SPIRITUAL RUTS

ten principles to help you get out and reconnect with **JESUS**

ARE YOU STUCK IN A SPIRITUAL RUT?

Healthy things grow, but not at a constant pace. There are good seasons of vibrant growth and challenging seasons of discouragement. These darker, drier seasons are extended when we're stuck in a spiritual rut.

The first step toward life in the rut is guilt. And guilt is not just ugly—it's powerful. It picks us up and locks us in a cage. In the rut, we see little more than our mistakes. Freedom becomes a distant memory. After a while, the un-confessed guilt leads to something worse.

Indifference.

Indifference means we stop caring about what's right and wrong. Once apathy sets in, we no longer look to serve God. Instead, we are more concerned with rationalizing our choices and inventing new entitlements.

In the spiritual life, guilt is disastrous and indifference is catastrophic.

Life in the rut is bleak, a spiritual wasteland. We settle for less than God's best for us. We stop choosing joy. Pursing our purpose is exchanged with playing the Christian game—propping up a façade to look "good" to others.

The rut is a safe place. There is little risk because we act out of our comfortable self-strength rather than Jesus-dependent faith.

On this side of heaven, we are broken and imperfect. The Bible calls this sin, which literally means to miss the mark. We fall short of our personal standards, let alone, God's standards. We disobey God, hurt others, and we even hurt ourselves. Guilt is unavoidable, but it doesn't have to take up permanent residency in our hearts.

If we do not return to God, temptation will continue its work in the shadow of our shame. Without confession, our spiritual rut becomes a stranglehold, choking out all life.

There is hope! There is always hope, no matter how deep the rut we find ourselves in. God's love for us is unconditional, unavoidable, and unending. His Son, Jesus, defeated the power of death and sin so that we might have life—real and abundant life.

In this devotional, you will explore ten biblical principles that will help you climb out of the rut—and avoid them in the future.

Praying for your growth,

Matt McGill

OVERVIEW

GIVE YOUR BEST TO GOD

FIRST THINGS ALWAYS

GET RID OF THE GUILT

REJECT THE RITUALS

DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT

OPEN YOUR MOUTH, OPEN YOUR EYES

BE DILIGENT WITHOUT TRYING TO DO IT ALL

STOP MEASURING GOD'S LOVE

REALIZE YOU'RE NOT ALONE

POSITION ISN'T PROGRESS

the first principle

GIVE YOUR BEST TO GOD

Come now, let us reason together... (Isaiah 1:18)

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. (Mark 1:35)

The Creator of the universe invites us to spend time with him. He is without limits in every way we can imagine. He doesn't need anything from anyone. However, because of his love, he calls us into a relationship with him. When I remember this essential and elementary truth, I'm amazed and shocked and floored and humbled.

Time with God is an appointment worth keeping.

If you were going to a job interview, you'd show up prepared. You wouldn't be tired, unfocused, or easily distracted. You'd be fully ready and make sure you weren't interrupted. You definitely wouldn't rush the interview or hope it ended.

Time with God ought to have the same kind of priority.

Getting out of the rut begins with a mind shift: if God is ranked number one in our lives, then time with God is one of the most important things we can do. God deserves our best, not our leftovers.

For your personal devotions, pick a consistent time where you will be (relativity) distraction free. Jesus went off to a solitary place so he could spend time with his Father without the distraction of the crowds.

When you show up to church on the weekends or to your small group during the week, do what it takes to show up ready. Make sure your heart is positioned to give thanks to God and hear him speak.

When are you at your best? What hurdles do you have to overcome in order to be ready to worship with other believers?

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the second principle

FIRST THINGS ALWAYS

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.

(Revelation 2:2-5)

The church in Ephesus was filled with survivors who didn't tolerate moral bankruptcy or fake claims of leadership. They endured hardship and persecution; they rejected wicked people and false teaching. Even with these great qualities, they had fallen from great heights and landed directly in a rut.

They had forgotten their spiritual roots.

