

NEXT

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NEXT



GROWING
A FAITH
THAT LASTS

ANDY BLANKS

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HOW NEXT WORKS

Next is a super-interactive, highly creative book that's designed to take you on a faith-deepening journey. We wanted to share some thoughts on how to get the best out of the time you spend in *Next*.

AS WE SAID, NEXT IS A JOURNEY

Next is designed to show you what a next-level faith looks like, teach you how to grow such a faith, and challenge you to strive toward owning such a faith. This is accomplished over four weeks, each week having a mix of different ways to help you increase ownership of your faith. Start at the beginning and move from day to day, letting each day, and each week, speak to you.

GO AT YOUR OWN SPEED

You might be working through this with other teenagers and an adult leader. If so, you probably want to stay on track. But if you're not, take *Next* at your speed. Take it slow and soak it in. If you need more than four weeks to work through the book, so be it!

HAVE A BIBLE AND A PEN HANDY

Borrow a real Bible, use one online, or download a Bible app on your phone or tablet . . . Whatever you do, you must have one for this journey you're on. Make sure you have a pen or pencil. You'll need it!

THINK LONG-TERM

The goal of *NEXT* is to help you lay the foundation for a faith that lasts into your young adult and adult life. That's a pretty big goal. The concepts and practices you'll learn in *NEXT* are relevant for your life today. But, real, lasting change takes time. Keep this in mind as you work through this book. And don't be afraid to pick it back up months or even years down the road to revisit what you'll learn.

If you're a youth worker or other adult, and you've picked up this book for your student (or stu-



HOW NEXT WORKS FOR YOUTH WORKERS (OR OTHER ADULTS)

dents), you need to know that NEXT functions two ways:

STAND-ALONE DEVOTIONAL

This book works perfectly as a stand-alone devotional book. You don't have to do anything for your student(s) to engage with this awesome resource. There are four weeks of daily content, all designed for a teenager to walk through without an adult leader. (Though we suggest engaging where you can and allowing yourself to be available for questions!)

4-LESSON SMALL GROUP OPTION

However, if you want, you can use NEXT as the "out of class" piece for a four-session small group Bible study gathering. How? Easy. All you have to do is go to <http://youthministry360.com/next-small-groups>. There you'll find four free downloadable Leaders Guides that will enable you to lead a four-session Bible study centered on what your students are learning in NEXT.

INTRODUCTION

NEXT.

What does “next” mean? What does it imply? What is Next all about?

Next is about motion. It’s about movement. It’s about turning today into yesterday.

Next is about progress. Next says that what “was” is in the past. Next is moving upward and onward.

Next is about the challenge. The next opponent. The next level. The next trick. The next chance to strive greatly at achieving a goal.

Next is about potential. Next says that who you are now is not who you will be. Next is about becoming. Next sees the upcoming months and years as ripe ground for growth.

And when applied to your faith, “next” is an awesome way of thinking about the way God has called you to approach your relationship with Him.

At some point in your life, you became a Christ-follower. You heard God’s Truth and responded. You knew that you were a sinner and that your sin separated you from God. You learned that Jesus—perfect, holy Jesus—paid the once-and-for-all price for your sins, making peace between God and you. And in faith, you accepted His sacrifice on your behalf, submitting the leadership of your life to Christ, and entering into a relationship with God. At some point, this happened to you. And it was amazing.

The problem is that for many of us, our stories don’t go much further than this.

So many Christians, especially teenagers and young adults, come to a saving relationship with Christ, and after an initial time of growing closer to God, find their faith life flat-lining. It’s like someone hits pause on the movie of their faith-journeys. These people go through the motions of faith (attending church, wearing their camp T-Shirt to school, etc.), but they’re not driving their faith. In many ways, the ownership of their faith is in the hands of their parents, grandparents, or even their youth minister. They’re not growing in Christ-likeness. They’re believers in God, but not pursuers of God.

