

# Getting It Right

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The iFollow Discipleship Series



# Getting It Right

*Surviving the six most common  
obstacles to spiritual growth*

by Dan Day

With an Introduction by Debra Brill

**iFOLLOW**

# Getting It Right

*Surviving the six most common  
obstacles to spiritual growth*

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## FUNDAMENTAL BELIEFS APPLICATION

# 10

### Experience of Salvation

*In infinite love and mercy God made Christ, who knew no sin, to be sin for us, so that in Him we might be made the righteousness of God.*

# Chapter One

## Obstacle One:

### *Starting at the wrong place*

Our relationship with God is not theoretical or abstract. It happens where we live. A vigorous spiritual experience, then, happens “on the streets” and “on the move.” It takes place “in real time,” and in the face of challenges that hurt when they hit us. When we go “ouch!” it’s just the beginning. And then—to top it all off—we are faced with the harsh truth about spiritual growth: things just don’t always go our way.

That fact—that even in building a life of faith, things don’t always go our way—is the core reality that lies behind this book. It is the truth that shapes what we have to say here, the inescapable fact of our existence.

It’s one thing to paint a rosy picture of what it means to be a Christian (and it’s great when it happens that way). We all love it when we’re riding the “mountaintop.” But it is entirely another thing to slug it out on the streets, where trial and temptation raise their ugly heads and we get beat down far too often. It’s also another thing to walk in the valley, with all the associated confusion and discouragement, and to know that we’re neither strong nor especially courageous.

Do we walk that path alone? Of course not. God is always with us, eager to comfort us, quick to give us hope. It is that hope to which we cling when we’re in the valley. It is the assurance that God is with us that makes it all bearable.

To identify the challenges is not to say that we can’t live a life of faith, that we can’t follow Jesus. Neither is it to suggest that we can’t have a profound sense of God in our lives, or any certainty that we’re His children, safe in His

arms. Genuine Christians experience these things all the time. It's something we all want and should expect as part of the Christian "package." When the Bible speaks about inner peace, we have the right to expect it. When the apostle Paul wrote: "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus,"<sup>1</sup> he was talking to us. He was saying we can expect the peace of God in our lives.

It's just not something we all experience, all the time.<sup>2</sup>

**"The devil is in the details" applies to building a life of faith, too.**

This book, *Getting It Right: Surviving the six most common obstacles to spiritual growth*, has been written to provide hope to the Christian who wants to experience a fuller, more vibrant experience in following Jesus. Hope is vital, and we deserve to have it. For us to have that sort of confidence, however, our hope must be built on a solid foundation. It's not a fragile hope we're talking about here, built on flawed assumptions. Instead, we're talking about a hope that will last.

I've written this book in the series to remind us all (including myself) that the phrase "the devil is in the details" applies to building a life of faith, too. For our growth in Christ to survive the hard dose of reality we sometimes encounter in the real world, where most of us live, our relationship with Jesus needs to start well, constructed on the most secure possible foundation.

What happens if we don't build with these requirements? Consider the following story:

Ted and Janet were baptized in a tent meeting held on the outskirts of town by a very persuasive young evangelist with a big smile and an air of confidence. The young couple began their spiritual journey as Seventh-day Adventists with excitement and high expectation. While becoming Adventists was a bit traumatic for their family (who thought they were joining some weird cult), they began this new spiritual journey with clear eyes and high spirits.

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<sup>1</sup>Philippians 4:7 (NIV).

<sup>2</sup>This particular book in the iFollow discipleship series is aimed at some of the major challenges we face, as Christians trying to grow. Other books in the series are more specifically aimed at building key aspects of spiritual life. Be sure to read several of them in order to grasp the full scope of discipleship.



“When we were baptized, it was like a new lease on life,” Ted says. “We’ve always believed in God. While our church attendance was a bit sporadic, we considered ourselves believers. When the kids came along, we started thinking more seriously about spiritual things. And then when we heard the Sabbath truth, it was like a new light shining into our lives.”

