

IN CHRIST
First Things First
Part 4
Dr. George O. Wood

We're continuing our series in First Things First. Looking again at things that are new. I'd like for you to open your Bible today to the ninth chapter of Acts 11 and following. We'll be walking through that scripture in just a moment. Today we're focusing on our walk in Christ as one of the things that is new when we become a believer.

Years ago Watchman Nee wrote a very helpful little book called Sit, Walk, Stand. It was a small commentary on the book of Ephesians in which he rightfully divided Ephesians into three parts. The first three chapters emphasizing our position in Christ that we are seated with him.

The Christian life does not begin with a call to do anything. It begins with a call to rest in what Christ has done. When you sit on a chair you place all your weight on the chair. When you come to Christ you place all your weight upon him. That is why in looking at the things which are new we started off the last two weeks by looking at what Christ has done for us. He has given us a new nature. He has written our name in the book of life. He has justified us by his grace through our faith.

When we have learned to sit then we are called to walk. As we walk, Ephesians 4, 5 and the first half of chapter 6, emphasize what we do. But we only *do* when we've learned to *be*.

Then Watchman Nee says we go on to stand. That is we engage in spiritual warfare.

Since we have rested and totally relied on Jesus for our salvation and he completely supports us now we're called upon to walk as Christian. But what steps do I take as a Christian? That is my responsibility and my part in bringing about and facilitating growth as a believer?

I found this week in looking again at the conversion of Saul in Tarsus that there are eight steps that he took which become examples for us in walking with Christ. I want to share each of those points briefly with you. Because if you are new in Christ you need to be following these steps. And if you have been in Christ for some time but hear what I'm saying today and begun to drift away from any of these steps you need to get back to them. You need to re-pattern yourself after what it means to walk with Christ.

The first thing we find Paul doing after his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus is praying.

Verse 11, "The Lord told Ananias, go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul for he is praying." You will never build a strong Christian walk without prayer. Paul had some advantages in prayer that you may not have. He was a Jewish rabbi by all accounts. That meant he was familiar with the forms of prayer. He was familiar with the idea of prayer. He was familiar with the liturgy of prayer. He had a method for praying.

You may not have a method for praying. You may be like the disciples who come to the Lord after being with him for a whole year and say, "Lord, we don't know how to pray. Teach us how to pray." Perhaps you need to hear the Lord say to you what he said to those disciples, "Here's a

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little minute prayer. Pray it. As you pray that minute prayer it'll expand. It'll become the outline for what you're doing." Jesus really, in the Lord's prayer, taught them to pray for God's concerns and for their concerns. With God's concerns his concerns were that his name be hallowed or revered. That his kingdom come and that his will be done. For their concerns he taught them to pray for daily needs, for forgiveness and for security. Save us, deliver us from temptation.

Beginning with that minute prayer gradually they learned to become people of prayer as they pray it. Ultimately we find Paul telling us that we pray without ceasing. That's the epitome of effective praying. That doesn't mean praying every moment. The word in the Greek was used for a person who had a hacking cough. Didn't mean that the cough was occurring every moment. It meant that the cough kept interrupting the routine. You never knew when it was going to break out. That's the way with Paul's praying. It's an advanced state of prayer but you've got to begin somewhere in praying. So begin with the Lord's prayer.

Or maybe a little acrostic that I heard when I was new Christian. It's been a great help to me when praying, ACTS. Begin prayer A – Adoration. Simply Adore God. Go on to C – Confession. Bring to God your failures and your needs. Go to T for Thanksgiving. And then go to S for Supplication.

So many times praying becomes a laundry list of needs where we sort of go through a check line item list. Those kind of prayers can get boring very quickly because we're sort of saying, "God, do this. God, do this. God, do that." However when you read the prayers of Paul especially Ephesians 1 and 3 you'll find that prayer basically is fellowship with God. It's more than simply giving him a laundry list of needs. It is communing with him. It's asking him to do an inner work on us. And not just rearrange some furniture in the arena of life.

