



Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus

BIBLE FOUNDATIONS

Understanding Chapters, Verses, Cross-References, and Footnotes

Beginner Guide | Editable Master V1

Short answer

Chapter and verse numbers help us find passages, but they are not part of the original inspired text. Cross-references and footnotes are useful guides, but they must always serve careful reading in context.

This guide will help you use these tools with confidence without letting them interrupt the Bible's message.

3Nails resources are designed to support - not replace - your own time in Scripture. Choose a guide, open your Bible, and verify each passage in context as you study.



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Welcome

This companion was not written to replace your Bible. It was written to help you grow more comfortable opening it, following its message, and asking good questions. Every page is intended to send you back into God's Word with greater confidence, deeper understanding, and a clearer picture of Jesus Christ.

If chapter numbers, tiny superscript numbers, unfamiliar abbreviations, or notes at the bottom of the page have ever made the Bible feel complicated, you are not alone. These tools become much easier once you know what each one is designed to do.

Foundational truth

The Bible is not merely a book to be understood. It is God's self-revelation, given so that people may know Him through Jesus Christ.

What you will learn

- How to read a Bible reference.
- Why chapters and verses were added.
- How to read beyond artificial divisions.
- How to use cross-references without forcing connections.
- How to understand common translation and manuscript footnotes.
- How to keep every study tool in its proper place.



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PART ONE

Beginner Guide

Beginner memory anchor

Numbers help you find the passage. Context helps you understand it.

How a Bible reference works

A Bible reference is simply an address. It tells you where to find a passage.

Example: John 3:16

John is the book. 3 is the chapter. 16 is the verse.

Common forms

- John 3 - the whole chapter.
- John 3:16 - one verse.
- John 3:16-18 - verses 16 through 18.
- John 3:16, 18 - verses 16 and 18, but not verse 17.
- John 3:16; Romans 5:8 - two passages in different books.
- John 3:16-4:3 - a passage beginning in chapter 3 and continuing into chapter 4.

Book abbreviations

Study Bibles and cross-reference lists often shorten book names. Gen. means Genesis, Ps. means Psalms, Matt. means Matthew, Rom. means Romans, and Rev. means Revelation. The abbreviation changes the length of the name, not the meaning of the reference.



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Chapters and Verses

Were they in the original manuscripts?

No. The biblical authors wrote connected narratives, poems, prophecies, letters, and visions. Modern chapter and verse numbers were added much later to make passages easier to locate, teach, discuss, and copy.

Important

Chapter and verse numbers are useful navigation tools. They are not inspired sentences or built-in interpretation markers.

Why this matters

A chapter break can appear in the middle of an argument, story, prayer, or conversation. A verse number can split one sentence into several numbered pieces. If we read only the numbered unit, we may miss what the author was saying.

A simple habit

- Begin a few verses before the line you want to study.
- Continue a few verses after it.
- If the thought continues across a chapter break, keep reading.
- Look for the beginning and end of the author's complete thought.



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Read Across the Boundary

Romans 7 and Romans 8

Romans 7 ends with Paul describing the conflict of sin and thanking God for deliverance through Jesus Christ. Romans 8 begins, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus." The chapter number should not separate the struggle from the gospel answer.

John 7 and John 8

The familiar account of the woman caught in adultery appears at the boundary between John 7 and 8 in many Bibles. Modern translations also provide a manuscript note. Reading the surrounding chapters helps us notice both the narrative setting and the translator's disclosure.

Matthew 27 and Matthew 28

Matthew 27 records Jesus' crucifixion, death, burial, and the securing of the tomb. Matthew 28 records the empty tomb, the risen Christ, and the Great Commission. The chapter break helps us navigate, but the resurrection is the climax of the same gospel story.

Beginner practice

When a chapter begins with words such as therefore, but, then, for, or after this, pause and look backward. The author is connecting what follows to what came before.



