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START



SECTION ONE: A STARTING POINT

You had a first day of school, a first date, a first kiss, a first job. While many of our *first* experiences are the first in a series of similar experiences, some of our *firsts* are *starting points*. They represent the first points or steps on a journey. If you are married, that first date was more than a date, wasn't it? It was the starting point of a relationship. That first day of school was a starting point as well. Your career had a starting point. If you have children, your parenting had a starting point. But here's something you may not have considered—*faith has a starting point*.

If you grew up in a non-religious family, your first encounter with religious faith may have occurred at a neighbor's house or in school or it may be occurring right now. You may have been intrigued by the faith of others, or you may not have given it a second thought. Either way, you were aware that their experiences were different from yours.

If your faith began during childhood, you were probably taught some basic religious tenets: *God is good. God rewards good and punishes evil. God hears your prayers. God loves you.* These simple truths made sense in a world where the tooth fairy and Santa Claus

made regular house calls. You may have had questions. Perhaps you even doubted at times. But the adults you trusted seemed confident in their faith, so you remained committed to yours—for the time being.

Fast-forward a few years and you found yourself confronted with adult realities for which childhood faith had not prepared you. You found yourself wrestling with questions such as: If God is *good* and *all-powerful*, why doesn't he do more to prevent the bad things in the world? Why does so much evil go unpunished? Why does prayer seem like such a shot in the dark? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why are some religious people so judgmental and mean? Why don't science and religion line up? Why does it seem that smart people are less religious?

Even as your faith shrank or your doubt solidified, you may have run into some "grownups" that had faith. Strong faith. Faith that didn't resemble a child's belief in the tooth fairy or Santa Claus. They maintained what looked to be an unshakable confidence in God in spite of what they saw or experienced. They didn't pretend to have all the answers. In fact, they didn't pretend at all. They were honest and hopeful. They acknowledged the

complexities of the adult world, but their faith remained strong. Perhaps it was their faith that caused you to begin doubting your doubt.

If so, you are in the right place. That's exactly what this guided conversation is about. It's why we call these gatherings *Starting Point*. If you grew up without a faith framework or you've just begun a relationship with Jesus, this may be a *literal starting point* for you. If you lost faith along the way, you may see our time together as an opportunity to restart your faith. Regardless of where you are, we are honored that you have chosen to participate for the next eight weeks as we explore what it looks like to develop faith that doesn't merely survive the real world but thrives in it.

Ever since I was a little girl and could barely talk, the word "why" has lived and grown along with me . . . When I got older, I noticed that not all questions can be asked and that many whys can never be answered. As a result, I tried to work things out for myself by mulling over my own questions . . . So the word "why" not only taught me to ask, but also to think. And thinking has never hurt anyone. On the contrary, it does us all a world of good.

● Anne Frank



SECTION TWO: ROOTS OF FAITH

Most Christians grow up being taught that regardless of the question, the answer begins with, “The Bible says.” In childhood, this is enough. If God wrote a book, there is no reason to challenge what it says. But for some of us, “The Bible says” became problematic somewhere north of our eighteenth birthdays. Truth is, for faith to be unshakable, the foundation must be more substantial than a *book of miracles* written thousands of years ago. Right? A storybook may be enough to birth faith in a child. But a storybook is not enough to sustain faith in an adult. But if we dispense with the Bible, where do we go for our starting point? Where does faith begin?

All truths are easy to understand once they are discovered. The point is to discover them. That takes investigation.

● Galileo

The first Christians didn’t use the Bible as a starting point for their faith. For the first two hundred-plus years of Christianity, Christians did not support their faith with a book. Their starting point was not something *written*; it was something that had *happened*.

As you probably know, the Bible is divided into two parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The New Testament contains the teachings of Jesus along with the narratives surrounding his birth, life, and crucifixion.

There are four accounts of Jesus’ words and works. These ancient documents are referred to as the Gospels. While most agree that the Gospels were written during the years immediately following Jesus’ life, they were not collected and published together until many years later. The term “New Testament” was first used around AD 250 in reference to one of the earliest collections of sacred Christian texts. Despite the fact that there was no Christian Bible, hundreds of thousands of men and women became followers of Jesus in the first three centuries. The starting point of their faith was not “The Bible says” or “The Bible teaches”; it was something else entirely. And we’re convinced that something else serves as an adult starting point for faith in our generation as well.