“It was like God had reached out to us, personally,” Janet adds. “It was like He was saying, ‘I have a Christmas gift all wrapped up for you, and it will change everything.’ We were so charged.”

Like many new believers, Ted and Janet wanted their experience as new Adventists to be a positive one. They wanted to feel God’s presence in their lives every day. They wanted to keep learning and growing. And they wanted to find a real church family and a ministry in which they could become engaged—a way of giving back for the joy they had discovered. They wanted the whole package.

But after the first few months, the “first love” enthusiasm began

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## ADVENTIST VOICES PAST AND PRESENT



- Not mental assent to the truth, not formal acceptance of the truth, not outward conformity to the truth, not any one nor all of these will save a soul in the day of God, but only complete sanctification by the truth, complete transformation of character by the word and Spirit of God, will secure acquittal in the judgment of the great day of the Lord.  
C. P. Bollman, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 21, 1927, p. 3
- All men are born spiritually blind. Unless a transformation is wrought and a spiritual vision implanted, they must go through life in darkness, halting and stumbling by the way. God admonishes, “Anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see.” God will have no blind Christians.  
M. L. Rice, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, May 10, 1934, p. 11
- Transformation begins to take place the moment we receive grace. Transformation takes place inside us. We always look to grace for the assurance of our salvation, yet are always conscious that we are growing in obedience to God. As we cooperate with God He changes us into His image.  
J. David Newman, *Adventist Review*, September 25, 2003, p. 9

to dry up. They got busy with making a living and paying the bills. The people at the church were nice enough, but they didn't really quite know what to do with Ted and Janet. The young family wanted to make friends in the church, but it was considerably more difficult than they'd thought. Adventist people were actually a bit strange, it seemed. They had all these rules and traditions that seemed to matter more to them than the people in the church. And so many of them just sat there, Sabbath after Sabbath, seemingly uninterested in doing anything to make church life more vigorous. Ted and Janet began to wonder if maybe they'd made a mistake. Maybe they would be better off back with the old church and the people they knew.

You and I are in this story, too. We represent the church Ted and Janet have joined. Sitting with them in the pews are all the other Teds and Janets, as well. We're glad to have them with us, right? We love them and their children. We're eager to have them integrated into the life of the church. But how can we be sure, as a church, that we're doing all that we can to make their transition into Adventism a positive experience? And if you were asked to serve on a committee to help your church think about how to make itself more welcoming and helpful, what would you advise?

What would you urge Ted and Janet to do in preparation for the realities they will face in the first few months of being in an Adventist fellowship? How would you suggest that they make sure they begin the transition in a way that assures steady spiritual growth?

## Discipleship: real questions for real people

These are real questions, aren't they? And they're not questions just for brand new members like Ted and Janet. The rest of us live with questions like these, too. No matter where we are in our spiritual journey, we face continuing challenges as we seek a vigorous spiritual experience. We want to grow into mature Christians, but how can we be sure we're on the right path? We've all seen people who began with great enthusiasm but who after a short time dropped off the radar screen. We've also all seen those who were regular members at one point, and then they were gone. How do we prevent that from happening to us? How do we make sure we're on the right trajectory for becoming productive

disciples—both as individuals and as a congregation?

I hope you noticed on the cover of this book that it is one in a series of iFollow books. Discipleship is the theme of this entire series. iFollow represents a comprehensive series of resources developed by the Adventist Church in North America for its members and churches. The series is designed to enable you to teach and experience discipleship in your life and in your congregation.

But what, precisely, is discipleship? Would you know it if you saw it? As Adventists, we're not as familiar with the term "discipleship" as some in other churches are. Recently I asked a pastor of a fairly large Adventist church what his views on discipleship were, and he responded, "What's discipleship?" It's not that we don't know the term; it's just that it hasn't been as central to our common vocabulary as it has been with some other groups.

