

Congratulations!

Your decision to be baptized is one that will impact your whole life.

We celebrate with you! We would love to hear about your decision to be baptized. Email your story to us at mystory@rivertreechristian.com.

One of the most crucial things you will do as you walk in relationship with God and with others is to consistently be interacting with the Bible. And since you have made this new beginning in your life, the time to start that interaction with the Bible is now!

Our goal in the “The First 21 Days After My Baptism” is to give you a good understanding of the Big Story of The Bible. And the Bible is just that, a story... God's story.

Begin today... right now. As you move through this booklet, you may have questions, needs or like more clarity. Feel free to email Al Dangelo at dangelo@rivertreechristian.com or Toby Thomas at thomast@rivertreechristian.com.

Have a great adventure these next 21 days!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Pastor Guy". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned in the lower-left quadrant of the page.

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Day 1

It's All Good

The best way to begin is, well...in the beginning. Have you ever gone to a movie theatre and found yourself walking into your movie 10 minutes late? If it was a good movie, chances are you felt a little lost right off the bat because the beginning is crucial to any good story. It's the same with the Bible. If you miss the beginning, you will become lost very, very quickly. You may even end up with a misunderstanding of what God is actually doing the rest of the time. So let's begin "in the beginning" shall we?

Read Genesis Chapter 1

If you had to sum up chapter 1 in one sentence what would you say?

Fill in what God thinks as he creates in chapter 1

- (1:4) "God saw that the light was _____."
- (1:10) "and God saw that it was _____."
- (1:12) "and God saw that it was _____."
- (1:18) "And God saw that it was _____."
- (1:21) "And God saw that it was _____."
- (1:25) "And God saw that it was _____."
- (1:31) "God saw all that he had made, and it was _____!"

From the beginning, how do you think God feels about His creation, including us as humans?

Day 2

Imago Dei ... It's in You

Let's look at something from the beginning of The Story again.

Genesis 1:26-28

26 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." 27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. 28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

You may want to highlight that in your own Bible...it's a BIGGIE!

Right from the beginning we see the Father, Son and Holy Spirit make an amazing choice. They decide to make humans in their image. The Latin term for "the image of God" is ***Imago Dei***. Every human being that exists is made with *Imago Dei* in them. Think about that ...you have been made in the image of your Creator.

How does that compare to what you may feel about yourself?

How does this truth mesh with your thoughts about other people...yes, even those you don't seem to like very much?

If you are created in the image of God, what might God want you to do in this world?

Write additional thoughts here:

Day 3

Shalom ... It's All About the Oneness

Read Genesis Chapters 1 & 2

In the beginning, we enjoyed shalom (shä-lom'). What is shalom? Shalom is peace, but not "the lack of war" kind of peace. This is a wholeness type of peace. To live in shalom is to be at peace:

1. with God
2. with self
3. with others
4. with the world

In the beginning, that is the kind of peace we enjoyed. We were in unbroken, uninhibited oneness with God, self, others and the world. This is God's desire for His creation.

Do you think you have ever experienced shalom in your life? When?

Do you think shalom is possible in this life? Why or why not?

Read Genesis 2:18

God wanted man to enjoy what He enjoyed, mutual oneness with an equal. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the original picture of this type of oneness relationship (three-in-one). And so God takes Adam and splits him into two, into an *Ish* (man) and into an *Isha* (woman).

Genesis 2:23 reads, "She shall be called *Ishah* (woman), for she was taken out of *Ish* (man)."

God's desire is always for us to enjoy oneness. This unbroken oneness with God, self, others and the world...this is the goal. If we lived in that reality, well then that would be heaven wouldn't it?

Day 4

Heaven and Earth ... the Same Place?

Re-read Genesis Chapters 1 & 2

Notice what isn't in the beginning.

- Is there death?
- Is there pain?
- Is there fighting?
- Is there shame?
- Is there hunger?

God is actively with the man and the woman on the Earth He created. There is perfect peace. The man and woman are in perfect peace with God, with themselves, with each other and with the world they find themselves in.

People often think of Heaven as the place where God is. It seems to be somewhere "out there". It is thought of as where people go when they die. But in the beginning Heaven and Earth are the same place. It wasn't somewhere else or some place people went to see God when they died because there was no death...and God was already there!

When you think about Heaven, what comes to mind?

