

unstuck

getting a jump start on
your spiritual growth



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**YOU'RE NOT
ALONE**





We all go through seasons of life when we feel stuck in a rut.

It could be with our job, our health, a hobby, or a relationship. It's no different with our faith. We're all bound to hit seasons in our spiritual life when we feel stuck.

Maybe you're there. You're not growing. You don't feel challenged. You've become complacent. Maybe, even worse, you've regressed and taken steps backward. If that's the case, be encouraged!

I realize that sounds weird. You might be thinking, “Be encouraged? Why would I be encouraged about being stuck?”

The very fact that you're reading this is a good sign. It means you've hit a breaking point. You've come to the realization that something has to change. Many people resist change because there's always a cost or a pain point when making a change. And if you're ready for change, it means that the cost or pain of not changing is greater than the cost or pain involved with the change.

That's a good place to be. It means the soil of your soul is ready for something new to be planted.

My hope with this short ebook is to give you some guidance on making small changes in your spiritual life to help you get unstuck and put you on track to where you desire to be.

You'll find that what I'm going to share will be simple and straightforward. But that doesn't mean it will be easy. It won't be impossible, but it will take intentionality. Like I said, change costs something and involves some measure of discomfort.

If you're ready to get unstuck, let's get going.



A Metaphor





The summer between my sixth and seventh-grade year my family moved from one corner of the country to the other. We moved from Phoenix, AZ to Keene, NH. The move came with all sorts of new experiences, but one of the biggest was snow.

Phoenix is in the middle of the desert, and it's hot, extremely hot! In the summer the temperature regularly reached 120 degrees. That's hot enough to fry an egg on the sidewalk or bake cookies in a car that's been sitting in the sun all day.

Keene is the exact opposite, and in the winter it gets cold, ridiculously cold. I remember stretches when the temperature dropped to negative fifteen degrees for days on end. And of course, it would snow. As a kid, I remember snowstorms that dumped two feet of snow in a single day.

As a result, I got pretty good at digging cars out of snowbanks.

When my friends and I started to drive, before we had our own cars, we all used our parents'. On snowy days, if I was hanging out with my friends and we drove past an empty parking lot that wasn't fully cleared of snow, we'd pull in and practice doing donuts, fishtails, and spin-outs. After a few snow storms during a given winter, the edges of the parking lots had snowbanks that were sometimes ten feet high. It wasn't uncommon for us to lose control of the car and slam into a snowbank and get stuck.

Resolved not to call our parents for help (we were using their cars after all!), we got pretty good at getting cars unstuck from the snow. And there were three things we did to get them out.

The first was to get the tires some traction. For those who've never experienced a car stuck in the snow, when you push down on the gas pedal, the tires just spin because there's nothing for them to grip. We used anything we could to help the tires get traction: sand, gravel, plywood,



whatever we could find.

Second, there's a technique to moving a car that's stuck which uses its own momentum. You put the car in gear and move it forward a matter of inches. As soon as it stops moving forward, you put the car in reverse and back it up a few inches. This starts a rocking motion. Once the car stops moving backward, you put it in gear again and try to go forward further than you did the last time. With each move forward and back, the momentum of the car increases and sometimes it's enough to get you out of the rut.

Third, it always paid to have a friend with a big truck. Even though most of us didn't have our own cars, Mitch did. He had a truck, and it had four-wheel drive. If we couldn't get the car out with the techniques above, we called Mitch. He'd hook a chain between his truck and our car and slowly pull us out.

While these three steps were effective in getting cars out of snowbanks, they're also helpful in getting unstuck in your spiritual life.



Get Some Traction



The Scriptures





The thing about a car stuck in a snowbank is that it's not dead. To some degree, it's still functional. Not much, but some. You can keep the car running. You can turn on the heat and stay warm. You can listen to the radio. You can even push the gas, rev the engine, and exert a lot of energy. However, without any traction, you literally spin your wheels. You can't go anywhere. You can't do what a car was designed to do.

Maybe that's how you feel. You're exerting energy. You're pushing on the gas, yet going nowhere. You don't feel like you're living into all of what God has for you.

Just like the tires of a car that's stuck in a snowbank need traction, so do you. There are three necessary things to help give you traction and get you moving. The first are the Scriptures.

When people talk to me about feeling stuck spiritually, the first thing I wonder about is whether or not their connection to the Bible has grown stale.

There are many different ways to talk about the Scriptures. Specifically, what they are and how they work. Some people might think the Bible is a list of rules that need to be followed in order to make God happy and have Him love you. Others might think it's a plan of salvation that tells us how to get to heaven when we die. Still others may view the Bible as a book of inspirational sayings that gives you a jolt of encouragement when you're feeling down. And then, there are those who see the Bible as an ancient artifact that has no relevance to today.

