

Message: “Spiritual Sticking Points Part Two”, Week Two of “Is He Really Who He Says He Is? Series”, presented by Reverend Kristen Lowe on 03-12-2017 at Crossroads United Methodist Church, Waunakee, WI.

Last week we had the opportunity to join Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch on the desert road between Jerusalem and Gaza. Philip was called by Jesus to be a disciple in the Gospel of John. Although the Gospel doesn't get into much detail, we find out that Philip's belief is so strong, that no sooner had Jesus called him to follow him but then Philip immediately began telling others! Listen to his call story in John 1:43-46:

⁴³⁻⁴⁴The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. When he got there, he ran across Philip and said, “Come, follow me.”

⁴⁵⁻⁴⁶Immediately, Philip went and found Nathanael and told him, “We've found the One Moses wrote of in the Law, the One preached by the prophets. It's *Jesus*, Joseph's son, the one from Nazareth!” Nathanael said, “Nazareth? You've got to be kidding.”

But Philip said, “Hurry! Come, see for yourself!”

In Acts chapter 8 we find that Philip, once again excited about the opportunity God places before him. With complete trust and obedience, he hits the road.

Acts 8:26-38

²⁶Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” ³⁰So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” ³¹He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³²Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,

and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.

³³In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.”

³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” ³⁵Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” ³⁸He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip¹ baptized him.

May our faith and enthusiasm be like Philip's!

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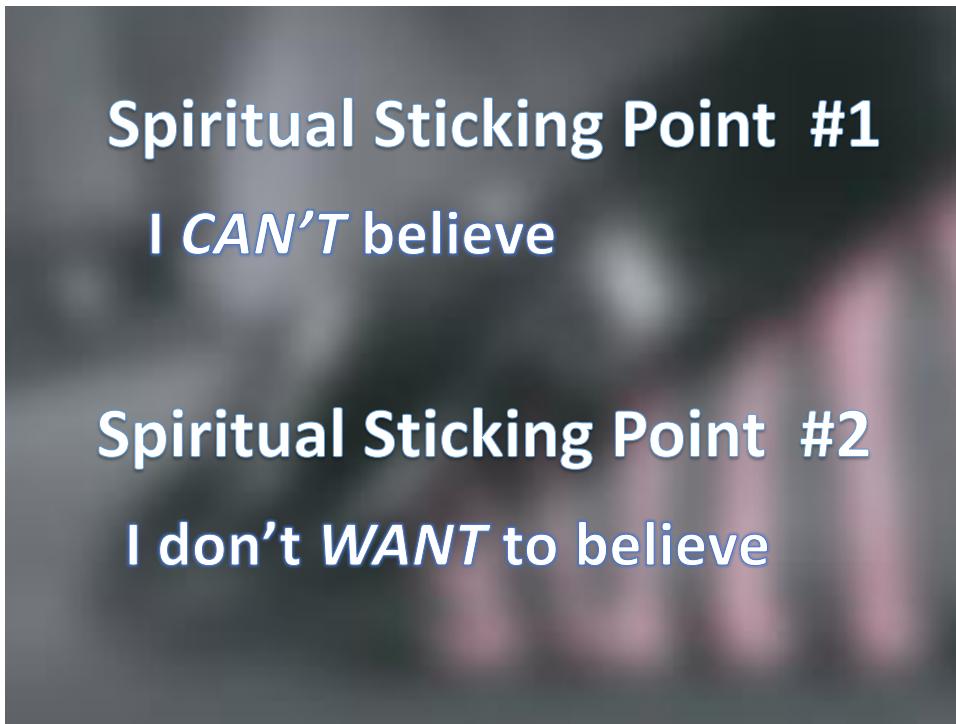
Is Jesus really who he says he is? As we move through Lent toward Easter, I am reminded of how many people growing up were discouraged from asking questions about their faith. They were taught that it was a sin to question God. We were supposed to simply believe.

There's a movie coming out next month called the Case for Christ. It's the true story of journalist and atheist Lee Strobel, who is trying to rescue his wife from her newfound Christianity. He begins a two-year in-depth study to disprove the divinity of Jesus Christ.

I'd like to show the video clip from last week where a very frustrated Strobel is sitting in the newsroom of the Chicago Tribune, trying to figure out what to do with all of the evidence he was uncovering that was consistently pointing him toward the truth of the Christian faith. Then, in the middle of his contemplative moment, Strobel's coworker Kenny London, the Tribune's religion editor, walks in and senses the situation, and how he might help.