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A Verse Belongs to a Passage

A single verse can be true and still be misunderstood when it is separated from its setting. Context includes the sentences around it, the paragraph, the whole book, the original audience, and the Bible's larger story.

Philippians 4:13

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" is often treated as a promise of unlimited achievement. In context, Paul is explaining that Christ strengthens him to remain faithful in both abundance and need (Philippians 4:10-13).

Matthew 18:20

"Where two or three are gathered together in my name" is sometimes used as a general statement about any Christian meeting. The surrounding passage concerns correction, agreement, and church discipline (Matthew 18:15-20). Jesus is present with every believer by His Spirit, but this verse has a specific setting.

Jeremiah 29:11

God's promise of hope was spoken to Judean exiles who were told to settle in Babylon and wait through a long season before restoration (Jeremiah 29:1-14). The verse reveals God's faithfulness, but it was not originally a promise that every individual plan would become immediately comfortable.



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Paragraphs and Section Headings

Paragraphs are often more helpful than verse numbers

Most modern Bibles group verses into paragraphs. A paragraph usually follows one main thought more closely than a single verse does. Begin by reading the whole paragraph before studying one line.

Worked example: Ephesians 2:8-10

Verses 8 and 9 teach that salvation is God's gift, received through faith and not earned by works. Verse 10 continues the thought: those saved by grace are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works. Reading all three verses keeps grace and faithful living together in the right order.

Section headings are helpful but not inspired

Headings such as "The Good Samaritan" or "Spiritual Gifts" were added by editors. They help readers scan a page, but another translation may divide or title the passage differently.

Use headings as signs, not fences

Let the biblical text decide where a thought begins and ends. If the argument continues past a heading, continue reading.



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Cross-References

What is a cross-reference?

A cross-reference is a suggested connection to another biblical passage. It may appear beside a verse, in the center column, at the bottom of the page, or inside a Bible app.

What kinds of connections might it show?

- A direct quotation of another passage.
- A prophecy and its fulfillment.
- A repeated event, promise, image, or theme.
- A parallel account of the same event.
- Another use of the same word or phrase.
- A passage that explains or expands the idea.

What a cross-reference does not prove

A cross-reference is an editor's study aid. Its presence does not automatically mean the passages have identical meanings or that one fulfills the other. You still need to read both passages in context.

Beginner memory anchor

Follow the reference, then read the neighborhood.



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Worked Example: The Lamb of God

John the Baptist sees Jesus and says, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). A study Bible may point you to several passages.

Exodus 12

The Passover lamb’s blood marked Israelite homes so judgment passed over them. Read Exodus 12:1-14.

Isaiah 53

The suffering servant is compared to a lamb led to slaughter and bears the sins of many. Read Isaiah 53:4-7, 10-12.

1 Corinthians 5:7

Paul calls Christ “our Passover,” who has been sacrificed.

1 Peter 1:18-19

Peter describes believers as redeemed by Christ’s precious blood, like that of a lamb without blemish.

Revelation 5

The slain Lamb stands victorious and is worthy to receive worship.

What the references accomplish

Together, these passages help us see a biblical pattern that reaches its fulfillment and victory in Jesus. The connection becomes clear by reading each passage, not by collecting references alone.



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How to Use a Cross-Reference

- Read the verse that contains the reference.
- Read its complete paragraph.
- Open the suggested passage.
- Read that passage in its own context.
- Ask what kind of connection is being suggested.
- Notice both the similarity and the differences.
- Keep the clearest teaching in charge of the more indirect connection.

Parallel accounts

The Gospels sometimes record the same event from different perspectives. Cross-references can help you compare Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John without assuming that each writer includes every detail.

Explicit connections carry special weight

When a biblical writer directly quotes or explains another passage, Scripture itself establishes the connection. Matthew 2:15 explicitly connects Hosea 11:1 to Jesus. By contrast, a shared word suggested by an editor may be worth exploring but should be held more lightly.

