

Seek **FIRST** the Kingdom of God & How to Build a House

Suppose you are new to studying God's word. Maybe you are just new to studying it by yourself, even if you've been in church for years because you have always let others do the studying for you. Maybe you now feel a need to see for yourself because you sense that you haven't been given the full story or all the necessary information. Where do you start?

The First Step - Seeking

The Bible can be a very overwhelming thing to look at. It is incredibly long and complex, and this is the biggest reason most people do not look at it seriously, even if they have an interest in knowing all or even some of what it says. What is most important in there, and how do you recognize that? If you start at page one and try to read straight through the Bible, expecting it to maintain a linear sense of teaching you what you need to know, as most modern books do, you will likely be very disappointed. If your learning style involves loving to learn about history and context, you may get further, perhaps as far as Job or Psalms or even Isaiah before getting completely lost. Without that love of history, though, most will not even make it through Exodus or Leviticus before getting bored out of their mind with reading about seemingly archaic laws or the minute details of tabernacle furnishings. The reason we get so bored or lost is that we don't know what to do with that information.

Imagine trying to build a house, and somebody gives you a pile of roofing material, some windows, some paint and a stack of drywall. What can you do with it? You haven't leveled the ground, there is no foundation laid to build on, and most importantly, you don't even know what the house is supposed to look like! This is what happens when most people pick up the Bible without understanding the process, or blueprint for what they are doing. They are given bits and pieces of information, some of which may make sense or even flow in a sort of order, but for the most part, things seem unconnected, vague, confusing or even contradictory. So how are you to go about sorting through all of it? What is the first step? Where do you begin? At the beginning of course! But what is the beginning with our house analogy? Pour the foundation? Back up. Laying out the space? Clearing the land? Back up further. Drawing up blueprints? Getting there, but keep going back. Before you can even draw up plans, you must have an idea. You must visualize your house – what it will look like, where it will be, how it will function. So is that the first step? No. The very first thing is to decide why you want to build this house in the first place!

It is the same with studying God's word. First, you have to decide why you want to study it. There might be many reasons specific to each individual, but I believe they all generally lead towards one commonality. We hope to one day be with God, and we want to find a way to facilitate that.

When I decided to start studying the Bible on my own, I was leaning towards getting out of Christianity altogether. College had beaten me into thinking Christianity was outdated and unnecessary. There were large portions of the Bible that were never read or studied in Church. Some of those lesser known parts were the ones that I heard quoted in College to preach against believing the Bible. Things such as justifying slavery and

proclaiming homosexuality to be wrong! And besides, doesn't the Bible's claim of a six day creation prove itself to be nothing but a fairy tale? What about all those things? I wanted to look into what I was throwing away and read things for myself before I made any final decisions.

I had a small, haunting suspicion that there might be something those college teachers and peers missed. Underneath my suspicion was a need to know that there was a true God that I could one day be with in some form of heavenly afterlife. I needed to find that God and connect with Him however I could. Put another way, I was, without knowing it, seeking the Kingdom of God. It just so happens that the Bible tells us that this is the very first step. Matthew 6:30 "But seek **first** the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." Yes, seeking God is the first thing. At this stage, we will not know Him well, and may not even be familiar with the Bible. But we know there is something out there and we are looking for the truth. That is seeking the Kingdom of God. It is much like getting to know the person who will become your spouse. Once we have decided to get married, and even after getting married, we can't stop trying to get to know our spouse better. If our marriage is to work well, we have to show a continued interest in growing together. If we stop pushing ourselves to grow and know each other more deeply, the relationship can stagnate or deteriorate. I have been guilty of this, so know that it is true! So this seeking doesn't stop once we have found our mate. It must continue. This is the same with God. We seek first, but we also seek continually. The common thread I have noticed in those that study God's word themselves, is that they are never satisfied that they know it all. Their relationship with their creator is a real one, one that has to keep growing to keep alive.

Let's look at the context of Matthew 6:30 for an even better understanding of this. We'll back up and read verses 25-34.

²⁵ "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? ²⁸ "So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; ²⁹and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰ Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, *will He* not much more *clothe* you, O you of little faith? ³¹ "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day *is* its own trouble.

We see that those things that "shall be added to you" are our daily, worldly needs. They are those things that we need to survive, that often take precedence in our lives. God knows our tendency to seek comfort first. But if our main focus is seeking after those things, we will never find time to seek God. Those things will end up being all consuming. I am sure that we can all relate to how much time our worldly needs can take up. He doesn't say we cannot spend any time pursuing those needs, but they cannot come first in our priorities.

