

“If you want to get ‘unstuck’ in your walk with Christ, work through this book and put its principles into practice. Nate Akin takes us back to the basics; back to our ‘first love’. His core truths offer the help you need to rekindle the passion that propels you forward in Christlikeness. These are not mere facts to know but life altering truths to live.”

Donna Gaines, Founder & President of ARISE2Read.org

“Nate Akin delivers exactly what every weary believer needs: a gospel wake-up call that brings us back to the foundation of our faith. Read this book, not for something new, but for something better: the joy that was never lost, only forgotten.”

Betsy Gómez, author of Soy Niña

“If you are like me, you sometimes get spiritually stuck. Stuck in reading your Bible, praying, and just following Jesus on mission in the world. Nate Akin has written the perfect antidote for us! This brief but blessed book will bolster your walk with God and put new wind in your spiritual sails.”

James Merritt, Senior Pastor of Cross Pointe Church, Duluth, Georgia and former President of the Southern Baptist Convention

~~Static~~
~~Stalled~~
Stuck?

Recapturing your
joy in Christ

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Nate Akin

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To my beloved children, Ada and Ryland:
I pray daily that you will find unceasing joy in
“Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn
of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.
To him who loves us and has freed us from
our sins by his blood” (Rev. 1:5).

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Contents

Introduction: Back to Basics	1
1. The Gospel.....	9
2. The Scriptures	19
3. The Prayers	29
4. The Church.....	37
5. The Mission.....	47
Conclusion: Eyes on Jesus.....	57
Notes.....	63

Introduction: Back to Basics

Have you ever been stuck? Stuck in a car ride you don't want to be in? Stuck in a meeting while fighting to keep your eyes open? Maybe worse, have you ever been stuck in a crawlspace or other small, enclosed place?

In one hilarious scene from the sitcom *The Office*, Pam plays a prank on Dwight in which she gets a co-worker to switch the wiring on the elevator's "circus board" so that when Dwight presses certain buttons, the elevator does the exact opposite. The prank works at first as Dwight exclaims, "The elevator is disobeying us!" Soon, however, the prank backfires and the elevator loses power all together. Pam is trapped with Dwight as he cries, "We are stuck! We are stuck!"

In a much more serious way, have you ever been stuck in an area of your life that matters

Stuck?

most? Have you ever been stuck in your relationship with the Creator of your mind, body, and soul?

Being stuck is always challenging. But when you are spiritually stuck, struggling in your relationship with your Creator and Savior, it can be incredibly painful as well as hard to know how to move on from that place. I can empathize.

I grew up in a Christian home, coming to faith aged nine, and I now serve in Christian ministry. Yet I have experienced being stuck in my relationship with Christ many times. They have been seasons where I've felt trapped in by my sin, with no power to break out. I still remember one particularly hard but formative season full of sin, pain, repentance, and confession, where I felt like a spiritual leper, not knowing where to turn.

In other seasons my heart has been at times cold, dull, or weighed down. There have been times when living the Christian life did not seem as "fun" as living a non-Christian life, and the disciplines that are supposed to characterize us seemed dutiful rather than delightful. There have been times when I've driven to a Sunday

service full of apathy; joylessly trying to work up the willpower to attend—or worse lead—the worship service.

Perhaps for you, church attendance is becoming less frequent, reading the Bible feels lifeless, and prayer feels like a slog. Or maybe life has become so busy that Jesus is all but squeezed out. The thought of sitting down and praying sounds great, but right now the kids need a ride, dinner needs making, and work has spilled into the evening. Christian discipleship has been swallowed up in surviving this stage of life.

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In John Bunyan's classic book *The Pilgrim's Progress*, two friends, Christian and Hopeful, speak about a man they know called Turn-back. Together they chart the process of someone falling away from the faith. It begins in the mind and heart: Turn-back and his friends "draw off their thoughts all that they may from the remembrance of God, Death, and Judgment to come." This then affects their private actions such as prayer and curbing sin. Next they begin to "shun the company of lively and warm

Christians” and neglect church. As their friends change, hearts harden and sin is played with more openly until “being launched again into the gulf of misery, unless a Miracle of Grace prevent it, they everlastingly perish in their own deceivings.”¹

As you pick up this book, I don’t know where you are in your spiritual pilgrimage. I don’t know where you are in your relationship with Christ. Maybe you’re caught in a momentary rut and need a refresher in your discipleship. Perhaps you’re feeling desperate as I have in the past, knowing truth in your head but unable to see the light of Christ with your heart. Or maybe, like the character that Bunyan describes in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, you are backsliding in your faith. Being completely honest with yourself, you know if you don’t do something now, you might not be in church in a year’s time or still calling yourself a Christian in a decade.

Bunyan wrote his words to warn those in danger of giving up. And like this book, the warning is a call—not to despair, but an encouragement to be dissatisfied with stagnating and instead fan the flames of your love for Christ.