One of the ways I used to view the Bible was as a catalog of truth. My perception was that the Bible was filled with a wide variety of truth claims about God. Arguments for His existence and creation of the world. Assertions about His holiness, goodness, and immutability. Statements about His plan of salvation. No doubt, the Scriptures speak to these things



and they do capture Truth, but by perceiving the Bible in this way, my attitude toward and engagement with it was that it was something that I was supposed to master. If I studied and researched it enough, I could acquire all the truth claims present in the Scriptures and could attain the status of a spiritual Jedi who could convince anyone of its validity and argue them into receiving Christ.

The result of pursuing the Bible this way was that I was becoming proud and arrogant. Paul says in 1 Cor. 8,

We know that “We all possess knowledge.” But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. (v1)

I was increasing in my knowledge, but not in my love. The Scriptures were becoming an object that was separate from me that I studied but didn't necessarily embody. It didn't deepen my relationship with God or form me to become more like Him.

How we view the Bible will ultimately determine how we interact with it. For example, if we believe the Bible is only a book of commands, we could grow to view the Bible as a weighty burden. It creates a list of expectations that we struggle to keep and the more we try, the more guilty we feel. If we believe that the Bible tells us how to get to heaven when we die, once we've cracked the salvation code we'll be tempted to set it aside because we have no continued need for it. If we believe the Bible is a book of inspirational sayings, we'll be tempted to read it only when we're going through a hard season, and we'll focus on the passages that are quippy and uplifting.

The Bible certainly contains all the things mentioned above, and they have their place in our spiritual journey. But viewing the Bible in one of those terms is reductionistic and doesn't fully represent what it is.



It wasn't until I started understanding the Bible in a different light that things changed. I want to suggest that the Bible, at its most fundamental level, is two things. It's a story, and it's a revelation. When stuck or simply desiring to grow, viewing and interacting with the Scriptures in this way will give them the most traction in our lives.

Story

Some people have a hard time asserting that the Bible is a story. There's concern that it might trivialize it and present it as something juvenile or childish. As I write this, there is a stack of children's books on the coffee table in front of me. One is about monsters and aliens, another is about a king and his princess daughter, and one is by Dr. Seuss about a bird and mouse exploring what's inside a "people house." If we say that the Bible is a story are we suggesting that it's filled with fiction, fairy tales, and cute little fables?

When we view story as something that's childish, we fail to see both the power that stories possess and the universal reach that stories have. All cultures and people groups have been recording and telling stories from the beginning of time. It doesn't matter who you are or where you're from, once you hear the words, "Once upon a time..." you're engaged and ready to hear what comes next. If approaching the Bible as though it were a catalog of truth compels us to master it, viewing it as a story puts us in a position where it can master us.

Another way to think of the Bible as a story is as a living story, a play if you will, and we are actors in the play.¹ In that sense, the Scriptures become our script. It gives us our lines and direction on how to act. But in order for an actor to be effective in a play, more is needed than just the rote memorization of their lines, they have to be fully mastered by the world the script is seeking to create.



But if the Bible is a story, it raises the question, “What’s it about?” We’ll answer this in just a moment. But first, not only is the Bible a story. It’s also a revelation.

Revelation

Sometimes we can get stuck in our spiritual lives because God seems distant and unknowable. He can feel far away and detached from our world. But the Scriptures present Him in the opposite light. They present God as near and highly knowable. In fact, God has gone to great lengths to make Himself known. You could even say that God is an over-sharer.

Do you have people like that in your life? When they’re around it feels like they keep talking and don’t stop. God, in some ways, is the same. God is continually making attempts to communicate and reveal Himself to us, and He uses many different avenues to do it. For example, Psalm 19 says,

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. (v1-4a)

Essentially, Psalm 19 is saying that just by going outside and looking up into the sky we should be able to grow aware of God and His presence in our lives. But one of the most significant ways that God has chosen to reveal Himself is through the Scriptures.

It’s one thing to be aware of someone’s presence, it’s another thing to actually know them, to know what they are like, their personality, desires, hopes, and dreams. The way you get to know those things about an individual is through their words. They actually have to disclose those things to you. The result of that kind of communication is a relationship. If



God has made His presence known through creation, He has disclosed specific things about Himself in the Scriptures.

Therefore, the main purpose of the Bible isn't to acquire more knowledge or become a theological expert. The Bible isn't a textbook with facts about God. It's God's way of inviting us into an on-going, deeply connected relationship with Him. God's intention with the Scriptures is that they would enable us to be in a relationship with Him through His son Jesus because Jesus is the exact representation of God. We read in Hebrews 1,

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. (v1-3a)

In order to get traction in your spiritual life, you first have to have a vibrant engagement with the Scriptures. Secondly, you need a vibrant relationship with Jesus, God's Son.

