FOLLOWING JESUS

BOOK 1

Begin

New Life in Christ



Pastor Richmond Kobe

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Book 1: Begin

New Life in Christ

Chapters 1–8

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The stories in this book are composites. Names and details have been changed, and they do not describe any one real person.

This book is not a substitute for emergency, medical, legal or professional help. If you or someone else is in danger, see "Safety and Support: Start Here" at the back of this book.

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Before You Begin: How This Pathway Works

Welcome. Following Jesus is for adults who are new to faith, returning to faith, or still exploring who Jesus is. You can use it on your own, with a mentor, or in a small group at church.

Four books, one journey.

Book	Stage	The question it answers
Book 1: Begin (Chapters 1–8)	Meet Christ and begin following	Who is Jesus, and how do I begin to follow him?
Book 2: Establish (Chapters 9–18)	Understand the faith more deeply	What do Christians believe, and how does that truth shape life?
Book 3: Grow (Chapters 19–30)	Develop Christlike character and practice	How does Jesus change my mind, heart, relationships and daily life?
Book 4: Multiply (Chapters 31–40)	Help others follow Jesus safely	How do I share my faith and help others grow?

Some subjects, such as the gospel, the Bible, prayer, the church and the Holy Spirit, come back in later books. This is deliberate. Each time a subject returns, we go a little deeper, and you will be told where you first met it.

How each chapter works. Every chapter answers one real question. It teaches four central truths, looks closely at one Bible passage, tells a short story from everyday life, and gives you simple practices, a seven-day reading plan and questions to talk about. If you are in a group, you will normally meet once for each chapter.

Read or listen. Every Bible reading can be read in print, read aloud by someone else, or heard on an audio Bible. No one will ever ask you to read aloud, pray aloud or share your personal story.

If you are still exploring, you are welcome here. You may take part honestly, ask questions and say "I am not sure" at any point. Nothing in this course asks you to pretend.

Practices are invitations, not tests. After each practice, you choose one of four responses: I completed this · I will return to it · This is not appropriate or safe for me · I need support. Every one of these responses is acceptable.

Safety and support. Support Pages for urgent help are at the back of every book. Life Guides, which go deeper into particular situations, are in a separate Life Guides booklet. If you or someone else is in danger or needs help, start with "Safety and Support: Start Here." It will help you find the right page quickly.

What this course believes. Following Jesus respects Christians of other traditions warmly, but it is not neutral. It holds to the historic Christian faith confessed in the ancient creeds; salvation by God's grace, centred on Jesus Christ; the Bible as inspired by God and trustworthy; the new birth as Scripture describes it (John 3:3–8); openness to the present work and gifts of the Holy Spirit, without making any gift a proof of salvation; marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman; and firm opposition to prosperity teaching, spiritual abuse, and pressure of any kind.

When Christians differ. In some chapters, a "Christians differ" box explains fairly where sincere Christians disagree, such as over baptism or church leadership. These boxes do not mean that everything is uncertain. The central truths of the faith, such as who Jesus is and his resurrection from the dead, are never treated as matters of opinion. Neither is safety.

Finishing. Completing a book, or the whole pathway, records that you have worked through it. It does not mean that you are a mature Christian or that you are approved to lead, teach or counsel. Following Jesus is lifelong.

CHAPTER 1

Jesus Christ and the Good News

> *People talk about "the gospel" all the time. What actually is it?*

You may have heard the word "gospel" many times: in church, in songs, on the radio, perhaps in a street preacher's loud voice. Some people use it to mean "true", as in "that's the gospel truth". Some use it for a style of music. Many Christians use it every week without ever stopping to explain it.

This chapter asks a simple question: what is the gospel? By the end of it, you should be able to explain it in your own words, in four short parts. You do not need to believe it yet to understand it. You only need to listen carefully.

The short answer

The word "gospel" means **good news**. It is not advice about how to be a better person. It is not a set of religious rules. It is an announcement about something God has done.

Here is the good news in one sentence:

> **Jesus, the promised King, has come. He died for our sins and rose again, so that through him God now offers forgiveness, new life and hope to everyone who turns to him and trusts him.**

The rest of this chapter unpacks that sentence in four parts. You will meet these four parts again and again throughout this pathway, so take your time with them.

The four parts	In a few words
1. Who Jesus Is	Fully God and fully human, the promised King, who now reigns as Lord
2. What Jesus Announced	God's kingdom has come near: turn back to God and believe the good news
3. What Jesus Did	He died for our sins, was buried, and rose again on the third day
4. Why This Is Good News and How We Respond	God offers forgiveness, new life and hope as a gift; we respond by repenting and believing

Read it for yourself: Mark 1:14–15

Mark's Gospel is one of the four accounts of Jesus' life in the Bible. Very near the beginning, Mark sums up Jesus' message in two verses. Read them slowly, or listen to them twice:

> "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.'" (Mark 1:14–15)

Notice three things before we go on.