Do not create doctrine from a chain alone

A long trail of references can feel persuasive even when the individual texts are being used outside their contexts. Build beliefs from clear passages read carefully, not from the number of links on a page.



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Footnotes

What is a footnote?

A footnote is a brief note from the translation or editorial team. It may explain why a word was translated a certain way, show another possible wording, identify an Old Testament quotation, or disclose a manuscript difference.

Footnotes are a sign of honesty

They show readers where translators made a decision or where the surviving evidence deserves explanation.

Common kinds of footnotes

- Alternate translation: "Or..."
- More literal wording: "Literally..."
- Manuscript information: "Some manuscripts..."
- Ancient version information: "Greek..." or "Dead Sea Scrolls..."
- Meaning of a name or wordplay.
- Ancient measurements, weights, or money.
- Source of an Old Testament quotation.
- Explanation for a skipped verse number.



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Alternate and Literal Wording

“Or...”

An “Or” note usually means the original wording can be expressed in more than one responsible way. Languages rarely match word-for-word in every expression, so translators must weigh grammar, context, and natural English.

“Literally...”

A literal note preserves a more direct form of an idiom or image even when the main text gives smoother English. The literal wording is not always the best English translation, but it can help you see the original expression.

Why translations differ

Faithful translations may choose different English words because a Hebrew or Greek word can have a range of meaning, sentence structures differ among languages, and translators balance accuracy with clarity in different ways.

A wise response

Compare dependable translations, read the context, and avoid building a major conclusion on one English wording when the footnote shows a legitimate alternative.



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Manuscript Footnotes

Why do manuscripts differ?

The Bible was copied by hand for centuries before printing. The many surviving manuscripts preserve the text with remarkable agreement, while also containing small variations such as spelling, word order, repeated words, or omitted lines.

Do variants erase Christian teaching?

No essential Christian doctrine depends on one uncertain reading. Translation teams compare manuscripts openly and place important differences in footnotes so readers can see the evidence.

Two familiar passages

Many modern Bibles mark Mark 16:9-20 and John 7:53-8:11 with brackets or notes because the earliest and strongest manuscripts do not all include these passages in the same place or form.

How should a beginner respond?

- Do not panic.
- Read the translator's note.
- Compare several trustworthy translations.
- Avoid making an uncertain wording the only support for a belief.
- Remember that openness about evidence strengthens responsible study.



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Why Is a Verse Number Missing?

You may notice that some modern translations move directly from one verse number to the next and place the missing number in a footnote.

What happened?

The verse was included in some later manuscripts and therefore appeared in older English translations. When translators concluded that it was probably not part of the earliest recoverable text at that location, they retained the traditional numbering but placed the wording in a note.

Why keep the gap?

Keeping the established numbering allows readers, study tools, commentaries, and translations to refer to the same surrounding verses without renumbering entire chapters.

What the gap does not mean

It does not mean someone secretly removed God's Word. The note makes the evidence visible and preserves a shared reference system.



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Other Helpful Notes

Measurements, weights, and money

Ancient units do not always have a precise modern equivalent. A note may estimate distance, weight, volume, or value. Use the estimate to understand scale without pretending it is more exact than the evidence allows.

Names and wordplay

Biblical names sometimes sound like Hebrew words connected to a story. A footnote may explain a wordplay that disappears in English.

Quotation sources

When the New Testament quotes the Old Testament, a note may identify the source. The wording may differ from your English Old Testament because the New Testament writer may reflect the ancient Greek translation commonly called the Septuagint, may summarize a passage, or may combine related texts.

Maps and timelines

These are editorial tools rather than inspired content. They can clarify travel, geography, kingdoms, and chronology, but their labels and dates should be treated as informed aids, not as verses.



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A Simple Footnote Process

- Read the verse normally first.
- Identify the word or phrase marked by the note.
- Read the note slowly.
- Ask what kind of note it is.
- Compare another trustworthy translation if needed.
- Return to the paragraph and ask whether the note changes your understanding.
- Hold small uncertainties humbly while obeying what is clear.