Response:

1. What has been your dominant view of the Bible during your life?
2. How has that impacted the way you engage with the Scriptures?



Get Some Traction



The Son





Just a moment ago, we asked the question, if the Bible is a story, what's it about? The short answer, Jesus.

In John 5, Jesus was having a sharp dispute with the religious leaders of Israel. They were upset with Him for violating the Sabbath laws by healing people on their ritualized day of rest that's prescribed in the Old Testament law. In response, Jesus said to them,

You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. (v39-40)

The "Scriptures" Jesus was referring to are the Old Testament Scriptures, for the New Testament had not yet been written. In this one interaction, Jesus made the claim that He was the fulfillment of Israel's story and that the religious leaders had altogether missed the point of the Scriptures. The entire Old Testament was a pointer and signpost to Jesus, but the Pharisees primarily saw the Old Testament as rules they had to follow to stay connected to God.

Earlier we said that our understanding of the nature of the Scriptures will determine how we engage with them. For the first century Jewish leaders, it was no different.

Everything in the Old Testament dropped hints and set the stage for Jesus, but they missed it because their primary concern was adherence to the law to maintain good standing with God. Therefore, they didn't understand Jesus' ministry and that He was the embodiment of God among them. Jesus was the revelation of God in human form. He was bringing their story, and the entire world's story, to its rightful climax, the redemption and restoration of all things.

Again, what is the Bible about? It's about Jesus! All of it. The entire thing.



Even though Jesus doesn't enter the pages of the Bible until the New Testament (which is probably the last twenty percent), everything up to that point is also about Him. Jesus said so Himself.

In Luke 24, after His resurrection and while on a walk with two disciples, Luke tells us that Jesus gave these two individuals the best Bible study anyone has ever received. He writes,

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (v27)

Can you imagine being on that walk? Most people avoid the Old Testament because it's long and challenging reading. But Jesus in the span of an afternoon walk explained it all and showed how it's all about Him.

To understand how Jesus stands at the center of it all, it helps to have a good handle on the big picture of the Biblical story. Earlier, we used the metaphor of a play to illustrate our engagement with it. Let's carry that imagery forward and describe the Bible as though it were a five-act play.²

Act 1: Creation

God created the entire world. The earth and the sky. The sun, moon, and stars. The Milky Way and the Northern Lights. The Great Plains, the Sierra Desert, and the Rocky Mountains. He created the birds of the air, the animals that roamed the ground, and creatures of the sea: albatrosses, pink flamingos, jaguars, giraffes, hammerhead sharks, and dolphins. He created peanuts, olives, cucumbers, apples, pomegranates, watermelons, and pineapples. Then, He created humanity. God's design was that humanity would partner with Him in stewarding and caring for the world He had just created. (Genesis 1-2)



Act 2: The Fall

However, the first humans, Adam and Eve, were deceived into believing God didn't really care for them. That He didn't have their best interest in mind, and that He was holding out on them. Therefore, they were lead astray to disobey God. At that moment sin entered the world breaking our relationship with God, ourselves, each other, and the created order. All of humanity, then, turned their back on God, and on one another. Pride, deception, violence, manipulation, greed, rage, murder, and death took over the world. God's heart was greatly grieved. (Genesis 3-11)

Act 3: The Story of Israel

But God's love for His creation was too strong to let it slip away. He devised a plan to win it back. His plan began with inviting a group of people (the Israelites) into a special relationship with Him so that they could be a blessing and a witness to the rest of the world. Their calling was to be a people who were set apart for God, to show the world the benefits of a relationship with Him. However, the Israelites, just like Adam and Eve, were continually deceived and led astray from God and weren't able to fulfill their calling to be a blessing and a witness of God's love. (Genesis 12-Malachi)

Act 4: The Story of Jesus

Because the Israelites weren't able to fulfill their calling, God sent His Son to be and do for Israel and the world, what they couldn't be and do for themselves. Therefore, Jesus came to fulfill Israel's story and usher in the next chapter of God's larger story by opening up God's chosen people to everyone who would acknowledge Jesus as the true King and Lord of the world. His climactic act which demonstrated that He was indeed the embodiment of God was His death on the cross to take on the sin of the entire world. But even more notable was His resurrection, which was the



first step in reversing the curse and the destruction of sin. (Matthew-John)

Act 5: The Church

After Jesus defeated death and was raised to life, He launched a worldwide movement with a small band of disciples who were to take the good news of Jesus' resurrection to every square inch of the globe proclaiming that a new kind of King was now ruling the world. The Bible ends with a vision of a new heaven and new earth that overtake the current world and where restoration of our relationships with God, ourselves, each other and the created order takes place. (Acts-Revelation)

This illustrates that the Bible is one cohesive story with Jesus, His death and resurrection as the focal center. This means that those who are followers of Jesus are living in the fifth and final act. We are waiting for the day when Jesus will make all things new (Rev. 21:5) and restore all of creation to the way God intended it to be. If we are going to play our part well, we need to immerse ourselves in the script, not only to learn our lines but to be mastered and overtaken by the overarching story.