First, **this is Jesus' own message.** The gospel did not begin with a church or a preacher. Jesus himself came "proclaiming the gospel of God".

Second, **it is an announcement.** "The time is fulfilled" means that the moment God had been preparing for has finally arrived. "The kingdom of God is at hand" means that God's rule, his good and rightful reign, has come near in Jesus.

Third, **it calls for a response.** Jesus does not only give information. He invites people to "repent and believe". We will come back to those two words at the end of this chapter.

1. Who Jesus Is

The good news is about a person before it is about anything else. So who is Jesus?

Jesus was a real man who lived in the land of Israel about two thousand years ago. He was born to a Jewish family, grew up in the town of Nazareth, and worked as a carpenter or builder (Mark 6:3) before he began to teach in public. He ate, slept, wept and felt tired. He was fully human.

But the first Christians, who knew him well, came to believe that he was much more than a good teacher or a prophet. John's Gospel begins like this:

> "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God… And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1:1, 14)

"The Word" is John's name for Jesus. John is saying that the one who has always been with God, and who is God, became a human being and lived among us. Christians therefore say that Jesus is **fully God and fully human**. How this can be true is something we will explore later (Book 2, Chapter 10). For now, notice what it means: in Jesus, God himself came close.

Jesus is also called **Christ**. This is not his surname. It is a title meaning "the anointed one": the King whom God had promised for centuries through the prophets of Israel. When the first Christians called Jesus "Lord", they meant that this King now reigns over everything, and deserves our trust and loyalty.

2. What Jesus Announced

Jesus' message was: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand."

A kingdom is wherever a king's rule is welcomed and obeyed. The Bible tells us that God made the world good, but that human beings turned away from him. Since then, the world has been full of beauty and full of brokenness: love and cruelty, joy and grief, kindness and injustice, side by side. Throughout the Old Testament, God promised that one day he would put things right through his chosen King.

Jesus announced that this day had arrived. In Jesus, God's rule had come near. You can see it in the chapters that follow in Mark's Gospel, which you will read this week. Jesus welcomes people others push away. He forgives sins. He heals the sick and frees people from evil. He calls ordinary men and women to follow him. Wherever Jesus goes, God's kingdom is breaking in.

This does not mean that everything is fixed straight away. Christians still suffer, still struggle and still wait for the day when Jesus will make all things new (Book 2, Chapter 18). But the King has come, and his kingdom has begun.

3. What Jesus Did

If Jesus had only taught and healed, we might remember him as a great man. But the heart of the good news is what happened at the end of his life.

About twenty years after Jesus' death, the apostle Paul wrote to Christians in the city of Corinth. He reminded them of the message he had passed on to them, the message "of first importance":

> "...that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared..." (1 Corinthians 15:3–5)

There are four short claims here.

- **Christ died for our sins.** Jesus was executed on a Roman cross. But the Bible says his death was not an accident or a defeat. He died "for our sins": on our behalf, because of the wrong we have done. Exactly how his death deals with our sin is something we will look at more closely later (Book 2, Chapter 12). For now, hold on to this: he died for us.
- **He was buried.** He really died. His body was placed in a tomb.
- **He was raised on the third day.** God raised Jesus from the dead, not as a ghost or a memory, but bodily and truly alive.
- **He appeared.** Paul goes on to list people who saw the risen Jesus, including one occasion when he appeared to more than five hundred people at once, most of whom were still alive when Paul wrote (1 Corinthians 15:6). In effect, Paul was saying: "You can ask them."

The resurrection is the turning point of the story. It confirms who Jesus is, shows God's victory through him, and declares that death does not have the last word.

4. Why This Is Good News and How We Respond

Why is this *good* news? Because of what it means for us.

The Bible is honest about the human condition. All of us have **sinned**: we have turned away from God and gone our own way, in what we have thought, said and done, and in the good we have failed to do. Sin is not only breaking rules. It is a broken relationship with the God who made us, and it damages us and the people around us. And we cannot repair that relationship by trying harder, being religious or doing good deeds.

The good news is that God did not wait for us to fix ourselves. Paul writes:

> "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8)

Notice the order. God acted first, in love, while we were still far from him. Because Jesus died for our sins and rose again, God now offers:

- **forgiveness,** so that our wrongs are no longer held against us;
- **reconciliation with God,** so that we can know him as a loving Father;
- **new life,** as God begins to change us from the inside;
- **hope,** that does not end at death.

These are **gifts**, not rewards. No one earns them. They are offered freely, to people of every nation, culture and background.