[Movie clip: Case for Christ]

When we or people we know struggle to believe, it's because of spiritual sticking points. When this happens, we end up unable to move forward in our faith because we're stuck. Lee Strobel was stuck. The Ethiopian Eunuch was stuck. He wanted to believe, but he didn't know how to interpret the scriptures. He wanted to believe in something bigger. He wanted to understand but was at a sticking point.



Last week we talked about how some people “can't believe.” For others, the real issue is, “I don't want to believe.”

This week, I want to share the other two sticking points that most people struggle with and what to do about them.

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Spiritual Sticking Point #1

I *CAN'T* believe

Spiritual Sticking Point #2

I don't *WANT* to believe

Spiritual Sticking Point #3

I don't know *WHAT* to believe

For our friend the Ethiopian Eunuch, the sticking point was that he didn't know what to believe.

“The eunuch asked Philip, ‘Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?’

You can see how this passage would have been confusing.

So, Philip clarified what the Bible was teaching.

Today, people get confused because they hear all kinds of interpretations of the Bible. They see different denominations. They hear some people who take the Bible literally and some who say it's just a general moral guideline. They hear people using the bible to support contradictory positions.

So they throw up their hands and say, “I don't know what to believe. It seems like the meaning of the Bible changes according to who interprets it. So who is right?”

And you have to admit, some really whacked stuff has come from so called Christian experts and people of faith.

If that's your sticking point, it's important to know that the key to accurately understanding the Bible is the same as the key to understanding any communication—you must study to determine what the writer actually meant. Not what we want it to say; not to interpret it for our benefit with our biases—but to figure out what the writer intended to communicate in his setting and who the writer was communicating to.

This is important because sometimes we let what we want the Bible to say get in the way of what it's really saying. For example, let's look at this sentence:

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“Let’s eat Grandma.” It really changes when we add just a little comma and emphasize the sentence differently: “Let’s eat, Grandma.”

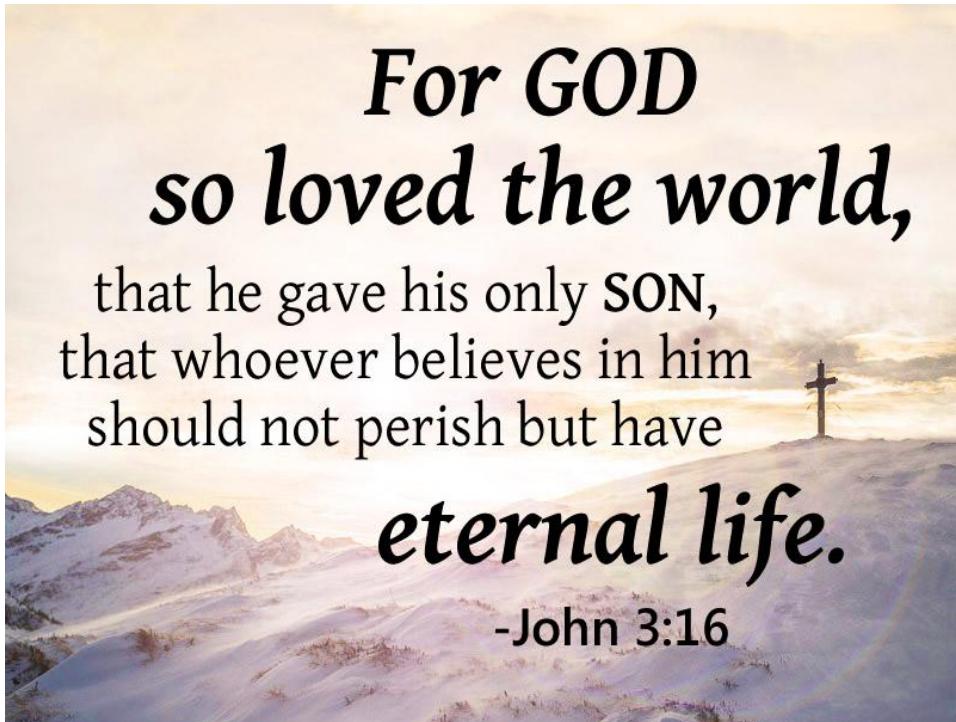
We need to know who the writer is speaking to and what the setting is.

We also learn that commas save lives.