Most people use the Bible as though it were a shot of espresso. We use it as a little spiritual boost or pick-me-up when we're feeling down to help us make it through our day. Even worse, we commodify the Bible by ripping verses from their context to put them on bumper stickers, coffee cups, and t-shirts as propaganda that has very little power to actually shape the way we live.

In the movie *Walk the Line*, a young Johnny Cash is talking with his brother, Jack, about the Bible and why he's always reading it. Jack replies, "If I'm going to be a preacher one day, I gotta know the Bible from front to back. I mean, you can't help nobody if you can't tell the right story."

It's not only true about helping other people but also ourselves. If we don't



know the right story, or that the Bible is one cohesive story, we will have a hard time living into what God is doing in our world.

When we don't know the entire story of the Bible, we lose sight of the fact that it's actually about Jesus and not us. It does inform us about our role in the play, but Jesus is the leading actor, the protagonist, if you will, who's the true hero bringing about a rescue mission for all humankind. We are merely supporting actors trying to spotlight His primary role.

Response:

1. Read John 6 as an example of how Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel's story.
2. If you're looking for a way to deepen your understanding of how Jesus is the center of the Biblical story, the Bible app YouVersion has a reading plan called "The Jesus Bible." It walks through the whole Bible showing how Jesus can be found in the Old Testament. You can also find the plan at thejesusbible.com.



Get Some Traction



The Spirit





In many church circles, the Holy Spirit is often viewed as the crazy uncle of the family. No one can deny that He's a part of the family. But at the same time, people in the family aren't entirely sure what to do with Him and try to avoid Him at family gatherings. There's a certain level of fear that if He's given too much leeway, He might cause trouble and make a mess that the rest of the family has to clean up.

It's easy for the Spirit to be misunderstood, but He's also a crucial part of a robust experience of faith.

Jesus said to His disciples, the night before He was crucified, that He would be leaving them soon. The disciples were troubled and confused by the news. They wondered where and why He was going. Jesus then went on to tell them that it would actually be better for them if He left. For the disciples, this had to be an incredibly jarring statement. What could be better than having the Son of God physically present with you? Finally, Jesus said that when He left the Father would send another counselor and helper for the disciples, the Holy Spirit. And unless Jesus went, the Father wouldn't send Him.

The reason the Spirit is so important is that He universalizes the presence of God. Before the Spirit was sent at Pentecost, God's presence was localized in Jesus. Before Jesus, God's presence was thought to be restricted to the temple. But when the Spirit came, it's as though God hit a detonator button, and His presence was available to dwell in people no matter where they are at all times.

The New Testament goes on to describe how God uses the Spirit's activity in our lives to help us grow spiritually. Here are three things God's Spirit does in our lives.



The Spirit Brings Freedom

Galatians 5:1 says, “It’s for freedom that Christ has set us free.” This is Paul’s opening line in a chapter talking about the role of the Spirit in our daily lives. In Christ, through the Spirit, we are free people. But what does that mean? Freed from what?

It’s helpful to think of our freedom in two ways. One, we’ve been set free from something. But also, we’ve been set free for something.

We’ve been set free from two things. The first is the law. We are no longer under the law. The law does not and cannot condemn us. The law is not the basis or measure God uses to make His judgment about those who are in Christ. The standard He uses is Christ! But God doesn’t judge us by comparing us to Christ. Instead, He judges us based on the righteousness of Christ as though it were our own. Therefore, we don’t have to live in fear of judgment concerning our sin because Christ has dealt with it and declared us righteous.

We’ve also been set free from the flesh, our fallen disposition toward sin. In Galatians 5 Paul is drawing the distinction between walking in the flesh and walking in the Spirit. He says freedom from God’s judgment based on the law doesn’t mean you are free to indulge your sin nature thinking, “It doesn’t matter what I do. Christ will forgive it anyway.” The purpose of being set free is that you would seek to walk in the Spirit so that your life would produce the fruit of the Spirit and not be overcome by the flesh.

Even though we’ve been set free from the flesh, there is still a battle going on in our hearts between our fleshly desires and the freedom we experience by walking in the Spirit. Essentially, our sin nature wants to imprison us continually. Therefore, we have to keep pursuing life in the Spirit. One of the ways we do this is by understanding the thing for which we’ve been set free.