**Discipleship  
is a story  
with many  
chapters.**

The truth is, discipleship is a story with many chapters. It is a multifaceted process, with many levels. There is a broad set of specifics from which we can draw in building our own spiritual life. Discipleship has to do with learning how to know Jesus and how to follow Him in our daily lives. It has to do with learning to trust God and developing approaches to life that keep us strong. It includes the way churches grow and develop, too. But the way it works for one person isn't necessarily precisely the way it works for another. And discipleship isn't just about things we do. It is also about attitudes we form and skills we develop. It is both simple and complex.

In *Rebuilding Your Broken World*, Gordon MacDonald suggests 26 questions to help develop accountability and invite feedback. Each of them has some relevance to our conversation on discipleship. I urge you to read the list carefully.

1. How is your relationship with God right now?
2. What have you read in the Bible in the past week?
3. What has God said to you in this reading?
4. Where do you find yourself resisting Him these days?
5. What specific things are you praying for in regard to others?
6. What specific things are you praying for in regard to yourself?
7. What are the specific tasks facing you right now that you consider incomplete?
8. What habits intimidate you?
9. What have you read in the secular press this week?

10. What general reading are you doing?
11. What have you done to play?
12. How are you doing with your spouse? Kids?
13. If I were to ask your spouse about your state of mind, state of spirit, state of energy level, what would the response be?
14. Are you sensing spiritual attacks from the enemy right now?
15. If Satan were to try to invalidate you as a person or as a servant of the Lord, how might he do it?
16. What is the state of your sexual perspective? Tempted? Dealing with fantasies? Entertainment?
17. Where are you financially right now? (things under control? under anxiety? in great debt?)
18. Are there any unresolved conflicts in your circle of relationships right now?
19. When was the last time you spent time with a good friend of your own gender?
20. What kind of time have you spent with anyone who is a non-Christian this month?
21. What challenges do you think you're going to face in the coming week? Month?
22. What would you say are your fears at this present time?
23. Are you sleeping well?
24. What three things are you most thankful for?
25. Do you like yourself at this point in your pilgrimage?
26. What are your greatest confusions about your relationship with God?<sup>3</sup>

As you consider questions like these, put them into the larger discipleship context. How would the answers you might give define your spiritual growth this precise moment in your life? What areas of your life might need examination and fortification? You might even sit down with a pen and paper and write out answers to each of the questions. If you did, what would you need to do next? What if your small group or your study group at church were to tackle these questions? What might you come up with? What might you all be challenged to do?

As you read this book, and others in the iFollow series, the various facets of discipleship will almost certainly become increasingly clear. You're going to

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<sup>3</sup>Gordon MacDonald, *Rebuilding Your Broken World*, pp. 216, 217.



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## RESOURCES FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

- When there is no advance, no growth in grace, no spiritual progress, something must be wrong. It is not God's will that it should be so. He would not have us always be mere babes in Christ, always children; but He desires to see us increasing in our spiritual stature, and advancing to spiritual manhood.  
Ashton Oxenden, *The Christian Life*, p. 193
- Look upon this life as a ripening time for eternity. Lose no opportunity of getting ready for the great change. Sit loose to this world, and live for eternity. Let your "life be hid with Christ in God;" and then, "when Christ who is our life shall appear, ye shall appear with Him in glory."  
Ashton Oxenden, *The Christian Life*, pp. 204, 205
- "The Way" refers both to the path and the manner of travel. To walk in "the Way" involves a moral style so intimately related to the destination itself that to wander from "the Way" is to miss the goal (a righteous life in a community faithful to God). Destination and means are so intertwined that means are themselves ends-in-process.  
Bruce C. Birch & Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in The Christian Life*, p. 22

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learn a lot from these books; if you stick with them, you will experience a rich adventure in spiritual growth. One thing is key, though. Throughout the entire series we are establishing as a core idea the principle that discipleship is quite simply about following Jesus. It's about a life-long journey, based on allowing God to lead us where He wants us to go. Central to the idea is learning to cling to God in whatever circumstances we face, choosing to be God's person, even in the face of great trials and temptations.