Remember the joy and excitement you had when you began taking God seriously? What about that feeling of anticipation and expectation you felt the moments before going to church or spending personal time with God?

When you are stuck in the rut, it's not enough to say, "I WANT THAT FEELING BACK!"

We must rise up and return to our first loves, to the things we did in the beginning of our faith. We must repent, admitting our pride and returning to God. True repentance is never easy because it means sacrificing our ego.

When I first became a Christian, I spent a lot of time reading the Bible, making tons of notes and writing out my questions. I journaled regularly because I didn't want to miss anything God might be teaching me. Writing is one important way I explore what God was doing in my life.

As I grew up in my faith, there were times that I neglected these "first things." In my arrogance, I'd consider them too "basic" because I had advanced beyond these baby steps. I'm ashamed to admit it, but there were times I would skip over a well-known passage in scripture because I falsely believed I didn't need it any more.

Nothing could be further from the truth! Leaving behind your personal "first things" is a sure way to remain stuck in a spiritual rut.

What were those first things you loved to do? What would it take to live every day as if it were your first day in the faith? Rediscover the "first things" you did to grow, and pursue them with all of your heart.

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the third principle

GET RID OF THE GUILT

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. (Philippians 3:12-15)

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23-24)

You can't get out of the rut if you keep holding on to your guilt.

It's a weight you can't carry if you expect to run the race God has set before you. Guilt has a place in our lives: it ought to be a warning, like the "check engine" light on your dashboard. You see the light and you get the car fixed....or you ignore it an have even bigger problems later.

Guilt is also like those shock paddles the doctor uses to get a heart beating again. You can't live with that constant shock going through your nervous system.

When we feel convicted for something we've done (or not done), the Holy Spirit is working in our lives to draw us back to Jesus. When we stumble, we ought to commit to "failing forward" by seeking God's forgiveness in humility.

When we confess our imperfections to God, he forgives us. We ought to follow his example and forgive ourselves! Accepting God's forgiveness is different from entitlement because we're driven further into God's presence and a life of obedience. Entitlement feeds our self-interests and deepens the chasm between God and us.

Here's a hard truth: confession to God is often followed by reconciliation with others. There is an undeniable connection between our vertical connection with God and our horizontal connections with others. When we have offended, hurt, or attacked another person, we need to make amends to experience God's presence in the way that he commands us.

What is one thing you need to confess to God?

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the fourth principle

REJECT THE RITUALS

So then, the word of the LORD to them will become: Do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule; a little here, a little there--so that they will go and fall backward, be injured and snared and captured. (Isaiah 28:13)

Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them. (Matthew 6:1)

Spiritual growth isn't automatic. It can't happen without action on our part. We must be disciplined and do the things that draw us closer to God. The athlete must practice to win, the soldier must train to prevail, and the farmer must plant to harvest. Spiritual disciplines (prayer, studying the Bible, hearing God's Word be taught, fasting, giving back to God, etc.) are essential if we want to grow.

However, growing spiritually can't be reduced to a checklist. It's not enough to simply do the right things, we have to do them out of an authentic love for God. If we don't love God, we're simply going through the motions of meaningless obligation.

If we are spending time with God ONLY because we want to be able to tell others, we miss the whole point. Jesus called this hypocrisy. Lacking integrity leads to a critical heart that judges others. When I focus on their problems I can ignore my own. "Going through the motions" isn't a trajectory that'll get you out of the rut. You may impress others, but you won't impress God.

This may sound radical: when you don't "feel" like doing your spiritual disciplines (prayer, reading scripture, etc.), don't do them. You run the risk of ritualizing your faith when you act out of an unhealthy obligation.

This is a difficult principle to apply, so here's what it looks like in my life (it will be different for you!): If I don't feel like going to church, I don't. If I don't feel like having a personal quiet time, I skip it. This principle can be taken too far. For me, I've created a boundary: I won't skip a spiritual habit more than 2 or 3 times. After that, if I don't feel like doing something to grow spiritually, I do it anyhow because there's a good chance my feelings need to be changed by my actions.