Paul writes in Galatians 5,

Do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh, rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself. (v13-14)

Sometimes we can get stuck in our spiritual lives when we are overly consumed with ourselves. When we focus only on ourselves and not on others, we get trapped in the flesh and aren't able to walk in freedom. Take my kids for example. We have three girls ages eight, six, and four. Most of the time they get along great and play well with each other. But there are definitely times when they don't. When they don't, it's often caused by a selfish mindset. Paul would call this walking in the flesh. They don't want to share what they have with their sisters, and they think all the toys in our house belong to them. The outcome is lots of arguing, fighting, intervention, and discipline. They don't have any fun, and it results in a lack of joy in their lives.

But when they're operating in a selfless mindset and they are more focused on one another, they share. They're aware of each other's wants and needs. They prioritize their sisters' joy above their own, and they all end up having a great time because there is a mutuality of love happening between all three of them. Paul would call this walking in the Spirit because their lives are producing love.

So part of getting unstuck in your spiritual life is considering others before yourself and leaning into a life of selfless love.

The Spirit Gives Power

But this is easier said than done. Loving people isn't always easy. But fortunately, the Spirit empowers us to live the life of love we're called to live. It's not as though God has thrown us into the deep end and is on the



side of the pool with arms crossed thinking, “We’ll see if they can get it right this time.” Rather, God desires our lives to be fruitful and seeks to give us what we need to complete the calling at hand. Instead of being on the edge of the pool with arms crossed, God is in the water with us holding us up and coaching us as we go. What He’s specifically given us is the Spirit, and with the Spirit comes power.

In Acts 1, before Jesus ascended back to the Father, He told the disciples that the Spirit was going to come. He said,

*But you will receive **power** when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (v8, emphasis added)*

In Ephesians 1, in his prayer for the Ephesian church, Paul wrote,

*I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great **power** for us who believe. That **power** is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms. (v18-20, emphasis added)*

Sometimes I wonder if we don’t take hold of the Spirit’s power because we misperceive the work of the Spirit. Because of over-sensationalized explanations of the Spirit, I wonder if we only look for the power of the Spirit to be miraculous and out of this world. I wonder if we’re expecting to be turned into some sort of spiritual superheroes. Or if we’re expecting life in the Spirit to be easy and free of struggle?

Jesus never told the disciples that life, even with the Spirit and His power, would be easy, or that they’d be superhuman. But He did promise always to be with them, and us, and give us exactly what we need.



The Spirit's power may not always look like a wild supernatural phenomenon, but He certainly gives us the ability to do hard things. To love hard people. To step into circumstances outside of our comfort zones. To be stretched beyond what we think we can handle.

Sometimes the reason we're stuck is due to fear. Fear of the unknown and uncertain. We're stuck because we're afraid we'll look foolish or won't measure up. It's only when we step into those uncomfortable places that we're able to access the Spirit's power to do the things we never thought we'd be able to do.

The Spirit Gives Peace

The beauty of it all is that even if we don't measure up, or when we look foolish or fail, that doesn't mean the Spirit's not with us. It could be that He's allowing moments of failure for the sake of our sanctification and formation. Because, in moments when things don't go as planned or are less than ideal, the Spirit is present to provide peace and remind us who we are.

Paul wrote in Romans 8,

*Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and **peace**. (v5-6, emphasis added)*

Just a few verses earlier, Paul opened this chapter with his classic verse,

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (v1)



When we try to love someone who is hard to love and it feels like we can't get it right, or we step into a tense situation seeking to resolve a conflict but end up adding to the dysfunction, we don't need to beat ourselves up over it. We can tell the voice in our head that's quick to put us down to keep quiet because God doesn't condemn us. And if He doesn't, why should we?

The Spirit empowers us to be bold and courageous and to try hard things, and at the very same time offers us deep peace as we rest in the love of God even when we fall short.

Here's what I mean. In high school I was the starting quarterback for our varsity football team. I know that sounds impressive, but it's not. The reason I got the starting spot wasn't because I was all that good. I wasn't. It was because I was the best option from a long list of not very good options.

When I realized I had the starting spot, I was nervous. I had only began playing football when I was a freshman. Most of the guys on the team, and other teams we played against had been playing football since they were in elementary school. Even though I was anxious, I was eager to try.

However, it quickly became apparent that we weren't going to be winning many games because of my quarterback-passing-ability. I'm pretty sure my interceptions far outnumbered my touchdowns. It was always tough to walk off the field after a hard loss when I didn't play well. But as I walked off the field after every game, no matter how good or bad I played, my parents were always waiting for me with huge smiles on their faces. They always told me how great I played (even when I didn't) and that they were proud of me.