How do we respond? Jesus put it in two words: **"repent and believe."** To repent means to turn: to turn away from going our own way and to turn back to God. To believe means to trust: to put our trust in Jesus and what he has done, rather than in ourselves. These two words are worth a whole chapter, and Chapter 2 explains them carefully. For now, it is enough to know that the gospel is not only something to understand. It is an invitation to respond.

See it in real life: Ama's story

Ama's story is a composite drawn from the experiences of many people. It is not a documented testimony.

Ama grew up in a church-going family in Kumasi, Ghana. She sang in the choir for years and knew most of the hymns by heart. One evening, a friend from work asked her a simple question: "What is the gospel?"

"It means going to church, praying, and trying to live a good life," Ama said.

Even as she said it, something felt wrong. She thought about her answer all the way home. Everything she had said was about what *people* do. She had not mentioned Jesus at all, or what God had done through him.

The next Sunday, Ama asked an older woman in her church, Auntie Efua, whether they could read one of the Gospels together. They chose Mark, and began meeting each Tuesday after work, reading a few verses at a time and asking questions. Some weeks Ama had more questions than answers. There was no sudden, dramatic moment. But there was a beginning.

Ama's experience is common in many countries and churches. It is possible to know a lot of church language without yet understanding the gospel clearly. If that describes you, you are in exactly the right place.

What the gospel is not

People often confuse the gospel with other ideas. Here are some of the most common.

- **"The gospel means being a good person."** Being good matters, but the gospel is not advice to try harder. It is news about what God has done for us in Jesus.

- **"Jesus was only a good teacher or prophet."** Jesus was a great teacher, but the gospel announces much more: that he is the promised King, who died for our sins and rose again.
- **"I have always gone to church, so I am already fine."** Belonging to a church is good, but attending church is not the same as trusting Christ. The gospel calls each person to turn to God and trust Jesus personally.
- **"The gospel promises that God will make me healthy, successful or rich."** God cares about every part of our lives and may answer prayer in remarkable ways. But the gospel does not promise health, wealth or worldly success to everyone who believes. Its centre is Jesus Christ and what God has done through him.
- **"The gospel belongs to one denomination, nation or culture."** The good news is for everyone. Jesus was a Jewish man, his first followers were from many places, and today people of every nation follow him.

If you are still exploring

You may be reading this without being sure what you believe. That is completely fine. You are welcome to keep reading, to ask questions and to take part in every practice. You do not have to decide anything today, and no one will ask you to say publicly what you believe.

If you are unsure whether you are a Christian, or what that would mean for you, the Support Page "I am not sure I am a Christian" may help (at the back of this book).

Remember

The gospel is good news about Jesus, in four parts:

1. **Who Jesus Is:** fully God and fully human, the promised King, who now reigns as Lord.
2. **What Jesus Announced:** "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

3. **What Jesus Did:** he died for our sins, was buried, and was raised on the third day.
4. **Why This Is Good News and How We Respond:** God offers forgiveness, new life and hope as a gift, and Jesus calls us to repent and believe.

Practices

Practise it now. Read or listen to Mark 1:14–15 twice. Then write one short line for each part of the gospel, in your own words. You can use the book to help.

Part	My words
Who Jesus Is	
What Jesus Announced	
What Jesus Did	
Why This Is Good News and How We Respond	

Live it this week. Read or listen to Mark 1–2, using the seven-day plan below. Each day, note one thing Jesus says or does. If you miss a day, continue with the next passage or return when you can.

Talk about it (with your group, a mentor or a friend, if you wish)

1. What are some common ideas people have about the gospel?
2. Which of the four parts was new or surprising?

3. Has anything in this chapter changed or clarified the way you understand the gospel? Share only if you wish.

Look outward. If it is appropriate and safe, tell a trusted person one thing you learned about Jesus this week. If sharing is not safe, write down what you would say, or talk about it privately with your mentor.

Looking back. In Weeks 2, 4 and 7, you will look back at these four parts, with your group or on your own. Use the book if you wish. This is a learning exercise, not a test. In Week 4 (Chapter 4), you will add what it means to follow Jesus as Lord.

After each practice, choose one response: I completed this · I will return to it · This is not appropriate or safe for me · I need support.

If you are still exploring: you are welcome to take part in every practice. When you share, you may begin, "This is what Christians mean by the gospel." No one will ask you to say publicly whether you have become a Christian.

Seven-day reading plan (read or listen)

Day	Passage	One thing Jesus says or does
☐ 1	Mark 1:1–13	
☐ 2	Mark 1:14–20	
☐ 3	Mark 1:21–34	
☐ 4	Mark 1:35–45	
☐ 5	Mark 2:1–12	
☐ 6	Mark 2:13–22	
☐ 7	Mark 2:23–28, then look back over the week	