

Mike McKinley has produced a highly readable and readily accessible resource. Perfect for someone starting out on the Christian life and trying to take the first steps in their discipleship with wisdom, faithfulness and biblical fidelity.

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Other Gospel*, and *Boasting*



BELIEVE

WHAT SHOULD I KNOW?

MIKE MCKINLEY

SERIES EDITED BY MEZ MCCONNELL

CHRISTIAN
FOCUS

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PREFACE

I didn't really get much exposure to church until I was about 10 years old. My parents had started our family when they were teenagers, and they had to kill themselves to get us into a solidly working-class life. But we lived in a place where most of the people were very wealthy. So when I first started going to church, most of the people there were rich. Everyone at church seemed successful, put-together, and important (I know now that it was only an appearance, that rich people have problems too – but I didn't know that then). But it wasn't clear to me as a child whether it was possible for people who weren't rich to follow Jesus. What did the church have to say to people who were struggling to make it from day to day?

I became a Christian as a young man, and now serve as a pastor. The neighbourhood where I live is full of needy people – many are in the country illegally and are barely able to keep their heads above water. These people have a lot of needs, but even more than food and health care and education, they need to know God – who he is and what he has said about them and their lives. It's my prayer that this little book would help them (and you) to know God better.

MIKE MCKINLEY
Pastor, Sterling Park Baptist Church

SERIES

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...



SAMUEL – At points in each chapter you'll meet Samuel 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 Samuel's life. So whenever you see this symbol you'll hear some more about his 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 Samuel'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 SAMUEL

Samuel was born in a world of violence. On the streets of his San Salvador neighbourhood only the toughest survived to see adulthood. He never knew his father, and almost every other boy he knew had joined a gang in order to find both protection and a sense of belonging. By the time he was a teenager, he was selling drugs and shaking down local merchants. In the course of business, he'd killed several people and even been shot once himself.

And yet, despite everything, gang life never felt like a good fit to Samuel. He hated the way he felt after taking drugs. The faces of the people he'd killed haunted him when he slept. He knew that he was going to be damned by God for the things that he had done, but he didn't know what else to do.

When his aunt sent him to the United States to live with an uncle, Samuel wanted a fresh start. Not long after he arrived, one of his teachers invited him to come to her church's youth Bible study. Reluctantly, he agreed, and it was there he heard the good news that Jesus had died to take away the guilt and punishment of anyone who trusted in Him. It was hard for him to imagine that God could forgive him for the terrible things he'd done, but after about a year he became a follower of Jesus.

**WHAT'S THE
POINT?**

GOD is holy
and more loving
than we can
imagine.



1. WHO IS GOD?



SAMUEL

Now Samuel is out of school and trying to work a 'straight' job. He's trying to grow as a Christian. At the same time, his old gang from back home has a growing presence among the Salvadorans in his new hometown. Some have reached out to him to make it clear they're not happy he left. Normally, the only way out of the gang is in a pine box; nobody just quits. His old friends mock him and his attempt to earn money doing honest work. Some gang leaders have been making veiled threats, and Samuel is beginning to wonder if any of this is worth it. He's even thought about taking his own life just to make everything stop.

STOP

What do you think could make Samuel's situation better? Why might it be tempting to go back to his old way of life?



ILLUSTRATION

When I was a teenager, there was a time when a local bully was making my life difficult. The kid was big and mean, and I didn't know what to do about it. But then my older brother came home on his holiday leave from the military. He was trained to be part of a Special Forces unit, and you could tell just by looking at him that he was not someone to mess with. When that bully got a look

at my brother, he didn't bother me again. I didn't have to worry, because the toughest guy I knew was on my side.

In the same way, what Samuel needs to know is that even though these gang members *seem* tough and powerful, **God is the one who is ultimately in control of everything.**

THE ONLY GOD



For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it empty, he formed it to be inhabited!): "I am the LORD, and there is no other" (Isa. 45:18).

'Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases' (Ps. 115:3).

We see some very important things about God in these two verses:

- He is a God who **speaks** ('thus says the Lord'). In other words, God can be known. We don't have to guess what He's like or what He wants from us. It doesn't really matter what we *feel* or what we *want* God to be like; what matters is *what He says about Himself*.
- He is the **creator**. We'll see more about this in a later chapter, but for now we need to see that God is the one who made the heavens, the earth and everything that lives in them. As the creator, He has the authority to tell everyone and everything how to act.
- He is the **only God**. God is not the *best* among a group of rivals; He is God and there is no other. We do not have to figure out which God to go to for help; there's only one true option.

- He is **in control**. He does whatever He wants to do and no one can stop Him. Everyone has had the experience of being opposed or frustrated, but God is not like that. He has the power to accomplish every one of His desires.



ILLUSTRATION

When our family is invited over to someone's home for dinner, we always have to remind our children that while they're in our friends' home, they must abide by their rules: take your shoes off at the door, no throwing a ball in the house, don't light anything on fire. Well, this whole world is God's 'house'; it all belongs to Him! As a result, we're all obligated to live according to His rules.

