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How to be a Christian (a refresher course)

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Psalm 27
Lent 2

I recently heard a podcast on mental toughness. James Clear, New York Times best-selling author of Atomic Habits describes a concept he has called, the two-minute rule. If you want to form a habit or change a habit, then focus on the first two minutes. When we think of forming habits, we shouldn't focus on the finish line but on getting to the starting line. He says to think of the first two minutes as the entrance ramp to a behavior. We need to figure out how to automate the beginning of the behavior. For example, if we want to write everyday then how do we automate the starting line – well maybe we go to the chair where we like to write, we take out the paper and a pen, and we light a candle or we silence our phones. There we have started. With the two-minute rule, we are supposed to start small – really small. People say they want to build the habit of running and so they think they should start by running for fifteen minutes. He says scale it down to the first two minutes. Automate the ritual of running by putting on your running shoes, stepping out your front door, and locking the door. If you can automate the beginning, then before you know it you will be going for a run and then next thing you know is you will become a runner. If you have initiated things, started the beginning of the activity, there is momentum and you have already signaled to your brain that it is going to be active and moving in the direction of that activity.

I started thinking about how the two-minute rule could apply to becoming a Christian. If the finish line of being a Christian is someone who talks about God to their friends, who enjoys being in worship, feels connected to God in prayer, rests on the Sabbath, celebrates the religious holidays, reads the Bible, fasts, gives alms, and serves the poor - well that list just sounds intimidating and overwhelming and best we not try so we can't say we failed, right? How about small steps in the right direction? How can we automate the first two minutes of each day to being a Christian and then see what happens for the rest of it?

The last two years have been hard on the Christian workforce as more and more have joined the WFH club, worship from home. More and more have joined the spiritual but not religious. More and more have joined the too I'm terrified / stressed out / angry club. Being a Christian just sounds exhausting. At school pick up on Monday, one of the other parents, who knows I'm a pastor announced excitedly, "I went to church on Sunday! First time in two years...it wasn't so bad." That sounds like something you'd say about going to the dentist or the dmv. I mean, usually, you would not admit to a pastor that you had not been to church in two years but this day and age it's a victory. I know it is hard to rebuild old muscles, to form new habits or get back into old ones, to intentionally change the direction things are going. But we need to: I fear the rise of secularism more than most things. I fear the rise of people who have no moral compass. I fear the church being slowly replaced by other pursuits. I fear Jesus being marginalized to other voices and influences.

I know there are people we have just lost to the pandemic – not to the dark side or to warmer zip codes but people who have fallen out of the habit of church and I fear, even of being Christian.

The American Psychological Association on Thursday published the results of its annual, “Stressed in America” poll. It notes that worries about inflation, the war in Ukraine, on top of the last two years of stressor upon stressor has pushed Americans to “unprecedented levels of stress.” 87% of those surveyed reported ‘significant levels of stress’. Lindsey McKernan, an associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Vanderbilt University said, “Americans were already in an overwhelmed and depleted place.” Add financial concerns and a horrific war that grows and threatens, and we are out of gas. The poll says parents and caregivers are particularly maxed out. The poll says lots of people are trying to eat and drink their ways to feeling better, but it just isn’t working. Never does, I’ve found.

What will work, what will help? Stressed out, maxed out, and in need of something. I’d like to offer Christianity but that is the finish line, and I can imagine it sounding too ambitious to the maxed out / stressed out clientele.

The author of Psalm 27 seems like he is stressed out himself. In verses 2 and 3 he talks about the state of his life, “Evildoers assail me to devour my flesh, an army encamps against me, war rises up.” The psalmist is living with human fears yet trying to find hope in the prospect of divine help. The psalmist is honest throughout this text about the tension between faith and fear. On one hand he proclaims God is his light and salvation and stronghold. He admits that God hides him and teaches him and leads him. But then the psalmist implores God to answer him, not to hide his face from him, not to turn away in anger, not to forsake or give up on him. There is a palpable tension in this text between fear and trust and between faith and doubt.

The author wants security from God and from his faith. And so, he begins with the two-minute rule and states one thing he believes. “The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?” It is a rhetorical question to himself. He says, “I believe God is my light and my salvation, so I don’t have to be afraid.” Okay, good start. Then he can go into the things he is struggling with, and the questions he has, and the hopes he has and then he concludes with this beautiful statement of faith. “I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!” The Psalmist shifted from someone who has his back against the wall to someone who is going to patiently wait and trust in God.

Wendell Berry has a poem called, *How to Be a Poet (to remind myself)*. This is where I stole the sermon title. It is composed of three paragraphs of advice on how to start a poem and none of it includes writing. It begins with these lines, “Make a place to sit down. Sit down. Be quiet. You must depend upon affection, reading, knowledge, skill – more of each than you have – inspiration, work, growing older, patience, for patience joins time to eternity.”

There is something about the audacity to start. Anything that seems hard takes some courage. Be that running, writing, or job hunting, or finding hope, or seeking forgiveness, or being Christian. We just must focus on the starting line. Given all that we have been through in the last two years if we can get ourselves to the starting line well that’s a victory! So, let’s say you want to be a Christian, you know the type the cheerful, hopeful, good kind of Christian. The one

who reaches out to people going through hard times, the one who remembers their colleagues' sick kids in their prayers, the one who signs up to help at the church punch bunch. The kind of Christian who reads the Bible in the morning, who gives joyfully to people and causes, the one who sees the best in situations and spreads kindness. You want to be a Christian. You have got to start small. Like put your church clothes on even if you don't make it out the door. Or open the bible and leave it on your desk. Or write the first verse of Psalm 27 on your bathroom mirror, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?"

It is okay to start small. We need to rehabilitate, we must mend our souls, we must relinquish the pain and the fear and the hurt of the last two years. We must return to people who have a model of the life of Jesus before them and strive to follow him. I am not so cynical to think we can't do it, but I am also not foolish enough to assume all's well in paradise and the church can just return to our normal ways. The church has lost sheep to find, and hearts to mend, and wounds to heal, and people to serve. We have lost two years of traction and we have gotten out of the habits of some of the things that took us years to build up.

It isn't going to happen overnight but with a little faith and the audacity to begin, we can be Christian. Thankfully God does not expect a polished product. God desires hearts like the psalmist who seek to live in the house of the Lord and behold the beauty of the Lord. God desires us to be open and striving and hopeful.

Lent is a good time to begin again. Two minutes. Begin your day with two minutes of prayer. Or two minutes of Bible reading. Or two minutes of focus on your heart and your soul. The Lord is our light and our salvation – we've got nothing to lose.

Two minutes. It has been two years. Come on – meet me at the starting line. Amen.