

Begin

First Steps
for the Journey of Faith

BOB FRANQUIZ



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Introduction

My Story

*M*y spiritual journey began when I was young. My parents weren't very religious people, but they thought highly of religious education. From third through eighth grade, I attended a parochial school near my house. That's where I learned about God and different aspects of the Bible. I was taught various prayers to say at specific times, and I was educated on who the major players are in the Bible. I even participated in services that probably once had rich meaning but by the time I learned them had become routine and shallow.

I was taught *about* God, but I was never introduced *to* God. God was explained to me the way a teacher gives

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information about a former world leader or historic figure. I was taught that God is “out there somewhere” but was never told that he is close to me.

My parents are divorced. Each has been married more than once, which makes my family tree look like a two-year-old drew it. I have two sisters and a brother, but my two sisters aren't related. This felt odd to me as I was growing up—odd enough to make God seem distant to what mattered in my life. So I went through adolescence with a pseudo-faith. I believed in God. I even believed that Jesus was God's Son who died on a cross so I could be forgiven, but that never meant anything to me. “Faith” never crossed paths with real life—never, that is, until May 29, 1993.

A New Understanding

I was nineteen and visiting my older brother, who lives in Boston; he had given his life to Christ. Now, this confused me because I thought we were already Christian. I mean, we were Catholic, but I thought that it was all the same thing, the way Coke, Pepsi, and RC are all types of cola, just different flavors.

When I saw my brother and spent some time with him, I realized that our understandings of God were different. It's

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not that we believed differently; I was amazed at how much we agreed about spiritual things. When my brother spoke about God, he spoke as if he were talking about someone he knew, as if he and God had just gotten off the phone.

My understanding of God was based on facts. I knew about how he created the world in six days, how he once caused it to flood, and how he parted the Red Sea (okay, I got that from the movie *Bruce Almighty*, but it's in the Bible too). My brother talked about a new creation, a re-creation of a human life that yields itself to God. He spoke of a flood of forgiveness God sent in his direction because of what Jesus had done for him. He explained the miracles God performed in his life. For some reason, these things were more spectacular to me than a sea parting down the middle, maybe because they were more tangible.

I awoke the next morning in my brother's house, full of questions. I sat at his kitchen table, and we talked for the next few hours. He didn't just share facts about how Jesus died on the cross, how humans are sinners, and that the Bible is God's book. He told me how all these things matter today. He explained that, as a person, when I do something wrong, I become separated from God because I have failed to meet God's standard. But in his love, God sent Jesus to be the sacrifice that covered all sins I committed. Because

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of this act of love, through my faith in Jesus, I can spend eternity with God. Meanwhile, I can have a real life here on Earth, in a relationship with God. Through the sacrifice of Jesus, I am no longer separated from God.

I was confused. I told him, “But I already believe in God.” Then he explained to me that there’s a difference between faith and belief. We believe many things without putting our faith in them. How many smokers believe smoking is unhealthy? Most of them. But that belief doesn’t change their habits. How many people believe that being overweight isn’t good for them? Most of them. Believing something is true and having the courage to take a step to walk in that truth are different things. That’s where faith comes in.

Faith requires acting on the beliefs we have. This is where my brother and I were different. He had faith, and I had only a belief. So he invited me to pray and put my faith in Jesus and become a Christian. This wasn’t an invitation into a religious system; I already had that. This was an invitation into a relationship, a connection with God. That’s why God asks us to call him Father. It’s a word of connection and relationship.

I decided to pray and ask Jesus to forgive me. I asked God to set my life on a new path and to give me peace. What’s amazing is that he did! God changed my life. And

if you're reading this, either God has done this in your life, or you want him to do it.

Welcome to Miami

A few days after becoming a Christian, I had to go home to Miami, where I lived with my mom and younger sister. I was nineteen and in college, but I didn't know any Christians or what to do with my newfound faith. I started attending a great church, and with the help of people there, I learned some basics of the Christian faith and steps to growing spiritually.

As I look back on my spiritual journey, I see five decisions that helped me tremendously in growing in my relationship with God. If you incorporate these into your life, they will help you immensely in your pursuit of knowing God and growing in your faith.