You do not need to solve every note

Some notes matter greatly for a passage; others simply give extra detail. A beginner can acknowledge, "There are two possible wordings here," and continue reading without fear.

When should you investigate further?

- When the wording affects the main point of the paragraph.
- When someone is building a major claim on the disputed phrase.
- When the note raises a question you keep encountering.
- When a study Bible or commentary can explain the evidence clearly.



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Common Mistakes to Avoid

Reading one verse as a complete message

A verse is part of a sentence, paragraph, book, and biblical story.

Treating a heading as inspired interpretation

Headings are helpful editorial summaries. Check them against the text.

Assuming every cross-reference is equally strong

A direct biblical quotation is different from an editor's thematic suggestion.

Ignoring footnotes because they feel uncomfortable

Footnotes help you study honestly. Uncertainty in a detail is not uncertainty about God's faithfulness.

Letting notes replace reading

Do not spend so much time following links that you lose the author's main thought.

Using verse numbers as sentence boundaries

Follow grammar and paragraphs. One sentence may cross several verses.



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A Beginner Process for Any Passage

- Pray for wisdom and a willing heart.
- Read the entire paragraph without stopping.
- Notice who is speaking, to whom, and why.
- Read before and after the passage.
- Identify any chapter break inside the thought.
- Use cross-references selectively.
- Read footnotes that affect meaning.
- Summarize the author's main point in one sentence.
- Ask what the passage reveals about God and His redemptive work.
- Respond in faith, obedience, worship, or prayer.

A healthy order

Text first. Context second. Tools third. Response follows understanding.



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Seven Days of Practice

Day 1 - References

Find John 1:1, John 1:1-5, and John 1:1; 3:16.

Day 2 - Read across a chapter break

Read Romans 7:21-8:4. Write one sentence explaining how the thought continues.

Day 3 - Read a full paragraph

Read Ephesians 2:1-10. Summarize the movement from death to life.

Day 4 - Use one cross-reference

Read John 1:29 and one suggested Old Testament reference. Explain the connection cautiously.

Day 5 - Read the footnotes

Choose a page with at least two notes. Identify what kind each note is.

Day 6 - Compare translations

Compare Psalm 23 in two trustworthy translations. Notice differences without assuming one must be dishonest.

Day 7 - Put it together

Study one short paragraph using the beginner process on the previous page.



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Review and Reflection

- What is the difference between a Bible reference and the biblical text?
- Why should you sometimes read across a chapter break?
- How can paragraph context correct a mistaken use of one verse?
- What kinds of connections can cross-references suggest?
- Why must both cross-referenced passages be read in context?
- What can a translation footnote tell you?
- Why might a modern Bible skip a traditional verse number?
- Which tool in this guide will help you most?

Make it personal

Choose one habit you will practice this week. Keep it simple enough to repeat.

Prayer prompt

Lord, help me handle Your Word carefully, receive it humbly, and follow where it leads. Give me wisdom to use study tools without letting them replace Scripture itself. Amen.



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PART TWO

Want to Go Deeper?

The main guide gives you everything necessary to begin. The following pages explain several details that help growing readers use Bible editions and reference tools more carefully.

Intermediate memory anchor

Every edition includes editorial decisions. Faithful study learns to recognize them without confusing them with the inspired text.

When were chapters added?

The chapter system used in most modern Bibles is commonly associated with Stephen Langton in the early thirteenth century. Earlier Jewish and Christian manuscripts had other systems for organizing and reading the text, but not the same universal chapter divisions used today.

When were verses added?

Verse traditions developed over time. Jewish scribal traditions long marked divisions in the Hebrew Scriptures. The numbered New Testament verse system commonly used today is associated with Robert Estienne, also known as Stephanus, in his 1551 Greek New Testament.