But pray. Don't read books on prayer necessarily. You don't even need to listen to many sermons on prayer. The most effective way to pray is just to pray. It's like swimming. You'll learn to swim effectively if you swim. If you don't swim you can read all the books in the world and it won't do you a bit of good. You've got to get in the water and try it. Praying gives us that opportunity to listen to God. Set aside a specific amount of time, reasonable amount of time. An amount you can achieve. Don't begin as a new Christian by saying, I'm going to pray an hour and a half a day. You probably won't hit that unless you were in an intensive time of prayer like Paul was in his early days. But set something that's realistic. Stick with it and learn to listen to God. Maybe keep a journal. Write down what you're praying for. Write down how God is speaking to you in prayer. What impressions are coming on your heart? As you write that down you can begin to test our what God's voice is. How you can learn to listen to God in prayer and how that can be tested with experience so you can begin to discern between your imagination and the voice of God. Pray. However you do it, pray. Because prayer puts us in communion with the eternal God and brings us into fellowship with him in a very powerful way. Nothing will ever substitute for prayer.

The second step that Paul took is that hands were laid upon him that he might be filled with the Spirit, Acts 9:17. "Ananias entered the house, placing his hands on Saul he said, brother Saul the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here has sent me so that you might see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

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Paul had already been converted. He'd been converted three days earlier and we know from the scriptures that when you're converted the Holy Spirit takes up residence in your life. The Holy Spirit was already in Saul. But Saul needed a subsequent experience with the Holy Spirit, such as the disciples had had on the day of Pentecost, such as Cornelius had in Acts 10, such as John's disciples had in Acts 19. An empowerment of the Spirit.

That's a wonderful thing the early church had. When a convert newly came in they practiced the laying on of hands. That they might receive the Spirit. And be empowered in a special measure in their life. We need the power of the Holy Spirit to successfully live the Christian life.

The third step that Paul took as a new believer was that he was baptized. Verse 18. "He got up and was baptized and after taking some food he regained his strength." Baptism.

Dr. Orr was with us several years ago and preached a sermon I'll remember forever. It was one of the greatest sermons I've ever heard. It was simply entitled "The First Word of the Gospel." He took as his opening illustration the fact that the alphabet begins with the letter "A". Why? Because it begins with A. That's where A is and A starts it.

He said when you're looking for the gospel of Jesus Christ, when you're looking for the first word what would you expect the first word of the gospel to be? He went through John the Baptist's preaching. Through Jesus' preaching. Through Peter's preaching on the day of Pentecost. Through the apostles' preaching. Through Paul's preaching. And showed time and time again where the first word was the word "repent." Change your mind, change your way, change your outlook, make an about face, turn direction.

I would say then if the first word is repent, the second word is "be baptized." It becomes the third step here that Paul took after praying, after being filled with the Spirit, he was baptized in water. Sometimes the second and third steps get reversed. Be baptized.

Sometimes a person will say, I'm not sure yet if I'm worthy to be baptized. If you become a Christian, God has already made you worthy. You need to be baptized in water. No one would ever think of entering an army and starting off the first order that was given deliberately disobeying that order. You may not understand all the reasons for that order but if the order is there, as a new member of the army, you obey it. The sovereign Lord of the universe says to us upon our confession of him as Lord "I want you to be baptized. Be baptized." It's an order. It's not a wish. It's an order.

Baptism of course expresses our identification with his death and with his resurrection. It expresses the fact that we've been cleansed from sin. It expresses our public stand with him. He says be baptized. Don't try to live the Christian life by being disobedient in a clear area where the Lord is telling you to do something. Be baptized. Paul was baptized. Baptism was immediate. The apostles did not put people on probation and said we're going to look at you again in a year or two to see if you're worthwhile to be baptized. It was "repent and be baptized." That's the order with us as well.

The fourth step that Paul took upon becoming a believer is that he joined himself to the disciples. Saul, verse 19, spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. Again we find when he came to Jerusalem, verse 26, "He tried to join the disciples." Paul understood that in coming to Christ

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he'd also come to the people whom the Lord had already gathered. He had come to the church. There's no such thing as a solitary Christian life. Unless you had the misfortune to be placed in solitary confinement because of your faith in Christ which nobody in this country has been placed in. We are called to serve him in fellowship with others. We need the encouragement, the strength, the support and the involvement of the church the body of Christ in our lives. We need other believers. If I don't have other believers I will become excessively puffed up or excessively discouraged. I need other people to straighten me out when I need straightened out and encourage me when I'm down. To live the life of Christ together.