The apostle Paul traveled around the Mediterranean planting churches in the first century. He found himself with some time to kill in Athens. He met a group of philosophers who gathered on a regular basis to examine new ideas. They were looking for a framework that made sense of the world. They knew more than most, but continued to pursue greater certainty by discussing the latest ideas. Like most people in their culture, they believed in a pantheon of gods. But they willingly acknowledged the gaps in their knowledge. They even erected an altar inscribed “To an unknown God.” They were covering all their bases. If a new god arrived on the scene, they were ready for him. Or her. Or it.

Paul viewed this *just-in-case* altar as an opportunity to introduce his new friends to the central message of Christianity. He couldn’t begin his presentation with “The Bible says” because there was no New Testament. In fact, at this point in history, none of the four Gospels had been written. So Paul drew their attention to the fact that curiosity regarding God was universal. He argued there was something in every man and woman that wonders, questions, and seeks. He went on to say that God actually wants to be found . . . so much so that he entered creation in the form of a man—*Jesus*. This God-man came to explain what God is like and to reconcile humanity to himself.¹

This was not an easy message for Paul’s skeptical audience to embrace. They had never heard of Jesus. The notion of a single god was difficult enough. The idea that this God had entered creation in the form of a man was outside the realm of possibility for most of Paul’s Athenian audience. But one thing was certain. Paul was not asking them to believe a book. He never mentioned a book.

¹ Acts 17:16–34

It’s not that the Bible isn’t important, but Paul was challenging them to put their faith in a person. The question he left them with is the question that anyone exploring faith must eventually answer. It is the question that serves as the starting point for the Christian faith. The question is, *Who is Jesus?*

The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, and of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries to merely comprehend a little of this mystery every day.

● Albert Einstein



SECTION THREE: WHO IS JESUS?

The name that was so new to the Athenians is one we have all heard today. Jesus is the central figure of the Christian faith. Interestingly, other faith traditions claim Jesus as one of their own as well. But Jesus' influence goes beyond religion. It is difficult to find anyone anywhere who does not respect Jesus. His teachings have shaped the consciences of nations. This Jewish carpenter, who never traveled more than a hundred miles from his birthplace, never wrote a book, never raised an army, and was a public figure for less than four years before being crucified by Rome, remains the subject of endless conversations, debates, books, movies, and controversies.

Who is he? What makes his life and teachings so unique? What sets him apart? Why do millions of people from cultures all over the world continue to follow him?

It's true that Jesus' teachings represented a radical departure from the established norms of his day. His version of generosity and compassion went head-to-head with the commonly held assumption that it was a waste of time to do anything good for someone who didn't have the means to return the favor.

He insisted that his followers pray and give privately while other religious leaders made a great to-do of praying and giving to be seen. While conventional wisdom said to love your friends and hate your enemies, Jesus taught his followers to love their enemies and to look for opportunities to serve them.

But it wasn't what Jesus said that ensured his teachings would survive the first century. It wasn't his insight, his parables, or even the events surrounding his death that catapulted his fame and renown into the next generation and the generations to follow. In fact, Paul didn't even mention Jesus' teachings to the Athenians. The reason men and women like the apostle Paul risked and eventually sacrificed their lives for Jesus was not what he said before he died but what happened afterward. Three days afterward, to be specific.

Jesus rose from the dead.

A religion that is small enough for our understanding would not be big enough for our needs.

Corrie ten Boom

BOTTOM LINES FOR CHAPTER 1

- Faith has a starting point.
- The starting point for the Christian faith is a question: *Who is Jesus?*
- The Christian faith isn't about what Jesus said before he died. It's about what happened after he died: he rose from the dead.

FOR THE NEXT GROUP MEETING:

Read and complete the questions for Chapter 2. Watch or listen to the Chapter 2 message at spmembers.com

At the next group meeting, we'll talk about why we so often feel separated from God. We all have a set of standards that we don't live up to on a consistent basis. We imagine that God's set of standards must be higher than ours. If we can't live up to our own, then we certainly can't live up to his. And when we fail to live up to God's standards, we assume he condemns us. Is that true?



Take advantage of essential chapter resources at: spmembers.com

Today is when everything that's going to happen from now on begins.

● Harvey Firestone, Jr.