**THIS ISN'T AT ALL HOW
GOD INTENDED OUR FAITH
TO LOOK. GOD EXPECTS
YOU TO GROW CLOSER
TO HIM. MORE THAN THAT,
GOD EXPECTS YOU TO
BE THE ONE WHO CARES
THE MOST ABOUT YOUR
SPIRITUAL GROWTH.**



The kind of faith God expects you to have is one that sits atop your list of priorities. The kind of faith that God describes in the Bible is a faith that flavors all of your interactions. It's a growing faith. A questioning faith. A serving faith. A faith that dramatically impacts the world around you for good. It's a faith that is owned by you.

AND THIS KIND OF FAITH IS WHAT NEXT IS ALL ABOUT.

Over the next four weeks, you'll be shown how the Bible talks about this next-level kind of faith. You'll be challenged to see how next-level faith defines your purpose. You'll be shown the kind of practices and habits that help you build next-level faith. And you'll be called to live out this next-level faith in a way that influences others around you to seek out Christ.

If this kind of faith seems different from the faith you are pursuing now, don't worry. Next will help you. This little book will help put you in a place where the Holy Spirit can get a hold of you and your life and lead you to an awesome place.

But this kind of change doesn't happen by accident. It takes intentionality. It takes a willingness to be moved and shaped by God. And more than anything, it takes a desire on your part to want to embrace what's next.

**ARE YOU READY TO
OWN YOUR FAITH?
ARE YOU READY TO
SEE WHAT'S NEXT ON
YOUR FAITH-JOURNEY
WITH GOD? IF SO,
YOU'RE IN THE RIGHT
PLACE. PAUSE. ASK
GOD TO BLESS YOUR
DESIRE TO GROW
CLOSER TO HIM. AND
THEN, CHECK OUT
WHAT'S NEXT.**

PREVIEW

I want you to think for a moment about your appearance. Think about the way you look when you see yourself in the mirror. Now, for some of you, your mom or dad is still the one who has the most say-so in what you wear. But for most of you, you're the one responsible for making sure you look presentable before you head out for school in the morning.

You take a shower, brush your teeth, and whatever else you do to check off the "personal hygiene" box in your daily routine.

Then, you put on makeup or fix your hair or both.

Next, you get dressed, most of you making sure that your clothes, though maybe not the newest or most stylish, at least look as put together as you can get them.

Then you head out of the door to school, having done your best to look as nice as you can (at least on days you haven't stayed up all night studying for a test).

SO HERE'S A QUESTION: WHO OWNS THIS PROCESS? WHO CARES THE MOST ABOUT WHAT YOU LOOK LIKE? WHO IS THE PERSON MOST RESPONSIBLE FOR HOW YOU LOOK?

For the vast majority of people reading this, the answer is "you." You have the most ownership in your appearance. While your parents care, you care more.

What if we asked the same question about your faith? Who owns your spiritual growth? Who has the most ownership of the process by which you grow closer to Christ? Who is the person most responsible?

For many of you, if you're honest, the answer would be someone else. A parent or guardian? A youth worker? A grandparent? For many of you, there is someone else in your life that pushes you, encourages you, and may very well (up to this point) care more about your relationship with Christ than you.

NEXT IS OUT TO HELP CHANGE THAT, AND IT STARTS THIS WEEK.

WHAT TO EXPECT THIS WEEK



DAY 1

What does the Bible say about growing in our faith?

DAY 2

This quiz will help you think about the current state of your faith.

DAY 3

What is standing in the way of you owning your faith?

DAY 4

What exactly does it mean to own your faith?

DAY 5

Are you ready to take your faith to the next level?

DAY 6

This journaling activity will help you reflect on the new way of looking at your faith.

DAY 7

What stood out most over the last week?

1

WEEK

DAY ONE

Read the devotion below and think about the questions on the following page. Answer them there or in a journal if you choose.

Do you play sports? If so, imagine this scenario: Let's say you're a healthy 15-year-old who has been playing baseball or softball since you were a kid. You miss most of the ground balls hit to you. When you do catch one, you can't throw it to first without it bouncing first, or flying off in some random direction. When you're up to bat, you miss most of the time. And when you do make contact, the ball goes foul. Would this be OK? Would this level of performance be considered normal or healthy for someone who had been playing his or her whole life?

What if you'd been playing an instrument since you were a kid, and still could only play *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*? What if you'd played the same video game for several years but couldn't get past the first level? What if you were a gymnast who had been taking lessons for years but could only do a forward roll?