Paul found the church in the place he lived. He became attached to it. There are too many believers in southern California culture that are attempting to be tumbleweed Christians or television Christians. Television can be an augment to spiritual life. But it will be a hindrance if a person becomes attached to a machine and substitutes it for the body of Christ. It was never meant to be a substitute for the body of Christ. If you're floating from place to place following speakers that's not God's will for your life. I say that unequivocally. It's not a plug for Newport Christian Center. It's the gospel truth. You need to be plugged in to a local body. You will never grow if you float. You will only grow when you get roots down in the soil and you begin associations with people and take on responsibility within the sphere that that local body has to reach its community. Your growth spiritually is going to suffer if you do not have a firm commitment to the local church. You need to be regular in attendance to the worship services. You need to reevaluate recreation priorities. You need to be faithfully involved. Because it's as you're involved and as you take responsibility that growth most readily comes.

The Lord loves the church and he wants us to love the church as well. His body, his people.

The fifth step in growth that Paul took that he made immediately a public stand for Christ. Acts 9:20 "At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God." Like Paul when we become a Christian we need to announce it. People around us need to know that the change has taken place. We need to say it. Because we need to hear it and they need to hear it: I've taken my stand for the Lord.

It's interesting to compare 9:20 with verse 22. At the beginning he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. Then a little short time later he was proving that Jesus is the Christ. I think there's a difference between *saying* that Jesus is the Christ and *proving* that he is the Christ. Some days' time elapsed between those two.

It's fascinating to watch when the twelve were sent out by Jesus on their first training mission. He sent them out and said, "When you go tell what's happened to you. Tell the good news of the kingdom. But if anybody won't receive you shake the dust off your feet and leave the place." He tells them basically don't get into a discussion with anybody. Don't get into an argument with anybody. Just move on. Tell your testimony and move on if they won't receive you. Yet when you come to Paul in the book of Acts you find him as a rabbi discussing and arguing in the synagogue proving that Jesus is the Son of God. The difference is this. In the beginning of the walk of the disciples with Jesus they didn't know enough to enter into a discourse with anybody to give a reason for the hope that was within them. They just knew of the change in their heart. Just their testimony. We tell that and if the person won't receive it, we walk on.

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That's all the Lord is asking from us. You will know more non-Christians in the early stages of your discipleship probably than any other time in your Christian walk. The average Christian knows more non-Christians in their first year of their Christianity than they do 10-15 years down the road. Why? Because over that period of time you get a lot of Christian friends. But right now you have a lot of non-Christian friends. They need to know. You need to tell them – declare it. Declare that you belong to the Lord. When you declare you are Christian you ought to live it with your lifestyle. Words are no good if they're not backed up by actions that declare there's something different about us. We belong to Christ. We're committed to his Lordship.

It's one thing to call Jesus savior. It's another thing to call him, Lord. If we're going to be an effective Christian we're going to need to name him as Lord.

A sixth step in Christian growth comes as we encounter adversity. Acts 9:23-25 "After many days had gone by the Jews aspired to kill him. But Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall." Paul's first adversity. Some people hadn't received his testimony. They launch a campaign to get him. To rub him out.

We might ask, I don't understand this mystery. "On the road to Damascus you appeared to me in blinding light and blind me. Why can't you from now on blind all my opposition?" But there's this strange paradox in God that sometimes we see his power in a marvelous way. Other times he appears to withdraw that power and we're left in kind of a wilderness experience.

Thank God, by the way, that the basket weaver at Damascus took seriously his trade. If he'd have made a weak basket we'd lost an apostle of the church. So whatever you're doing, doing it to the glory of God. Even if it's weaving a basket. It may be used to hold future leader of the church. Do it well. He did his work well.

Paul learned right off the bat that there was going to be adversity in his Christian experience. Read 2 Corinthians and you'll find him experiencing a lot of adversity. But if you're anything like me you'll discover that you grow best in adversity.

No one asks for it. It's not the thing you go out looking for it. But when it occurs it's a real occasion to sink your teeth and go for it. We as Christians know something called the wilderness experience – like Jesus had in the wilderness. A time when we appear to be vulnerable. When it almost seems that God has abandoned us and the devil has been given access to us. But when we trust the Lord completely in those times he puts power and strength in our life.

We go through those kinds of times and say I'd never do it again but I wouldn't trade it either. Learn to trust God in the adverse times. That's an important step in your development of Christian walk. Don't be a drop out at that point when adversity hits. It's going to hit. The devil's going to hit you if you've got a firm commitment to Jesus Christ. Every major step you take in your experience as a Christian, every major step forward in faith you are going to get hit. Just know it's going to happen.