Something that can slip by without our notice on that passage is that we are not only to seek the kingdom of God, but also His righteousness. Now a little ways back I mentioned that the commonality in all who have decided to study God's word is that

we hope to one day be with God, and want to find a way to facilitate that. That is a two-part goal. The first part is the *what*; seeking God's kingdom. The second part is the *how*; seeking His righteousness. This is the very first thing God requires of us because it is also the most important concept for us to understand. It is the entire Bible in a nutshell: Here is what to do and here is how you do it. Seeking His righteousness involves us trying to be like Him. We can only be with God if our heart is set on being like Him as well. As you get deeper into the Bible that pattern is played out over and over in many ways. From Israel's journey to the promised land, where the unfaithful generation was not allowed in (they were seeking God's kingdom, but not His righteousness), to God's plan for our own salvation as it is laid out in His Holy Days or Feasts. The entire rest of the Bible is there to show us how to be righteous (e.g. the law + Christ's example), how not to be righteous (e.g. Israel's misfortunes), and the consequences of doing both (e.g. prophecy).

The Second Step – Finding the Rock

Going back to our example of building a house, we can find the next step in our process. We've discovered how to start towards our goal by seeking His righteousness. So it is time to start drawing up plans for our house. Where shall we build it? If we just keep reading through the next chapter, we find Jesus Himself using building a house as an analogy for building our relationship with him. Matthew 7:24-27.

²⁴ "Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: ²⁵and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. ²⁶ "But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: ²⁷ and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall."

So our foundation needs to be solidly built on the rock. Notice it doesn't say "a" rock, but "the" rock. Isaiah 51:1 tells us very clearly what the next step is by naming the "seeking" step first, then adding to it. "Listen to Me, you who follow after righteousness, You who seek the LORD: Look to the rock *from which* you were hewn."

Christ is referred to repeatedly as "the rock", in both the old and new covenants. See also Psalms 18, 31 & 62 & Habakkuk 1:12; If you doubt that any of these scriptures were referring to Jesus Christ, thinking that only God the Father was around in the old covenant, then read 1 Corinthians 10:1-4, a new covenant passage referring explicitly to the old covenant Exodus.

¹ Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, ² all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³ all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.

Remember back to when you first made the decision to study God's word by yourself, without a pastor or church leader doing it for you and then just listening to what they said? This was quite a leap in the right direction. Paul wrote a letter to the church at Corinth about the need to do this, calling divisions within the church part of our carnal nature that we need to get out of. Today we have a hard time thinking of the early church being sectarian already, being split in their belief on details of understanding. But Paul shows us how common it was even then to let a person come between us and Jesus. Paul himself was one of the people that the Corinthians were placing on a pedestal, but rather than let this be seen as a compliment to himself, he scolded them for it and related to them the analogy of building a house with the correct foundation. 1 Corinthians 3: 1-17.

¹ And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual *people* but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. ² I fed you with milk and not with

solid food; for until now you were not able *to receive it*, and even now you are still not able; ³for you are still carnal. For where *there are* envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like *mere* men? ⁴ For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I *am* of Apollos,” [or “I am Lutheran”, and “I am Baptist”] are you not carnal?

⁵ Who then is Paul, and who *is* Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. ⁷ So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. ⁸ Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor.

⁹ For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, *you are* God’s building. ¹⁰ According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. ¹¹ For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if anyone builds on this foundation *with* gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, ¹³ each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is. ¹⁴ If anyone’s work which he has built on *it* endures, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

¹⁶ Do you not know that you are the temple of God and *that* the Spirit of God dwells in you? ¹⁷ If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which *temple* you are.

Paul just gave us another new and important piece of information here as well. He let us know what this building is that we are trying to construct. It is the temple of God! The function of this temple is to house God’s Spirit. His Spirit will not live in a carnal place, so we need to build a house for it, a temple, who’s foundation is Jesus Christ, built on His righteousness. This is the same function the tabernacle and the temple served in the old

covenant. The new covenant is simply the spiritual application of the physical examples we were given in the old covenant.

Steps 3&4 – the Structure & How to Clean it

Why do I put both of these steps together in one heading? Because they can be done in either order and are both ongoing. Once we have the correct foundation in place and know what this structure is that we are building, we need to do two things. We build the structure and we clean house. Then we keep building. And we do periodic upkeep cleanings. And we build more...and remodel...and make it better...and fix it...

The Structure

Building the structure is an ongoing process that involves growing in grace and knowledge. This will involve studying, praying, and putting what we learn into action. It will never be done, as we will never be perfect while we are still in the flesh. But we can improve. As a homeowner, I know firsthand that my house is never done. It was built in 1952, but has been remodeled and repaired multiple times, and I still have more plans for it. The longer I live in it, the more I can see how it can function better. So I plan improvements, some of which I have time to get to and some of which are dreams for another day. Similarly, there are many things I would like to be doing for my spiritual house, but cannot find time for because other things get in the way. My worldly needs too often take precedence; but as I grow and understand how these things work, I realize I must force myself to make time for this spiritual house or it will start to deteriorate and crumble as any house that is not kept up will. So here I am on a Sabbath morning when I’d really rather still be in bed, working on an article that I couldn’t find time to touch over the week. I got up early to work on this because I know that as soon as my son gets up there will be no more time for writing, and I really need to have some one on one time with Jesus to study and write about His word. After he is up, it will be my

challenge to find a way to include him in his level of Sabbath study. At least on the Sabbath, the physical house can wait for a day.