While God desires us to be effective, He's not looking for perfection. He delights in us because we're His, not because of our spiritual or missional performance. Even though God isn't waiting for us on the sidelines after a



bad game, His Spirit resides within us to remind us of how much he delights in us.

The more we're able to grasp that there is no condemnation in Jesus, the more we'll be set free. We can avoid being paralyzed by fear, and instead trust in the Spirit's power and embrace His peace.

But now the question is, how do we actually do that? It's one thing to know all of this. It's another thing to put it into practice.

Response:

1. What has been your perception and/or engagement with the Spirit throughout your spiritual journey?
2. Identify a person in your life who's hard to love or an area of service that seems scary. Identify one way that you can take a step toward loving that person or engaging in that area of service. Share it with someone who can ask you about it later.



Build Some Momentum





Like we said in the introduction, when a car is stuck in a snowbank it's amazing how just a little movement in the right direction at the right time can quickly lead to enough momentum to get you out of the bank and back on the road.

Remember the strategy is to use a simple rocking motion to create enough momentum to get the car unstuck. However, the key to this strategy is to start moving and try. If you can even move your car two to three inches, it might be enough.

People often get stuck in their spiritual lives because they believe that growth or movement isn't possible. They look at the size of the Bible and think, "There's no way I'll ever be able to understand that." Or they compare themselves to someone else who's been walking with Jesus in freedom and power for decades and think, "I'll never be able to live like that." Or they hear other people describe the joy of their relationship with God and it seems so rich and vibrant while their's seems dry and stale.

Once these thoughts become deeply held beliefs, they shut off the engine of their spiritual lives and resign themselves to being stuck forever and never try to put anything in motion. But all that's needed is just a little movement, and over time a lot of progress can be made. When trying to build momentum, four things are essential.

1. Start Small

Perhaps the Bible is intimidating to you. It's over a thousand pages long! It contains words and names that you can't pronounce. It has ancient cultural and theological references that mean nothing to you. You know you should read and engage with it, yet you're overwhelmed and don't know what to do or where to begin. If that's the case, the best thing to do is to focus on just one book of the Bible and start there. I think the best place to begin is one of the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John). My favorite is



Luke.

Instead of feeling the pressure to read and understand the entire Bible, just focus on reading about Jesus. He's the central figure in the story anyway. Read one or two chapters a day, it takes no more than ten minutes. As you read, take note of the way Jesus lived His life and the way He interacted with others. Notice what He said about Himself and His Kingdom. Look for patterns in His relationships with the Father, His disciples, different individuals, and the crowds. Ask yourself what it would be like to interact with Jesus in the twenty-first century at a local coffee shop. Allow your imagination to wonder what it would be like to be an individual in the story or at least be a bystander in the moment.

When it comes to growing in your engagement with the Spirit, start each day with a simple prayer. *"Lord, where in my life are you at work today?"* Earlier we referenced Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees in John 5 for healing on the Sabbath. Earlier in their dispute, Jesus said,

My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.
(v17).

God is always at work. It's easy to think that unless we're reading the Bible, praying, or doing some other religious activity to engage God intentionally, He's not doing anything. Sometimes we believe that His work is dependent on our engagement with Him. Actually, it's the other way around. He's always working in our lives and in the lives of those around us, even when we don't see it or realize it. The key is to be on the lookout for it. I have a friend who says we need to operate as divine detectives to identify the work of God in our lives. The prayer mentioned above is one of the ways that you can train yourself to be on the lookout for God' at work in your life.



2. Participate with God's Activity

When people are trying to discern where God is at work, one question people regularly ask is "How do I know?" As a pastor, this might be the most common question I hear from people.

"How do I know that this is God and not me being overtired, over spiritual or just reacting to bad Chinese food from the night before?"

There is a lot that could be said about this question, but for the sake of this short ebook, I'll limit my thoughts to three quick things. ³

First, God's leading requires responding. Throughout the gospels, Jesus regularly extends invitations to people. But the invitation always involves some sort of response from the person receiving it.

In Mark 10, Jesus is approached by a wealthy young leader who wants to know how to take hold of eternal life. Jesus tells the man,

Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me. (v21)

In that moment, there was a clear invitation from Jesus that required a specific response. However, in Mark 10, the man ultimately walked away because he couldn't imagine his life without his money.

If we are looking for where God is at work in our life, we should be expecting to respond to a particular call, prompt, or invitation. Maybe it's a call to simply go check on a neighbor next door. Perhaps it's a prompt to share an encouraging word with someone in our community. Maybe it's an invitation to dedicate time to intentionally be with God.

No matter what it is, God's leading requires our response.



Second, you should expect God's activity in your life to line up with the Scriptures. God isn't going to invite you into a situation that goes against something that is clearly laid out in the Bible.