Everything we've done as a church in the last 5 years as we've moved ahead in an unprecedented time of development and growth in the body, as a leader I've got hit on the head with things that the devil wanted to decimate me with in terms of my faith and confidence and the like and

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powerful slugs from the enemy. But it's a punching match. We're going to emerge with a TKO in the last round. The Lord is going to step into the ring and administer it. It's going to happen. We need to trust God in our adverse times. Trust him completely.

A seventh step of growth of Paul came as he was absorbed in the word of God. We don't find a particular reference in Acts 9 but we do know by cross referencing Galatians 1 with Acts 9 that there was a time in the moments when Paul was going back and forth from Damascus to Jerusalem, there was a time span of three years when he slipped away and went to Arabia. He slipped away and drops out of sight. What I personally feel Paul was doing at that time was taking those three years to integrate his Christian experience with where he had been as a Jewish rabbi. He was taking time to re-examine the word. It was his own personal seminary. His own personal encounter with the word of God and the Spirit of God where he came to get his grasp of scripture that he would use so powerfully.

Someone has said when Paul went into the desert he took with him psalms, the law and the prophets. But when he emerged three years later he had Galatians, Ephesians and Romans in his heart and on his lips. He went through the metamorphosis. We need to get the word into us. We need to take daily time, achievable time. Five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes. So new Christians start with the gospels – the gospel of Mark or the gospel of John. Read it and reread it. Soak yourself, saturate yourself in the gospels, in the New Testament. Learn to read and enjoy the scripture and let it speak to you. Keep a notebook. Jot things down, impressions you have. Ask questions. Is there an example here to follow? Is there a command to obey? Is there an error that I am to avoid? A sin that I am to forsake? A promise that God wants me to claim? A new insight into God. Ask yourself as you study the word and let it speak to you.

The eighth step in the development of Paul's Christian growth was his faithfulness to serve God in an unnoticed place. After escaping danger in Damascus and Jerusalem Paul went to Tarsus where he remained until Barnabus summoned him, Acts 11:25-26. We don't know what he was doing in Tarsus. Perhaps he was making tents. Perhaps he was ministering in some obscure place. Perhaps to a small band of Christians that had begun to gather. But whatever he was doing he had been faithful at it. Barnabus knew that and went and got him. He had been in an unnoticed place. After serving effectively in an unnoticed place the Lord gave him more responsibility. Jesus says in Mark 4:25 "To him who has more will be given." He's not really talking about economics at that point. He's talking about methodology, education.

He's saying if you want to learn to play the piano then you've got to keep playing the piano. "To him who has more will be given." What I had was taken away from me because I didn't use it. Wasn't faithful to practice. Same way with a foreign language. Same way with the Christian life. You need to have a place of commitment, a place where you know you're counted on. An opportunity for service. Somewhere maybe obscure and maybe seemingly unimportant. But somewhere you can serve. Even a place of intercessory prayer. Perhaps you can't *do* things for others but it can be a place where you take upon yourself some burden, some commitment to meet some need through prayer. Have a place of commitment and be faithful at it.

Assuming responsibility is vital to Christian growth. I think it's good to always have some responsibility that's a little bit beyond my natural ability. I need to be in slightly over my head so I can learn to trust God and depend upon him and grow in faith. If I'm just doing what I can do, then I'm not growing. I've stopped. I'm just doing what I can do. But if I will ask God,

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“Don’t give me an ocean to get lost in. But just give me more than I have so that I can grow up to that new level.” Then I’m content. Maybe every once in a while God might dump an ocean in our path as well. You’re going to need to launch out in faith and be involved in more. You look at yourself and say, “I could never do that.” Don’t say that. That’s the worst thing you could say. Don’t ever say never. Never say never. With God’s help I can. Be faithful.

The eight steps I’ve gone through are a checklist. We look and say Am I walking in these eight steps? I’d suggest to the degree you’re not, to that degree you’re weak in your Christian life. These are guidelines that keep you navigationally on course. I’d encourage you if you’re a new Christian to walk in these steps. If you’re an older Christian and maybe you’ve gotten careless in these disciplines to walk back into them and begin practicing them. That’s what we’re doing in this series of things that are new. Re-finding our roots, redefining our patterns. Growing anew in the Lord. Behold I make all things new. Be new. Grow in Christ. Walk with him.