As I've come through my own times of spiritual slump, God has graciously given me a clearer understanding of how to possess and pursue joy in my relationship with the Lord. My aim in this book is to share some of this experience with you. Whatever your situation, my prayer is that this book will help you move from feeling stuck to flourishing in the faith once again.

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It's become part of American football folklore that at the start of each new season the Green Bay Packers Hall of Fame coach, Vince Lombardi, would gather his players around him, hold up the oval ball, and say, "Gentlemen, *this* is a football." He was making the point that if they were going to succeed that season, then they would have to start back with the fundamentals.

In our own spiritual lives, whether we are progressing, stagnating, or going backward, the basics are always the place to go to. One of the wonderful things about Scripture is that it shows us how believers across the ages have done this.

Luke, the author of Acts, tells us that the first church were people with “glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46). Doesn’t that sound great? So, how did they get to that place of joy? Luke describes it in this way:

“So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”
(Acts 2:41–47)

These seven verses provide the remedy we need. In the coming chapters I want to unpack Luke's cure in more detail but, for now, let me quickly highlight five things.

1. Those first believers "received his word," meaning Peter's gospel proclamation. In other words, they were saved and shaped by the *gospel*.
2. They were devoted to the apostles' teaching of the *Scriptures*.
3. They were committed to *prayer*.
4. They were dedicated "to the fellowship," that is, to the *church*.
5. They prioritized *mission* as they shared their faith with others. As Luke makes clear, the church grew as the Lord added to their number.

Gospel. Scriptures. Prayer. Church. Mission.

Each is a gift of grace from your Heavenly Father who wants to return you to a place of joy in him, even in the hardest of circumstances (see Hab. 3:17–19). Dear reader, let me encourage you, if you are feeling stuck or stagnant, to return to the basics as a way to fuel your soul in the same way.

The Gospel

So those who received his word were baptized ...

As I think back to some of the times I was stuck, my experience was certainly clouded by sin that led to hurt. Those twin giants left me feeling unloved and unlovable, by people and by God. Could I have told you what the gospel was at those times? Probably. But it was having very little impact on the state of my heart. I was stuck. The issue was that I had not yet learned how to apply the gospel to my life for becoming more Christlike.

Growing up, I had somehow confusedly thought that being a Christian meant believing the gospel and then moving on to live a moral life. I missed that being a Christian meant leaning on and learning and loving the gospel for a lifetime rather than it just being the gateway in. It took

me a long time to understand that the gospel is both the way in to the Christian faith and the way on in the faith. Over time I learned that the gospel is also the way out of being stuck.

As we go back to basics, we need to get clear in our minds what makes us a Christian. Really understanding the gospel is the first step to letting it transform your Christian life. Then, crucially, we need to fight to *really believe* the gospel not just with our minds but deep in our souls for our sanctification, or growth, in Christ.

So let's remind ourselves: What is the gospel message? At heart, it is a message of substitution.

In the Garden of Eden, humanity's parents willfully rebelled against their Creator and his Word. They were told by Satan that if their disobeyed God then they would become like God. Tragically, all of Adam and Eve's descendants (that's everyone, by the way) willfully walk in sin, too. In other words, Adam and Eve's sin plunged the whole world into a curse and three things (at least) were devastatingly broken as a result.

First, humanity's relationship with God: in the beginning Adam and Eve communed with God; after the Fall they hid from him.

Second, humanity's relationships with one another were broken: in Genesis 3 God makes it clear that from now on, Eve's "desire shall be contrary to your husband" (Gen. 3:16). The brokenness of human relationships descends so quickly that it's only a chapter later that Cain murders his own brother. Third, the creation itself is broken: as God makes clear, "cursed is the ground because of you" (Gen. 3:17).

This sin and brokenness invades our whole existence. No wonder work is hard and unsatisfying and relationships feel strained or distant. No wonder we struggle with our ego or lack of self-worth. Disappointment and hurt are ever present. Our hearts naturally veer us away from God and not toward him.

When feeling stuck, it's easy to fall into the trap of putting hope in a change of circumstances, thinking: "It'll be easier when ..." But the gospel tells us: It won't! Life will always throw us a challenge. Sin will always be there. This is one of the reasons you can't put off sorting out spiritual stagnation until you move out of home, or get a job, or the kids grow up, or you retire. If we just allow ourselves to drift for

the time being, our hearts will naturally grow colder, not more spiritually alive. We need to act, but thankfully we're not left to sort it out on our own.

Despite the damage caused by Adam and Eve's sin, in the very chapter describing their punishment, God makes a promise that one day he would send someone who would defeat Satan and fix what was broken (Gen. 3:15). Centuries later, a man from Nazareth comes along who lived, died, and rose again to reverse the curse—restoring humanity's relationship with God, drawing his people together, and showing he has power over the brokenness of creation.