In this particular book in the iFollow series, *Getting It Right*, we are looking at how we make sure we're building well. We are focused on assuring that we are incorporating into our lives what we need in order to grow into vital Christians, in the face of the predictable challenges we will encounter. Specifically, in this book we're focusing on some of the more common obstacles Christians face in developing a vigorous spiritual life—things we can prepare for—and then offering some helpful strategies for staying on track.

That would be useful, right? But we don't want to oversell the process. We are not at all suggesting that there is a set of strategies that we can merely adopt in entirety that will prepare us for any eventuality along the journey. Life is rich in individual challenges, which no prescription can anticipate. It isn't at all predictable, with a "one-size fits all" set of answers. When we choose to follow Jesus,

we are embarking on an individual journey, in some ways uniquely ours.

Still, the fact is we will experience some or many of the six obstacles presented in these pages. And some of us may experience all of them. The truth is, some of us learn what we need to learn fairly quickly, “jumping on it like a chicken after a bug,” as a good friend of mine used to say, while others of us keep batting our heads against the same wall for a long time before we begin to get it. Personally, I’m one of those who takes considerably longer to learn the lessons God wants to teach me—which is what makes me a rather obvious, if not ideal, author for a book like this. It also makes me extremely thankful that God is as patient with us as He is.

## The challenge of following Jesus

In all this, are we suggesting it won’t always be easy to follow Jesus? Yes, we certainly are. Those of us who have been “in the way” for some time know it well. We can affirm the reality and potency of the challenges we face in seeking to grow in Christ. We’re acknowledging that many of us will find following Jesus to be more difficult than we might have thought it would be. We’re acknowledging that

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there are skills to be learned that are not always obvious to us when we start out. We’re also admitting that even when more mature Christians tell us what we need to do—such as studying the Bible or praying every day or doing any of what are commonly called “spiritual disciplines”—we don’t always know how to do it. Sometimes we even discount what they say because we don’t know how to begin. And there are even times when we get our backs up and say, “No. I don’t want to do that.”

Sound like anyone you know?

At one level, being a Christian *is* easy, of course: a vigorous Christian life is all about trusting God and letting Him do the work on our hearts. He has promised to build faith in us and to do the job right. In Philippians, the apostle Paul tells us, “Of one thing I am certain: the One who started the good work in you will bring it to completion by the Day of Christ Jesus.”<sup>4</sup> That’s good news, isn’t it? God is our spiritual building contractor.

<sup>4</sup>Philippians 1:6 (NEB).

So, we know of God's commitment to us. We know what He will do if we allow it. Actually, the Bible is full of positive statements about God's attitude to us. In Jeremiah we read, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."<sup>5</sup> God wants us to succeed at building vigorous spiritual lives. He wants what is best for us.

But even though God wants us to grow spiritually, we don't always experience a steady growth pattern. In fact, sometimes a fair number of us find ourselves flat on our faces, asking, "What just happened to me?" This book is about being right in that spot, and about what we should do when it happens. If you're in that spot right now, wondering how you managed to get into so much trouble, don't feel alone. Many of us have been there, too. We not only sympathize but also identify with your circumstances.

Though spiritual life is based on trusting God, at another level allowing God to do what He wishes is far more complex than it might seem. "Getting it right" in developing a healthy approach to spiritual life, then, offers several major challenges, as we've said. When I said earlier that many of us have faced *all* of the obstacles listed in the book, you will notice that I included myself. If we're going to talk about finding obstacles to spiritual growth, I count myself as an expert in discovering where they lie. Indeed, I'm a bit like a warthog, rooting in the woods: I know where to dig and how to get the most possible muck and mud on my face.

**Allowing God to do what He wishes is far more complex than it might seem.**

## The key message in this chapter

We've all heard the joke about the farmer who scratched his head when he was asked for directions from the city slicker and finally said, "Well, son, I don't think you can get there from here." It's funny, in a way, but it also touches on a key truth in developing spiritual maturity: *if we get it wrong in the beginning, we're going to be in trouble all the way along.* And that's the issue we're going to address in this chapter.