See how our motives can radically color the way we interpret things? And people do that with the Bible to get around teachings they don’t agree with or don’t want to apply to their lives. Clear statements in the Bible suddenly become very murky when we’re looking for ways to avoid them. But the way to read the Bible is to ask, “What did the communicator intend for me to understand?”

Now, there are difficult sections of the Bible, and well-intentioned people can legitimately debate the finer points. But when it comes to the critical central message of what you and I need to know the most, there’s no ambiguity.

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You don't have to know everything about the Bible to know something. And that verse is clear about the central truth you need to know. There's no ambiguity or confusion about it.

Spiritual Sticking Point #1

I CAN'T believe

Spiritual Sticking Point #2

I don't WANT to believe

Spiritual Sticking Point #3

I don't know WHAT to believe

Spiritual Sticking Point #4

I do believe. Isn't that Enough?

And that brings us to the fourth spiritual sticking point: “I do believe; isn’t that enough?”

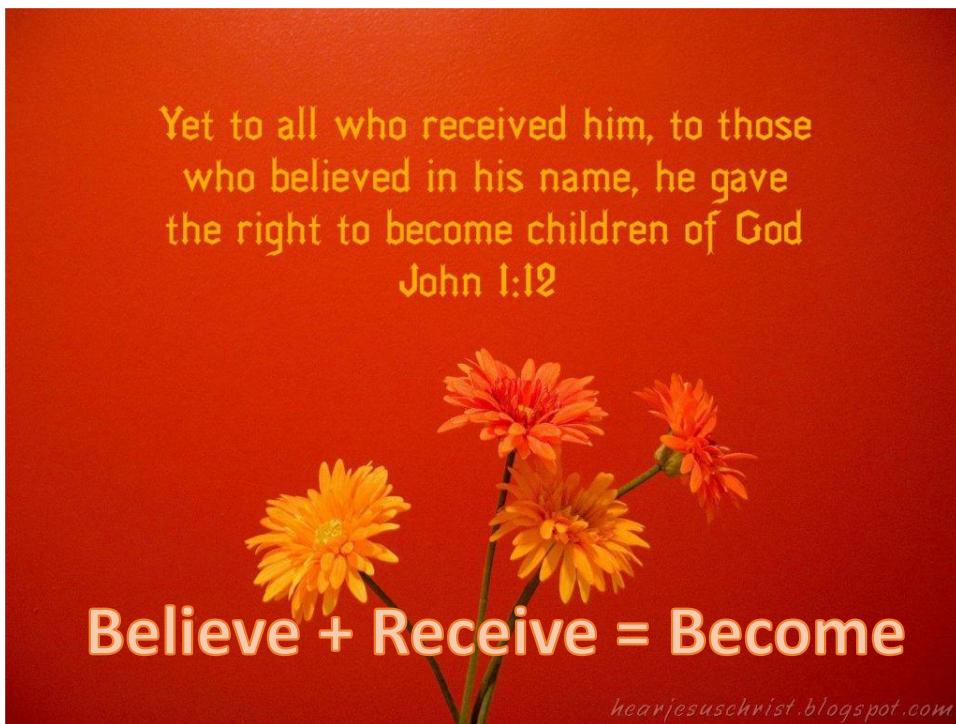
These people say, “I understand the gospel, and I believe it’s true. But I don’t feel God like other people do. When I pray I don’t really feel God’s presence. What am I doing wrong?”

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That's because merely agreeing with the gospel isn't enough. It's not enough to just understand. James 2:19 says, “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.”

It's not enough just to nod our heads in intellectual agreement. John 1:12 tells us, “As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.”

Believing is the first step, but we must also receive! Romans 6:23 says that eternal life is a free gift—but think about a Christmas gift. It doesn't become yours until you reach out and receive it. Otherwise, it sits unclaimed and unopened under the tree.



There's a simple spiritual equation that flows out of John 1:12: Believe + Receive = Become. We can't become true children of God without both elements—we must believe in him intellectually, and then we must receive his forgiveness and leadership personally.

That's what the Ethiopian eunuch did. He learned the meaning of the Scripture passage he was reading—he believed. But then he received the free gift of salvation by trusting in the promised Messiah, as demonstrated by his being baptized. The result? He became a child of God and was swept up in the joy of forgiveness and new life in Christ.