STOP

For Samuel, the problems in his life seem massive. How might he feel differently if he began to understand that God is in control of everything and everyone?

GOD IS THE HOLY JUDGE



'For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy' (Lev. 11:44).

When the Lord speaks to His people, He reminds them that He is their God. He also tells them to consider themselves as set apart and different from the surrounding nations (that's the idea behind that word 'consecrate'). Other people do whatever seems right to them, but God's people are supposed to be holy. Why? Because God Himself is holy.

When we say that God is 'holy,' we mean He is morally pure. You and I may be inclined to do things that are wrong, but God is not. He hates evil, sin, and immorality. He is pure and always does the right thing in every situation. As a result, God's people are supposed to be like Him. Just like children resemble their parents,

so we are supposed to resemble our Father in heaven. He is holy, so His children (that's us!) should be holy, too; there's a family resemblance. Sin is supposed to be normal to the world around us but foreign to God's people. For somebody in Samuel's position, this means he cannot go back to his old way of life.

This even explains why his old friends from the gang have been giving him such a hard time. In the book of 1 Peter we read:

'For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead' (1 Pet. 4:3–5).

You can see the situation Peter was addressing—new believers were struggling with their old buddies and their old way of life. Back in the day, before they became followers of Jesus, life was all drinking parties and orgies. But Peter says the time for that is past. Since they're now God's people, they're supposed to be holy; they no longer join in and live that way.

And as a result, their friends were giving them a hard time. Isn't it amazing how little has changed in 2,000 years since Peter wrote this? There's a feeling of safety in a crowd. When everyone is getting drunk and sleeping around, it makes such behaviour seem acceptable, even normal. As long as no one says anything, people do what they want without feeling guilty or having their conscience flare up. But now these new Christians were refusing to do the things that they used to do, and as a result their old 'friends' were talking smack about them (Peter uses the word 'maligning').

Notice what Peter tells these believers. The one thing they need to understand is that everyone in the world will ultimately give an account to this holy God for how they've lived. He is the one who judges the living and the dead. That has a way of putting everything in perspective, doesn't it?



SAMUEL

It might seem like becoming a Christian has created a bunch of problems for Samuel, but in reality it's his old friends who have the biggest problem of all. They're going to face a holy, all-powerful God as their judge!

STOP

How should knowing that God is a holy judge help Samuel resist the temptation to go back to his old way of life? How should it help him tell his old friends why he no longer lives like they do?

GOD IS LOVE



'But you, O LORD, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness' (Ps. 86:15).

Is God a powerful and holy judge, or is He a loving Father? The answer, according to the Bible, is both. The good news for us is that the God who created us and who judges us is also kind and loving toward His people. If God used His power like a bully, it would be hard to see how the Bible could claim to be good news. But the truth is, God always exercises His power with love and kindness towards His people.

In Psalm 86 the psalmist tells us wonderful things about God's character:

- ✦ He is **merciful**. He shows kindness to those in need.

- ✦ He is **gracious**. He forgives and blesses those unworthy of His care.
- ✦ He is **slow to anger**. God is holy, but He is also patient. He is angry at sin and injustice, but it's not an out-of-control, hair-trigger anger. In fact, God restrains His anger in order to allow people time to repent and seek His grace.
- ✦ He **abounds in steadfast love**. God overflows with an unshakeable love for His people. God's love is so great that in one of the Apostle John's letters, he says that 'God is love' (1 John 4:16).
- ✦ He **abounds in faithfulness**. God never fails to deliver on His promises. His love for His people is unshakeable and unbreakable. Other people might betray us or fade out of our lives, but the Lord is always faithful.

It may seem strange to our modern minds, but the authors of the Bible do not really seem to struggle with the idea that God is powerful, holy, and just. His righteous anger against mankind's sinfulness makes sense. What astounds them, however, is God's love. Why would someone so great, so infinite, and so holy stoop to love insignificant and messed-up people like us (see Ps. 8:3–4, Rom. 3:23–26)? Time and time again, God affirms His love for His people is not rooted in anything wonderful about them, but in His own loving character (Deut. 7:7–8, Jer. 31:3, Hosea 11:1). God loves the unlovely because He is love.

We'll see more in coming chapters about God's love for His people, especially as it is shown to us in the gift of His Son, but for now just notice that the God of the Bible is even better than any version of Him that we could imagine or create in our minds. He is a beautiful combination of every good thing: holy and forgiving, powerful and tender, majestic and loving.

STOP

When you think about God, what aspects of His character are harder for you to accept and believe? Which are easier?

**MEMORY VERSE**

'Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength.'
(Isa. 40:28–29)

**SUMMARY**

What Samuel needs more than anything else is to understand who God is. His problems seem very big, and so he needs to know there is One who is bigger. The Lord is the only God, eternal and limitless. He does whatever He pleases. Since He is the One who created everything, He is our holy judge and the only One who has the right to determine how we should live. And here's the good news: this holy God is more loving than we can imagine. So we can be sure He will always show kindness to His people in their time of need.