When we first become a Christian, it is a big deal, right? Typically, it's a moment of great enthusiasm. We're excited and hopeful. Maybe we've heard about the Sabbath, and we want to do what God's Word says. Maybe we've gone

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<sup>5</sup>Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV).



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## INSPIRED THOUGHTS

- Only those who will become co-workers with Christ, only those who will say, Lord, all I have and all I am is Thine, will be acknowledged as sons and daughters of God. All should consider what it means to desire heaven, and yet to turn away because of the conditions laid down. Think of what it means to say “No” to Christ. The ruler said, No, I cannot give You all. Do we say the same? The Saviour offers to share with us the work God has given us to do. He offers to use the means God has given us, to carry forward His work in the world. Only in this way can He save us.  
E. G. White, *Desire of Ages*, p. 523
  - The Christian life is a battle and a march. But the victory to be gained is not won by human power. The field of conflict is the domain of the heart. The battle which we have to fight—the greatest battle that was ever fought by man—is the surrender of self to the will of God, the yielding of the heart to the sovereignty of love.  
E. G. White, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessings*, p. 141
  - We draw from God’s promises all that peace, that comfort, that hope that will develop in us the fruits of peace, joy, and faith. And by bringing these promises into our life we bring them always into the lives of others. Then let us appropriate these promises to ourselves. . . . They are to awaken our hope and expectation, and lead us to a firm faith and reliance upon God.  
E. G. White, *The Upward Look*, p. 15
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through some crisis in our lives, and we’ve turned to God in desperation. Maybe we are like the apostle Paul, who thought he was doing God’s will until that moment on the Damascus Road when God said, “Time to change directions.” My own experience was like that of Ted and Janet, who I mentioned earlier. I was baptized at a tent meeting, and I did, in fact, walk down that sawdust trail, full of emotion and expectation. I didn’t have an Adventist background at the time, and I was caught up in a moment of radical transformation. I thought everything was going to be a smooth process from then on. I was God’s child, after all.

But I was young, after all, and had a great deal to learn.

As we’ve said, the process of growing in Christ is one filled with potential obstacles. There are tripwires all along the path. Some of them we can avoid, while others we must face and overcome. One of them is the obstacle we’re considering in this chapter—that we sometimes don’t begin the process with clarity of thought about what it means to be a Christian. How we begin a journey sometimes influences our success. If we’re going for a hike in rough territory,



we need to be sure we have a compass. We need the proper clothing and shoes. We may need other tools, like a knife or a walking stick. We need to bring along provisions appropriate to the circumstances.

So, let's consider this moment of starting out—this time of beginnings—and be sure we're going in the right direction. The last thing we want is to be going down a path that just won't get us where we want to go. Right? We don't want "you can't get there from here" to be applied to our lives.

## Common ways we start out in the wrong place

Not all of us start out our spiritual lives in the wrong place, of course. Most of us begin with great enthusiasm and a high sense of certainty that we're going the right direction. And we may well be. But you might be surprised at how many of us begin with some flawed ideas and approaches that we don't even know we've adopted. These often become "baggage" we're carrying with us, making it difficult for us to deal with what we face along the way.

So, what are some of the more common ways we start out in the wrong place? Let's consider several.

### 1. **Some of us begin with a flawed grasp of God's attitude toward us.**

For example, we think of Him as a judgmental God, more eager to destroy the wicked than save His children. How is that a problem? Because it's like building a bridge with a broken rock as its foundation. For example, it is not possible to build a powerful spiritual life on the basis of fear that last day events are closing in and we want to escape God's wrath. In all candor, sometimes in our evangelistic fervor, we leave our listeners more frightened than hopeful. They run into the church looking for a safe place.