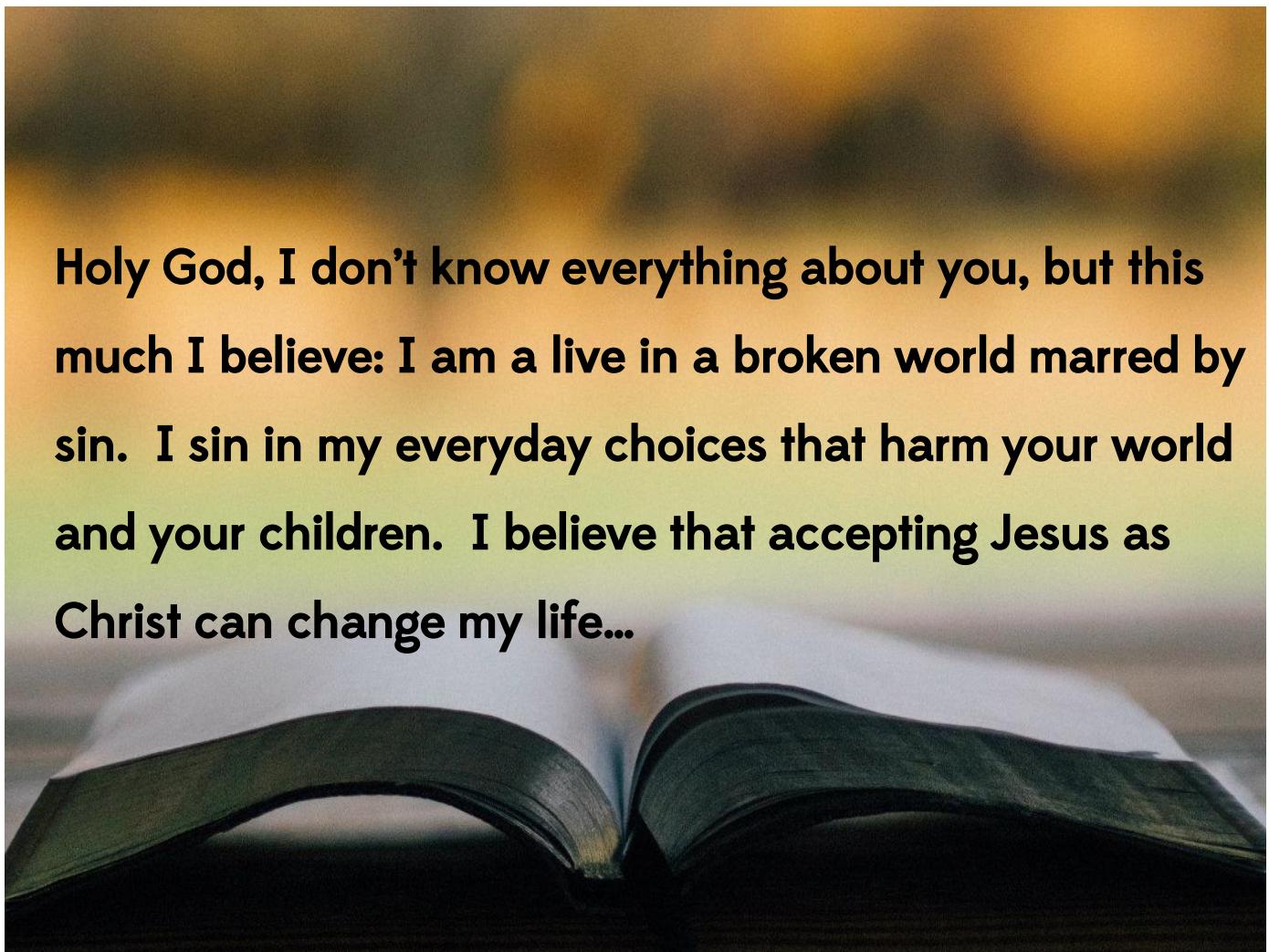
The story in Acts concludes with this: As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.