I Decided to Communicate with God Daily

We communicate with God through prayer. Sometimes we make prayer out to be something that only the professionals can do. They use special words such as *thee* and *thou*; they wear special clothes and place their hands a particular way. You might be surprised to know that Jesus

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didn't pray like that. He didn't teach his disciples to pray like that.

In a conversation about prayer, Jesus said, "And when you come before God, don't turn that into a theatrical production either. All these people making a regular show out of their prayers, hoping for stardom! Do you think God sits in a box seat? Here's what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace" (Matt. 6:5–6 Message).

Don't worry about the words you use, because God knows your heart. Don't worry about whether you're sitting or standing, because God wants to hear from you.

I have three kids I love dearly. When they want to speak to me, the important thing isn't the position of their hands or the formality of their words; it's the genuineness of their heart. That's true with God as well.

Decide to spend some time daily telling God what's happening in your life and what you are thinking and feeling. It will do more for your journey than you know.

I Decided to Learn about God Daily

I was never a reader before I became a Christian. If you aren't a person who reads much, that's okay. But people

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who grow in their relationship with God spend some time reading the Bible daily. Why? Because in the Bible, we learn things about God we never knew.

I have a box in my office at home with all the letters my wife wrote me while we were dating and she was away at college. I read and reread those letters because I wanted to know her better. The same is true with God. The stories we read in the Bible tell how God worked in the lives of people throughout history. What's amazing is that as you read those stories you learn that God wants to be faithful to you the same way he was faithful to them.

You don't have to read the entire book in one sitting! Just decide to carve out some time daily to spend with God. Think of it this way—if prayer is speaking to God, then spending time reading the Bible is God's opportunity to speak to you. I've learned that if there's something I'm praying about, often the answer can be found in the section of the Bible I'm reading that day.

I Went to Church Weekly

As I wanted to grow in my faith, I thought the best place to be would be around others who wanted to do the same. When I started to attend church, I sang songs from my heart to God. I opened the Bible, and I was taught how to walk with God through a gifted Bible teacher. I got to know

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some people who became friends with me and helped me along as I took my first few steps, and I could even use the talents God gave me to help others connect with him.

Getting involved in a church regularly is so important. I know we live in a very busy world, but if we don't make the time to cultivate our relationship with God, no one will do it for us. So we must protect our time and prioritize it. All these years later, I have never regretted that decision to go to church regularly.

I Found Some Friends on the Journey

I had many friends when I became a Christian and started to follow Jesus, but I knew that I also needed friends who would help me along in my spiritual journey. As I went to church and got to know people, friendships naturally formed, and I saw my spiritual life soar because of the people I got to know.

I have learned that getting involved in a small group helps tremendously, because there's nothing greater than going through a difficult time and knowing that you're not alone. It's comforting to know people are praying for me and are ready to help in whatever way possible when I have a problem. It makes life a little easier knowing you have a support system of people who love God and love you.

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I Went Public with My Faith through Baptism

Baptism is a public symbol of the inward commitment you've made to follow Jesus. Baptism is a command of Jesus. He asks every one of his followers to be baptized in water. Why? Because in baptism we identify with Jesus's death when we go in the water and then identify with Jesus's resurrection when we emerge from the water (see Rom. 6).

When I was baptized, it was a big deal. It was one of the first times when I read something in the Bible that Jesus asked me to do and I obeyed. Baptism has so much rich meaning and depth, but on a practical level it set a pattern of obedience in my life where I wanted to do God's will.

I recognize these five decisions aren't the answer to all life's questions, but they have been a foundation in my life. They have helped me keep taking steps in God's direction. In the following chapters, I will explain each decision I made and give you some tools for growing in your faith.

One of my favorite movie quotations comes from *The Hurricane*, a film starring Denzel Washington about a boxer wrongfully convicted of murder. In the movie, Lesra Martin's character is in a bookstore and picks up a book by Washington's character. The book moves Martin to help

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Reuben “The Hurricane” Carter get a fair trial and, ultimately, get out of prison. When he rhetorically asks his friends how a book can move a person to act, his friends respond, “Sometimes you pick the book; sometimes the book picks you.”