The church should be a safe place—and if we're afraid, it is a place toward which we should run. But we don't want people running from an angry God. Instead, we need to be sure that we're telling the stories of Jesus. We need to be sure that people hear Him sharing with us about God's love, a Father's love for His children.<sup>6</sup> And we need to be sure they hear Jesus saying that it is by *love* that people will know we are His disciples.<sup>7</sup>

Whoever we are—whether we're the preacher or the church member—we need to be sure we're conveying a picture of God that is one on which a

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<sup>6</sup>John 3:16; Matthew 22:33-40; Luke 15:11-32.

<sup>7</sup>John 13:35.

vigorous relationship can be built. It is our job to be sure this is happening. If people start out wrong in this area, they'll be in danger of never getting it right. And in all our efforts to reach those in the outside world, we need to see the difference between mere proclamation and true ministry. Remember what Ellen White wrote: "The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow me.'"<sup>8</sup>

This is how we do it. If we love the people we serve, then we have a chance to "get it right." It all fits together.

**2. Some of us begin with only a "theological persuasion," not a heart transformation.** For example, believing that the Sabbath is Saturday, not Sunday, isn't a secure basis on which to build a life of faith. Adventism isn't just a group of abstract theological ideas to which people can subscribe. *As Adventists, we have a cohesive center.* We understand what it means to be true Christians, with a powerful, lasting relationship with Jesus.

However, it will always be the temptation in a church like ours, with distinctive beliefs that matter to us, to confuse those distinctive beliefs with our core beliefs. We do it in our preaching, and we sometimes do it in our living, too. When we talk to people, what is it we discuss? My experience is it's often not about our faith in Jesus, but about how persuaded we are that the Sabbath doctrine is right or that people don't go to heaven when they die—or some other of our distinctive doctrines. This is a serious mistake, with lasting implications.

Should we never talk about the doctrines? That's not at all what I'm arguing. I'm saying, instead, that when someone asks you what you believe, your testimony should be about Jesus, not about some abstract theological idea. Later on, when you know them and have won their confidence, you can share other elements of your belief system.

I'm not at all arguing that because we get a bit confused over these matters we're not Christians. I'm just saying we need to be clear on what we really believe, as opposed to what we're just prepared to argue about. True Christians really believe that Jesus has saved them and that He wants them to live for others. When Jesus spoke of the judgment, He said that those who were saved could be seen as sheep and those who were lost could be seen as goats. When He was asked how these two groups were different, He spoke of ministering to "the least of these," the members of our community who need our help.<sup>9</sup> We need to hear

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<sup>8</sup>E. G. White, *Ministry of Healing*, page 143.

<sup>9</sup>Matthew 25: 31-46.

what Jesus is saying here, and allow it to transform our sense of mission.

True spiritual vitality is not a matter of “head-religion.” It’s about the transformation of the heart. When the apostle Paul wrote to the believers in Corinth, he spoke about his own spiritual struggles and what he had learned from the process. He wrote:

No wonder we do not lose heart! Though our outward humanity is in decay, yet day by day we are inwardly renewed. Our troubles are slight and short-lived; and their outcome an eternal glory which outweighs them far. Meanwhile our eyes are fixed, not on the things that are seen but on the things that are unseen.<sup>10</sup>

As Christians seeking to continue growing—and not get tripped up along the way—we need to take this to heart. It is this “inward renewal” we need. Our hearts need to be transformed, so that we can love the way Jesus loved, and serve with humility the way He served. That’s how we grow. That’s how we stay on the road.

**3. Some of us think that it’s enough to be children of believers, rather than true believers ourselves.** A fair number of those baptized after a series are children of members, your children and mine. Baptism is a good thing in a child’s life, of course; however, a vigorous spiritual life is a personal thing, built around our own love for Jesus and desire to be His person. It’s not something you can inherit. Do we want our children baptized? Of course we do. We want them to join the church. But think for a moment: is that all we want? More than that, we want them to know Jesus.

That’s why one of the books in this iFollow series has to do with how to lead a child to Christ. As adult leaders in the church, we need to understand and sympathize with our young people as they seek to know Jesus personally. We need to support them and create settings where the opportunity to develop a personal relationship with Jesus is fostered.