While kind of funny, none of these scenarios would be considered OK or normal. Why? Because we expect people who have practiced at something for years to have shown some level of progress. If you still can't throw from shortstop to first base after ten years of playing softball, you might want to pick a new sport, right?

The same is true with our faith. I've said it several times already in this book, but I want to make sure we're on the same page. *God expects you to grow in your faith.* God expects you to progress in your knowledge of Him and your closeness to Him. It's not an option. It's not something reserved for the "Super Christians." God calls you to a relationship with Him that is continuously growing deeper and becoming more real.

LET'S TAKE A QUICK LOOK AT WHERE WE SEE SOME EVIDENCE OF THIS IN SCRIPTURE.

Take a moment and read Paul's words to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians chapter 3:

[1] But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. [2] I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, [3] for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? - 1 Corinthians 3:1-3

Paul was actually kind of frustrated with the Christ-followers in Corinth. Can you tell from his words here what he was frustrated about? (You can write your answer in the space below if you want.)

Paul wasn't talking about real food here. He was using a metaphor. He is frustrated because the Corinthians should have been feeding on solid spiritual food by now. But, they were spiritually immature, like babies. Paul was frustrated because they weren't meeting the expectation of spiritual growth.

LET'S LOOK AT ANOTHER. THE WRITER OF HEBREWS HAD THIS TO SAY TO THE RECIPIENTS OF HIS LETTER:

[11] About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. [12] For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food. - Hebrews 5:11-12

Can you spot the same level of frustration by the writer of Hebrews? Jesus expressed His frustration in much the same way time and time again, whether it was with His disciples, the Jews, or even the Pharisees. The Bible is clear: to find ourselves living the life God desires us to live as His children, we must be committed to growing our faith.

TODAY, TAKE THE TIME TO THINK ABOUT YOUR FAITH IN ITS CURRENT FORM. ARE YOU PURSUING GOD WITH THE PASSION AND COMMITMENT YOU SHOULD BE PURSUING HIM WITH? ARE YOU GROWING IN YOUR FAITH? LISTEN TO WHAT GOD MIGHT SHOW YOU TODAY. IT'S AN IMPORTANT QUESTION.

1
WEEK

DAY TWO

Today, you're going to get the chance to fill out a simple questionnaire to get you thinking about where your faith is now and where you want to see it in the future. Simply follow the prompts below to work through the questions.

1. How would you describe the importance of your faith in your life?
 - A. Vital. I view every part of my life through my faith.
 - B. Kind of important. I think about it a pretty good bit.
 - C. Non-essential. I believe in God, but my faith doesn't dictate all my decisions.
 - D. Not important at all. Some days I don't even know if I believe any of this.

2. How often in the last month have you spent meaningful time with God in the Bible outside of Church?
 - A. 15 or more times
 - B. 5 to 10 times
 - C. Once a week if I'm lucky
 - D. None

3. If the decision were totally up to you, would your church attendance:
 - A. Increase
 - B. Decrease
 - C. Stay the same

4. How likely are you to talk about your faith to others?
 - A. I'm pretty cool with talking about my faith.
 - B. I'll talk about it occasionally, but it makes me nervous.
 - C. I hardly ever talk about my faith.
 - D. My faith is not something I talk about with others.

5. I am curious about my faith, often asking questions to my youth minister, parents, or other adults.
 - A. True
 - B. False

6. I am the one who initiates discussions about Camp, mission trips, or other youth group functions with my parent or guardian.
 - A. True
 - B. False

7. Are you happy with the status of your relationship with Jesus? Why or why not? Write your answer below:

8. Think about the last few years of your life. Has your relationship with Christ grown significantly? If the answer is yes, can you think of the main reason why this is true? If the answer is no, why not?

9. Why is it easier for others to be the ones to have ownership of your faith?

10. Describe in your own words what it would look like if you were the one who had the most ownership in your faith.

Well, now it is go time! This little quiz isn't designed to make you feel bad. No one is keeping score. And it's not exactly scientific. In asking you to take this quiz, I wanted you to take a moment out of the busy-ness of your life to think about where you are with God.