What would you enjoy most if you found yourself in this type of reality?

Read Genesis 2:25

This is an amazing thing. This man and this woman had absolutely nothing that made them ashamed of themselves. They had nothing to hide. All was well.

Day 5

Maybe the End is the Beginning Too

Let's do something different today, let's cheat and read the end of The Story.

Read Revelation 21 & 22

Thinking back to what you have discovered about the beginning of The Story, what similarities do you see in the end of the Story?

What seems to be God's desire in Chapter 21?

Read Revelation 21:2

In the beginning we see two humans become one in marriage. Now, in the end, we are in a wedding environment again. In the beginning, it was about two becoming one flesh and in the end it is about two (God and His Church) enjoying an eternal oneness again.

Write your thoughts:

Remember "shalom"? It is a whole and perfect peace with God, self, others and the world. Heaven is the return to this reality. Imagine that.

Write your thoughts:

Day 6

Disturbing the Peace (Part 1)

Read Genesis 3

For the first time, human beings break from the peace (shalom) they are enjoying. And when they choose to break from God's way, what happens?

Read Genesis 3:8-11

What is the indicator that their peace with God has been disturbed or disrupted?
What did they do when they heard God walking in the garden?

What is the indicator that their peace with self has been disturbed or disrupted?
What did they notice about themselves?

Think of a time when you were a child and you did something wrong. Did you ever try to hide from your parent(s)? Do you ever remember a time as a child when you felt ashamed for something you did?

Day 7

Disturbing the Peace (Part 2)

Read Genesis 3

Now let's look at the other two relationships: Our relationship with others and with the world.

What happens in verses 11-13?

So for the first time we see humans at odds with each other, blaming each other for the situation they found themselves in.

Remember, shalom is the perfect and unbroken peace with God, self, others and the world. We discovered yesterday that the peace with God and self was disrupted as soon as sin entered the picture. Now we have discovered that peace with others has been disrupted as well.

Read Genesis 3:17-24

Now the peace with the fourth and final relationship, the relationship with the world, is disrupted. The entire idea of shalom has been shattered.

Re-read Genesis 3:23-24

What would have you been feeling if you were Adam or Eve walking out of the garden for the first time?

Day 8

Where Are You? (Part 1)

Read Genesis 3:8-9

Now, this is the Creator of the entire Universe...do you really think He couldn't find the man and the woman in the garden? What do you think he may really be saying when he says, "Where are you?" Remember, to this point, everything was encompassed by an unbroken and perfect peace between God, self, others and the world. Now something has changed, something has broken in and disrupted that peace.

Spend the rest of your time here today recalling the times you have hidden from God or been ashamed of yourself. This isn't about making yourself depressed or focusing on the negative. We all...I repeat... we *all* have this history in our lives. But honestly evaluate these two relationships in your life:

"Where are you?" when it comes to enjoying peace with God? Explain.

"Where are you?" when it comes to enjoying peace with yourself? Explain.

Day 9

Where Are You? (Part 2)

Read Genesis 3:8-9

Again, spend your time here today honestly evaluating these two relationships in your life:

“Where are you?” when it comes to enjoying peace with others? Explain.

“Where are you?” when it comes to enjoying peace with the world? Or maybe we could ask another question: Are you enjoying a peaceful relationship with the Earth? Explain.

Day 10

He Did What?!

Read Colossians 1:15-20

Much of the rest of the Old Testament is a cycle of God's people living right with God, losing their way, experiencing exile, crying out to God, being rescued and then repeating the same cycle. On their own power, they couldn't ever become what God desired for them to become, a body of people that put Him on display to the rest of the world. The shalom (the perfect peace with God, self, others and the world) that was disrupted by sin needed to be restored.

So God did the unthinkable, he became one of us. He came to accomplish what we could not accomplish for ourselves or for the world. He came to redeem (to buy back, to pay the price for) His creation. He came to restore all things.

Read Philippians 2:1-11

What an amazing passage, and this may be the most amazing part:

“Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.”

The phrase “made himself nothing” literally means that Jesus *emptied* himself of all the “God Powers” he could have kept. He literally became a human just like us, totally reliant on God. In the Bible you will find that God is always pursuing a relationship with us. He pursues us with passion, not because He's lonely, but because He is love and that is what love does. Knowing that we could never make peace with Him, He decided He would make peace with us so that what was lost might be recovered.