Where is ritual and obligation showing up in your life? What can you do to restore an authentic love for God?

the fifth principle

DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT

No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins. (Mark 2:21-22)

There are times that the rut isn't very deep, and we only need to make a minor change to get our spiritual life back on track. Is it time to do something new? Everyone needs a spiritual growth game plan that is personal. And that plan ought to have some variety.

People approach structure and spontaneity differently...so I leave it to you to figure out how much planning and how much variety you need. Just don't forget you need both. If you're in a rut, go for what you're currently lacking. If you lack structure, add some. If you have lack variety, do something different.

Here are a few different options to give you some ideas:

>> **JOURNALING** – Making the time to write down your thoughts has TREMENDOUS power to help you grow. The words are never good enough to describe what you're thinking and feeling, but they help make your mental life more specific and concrete.

- Write about a meaningful passage or verse...explore it in-depth
- Write about your life, examining your deeds, words, and thoughts
- Write out your prayers, express your thankfulness and ask God to help others in need
- Write out major life lessons and reread them periodically to remember what God has taught you in the past

>> **REFLECTION** – Staying focused for an extended time (meditation) is difficult for most of us, but the benefits make it worth it. What we think about determines who we are (Romans 12:1-2) and how we act.

- Think about a single verse or phrase, mull it over to consider all that it means for your life.
- Memorize a scripture that is especially meaningful and personal.

>> **PRAYER** – Every relationship is improved by talking, and prayer is just talking and listening to God.

- Stretch your prayer life and set an attainable time goal that is a little longer than what is normal for you.
- Pray out loud: this may feel a little awkward (specially if you are in line at Starbucks) but saying the words can help create a deeper focus.
- Say nothing, just listen. This is tough, it's hard to "keep yer mouth shut."
- Confess your guilt, forgiveness is ESSENTIAL to growing spiritually, and God wants us to ask him specifically for grace.
- Kneel while you pray, approaching God in physical humility can create spiritual humility.
- Sing a favorite praise song—God loves your voice!

>> **READING** – God's Word is the best way to learn about him and who he's made us to become.

- Read a large portion of Scripture (two chapters or more) to get general ideas and thought flow
- Read a small portion of scripture and carefully digest each verse
- Occasionally make the time to read an entire book of scripture
- Read a devotional book
- Do deeper study and read some Biblical study reference materials

Location is important! It's good to have a consistent place where you can easily retreat to be with God and free from distractions. It's also good to have some special places (like a beach or a park) where you can enjoy God's creation.

Do you feel like you need more structure or less? What is one thing you could try differently for the next three weeks?

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the sixth principle

OPEN YOUR MOUTH, OPEN YOUR EYES

When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees... (Deuteronomy 8:10-11)

Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them. (Deuteronomy 4:9)

We can get used to just about anything, especially good things. We are creatures of comfort and put great effort into searching for it and planting deep roots. We don't just have comfort zones, they are more like comfort castles.

God provides. That's actually one of his names in the Bible. When we trust in God, he gives us what we need. The more we grow in our faith, the more we surrender to God, the more he provides for our needs.

There is a great danger for everyone who is spiritually mature: the subtle shift from ASSUMING God will provide to PRESUMING he will bless us because we deserve it.

One sure sign that we are in this rut is a comfortable life. We can't remember the last time we stepped out in faith and risked something for Jesus.

The antidote is two-fold: We must open our mouths to praise God for all of the good things he has provided. We must also open our eyes to closely watch the condition of our hearts.

When we thank God for what he's done in the past, we are remembering him in the present and building our faith for him to act in the future.

Changes in the heart come slowly, we must watch diligently so that we can make the necessary small changed. Slight course corrections are better than cleaning up a shipwreck.

What are ten things you can thank God for? What does the purity of your heart look like?