The benefit and the risk

Standard numbering made citation and comparison much easier. It also made it possible to treat small numbered fragments as independent statements. Good interpretation receives the benefit while resisting the risk.



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Versification Can Differ

Not every tradition numbers every passage identically

Jewish, Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant editions may number certain Psalms, verses, or sections differently. The text may be present even when the number differs.

Psalm superscriptions

Titles such as “A Psalm of David” appear in the Hebrew text. Some numbering systems count a superscription as verse 1, while many English Bibles display it above verse 1. This can shift subsequent verse numbers by one.

Practical response

- Compare the wording, not only the number.
- Check nearby verses when a reference seems wrong.
- Notice which Bible tradition or translation a source uses.
- Cite enough wording to help readers locate the intended line.

Key distinction

A numbering difference is not automatically a textual contradiction.



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Paragraphs and Punctuation Are Editorial

Ancient manuscripts did not look like modern pages

The earliest manuscripts did not use modern quotation marks, paragraph indentation, commas, or sentence punctuation in the same way English Bibles do. Editors and translators add punctuation and paragraphing to represent their understanding of the grammar.

Luke 23:43

Jesus' words to the criminal are usually punctuated, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Some have proposed moving the comma after "today." Greek manuscripts did not contain the modern comma in that form, so grammar, usage, and context must guide punctuation. The standard punctuation fits Luke's usage and the immediate promise most naturally.

Why paragraph breaks vary

One translation may keep a long argument together while another divides it into smaller paragraphs. Compare the actual wording and follow the author's connectors rather than assuming the paragraph break settles interpretation.



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Other Editorial Features

Italics

In some translations, italics mark English words supplied for clarity even though no separate equivalent word appears in the original language. In other publications, italics may simply show emphasis. Read the translation's preface to learn its convention.

Red-letter editions

Red letters identify words attributed to Jesus. The color was added by publishers, not by the biblical authors. It can aid navigation, but all Scripture is God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16), and Jesus' words must be read within the inspired witness of the whole Bible.

Capitalized divine pronouns

Some translations capitalize He, Him, and His when referring to God; others do not. The original manuscripts do not use English capitalization conventions, so this is an editorial choice.

Quotation marks

Quotation marks can help identify speakers, but in a few passages interpreters debate exactly where a quotation ends and the narrator's explanation begins. John 3:16-21 is a familiar example.



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Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament

Why might the wording differ?

- The New Testament writer may quote the ancient Greek Old Testament.
- The writer may translate the Hebrew wording directly.
- The writer may give a faithful summary.
- The writer may combine related passages.
- Your Old and New Testaments may follow different English translation choices.

What should you do?

Read the Old Testament passage in context, then return to the New Testament and ask how the inspired writer is using it. Notice whether the connection is quotation, fulfillment, pattern, explanation, or thematic echo.

Do not demand identical English words

Translation happens at both ends: ancient languages are being represented in English, and the New Testament itself may preserve a Greek form of an earlier Hebrew passage. Compare meaning and function, not merely surface wording.



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Cross-Reference Systems

Different systems have different purposes

A compact Bible may list only direct quotations and close parallels. A reference Bible may include thousands of verbal and thematic links. A topical chain system may guide readers through a selected doctrine or subject.

Strengths

- They help readers see repeated themes.
- They locate parallel accounts and explicit quotations.
- They encourage Scripture to be compared with Scripture.
- They can reveal connections across the whole canon.

Limitations

- Editors select which links to include.
- A shared word does not guarantee a shared meaning.
- The system may reflect a theological framework.
- Too many links can distract from the passage being studied.

Responsible use

Treat references as invitations to investigate, not conclusions you must accept.



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Translation Notes and Study Notes

Translation footnotes

These notes come from the translation or editorial team and explain the wording, manuscript evidence, or ancient-language issue. They are closely connected to the production of that Bible's text.

Study notes

These notes interpret, explain, or apply the passage. They may include theology, historical background, harmonization, maps, or pastoral guidance. They are useful but are not part of the translation and are not inspired.