For example, if someone has hurt or offended you and you are wondering if God is prompting you to get revenge on that person, you can rest assured that the answer is no because it clearly says in Romans 12,

Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.
(v19)

Instead of spending countless hours wondering whether or not your thoughts and feelings are from God, you can move on and continue the work of discerning God's activity looking for something that aligns with God's character and the things we read in Scripture. With the above example, most likely God would be calling you to respond in a way that is loving and looks more like forgiveness than revenge.

Lastly, what if you're wrong? That too is a question I often hear.

What if I'm seeking to participate with God and I don't get it right?

Like we said earlier, God isn't looking for perfection. He's looking for you to trust Him and continue to develop your relationship with Him. If your heart is in the right place and the things you step into embody God's love, what's the worst thing that could happen? The world has more love in it, which is something that it needs anyway.

3. Do Something Different

When trying to get a car unstuck by building momentum, you have to go in different directions. You have to change it up and go forward and



backward. If you were to move only in one direction, it wouldn't work. In our spiritual lives, sometimes we get stuck because we only do one thing and we fall into a rut.

Remember the goal of our faith is to grow in an active and vibrant relationship with God, not spiritual or religious activity. And in any relationship, if you only do the same thing over and over, that relationship will grow stale. For example, there are times my wife I and get in a rut in our relationship. When it comes to date night, we always end up at the same restaurant. We end up having the same conversations about work, and the kids, and house projects. When we find ourselves always doing the same thing we realize it's time to mix it up. We need to go out with friends, or go to a concert, or go look for a new experience.

In any relationship, it's important to keep it fresh and engaging. Our relationship with God is no different. If you find yourself in a rut, try doing something different. Try a prayer walk. Keep a journal of things you notice and observe while reading the Bible or while paying attention to the leading of the Spirit in your daily life. Participate in a weekend retreat. Find or create an outreach opportunity.

There are many ways to engage in your relationship with the Lord. Don't be afraid to experiment. The key is to always be on the lookout for God's Spirit opening your eyes and heart.

4. Be Consistent and Intentional

Lastly, the important thing is commitment and consistency. Getting unstuck doesn't come with doing one new thing one time. Just like any relationship, a relationship with Jesus takes intentionality, effort, and consistency over time. Deep friendships don't just happen, they are prioritized. We readily



say no to other things so that we can say yes to investing in those relationships. Without some level of consistent and intentional engagement, your relationship with God won't grow or change.

Response:

1. Identify one new and simple thing that you can do starting now that will help you engage with God in a new way.
2. Identify a consistent time in your day when you can try this new practice so that it will be sustainable.



Call A Friend





“It’s not good for man to be alone.” (Genesis 2:18)

All through the creation account in Genesis 1, God created something and then declared it good. But in Genesis 2, after He created Adam and before He created Eve, for the first time God said that something was not good. It’s not good for us to be alone. We’re created in the image of God. The very essence of His being is relationship. In the Godhead -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -- there has existed from eternity a divine community. Therefore, part of being made in God’s image is the hardwiring for relationships.

Life is hard. No matter who you are or what your circumstances are we all enter seasons when life seems to be against us. What we need in order to get through those seasons is help. But, sometimes we get stuck in those hard places because we’re afraid to ask for it.

*What will others think of me if they know I’m going through this?
Will they think I’m not good enough or strong enough to do it on my own?
Will people stop being my friend?
Will my family look down on me?*

So instead of reaching out, we close other people off.

There are some church circles where people believe that being a follower of Jesus means you never struggle, you’re super spiritual, and always have it all together. The unspoken belief in those communities is it’s not okay to be not okay. But that’s not a reality for anyone. We all have unredeemed places in our lives that need to be continually submitted to Jesus to be healed and made whole. We all go through seasons when our spiritual lives feel dry and barren.

If you find yourself in a community that holds to the belief that it’s not okay to not be okay your default will be to hide. If you’re in a spiritually



tough season, you'll project a false image that everything is fine when in reality you're barely hanging on. If you have doubts about your faith you'll stuff them because asking hard questions might not be allowed. The result of hiding your struggle is isolation and the potential of getting stuck in painful circumstances.

During hard times, what we need are relationships in which it is okay not to be okay. We need friends whom we can call who will stand with us and support us no matter what we're going through.

Acts 2 paints a beautiful picture of a spiritual community full of people who are there for one another and motivated to help each other in hard times.

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were **together** and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet **together** in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate **together** with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (v42-47, emphasis added)*

Notice it says three times that they were together. They spent time in each other's homes. They shared meals together. They shared their resources to ensure that everyone had what they needed. There was freedom in that community to say that you were in need of help. And they were readily there for one another.