That’s what Children’s Sabbath School is about. It’s what Christian education and our extensive church school system are about. It’s what our summer camp investment is about. It’s what Vacation Bible School and dozens of other programs are about, as well. But there is a continuing need for us to under-

True spiritual vitality is not a matter of “head-religion.” It’s about the transformation of the heart.

<sup>10</sup>2 Corinthians 4:16-18 (NEB).

stand that keeping our kids in the church is always secondary to introducing them to Jesus.

**4. Some of us are hung up on the emotion instead of being committed to the long haul.** Emotion is great, isn't it? When my friend Ray Tetz and I used to regularly hold "afterglow" sessions with young Christians at summer camp and campmeeting and during weeks of prayer, those were often moments of great spiritual closeness with the young people. They were moved and we were moved. I still remember the way it felt, all these years later. But that "good feeling" wasn't a substitute for the tenacity required for the heavy pulling that true spiritual growth entails. Growing in Christ is a life-long process. Some moments during that process will be highly emotional; others will not. The eagerness of

The process of beginning our spiritual journey the right way has an element of strategic planning to it.

the moment must be buttressed by the commitments of a changed life. We can't depend on emotions. They won't carry us through the dark times that are almost certainly coming. We need a stronger platform.

The process of beginning our spiritual journey the right way has an element of strategic planning to it. We need to know, going in, that we won't always be on the mountaintop. Sometimes we'll be down in the valley. Nobody wants to linger in the valley of despair, of course. But when we're in it, we need to realize that God can use those moments to help us grow, and we need to be able to remember the signposts along the road, the times in our lives when we had a powerful sense of certainty.

So, we need to begin with a clear-minded commitment to stick with this, all the way through. It's like marriage. The preacher asks us if we'll stick to our vows through thick or thin, the good times and the bad. Not everyone does, of course; but the memory of those vows can enable us to survive moments of temptation. It can remind us that we knew there would be times like this, moments when we were tested or tempted. And that we vowed to continue over the bridge, however so thin.

"Getting it right," then, involves starting at the right place. It involves taking the time to be sure we're trusting Jesus, not our emotions, not some set of specific doctrinal beliefs—or anything else. We have to begin with our confidence that we have a God who loves us. We have a God who has already gone to sacrificial lengths to reach out to us, and promises to continue it all the way to the end. Christian writer Frederick Buechner has written about the amazing act of God in sending

Jesus to us:

Those who believe in God can never in a way be sure of him again. Once they have seen him in a stable, they can never be sure where he will appear or to what lengths he will go or to what ludicrous depths of self-humiliation he will descend in his wild pursuit of man.<sup>11</sup>

We cannot hope to encompass God with our limited imagination or comprehension. He is just too big, with a love that is too foreign to us. But we can get an inkling of it. We can see how much He loves us by the Gift He has given us. And we can begin our life of faith by clinging to that vision.

Building a vigorous spiritual life requires that we overcome the obstacle posed by all the possible mistakes we can make in beginning our walk with the Lord (the list of which certainly is longer than the few we discussed here). So, let's begin well, starting with a God who loves us, wants us, and desires to be in relationship with us.

It's the right place to begin.

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<sup>11</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark*, p. 13.

# Obstacle One:

## *Starting at the wrong place*

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How is our own personal image of God formed? What role does our image of God have in our Christian experience, and how can our image of God be changed to more accurately reflect the truth as revealed in Scripture?
2. How is it possible to overcome one's own self-image issues in order to appreciate and accept God's high regard for us as individuals?
3. What would be the identifying characteristics of one who is a church member because he/she has found truth compared to one who is committed to Jesus? What about an individual who has been nurtured in the culture of the church and its institutions but has never made a commitment to Jesus?
4. Why would an individual want to be a disciple, since it requires leaving everything else behind to follow Jesus? What does that really mean in practical, everyday living?

### **An In-depth Group Discussion Idea**

Review Abraham's story, Genesis 12-25, then identify those incidents in which he was interacting with God on a personal basis. Describe what that tells you about God's nature.