Take a few minutes and deeply consider the choice that God made to rescue us and write your thoughts below:

Day 11

Breaking News

Read Luke 4:14-20

Jesus says that he came to proclaim “good news”. In the 21st century, we might say Jesus came with “breaking news!”

In that Scripture, what seems to be the “good news” or “breaking news”?

Read Luke 2:42-43

Notice the phrase *Kingdom of God*. Whenever you see this phrase or the phrase *Kingdom of Heaven* it is almost always talking about God’s reign on earth, here and now. It is the breaking-in of God’s shalom. When you read the gospels (The books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) you will constantly see Jesus putting this on display in very visible ways. When he heals the crippled, he is demonstrating the restoring of things back to the way they should be. When he restores sight to the blind he is demonstrating the restoring of things back to the way they should be. When he addresses issues of justice he is demonstrating the restoring of things back to the way they should be.

Do you think you’ve ever experienced the Kingdom of God breaking in on your life?

Write an example of where you might be seeing the Kingdom of God breaking in on our world?

Day 12

It's a Heart Thing

Read Matthew 23:1-28

Whoa! Those are some strong words from Jesus. And notice who he is talking to. He is talking to "church people". The Pharisees were religious leaders who studied the Scriptures day and night. They prided themselves in their knowledge and took it upon themselves to keep the people in check. But they had lost the heart of the Scriptures. God always leads us into fields of freedom, but the Pharisees, Teachers of the Law and other religious leaders created a religious system that actually oppressed the people. They ultimately, instead of being humble servants of God, became power-hungry and greedy. They became a misrepresentation of God.

1 Samuel 16:7 says, "...The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

Have you ever experienced religion that actually seemed to box people in instead of leading them in paths of freedom?

The religious leaders in these Scriptures had become arrogant rule-keepers. They knew facts about God but they had lost touch with God's heart. How can you make sure that you don't become like one of these Pharisees in your journey with God?

Re-read Philippians 2:1-11

Day 13

Jesus Changes EVERYTHING ... Seriously

Read Colossians 1:15-20 and underline the phrase “all things” wherever you see it appear in that Scripture.

The phrase “all things” is actually translated “all things”. Consider this truth: when Jesus shed his blood on the cross, was buried and resurrected back to life, EVERYTHING changed. The cross was the defining moment in history when God began the restoration of all things back to perfect shalom (perfect peace with God, self, others and the world). This restoration is happening already, but has not yet come in its fullness. When Jesus returns to Earth again, it will be for the full restoration of all things...that will be Heaven!

Write your thoughts on some specific things that might be included in “*all things*”:

Why is the statement “Jesus died on the cross to forgive my sins” true, but incomplete?

Spend some time writing down your thoughts of what you feel when you consider that Jesus will return to usher in full restoration of all things back to shalom:

Day 14

Empty is the New Full

Read Luke 9:23-25

Until Jesus returns to restore the Kingdom of God in all its fullness, your spiritual journey will be about learning to empty yourself so God can live in, with and through you. Much of our work is about emptying ourselves of our ego (our drive to be our own judge of what is good and not good). Our ego will continually battle for our attention and allegiance. But it is Christ that brings us life. And it is our own ego that drives us to sin which leads to death. Always remember that Jesus will always lead us into a fuller life and more freedom.

Read Colossian 2:9-10

How much of God dwells in Christ?

How much of God did you receive when Christ entered your life?

What might this mean for your life?

Read Roman 8:9-11

Write your thoughts:

Day 15

I Don't Think I Can Do This ... And I'm Right

Read Romans 7:15-25

How can you relate to Paul's frustration?

What is his conclusion in verse 25?

A few years back there was a saying that started in Christian-subculture, it was WWJD (What Would Jesus Do). This was put on bracelets, bookmarks, bumper stickers...it was basically put on anything that people were willing to buy. The problem with this saying is that it can lead people down a very bad path. It assumes that we, *on our own power*, can somehow repeat what Jesus did. It assumes that we, *in our own minds*, can actually know the mind of Jesus.

But is this how we saw Jesus live as he was on earth? Remember Philippians 2:1-11? Jesus emptied himself of all the luxuries of being divine to become human. He became *totally* reliant on God's power, strength and mind.