If you're reading this because you're in a season when you feel stuck, a strong and safe community is a necessary ingredient to start moving forward.



We live in a day and age when people are readily giving up on the church, sometimes for good reason. Maybe they've experienced significant hurt from individuals in the church, and it feels safer to create distance rather than continue on.

One of the mantras from people in this situation is, "I've not given up on Jesus, just the church."

While I'm sympathetic to their situation, I'm also convinced that the New Testament leaves no room for an expression of the Christian faith disconnected from a community of other Christians. I'm not saying that an individual should walk back into or stay in a toxic church environment. But I am saying that giving up on healthy Christian community isn't an option. Even though there are many dysfunctional churches in our world, there are also many healthy ones.

It's not good for us to be alone.

If you're reading this and feel as though you're in a season when you're stuck, whether it's spiritually, relationally, or financially, one of the best things you can do is reach out for help.

If the thought of reaching out to a friend terrifies you, what's worse? Staying where you are or walking into your fear with the hope that things could get better.

At the beginning, we said that people often times resist change because there's a cost or pain involved with change. We also noted that people won't make a change until the cost or pain of not changing is greater than the cost or pain that comes with doing something different.

The thought of reaching out to someone might feel difficult or painful, but without ongoing support, it's hard to make changes that stick. This is why



when it comes to changing habits, whether it's dieting, exercising, or quitting smoking the best results happen when we pursue change in the context of a community that's also seeking the same result.

It's not good to be alone.

We were made for relationships. Whatever change you're seeking, there are people out there who are seeking the same thing, and they'd be delighted to walk the journey with you.

Response:

1. What aspects of life in community cause fear or frustration for you?
2. Has it prevented you from fully committing to life in community?
3. If the idea of going to a church or small group seems overwhelming to you, identify one individual with whom you can share the things you've learned from this book. Invite them to coffee and share your reflections with them.



Now What?





Admitting that you're stuck is the first step to getting unstuck. If you've read to this point, I'm guessing you've admitted where you are. But once you've made that realization, the big question is, what's next?

The only thing left to do, at this point, is to lean into the things we've discussed. Get traction. Build momentum. Call a friend. But there are two other things that are important to have when working on getting unstuck. The first is the right mindset.

While getting a car unstuck from a snowbank can take a matter of minutes with the right tools and technique, getting unstuck in our spiritual lives doesn't happen overnight. Sometimes there are deeply held beliefs that are incorrect or untrue which have contributed to being stuck and they need to be changed. Sometimes there are long-standing patterns of behavior and bad habits that need to be undone. If these beliefs, patterns, and habits have been going on for years, it very well could take a similar amount of time to undo them.

Therefore, it's important to realize that there's no magic formula for getting back on track. It's not as though you simply do A, B, and C and then you're immediately on easy street! It takes time, consistency, and discipline. Gauging your expectations is important. There will be days when it will be easier to slide into the path of least resistance, but that's when courage and accountability will be needed to stay the course.

The second thing needed is vision for a different and better life. In John 10:10, Jesus said that he came to give life and give it to the full measure. There's a certain type of life that God has designed us to live. It's often referred to as an abundant life (John 10:10). It's a life characterized by deep satisfaction and joy irregardless of our circumstances. It's a life of knowing who and Whose you are. It's a life marked by mercy, grace, and redemption. It's a life that's forgiven and free, not controlled by fear. It's a life that's only found in Jesus.



Therefore, maybe the best way to get unstuck isn't by focusing on the fact that you are stuck, but to focus on pursuing a relationship with Jesus.

Make a relationship with Him your aim. Seek to build a genuine relationship with Jesus through the Scriptures and prayer through the Spirit. Invite others into that relationship to share with them what Jesus is teaching and revealing to you. Don't go at it alone.

When genuine relationship is the goal, both with Christ and others, the pressure of spiritual performance decreases and hopefully goes away all together and freedom sets in. In many ways, that's what we were created for, freedom found in Christ's love.

Perhaps the best way to end this book is with a prayer. The same prayer that Paul prayed for the Ephesian church in his letter to them urging them to be rooted in the love of Christ.

As you read it, do so in a posture of prayer for yourself.

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (Ephesians 3:14-21)



Footnotes:

1. I first encountered this metaphor in N.T. Wright's book *The New Testament and the People of God*, pg. 141.
2. This breakdown of the Scriptures as a five act play also comes from N.T. Wright's *The New Testament and the People of God*, pg 141.
3. When beginning to look for where God is at work in your life it can feel a little awkward. The natural question people ask is, "How do I know this is God and not my own thought or idea?" Depending on when you're reading this, I will be writing more about this on my blog (bryanmarvel.com/blog) in the near future, or have already.