These Sabbath activities are one way of building our spiritual house - keeping active with Godly activities and trying as hard as we can to understand our Creator. When I write out a study like this one, it is not because I have so much knowledge lying around in my brain that I can just put it into words at any time. I write as I am studying this stuff myself. The stuff I do already know I revisit and try to connect with other things I may not know as well. I always pray for my studies to be a two way discussion with Christ, who always helps me find information I might not otherwise have come across. We are building His house when we are praying, actively studying the Bible, having fellowship with others of like mind, discussing (not arguing) our beliefs with those who are not of like mind, standing up for what we believe, acting upright in the face of adversity, and when not falling back into sin or worldly ways.

Cleaning House: Baptism

Baptism's basic function is to cleanse the house we are building of the sins and carnal nature that we have lying around, so that God's Spirit will not have a filthy residence. A mature person can take this step at any time (children do not buy houses, nor do they get baptized). The structure does not have to be completed, because in reality it will never be perfectly complete. If I were to wait until it is completely done, I could never clean it and move in. We need only have made the decision that we truly want to pursue God's righteousness. It is a very big decision for us to make, but it will also help us immensely in our growth. My rate of learning and understanding concepts grew exponentially after my baptism.

Have you already been baptized as a child? Maybe you went through a confirmation of Baptism classes and ceremony in church as well. Sorry to say it, but it really doesn't count unless

you do it as a fully aware adult, in the manner that was taught in the Bible. John the Baptist and the disciples all baptized others with full immersion in water. This water is symbolic of God's Holy Spirit and cleanses us of our sins if we truly repent of them. If we do not truly repent of them, we are harboring them in our bodies, and they cannot be washed away, making the washing ineffective.

I have a story about my own baptism. At the time of my baptism, I had been doing something I knew to be wrong. I had not admitted it to anybody. During my baptism, just before I was immersed, I was asked if I truly repented of my sins. Of course I said yes, I did. But this thing was still in my head, as I know that sins must be confessed to be forgiven (not confessed to a priest, but to God and to any person that the sin affects). I really did not want to be doing it, but it had control of me, and I could not stop it. At the baptism, my family took pictures but didn't look at them for a long time. The family that performed the baptism also took pictures of the immersion and were concerned when they noticed that of all the pictures they took, in none of them was I completely immersed - my hand was still above the water. They started asking to see our pictures, but we did not know why, so we didn't rush to get them to them. In the meantime, I had been realizing that I really need to come clean about what I had been doing, and told my wife. It did become the ordeal that I knew it would, but we were able to work through it. After I had admitted my sins to my wife, we finally found time to get our photos printed and show the other family. They looked at them with great relief that our photos showed my hand completely underwater, and then they explained their concerns that my baptism might not have been valid had I not been completely immersed. I really believe that God was waiting to see if I did truly repent of my sins before He validated my baptism.

The point of my story is that baptism involves our full awareness and responsibility. It cannot be undertaken half-heartedly, and we certainly cannot do it as children who cannot understand what it is about. Does baptism mean that we will never sin again? Not at all. We will always fight with our human nature and fall backwards. I have fallen backwards with the issue mentioned above. The difference is that I am open about it with those whom it concerns, so I can work to improve myself.

Once we have been baptized, the Holy Spirit can enter into our temple. This will not make us perfect people, but we will have God's seed growing inside of us, helping us to become like Him over time. There is a belief among many Christians that once we accept Jesus into our hearts, we are forgiven and any subsequent sin is just done away with automatically – Jesus has done it all and we just have to sit back and wait for the Kingdom to come. This is just not true at all. We need to be very active in our salvation. Yes, our sins will be forgiven by His sacrifice, but only if we repent and make every effort to not fall back. Because we will still fail, we will need to clean our house occasionally to rid ourselves of our accumulated dirt. This is what Jesus taught us to do on Passover in His foot washing ceremony. John 13: 3-17.

³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, ⁴ rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. ⁵ After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe *them* with the towel with which He was girded. ⁶ Then He came to Simon Peter. And *Peter* said to Him, "Lord, are You washing my feet?"

⁷ Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this."

⁸ Peter said to Him, "You shall never wash my feet!"

Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me."

⁹ Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, not my feet only, but also *my* hands and *my* head!"

¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "He who is bathed needs only to wash *his* feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you." ¹¹ For He knew who would betray Him; therefore He said, "You are not all clean."

¹² So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³ You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for *so* I am. ¹⁴ If I then, *your* Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. ¹⁷ If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

So we do not need a head to toe cleaning again as we did when we were first baptized. We only need to clean off the accumulation on our feet that comes from walking in this unclean world.

From here, what we do is largely up to us as the Spirit leads us. The important thing is that we do not give up and let our house fall into a state of deterioration. It needs to stay clean and in working order so that the Spirit can dwell in our heart and have room to grow.

I will make a suggestion as to a good thing to study next, however. We were just talking about the Passover, which happens to be the first of God's appointed times and Holy Days that were laid out in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. Studying and keeping these days, I believe, is one of the most critical things one can do in learning more about our Creator, as they perfectly lay out God's plan of Salvation for us. I will be writing a study on the Holy Days soon, as a companion to this one.

Amen