Not only have you picked this book, but this book has also picked you because it contains the tools for spiritual growth that can serve you for a lifetime.

1

What Does It Mean to Be a Christian?

I received a very kind gift for my fourteenth birthday. A family friend gave me a gold chain that was so cool; it made me look like a member of *Miami Vice*. A gold necklace like that probably cost \$500 in 1989 when it was given to me. I wore it to school thinking I was the coolest kid in the world. My classmates *ooed* and *aahed* over my recently acquired gold chain, and I internally vowed that I would never take it off.

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That lasted for three days. As I left for school on the third day, I looked at myself in the mirror and noticed something—there was a discoloration on my neck. I thought I was turning into the Incredible Hulk because my neck was turning green. My fashionable gold chain had turned green as well because it wasn't gold. It was a fake! I was angry that I had been given a counterfeit rather than the real thing. I learned that not everything is real just because of its label.

So here's my question for you—what is a Christian? There are enough answers to go around. A 2009 Gallup poll showed that 78 percent of Americans consider themselves Christians.¹ An ABC News poll showed that 75 percent of Americans believe they will go to heaven when they die. Another 14 percent of those surveyed believe in heaven as well; they just aren't sure whether they'll get to go in.²

In my experience as a pastor, I have found that people give various reasons why they call themselves Christians:

“I'm a Christian because I'm an American.”

“I'm a Christian because my parents believed.”

“I was born a Christian and grew up in the church.”

“I'm a Christian because I'm not Jewish or Muslim.”

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My problem with these answers is they don't mention the only reason a person is a Christian. Here's the challenge: You can go to church and not be a Christian. You can read the Bible and not be a Christian. You can eliminate bad habits, pray daily, and try to be a moral person and still not be a Christian. All these habits are good, and Christians should do them, but the actions alone don't make a person a believer.

What then is a Christian? A Christian is a person whom God has forgiven through the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross. The Bible says:

Once we, too, were foolish and disobedient. We were misled and became slaves to many lusts and pleasures. Our lives were full of evil and envy, and we hated each other. But—“When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit. He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior.” (Titus 3:3–6)

We are Christians because of the finished work of Jesus on the cross. We are sinners who have fallen short of God's standard. God came to Earth in the person of Jesus and,

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being fully God and fully man, he died for us and paid the price for our sins. Through our faith in him, we receive forgiveness of our sins and the gift of eternal life.

In the Bible, a law-enforcement officer once asked the apostle Paul the most important question a person can ask: “What must I do to be saved?” Paul responded, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31).

Here’s the point: being a Christian isn’t about what you do; it’s about what Jesus has done. He loves you. He died for you. He forgives you when you open your heart to believe.

So how do you know whether you are a Christian? The Bible says it’s a good thing to test ourselves to make sure our faith is real. “Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine. Test yourselves. Surely you know that Jesus Christ is among you; if not, you have failed the test of genuine faith” (2 Cor. 13:5).

The apostle John was one of the original twelve disciples who followed Jesus. Toward the end of John’s life, he wrote a letter to the church at large, letting them know how they can have eternal life and be confident and secure that they are truly Christians. He wrote at the end of 1 John, “I have written this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life” (5:13).

So what things did John write that can assure us we are Christians? We'll learn there are four tests to see whether we are Christians.

Test #1—Confess Jesus as Lord

Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. (1 John 4:15 NKJV)

The first mark of a true Christian is that he or she confesses that Jesus is Lord, which differs from simply believing in God. The Bible says that even demons believe in God and tremble (James 2:19). Confessing Jesus as Lord means calling on God to save you through the finished work of Jesus on the cross. The apostle Paul put it this way: "If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Rom. 10:9–10 NKJV).

Being a Christian has nothing to do with being a good person or your good deeds outweighing your bad deeds. All these lines of reasoning are variations of saying, "I'm good enough to save myself." The only problem is we can't

save ourselves. We cannot deal with the fact that you and I are fallen, broken, sinful people, which is why the Bible tells us to confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead. Understand these are not academic exercises. These two acts signify a paradigm shift in a person's life.

Confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, saying, "Jesus, you're in charge. You control my life. I resign that position to you. You're the master, and I'm the servant." Making Jesus Lord of your life is not about title; it's about control. It's about giving him the power to lead, direct, and guide you.

Believing in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead is a statement declaring that, at the cross, my sins were paid for. When I place my trust in that fact—that Jesus is the only one who can save me—that's when the Bible says, "You are saved." We aren't saved because our parents were Christians or because we gave money to a charity last year. Jesus's death and resurrection are what saves us from a life of futility and misery and an eternity separated from God.

Some people think they're too bad and that God would never accept them. However, there's a promise in the Bible that says otherwise. Romans 10:13 tells us, "Whoever calls

on the name of the LORD will be saved” (NKJV). It doesn’t matter who you are or what you’ve done; salvation is about who Jesus is (he’s God, and he has the power to forgive) and what Jesus has done (he died for us, rose again, and invites us to experience the life he offers us).

Test #2—Obey the Commands of God

For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.
(1 John 5:3 NKJV)

A revelation happens when we’re confronted with the commands of God. First, the commands of God show who God is because they show us God’s heart toward us. His commands are given to us out of love and a sincere desire for us to live the best life possible. If you have kids (or if you were ever given rules by your parents), then you know your rules for your kids are based in love. You want your kids to be safe, loving, and functioning members of society, so you create boundaries that ensure they have the chance to grow into the best versions of themselves.

God’s commands show God’s love for us and his desire to lead us to live in a way that will take us into the

abundant life he promised us. Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10 NKJV). In short, obeying God’s commands leads to the best possible life. In a world where most people simply exist and just “get by” with life, Jesus offers a life with depth, meaning, and purpose in him.

The second discovery we find in obeying the commands of God is the revelation of our faith. Our desire to obey God shows our relationship with him. True Christians won’t be perfect in their obedience to God; however, they will seek to obey God. True Christians seek to guide their lives by what God says. This doesn’t mean Christians never sin. Unfortunately, we are all sinners, and just because you’ve become a Christian doesn’t mean you’ll never sin again. However, true Christians will be miserable when they sin because they will know they are living apart from God’s guidance.

The Bible says, “Those who have been born into God’s family do not make a practice of sinning, because God’s life is in them. So they can’t keep on sinning, because they are children of God” (1 John 3:9). True followers of Jesus will feel uncomfortable when they sin because the Holy Spirit is working in their lives.

I became a Christian on May 29, 1993, in my brother's kitchen. He shared the gospel with me, and I responded by inviting Jesus Christ into my life to be Savior and Lord. However, the first thing I did after making the most important decision in my life was go to a baseball game.

I grew up in Boston, and I was there visiting my brother when I decided to follow Jesus. So I went to Fenway Park that evening with my girlfriend Carey (now my wife of sixteen years) and looked forward to enjoying the game.

Here's what you need to know about me: before becoming a Christian, I cussed like a sailor who spent all his free time watching *The Usual Suspects*. My language got especially salty when I watched sporting events.

So during the game, when the umpire made a call I didn't agree with, I stood and said, "Why you—" But somehow I stopped, looked around, and sat down. Carey looked at me, wondering what I would say. I turned to her and said, "I'm a Christian now, and I don't think God wants me to talk like that anymore." I had been a Christian for only three hours, and God was already working in my life.

Does this mean I've never said a word I've regretted since that day? Unfortunately, I have. But whenever it happened, I was unhappy about it, and thankfully God has

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given me victory in this area of my life. You don't enter a state of perfection when you become a Christian. Instead, you come to an awareness of sin, and the Holy Spirit works in your life to give you victory.

Test #3—Build Friendships with Believers

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has become a child of God. And everyone who loves the Father loves his children, too. (1 John 5:1)

It's impossible to grow in your faith alone. Christianity was not designed to be practiced in solitude. The Christian faith works best when we are engaged with others in the journey. Jesus had twelve disciples with him almost everywhere he went. We must follow this model as well.