So, how do you feel about your faith? If you feel that itch to do something, you've come to the right place. Tomorrow we'll jump into a really practical look at how to think about growing your faith. But for now, spend a few moments talking to God and telling Him how you feel now that you've taken some time to think about things between you two.

1
WEEK

DAY THREE

For today, you'll read through a passage of Scripture, then answer a few questions about your life with Christ.

We don't know who wrote the letter to the Hebrews. Some people think Paul may have written it. Other people have their guesses. While we don't know exactly whose words they are, we know they're good ones. Take a second and read these words from Hebrews 12:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. - Hebrews 12:1-3

OK, let's dig into this a little bit. Paul had just finished listing a ton of the awesome, God-loving people from Israelite history. (If you've never read Hebrews 11, it's pretty cool.) The writer was saying that since the Hebrews had such a rich tradition of faith around them, they should be encouraged to "throw off everything that hinders them" and continue to run their race of faith. Here are a few questions to think about:

1. Who in your life has a faith you can model? Write their names below.
2. When the author of Hebrews mentions "every weight" and sin that clings closely, he's talking about anything that keeps us from growing in our faith, things like sin, distractions, and obstacles. In your own words, how do these things "entangle" you as you try to grow closer to Christ?
3. How does focusing on Jesus and His life and teachings enable you to grow closer to Him?

4. What encouragement can you take in your own life from the strength Jesus demonstrated in staying true to His calling?

I want you to take a few minutes and think about the things that “entangle” you. Below you’ll see some categories. Take a few minutes and answer the questions under each one.

THINGS I DO

What are some things you do (or don’t do) that act as an obstacle to you growing your faith?

THINGS I THINK

What are some examples of the way your thoughts act as obstacles to you growing your faith?

THINGS I FEEL

How do your emotions and your attitude get in the way of you growing your relationship with Christ?

the way of your faith.

Look at what you’ve written above. Take the time today to pray about them, talking to God about the elements of your life that seem to trip you up, keeping you from pursuing Him more faithfully. Listen to what God says to you. Ask Him for the strength to do something about it.

1
WEEK

DAY FOUR

Read through the following verses and answer the questions to help define exactly what it means to own your faith.

We've talked a lot about owning your faith. But we haven't defined it yet. Let's do that now. Let's look at what the Bible has to say about the four different truths of owning your faith.

TRUTH 1: YOU MUST RESPOND TO CHRIST WITH A DESIRE TO PURSUE HIM.

READ MATTHEW 16:13-20

In this passage, Peter confessed that Jesus was more than just another great teacher or leader. This was a gut-check moment for Peter. It was the moment Peter identified Jesus as his Lord and the moment where Peter solidified his pursuit of Jesus.

In the space below, write down who Jesus is to you.

TRUTH 2: YOU MUST GROW IN YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF GOD AND HIS WAYS.

READ COLOSSIANS 1:9-12.

What does Paul pray for his friends at the church in Colossae? That they would grow in their knowledge of God through wisdom and understanding. And why did Paul want this for them? So they could live a life of action and growth, a life worthy of the Lord.

Think about this: Why is a growing knowledge of God and His ways important for growing a faith that lasts?

TRUTH 3: YOU MUST, WITH THE HELP OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, LIVE A CHRIST-

LIKE LIFE.

READ EPHESIANS 5:1-2

Paul gives an awesome command here to the Christ-followers in Ephesus (and to us). He says that we are to imitate God in the way we live, especially in how we love those around us. Imitating Christ means living as Christ would live if He were you. It means speaking as if Jesus were talking through you. It means acting as Jesus would act in any situation. It's a tall order, isn't it? But one you have to be serious about if you're going to grow your faith.

Use one word to describe how effectively you are imitating Christ in your day-to-day life.

TRUTH 4: YOU MUST LIVE IN SUCH A WAY THAT YOUR LIFE POSITIVELY IMPACTS THE WORLD AROUND YOU.

READ MATTHEW 5:16

Jesus is summing up His introduction to the Sermon on the Mount. He has finished instructing His listeners to be salt and light in the world around them. He sums up the idea of positively impacting the world around us with His words in Matthew 5:16.