How is it that Jesus undoes the curse of Genesis 3? By substitution. As the apostle Paul writes, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). In other words, Jesus deals with the curse by taking the thorns that come out of the ground on his head at the cross. Jesus provides a way for us to be made right with God; he deals with our sin and the final penalty of that sin—death—by coming back to life. Jesus did all that was necessary for our forgiveness, salvation,

adoption, and future glory.

If you have never believed this gospel message then you are not stuck, but lost. Today is the day to repent and turn from your sin, and put your faith in Christ alone. Know this: Jesus freely welcomes you. In Acts 2:41–47 Luke tells us that Christians are those who have believed the message of the gospel. Thousands turned from sin to God as Peter preached about Jesus' death and resurrection, and they immediately got baptized and formed the first church.

That is why the message is called the gospel—it is *good* news. Actually, it's more than that—it's the *best* news. If we are trusting Jesus, we will not face eternal judgment but are saved for a restored relationship with God. Moreover, he fills us with his Spirit to transform us.

Believe It (Head)

Perhaps the chapter so far has been familiar ground for you. You know all this. And you still feel totally stuck.

A good way out of a rut is to remind yourself again and again who you are in Christ and, therefore, how loved by God you really are. See

yourself the same way God sees you. He sees you *in* Christ, which means that he views you in the same way he views his beloved Son. Please believe this. You are not merely tolerated by God. You are loved by God. Even in your sin or spiritual apathy.

Why not stop reading for a moment and jot down a few words that describe how God feels about Jesus?

Now look again at your list: this is how the Father feels about you.

When you struggle to be impacted by the truths you know, be like the dad who comes to Jesus in Mark 9. His son was possessed by an unclean spirit and, as he struggles to have faith that Jesus can heal him, he prays, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). This prayer is powerful when you are stuck, stagnant, or doubting.

Love It (Heart)

The Maker of heaven and earth has set his affections on you and demonstrated it in the most glorious and visible way possible. Even though you were a rebel, he loved you with a saving love and sent his Son to die on a cross for you.

It's not enough to just believe this when you're stuck; you need to embrace it.

When your heart falters in its love of the gospel, do what you can to find verses, hymns, lyrics, and quotes that will help stoke your passion again to remind you of what God has done for you in Christ. Sometimes a familiar truth expressed in a poetic or unusual way can cause us to appreciate it afresh. At other times it's not something new, but something precious that can get past our jadedness. I like to recall hymns I learned as a child to fan my happiness in the Lord.

And it's not just the words. Music itself is a gift which can rekindle our souls, so find a playlist for when you shave or shower or straighten your hair each morning and allow the songs to prepare your heart for the day while you prepare your body.

Act on It (Hands)

The gospel does not just save sinners; it sanctifies saints. When we have lost joy in our spiritual walk, the very thought of fighting sin may sound oppressive, but it's sin that makes us

miserable, not holiness. Just ask Adam and Eve. Sin promises so much and delivers slavery. If we want to know true joy again, we need to apply the gospel to struggles with sin.

Growing up, my father used to give me and my brothers a very easy way to identify what is at the heart of our sin. He told us to consider the phrase, “I need Jesus + _____.” Whatever we fill that blank in with is an idol at the heart of our sin. And it does not matter if you fill it in with good things—health, a spouse, family, good job—or with sinful things—greed, lust, power. Just as Adam and Eve discovered, the idol will not deliver. Eventually it’ll disappoint us or become a tyrant over us. It sucks out life and replaces it with death. And we get caught in its trap.

I love the quote from the nineteenth-century preacher Thomas Chalmers, who said:

“There is not one of these transformations in which the heart is left without an object. Its desire for one particular object may be conquered; but as to its desire for having some one object or other, this is unconquerable ... The only way to dispossess the heart of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new one.”²

Just trying to “do better” is not the gospel way. It will not produce lasting and enduring joy either from our sin or our complacency. I guarantee that will result in feeling more stuck than ever. Instead, we must replace sin with even greater love for the Lord. We should dwell on Jesus, seeing his beauty, his patience, his compassion, his love. When I was at my lowest, I needed to know the truth of the gospel and feel the impact of God’s love. This was my turning point in fighting sin. Jesus came to mean more to me than any idol.

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As we move on in the next chapters to think about our need to hear from God, pray, commit to meeting with other Christians, and engage in mission, remember that we are in no way earning God’s favor through any of this. We pursue these things because he has saved us, not in order to be saved. In your struggles with spiritual apathy and duty-driven service, in your prayerlessness and your irregular church attendance, the Father looks at you and says, “my beloved child.” And just like the Father in the Parable of the Prodigal

Stuck?

Son, our Heavenly Father does not just walk to meet us with outstretched arms; he runs.