How to evaluate a study note

- Does it explain the passage in context?
- Does it distinguish fact from interpretation?
- Does it acknowledge reasonable uncertainty?
- Does it send you back to Scripture?
- Does it depend on clear biblical teaching?
- Does it magnify Christ without forcing Him into every detail?



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Confidence Levels

Not every observation carries the same level of certainty. Mature study learns to speak with confidence where Scripture is clear and humility where evidence is limited.

High confidence

The biblical writer explicitly states or explains the point.

Moderate confidence

The conclusion fits grammar, context, and the book's argument, though details may be discussed.

Tentative

The suggestion is possible but depends on an indirect link, uncertain reconstruction, or disputed editorial decision.

Helpful language

Say "the text states" for explicit teaching, "this likely means" for a well-supported interpretation, and "one possibility is" for a tentative proposal.

Why humility matters

Humility does not weaken confidence in Scripture. It keeps our confidence attached to what Scripture actually says rather than to every conclusion we draw from it.



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Reusable Study Worksheet

Passage:

1. Read the complete paragraph. What is the main thought?
2. Does the thought cross a chapter boundary?
3. What do the connecting words show?
4. Which cross-reference is most relevant, and why?
5. What kind of connection is it: quotation, parallel, fulfillment, explanation, word, or theme?
6. What does each passage mean in its own context?
7. What footnotes affect the meaning?
8. Are any editorial features influencing how I read the passage?
9. What conclusion is clear? What remains uncertain?
10. What does this reveal about God, Jesus, the gospel, or faithful response?

One-sentence summary

In its context, this passage teaches _____.



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Final Encouragement

Chapter numbers, verse numbers, cross-references, and footnotes are gifts when they help us find, compare, and understand Scripture. They become unhelpful when we mistake them for the inspired message or allow them to replace attentive reading.

You do not need to master every technical detail before you begin. Open your Bible. Read a complete thought. Follow a helpful reference. Notice an honest footnote. Ask God for wisdom. Confidence grows through faithful practice.

Final memory anchor

Use the numbers to find it. Use the context to understand it. Use the tools to investigate it. Let Scripture lead you to God.

Key passages for further study

- Luke 4:16-21 - Jesus reads and explains Isaiah.
- John 1:29 - a doorway into the Bible's Lamb imagery.
- Acts 8:26-35 - Philip explains Isaiah in light of Jesus.
- Acts 17:10-12 - the Bereans examine the Scriptures.
- Ephesians 2:1-10 - a complete paragraph clarifies grace and works.
- 2 Timothy 2:15; 3:14-17 - handle God's Word faithfully.



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A Call to Salvation

The purpose of Bible study is not merely to collect information. Scripture leads us to Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who lived without sin, died for our sins, rose from the dead, and offers forgiveness and new life to all who trust Him.

We have all sinned and fall short of God's glory (Romans 3:23). The wages of sin is death, but God's gift is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23). God demonstrates His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

Salvation is God's gift, received by grace through faith - not something we earn (Ephesians 2:8-9). Scripture calls us to repent and believe the good news (Mark 1:15), confess Jesus as Lord, and believe that God raised Him from the dead (Romans 10:9-13).

If you are ready to turn to Jesus

You can speak honestly to God. Admit your sin, trust what Jesus has done, ask for forgiveness, and surrender your life to Him. A prayer is not a magic formula; Jesus saves. Prayer is one way to express genuine repentance and faith.

A simple prayer

Lord Jesus, I know that I have sinned and cannot save myself. I believe You died for my sins and rose again. Please forgive me, make me new, and teach me to follow You. I place my trust in You. Amen.

If you have trusted Jesus, begin reading His Word, pray, and connect with a faithful local church where Scripture is taught and Christ is honored.



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Helping people know God by understanding His Word, recognizing Jesus throughout Scripture, and becoming lifelong disciples who confidently study the Bible for themselves.