

I am twenty-seven years old and live in Memphis, Tennessee, USA. My wife Emily and I have a six-month-old boy named Noah. We are members of an Evangelical Presbyterian congregation.

I was raised as a Christian in a family that took the faith seriously. I went to a Christian private school until I was fourteen. At home I was taught to read the Bible daily. I enjoyed reading it – especially the Old Testament books of Proverbs and Psalms – and read it in its entirety before the age of thirteen. My sister and I were raised on Bible stories, right behaviour, and respect for our parents and others. More than that, we were encouraged to seek God on our own. My parents held, as I do now, that beliefs must be heartfelt. A relationship with God is personal and must be freely entered into. Although instruction and example guided me in my formative years, my own public profession of faith and a personal prayer of surrender, forgiveness, and acceptance seemed to demarcate the beginning of my individual life of faith. It was then, and remains today, a life I base on the fact that God is perfect, I'm not, and Jesus makes up that infinite difference.

I feel confident in my personal relationship with Jesus, who I believe to be Lord and God, and I am continually trying to bring every element of my life under God's authority. This means, with the help of God's Spirit, continually working to understand the Bible and live by its principles, bringing my desires in line with God's guidelines, which I believe are revealed in the Bible. My aim is to live a life of gratitude for the gracious love God has shown me, living in the peace and joy that comes from knowing I am loved and accepted by my maker. I've sometimes tried to live by ideas that run contrary to what I believe the Bible teaches and, frankly, have wound up hurting myself and others.

My practice of faith is not very ceremonial or ritualistic. For me, faith is more about believing and practicing what the Bible teaches. I believe Christianity is about a relationship with Jesus as a personal saviour, lord, and friend. One of my guiding principles is Jesus' commandment to love others in the same way that he has loved us. For example, after college I spent four years teaching and mentoring inner city youths.

My wife and I currently live with her parents so that she can help care for her mother, who is paralysed. These experiences have taught how difficult such love and commitment can be. Following Jesus has also helped me to respect others, learn from them, and seek ways to increase their health and well-being.

Jesus' example of love has led my wife and me to tithe our earnings, sharing ten per cent of our income every month with our church and others. That said, we understand ten per cent to be a benchmark, and seek to give more. For example, having won some money on a game show, we felt strongly that at least half of it should be donated to a relief fund. Loving others means making sure that whatever I do in life – including my occupation and all other activities – I do for God's glory and the benefit of others, not primarily for my own gain, reputation, or personal satisfaction. Because God loves the whole world, and because a person's greatest good is found in a relationship with Jesus, I feel obliged and privileged to share Jesus with believers and unbelievers, always being sensitive to the needs and rights of others.



The fact that my wife and I were both Christians was of paramount importance to us in our decision to marry, and also very important to our families. Having said that, the marriage was not arranged. Our parents were not involved in the decision-making process. However, I did formally ask my wife's father for her hand in marriage. Following this, we received the blessing and encouragement of both our families. My wife and I take our relationship of love to each other and to God seriously. We pray together frequently, discuss the Bible, and talk honestly as partners on a shared journey, never making big decisions without first seeking God's will.

One of the most important parts of being a follower of Jesus is living in community with other Christians. I feel enormously privileged and grateful to be part of the large, global Christian family – imperfect, to be sure, but a real family nonetheless. The main gathering of our local branch is the church service on Sunday morning, which always includes thanksgiving for what God has done, prayers of petition and confession, hymns of worship, statements of belief about God and salvation, and a talk/sermon on a passage from the Bible.

Sunday is a special day to us, when we celebrate a day of rest and worship. It is the Lord's Day, a day of the week that reminds us of Jesus' resurrection. Other important celebrations are Christmas, when we celebrate the event of God becoming human in the person of Jesus, and Easter, when we remember Jesus' death on a cross for sinners and his subsequent victory over death and evil in his resurrection from the dead.

Since our church is quite large, we break down into groups for social and educational purposes, meeting on Sundays and during the week. Our group consists of newly-married couples, and within this group there are smaller 'mentor groups' which meet for intimate conversation, prayer, and Bible study. Whereas the larger groups are led by pastors, the smaller group is led by an older couple with more wisdom and experience in life than we possess. These groups and leaders are important to us. I always pray before making important decisions, and seek counsel from my group leaders, pastors, and peers.

Finally, the heart of my religion and religious experience can be summed up in the word 'love'. I celebrate the love God has for me and others, and I love God in return. My deep desire is that my love for Jesus and his love for me and others will be evident in my life in all places and at all times.

JASON HOOD