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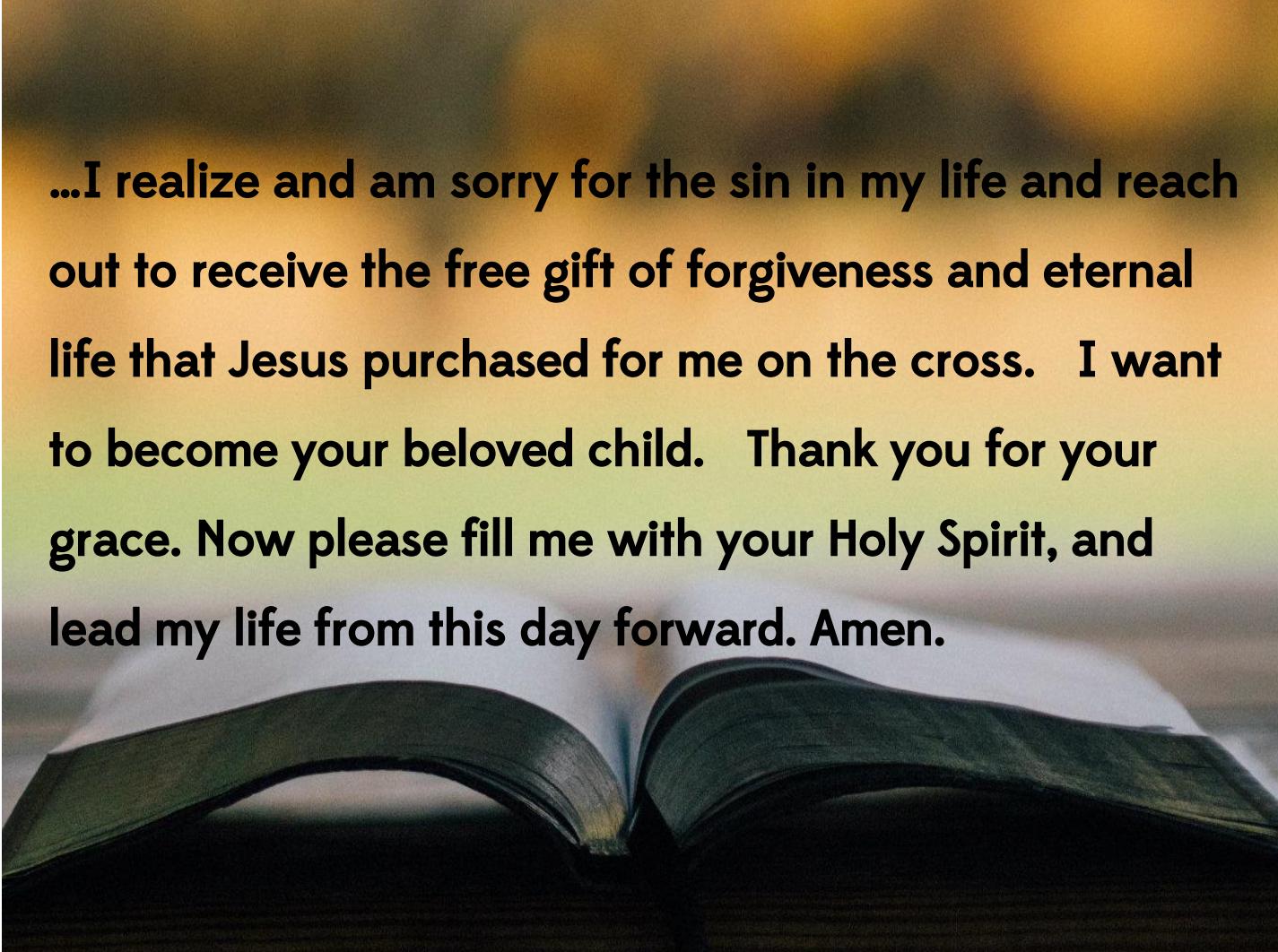
Today a couple accepted Christ on behalf of their child. Thankfully I did not suddenly disappear like Philip, but hopefully they will go on their way rejoicing in the declaration of their commitment to Christ. And all of us will go on our way rejoicing because Vincent has become our child to nurture and support on his faith journey.

Where are you on your journey of investigating the Case for Christ? What obstacles stand in your way? Now can be the time you get past your sticking points once and for all, if you believe the truth, receive Christ, and become a child of God. If you want to take that step, pray this with me now:

Holy God, I don't know everything about you, but this much I believe: I am a live in a broken world marred by sin. I sin in my everyday choices that harm your world and your children. I believe that accepting Jesus as Christ can change my life...



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...I realize and am sorry for the sin in my life and reach out to receive the free gift of forgiveness and eternal life that Jesus purchased for me on the cross. I want to become your beloved child. Thank you for your grace. Now please fill me with your Holy Spirit, and lead my life from this day forward. Amen.

If this was your prayer today. Congratulations. In the weeks ahead, I hope to continue to reveal some solid truths that led Lee Strobel to abandon his atheism and embrace Christ's divinity. And, I hope you will be blessed as we prove that Christ is really who he says he is. Amen!