VERSE

'Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil' (Eph. 6:11).



SUMMARY

Joe needs to know that when he signed up to follow Jesus, he signed up to fight a war. This is not a short war, but rather a war for life. However, God hasn't left Joe, or any of His people, to fight alone. He has given us all we need to fight and end up victorious.

But before any of us can fight the war well, we had better understand our enemies and their plans a little better...