What does Jesus say is the result of the good things you do in your life? (In other words, who gets the credit?)
What kind of impact are you having on the world around you?

What does it mean to own your faith? It means desiring to follow Jesus in all areas of your life. It means knowing God by engaging with Him the Bible and by talking to Him through prayer. It means striving to live as Jesus lived, not as others live. And finally, it means giving of yourself to others to make the world a better place in Christ's name.

Can you do this? I think you can. I think you're probably already doing some of these. Or all of these on occasion. But it's time you got serious about owning your faith. It's time you stopped letting others steer the ship. It's your life. It's your faith. Take charge. Move forward. Take ownership of your relationship with Christ. You're ready.

1
WEEK

DAY FIVE



Read Joshua 4: 1-7. (Seriously, go do it. I'll wait.) What has just happened is the culmination of 40 year's worth of waiting. The Israelites have just finished their four-decades-long tour of the desert and have finally entered the land God had promised them. It was a big deal. And so Joshua told them to do something special. He told them to make a marker, a pile of stones, to commemorate this epic event in the course of their faith journey with God. Joshua told them that in the future, they'd be able to see these stones and remember a time when God was super-faithful to them.

Here's a true statement: if you stay close to God throughout your life, you will have spiritual markers (just like the Israelites and their stack of rocks) where you can look back and see evidence of God doing something awesome in your life.

I want this day to be one of those days for you.

I do. I mean that. I want you to look back on today and say this was the day that you got serious about your faith. This is the day your pursuit of God got real.

You're almost at the end of the first week of this book. And you have three more awesome, intense, potentially life-changing weeks. And so, it's time to make a decision.

You need to decide at this point whether or not you're ready to move your faith forward.

Are you ready to take that next step?

Are you ready to take ownership of your faith journey?

Are you willing to put Christ first in your life?

I think you are. I think you want your journey with Christ to be something more authentic. And more personal. If you're serious about seeing your faith become a real presence in your life, look over at the next page.

This can be a day that signifies an important spiritual marker in your journey. If you're ready for that, I want you to do two things:

FIRST, I want you to say a prayer to God, asking Him to honor your desire to grow closer to Him and to take more ownership of your spiritual growth. You can pray whatever you would like. But, if you want, I've written a short prayer below. If you choose, pray this prayer to God:

Father, I praise you because of how awesome you are. Thank you for loving me and for calling me into a relationship with you. God, I'm ready to get serious about my faith. I'm ready to take more ownership of my journey with you. Please help me know what this looks like. Guide me. Give me strength. Encourage me. And most importantly, remind me of your presence as we move forward together. Thank you for the goodness, love, and grace you surround me with. In your Son's name, I pray. Amen.

Now, trust that God will honor your desires. Trust that the Holy Spirit will work within you to draw you closer to God, making you more like Him in the process. It's a long journey. But it's an awesome one. Get ready.

SECOND, I want you to come up with a marker to remember this moment, kind of like the Israelites did with the rocks. You can use the space below to draw a picture. You can go find a rock and put it on your desk or bathroom counter. Take a picture of something interesting or beautiful and make it your phone's screensaver. Write a poem. Make a sculpture. Whatever you do, take the time to mark this moment. It may very well turn out to be a turning point in your faith.

End this activity by spending some time in silent reflection. Listen to God. Praise Him. Reflect on this change you're making in your life.

1
WEEK

DAY SIX

Today you'll have the chance to journal your thoughts. Read the instructions below and take some time to put your thoughts on paper.

Journaling. The word makes some of you cringe, doesn't it? Maybe you don't normally express yourself in words (which is 100% OK). Or maybe it's an idea that just kind of sounds weird. I get that. But even if you aren't completely comfortable with it, putting your thoughts on paper forces you to stop and think deeply about what's going on in your heart and mind.

So, take a few minutes to journal some today. Need a prompt to get started? Think about this new way of thinking about your faith that you've been challenged with this week. Then, maybe you could answer all or some of the following questions in the space below:

- What about this new approach to faith makes you excited?
- What about this new approach to your faith makes you fearful or anxious?
- How do you expect your life to be different as a result of taking more ownership of your faith?

End your journaling time by praying to God and asking for strength to follow through on the changes you want to make.