Jesus doesn't desire us to try to imitate his life on our own power; his desire is to live in, with and through us.

What Paul is saying is that left to himself, he will never become what God desires...even if he really, really *wants* to. It is only Jesus Christ living *in, with and through* him that will allow him to live fully awake to God's reality here and now.

How do you need to posture yourself if you desire to be a person that God lives in, with and through you?

Day 16

Moving from “Me” to “We”

A major part of your growth as a Christian will be the shift from thinking with an individual mindset (“me”) to thinking with a community mindset (“we”).

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-26

Everyone has a body, so everyone can understand this truth. Because you understand your body, you understand the great importance of every single part of your body. At the same time, you understand that without the other parts, any one part is rendered useless. So it is with the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ is what God calls His people. Another term for His people is The Church. The Church is people, not a place.

You are now part of something bigger than yourself. This isn’t just about “my” relationship with God; this is about “our” relationship with God.

Read the Following and write down what we are to do:

Romans 12:10

Romans 12:16

Romans 14:13

Romans 15:7

Galatians 5:13

Ephesians 4:2

Ephesians 4:32

And the Scriptures go on and on with these kinds of commands. So may you move from a “me” framework to a “we” framework in the way you think and live.

Day 17

The Most Important One is Both of Them

Read Matthew 22:34-40

How many commandments did the Pharisee ask for Jesus to give him as the most important?

How did Jesus respond?

According to Jesus, you can't separate loving God and loving people, you simply can't do one without the other.

Read 1 John 4:19-21

What does this Scripture make clear?

Are there any relationships in your life that this Scripture causes tension in?

How do you plan to proceed in that relationship?

Day 18

Love is a Person

Read 1 John 4:7-12

Love is infinitely tied to God because God is love. So when you are loving someone, you are actually giving them God.

Read Psalm 103 and write your response to God's loving actions.

Read 1 Corinthians 13

From this passage, what is made clear about the importance of love?

Day 19

Partnering with God to Put it All Back Together

Well, by now you are understanding that the day you decided to follow Jesus was the beginning of what will become a lifelong journey. God's work in your life now is about transforming you and awakening you to His reality (The Kingdom of God).

Read James 2:14-19

It is said that you don't really believe something unless you are willing to put that belief into action. Well, a life of following The Way of Jesus is constantly in motion.

How do you think God wants your faith to be put into action?

Remember when there was shalom (perfect peace with God, self, other and the world) in the beginning? Do you remember how that shalom was shattered?

Our work now is to be agents of shalom when we see things aren't as they should be. When you are a follower of Jesus, your focus is in the present...in the here and now. God's desire for us is that we wouldn't live imprisoned by our past, nor does he desire to have our heads stuck somewhere in the future. God's desire is for us to be present, right here and right now.

Consider the following places and write down where you think something isn't as it should be (example: homelessness, hunger, poor education, etc.):

Stark County:

Ohio:

United States:

The World:

What action will you begin today (in one of those areas) to partner with God to right the wrong that you see?

Day 20

My Story is His Story

The Bible is God's Story. It contains real people and real places. It was authored in real space and time. Some of the most well known people of the Bible - people who become great servants of God - have track records including murder, affairs, lying, anger issues, drunkenness, and more. Even Paul, who authored much of the New Testament, was at one time in favor of killing anyone who followed Jesus. These were all human beings who were created in the Image of God. They truly had the same struggles we have. Some things never change about humans, things like greed, power, lust, selfishness, anger, grudges, etc. These things are part of all our stories.

One of our core values at RiverTree Christian Church is "My Story". We believe everyone has a story and that Jesus' story is the best one. The truth is that all of our stories are contained within one big story, God's Story. Another way to understand it is to say that God's Story is HISStory.

Take the rest of your time today and write your story, the story of where God has brought you thus far. Write it down as if it were part of one of the books of the Bible.

We would love to hear your story if you are willing to share it. You can email it to mystory@rivertreechristian.com.

Day 21

***Always Remember Where the Story
Begins and Ends***

Go back and re-read Days 4 & 5

Write below what you have learned about where God's Story started and where it ends.

Then write about where you find yourself presently in that story and how you will partner with God to put all things back together as He restores us to shalom (perfect peace with God, self, others and the world).

Great Job! You completed all 21 days!