As a young Christian, I wanted to grow in my faith. I didn't know any other Christians, so I thought the best place to find others of like faith was church. It seemed simple enough, but I had never attended a church in my life. Here's what I found when I started to attend a church: I found people headed in the same direction I was—sincere people more than willing to help me in my new faith journey.

Early in my Christian walk, I met a man named Bill. He wasn't a Bible teacher or theologian. He lived three doors down from me and was a construction worker. He invited me to knock on his door whenever I had questions about the Bible. I kept a notebook of all the questions I had.

Once I had two pages of questions, I would knock on his door, and he would graciously spend hours with me answering every inquiry I had about the Scriptures. Those sessions gave me such confidence in God's Word and helped me build my life on God's truths. Godly men such as Bill and many others who befriended me and mentored me are some reasons I still walk with God.

Here's the bottom line: if you're a Christian, go to church. Get involved. Build some friendships with followers of Christ who inspire you with their faith. We'll cover this topic in-depth in chapter 3, but suffice it to say, this decision is one of the best you can make in your life.

Test #4—Grow in Your Love for Others

He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness,

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and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes. (1 John 2:9–11 NKJV)

My five-year-old daughter, Mia, recently memorized the Bible passage on the fruit of the Spirit. It's a section in the Bible that talks about what it looks like when the Holy Spirit begins to work in our lives: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law" (Gal. 5:22–23 NKJV).

I told her how important it is to hide God's Word in her heart and that God was pleased with her committing sections of the Bible to memory. Mia was so happy. Twenty minutes later, she got into an argument with her three-year-old brother and punched him. So I took her aside and asked, "Mia, is acting like that showing any of the fruit of the Spirit?" She agreed that her actions weren't loving and apologized to her brother.

This is what it looks like when we say we love God and hate our brother. When God transforms your life, you become a more loving person. God changes your heart and gives you compassion and grace for those you wouldn't have any time for previously.

Do you know why John is so passionate about this topic in particular? It's because John wasn't talking about this in

theory. God had transformed his life from an angry, over-reacting hothead to a person of grace and love.

There's a scene in the Bible where Jesus comes to a town with his disciples, including John, who was a young man at the time. The townspeople aren't interested in Jesus's message of love and grace, and they ask him to leave. When they don't receive Jesus's message, John and his brother James say, "Do you want us to call down fire from heaven and consume them like Elijah did?" (see Luke 9:54). Essentially they were saying, "Lord, they won't receive the message of love, grace, and forgiveness. Do you want us to kill everyone?" This scene and many other encounters earned John and his brother the nickname *Boanerges*, which means "sons of thunder."

Let's fast-forward a few years. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, the same John who wanted to torch a town instead preached the gospel and saw the grace of God save a town. John's name was changed from "son of thunder" to "the apostle of love." How does this transformation happen? It happens when a person has a real encounter with the living God.

So, are you a Christian? The answer to that question comes down to what you've done with the gospel message that Jesus Christ lived a perfect life, died on a cross, and was

buried. Three days later he rose from the dead and offers forgiveness and grace to every person who comes to him.

Have you invited Jesus Christ to come into your life and forgive you of your sins? If not, you can pray this prayer and ask God to forgive you because of what Jesus did. He loves you and wants to do great work in your life. So if you're ready, pray:

Dear God, I open my heart and invite you in. I'm sorry for my sins. I turn from them and turn to you. Thank you for sending Jesus to die for me. I receive Jesus as my Savior and Lord. Thank you for saving me. In Jesus's name. Amen.

If you just prayed that prayer and meant it in faith, Jesus Christ has now taken residence in your heart and life! Your decision to follow Jesus means God has forgiven you. God has started to work in your life right now, and you will spend eternity in heaven.

But this isn't the finish line—it's just the starting point. This is the first step to building your life on God's truth. So now that you're a Christian, how do you communicate with God? What do you say? How do you know that God hears you? How do you know whether you're praying the right way? We'll pick up that topic next.