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the seventh principle

BE DILIGENT WITHOUT TRYING TO DO IT ALL

...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. Philippians 2:12-13

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last. John 15:16

Growing spiritually is a lot like water skiing.

Water skiing requires two essential elements: the boat and the skier. The boat's power cuts through the water, moving thousands of gallons every moment. The skier's power in his legs keeps him standing.

Of course, the skier's power is far weaker than the boat. But, it takes more than a boat to make skiing happen. Both must work together, closely coordinated, to make a successful ski run.

Spiritual growth is a lot like skiing. Our power works in concert with God's power. Of course, there is no comparison between our power and God's power! We work out our salvation as God works in us.

When we fail to maintain the balance between our part and God's part, we fall into a spiritual rut.

On one hand, we lose balance when we lack diligence and discipline... "trusting" God too much by doing nothing. The couch potato Christian sits back, feet comfortably propped up, carefully doing nothing so that "God can work."

On the other hand, we work too hard, and fail to trust God's power. We rush ahead of what God is doing and wonder why he isn't present in our lives.

It's possible to be too "surrendered" or too "diligent." We can climb out of either rut by remembering that God chose us long before we ever chose him. He loves us more than we love ourselves. It's his lead we must follow: being diligent without (trying) to do it all on our own.

When it comes to your spiritual life, are you trying too much or not enough?

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the eighth principle

STOP MEASURING GOD'S LOVE

But For great is your love, reaching to the heavens; your faithfulness reaches to the skies. Psalm 57:10, 108:4

because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. Ephesians 2:4-5

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge. Ephesians 3:17-19

He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. Philippians 1:6

Have you forgotten how much God loves you? We'll never get out of the rut without a clear view of his boundless grace. When we forget God's love:

- guilt lingers
- joy is fleeting
- compassion shrinks
- pain grows
- purpose is forgotten
- · fears become the focus

God's love is beyond our understanding, greater than the heavens. His love gives us new life through his son Jesus. His love can be known, but never fully understood. God's love will keep working in our lives until the end of time.

This is amazing love. It meets our every need. It is unconditional, unending, and inescapable.

At some point, we all wonder: Do I really matter?

I don't know much about economics, but a teacher once told me that a thing is worth whatever a person is willing to pay. God paid the highest possible price: the life of his Son, Jesus. We matter. We matter very much.

Human love is always conditional, temporary and unstable. God's love is dependable, he is faithful and will never stop loving us.

What does Gods love mean for you personally?

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the ninth principle

REALIZE YOU'RE NOT ALONE

What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, "Look! This is something new"? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time. (Ecclesiastes 1:9-10)

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear... he will also provide a way out... (1 Corinthians 10:13)

Since the beginning, God's people have gone through spiritual ruts, times of dryness and distance from God. While the rut may be new to you, it's not new for God. He knows how to meet you in the dry places and draw you closer to him. Every mature believer you know has experienced—and overcame—their spiritual ruts.

In the rut, we're fed a constant diet of lies, and each one is crafted carefully to separate us from other believers:

- "This doesn't happen to others..."
- "If I was a real Christian, I wouldn't be struggling this much..."
- "No one else can understand what's happening to me..."
- "There is no way out, this will never end..."

With each lie, we withdraw from community because our insecurities multiple. We put up superficial masks, and our loneliness only increases.

You are not alone! There is great comfort here, and it's waiting to be found. Take heart! You can, with God's help, climb out of the rut. No problem you face will ever be too big for you to handle together with God.

If this is your spiritual rut, who is one person you can reach out to and share about what's going on in your life?

MY RESPONSE					

the tenth principle

POSITION ISN'T PROGRESS

Oh, don't worry; I wouldn't dare say that I am as wonderful as these other men who tell you how important they are! But they are only comparing themselves with each other, and measuring themselves by themselves. What foolishness!

(2 Corinthians 10:12, The Message)

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

(Philippians 2:3–4)

When we compare our spiritual "position" with someone who isn't as mature, we can think we're growing spiritually even when we aren't.

Comparison typically leads to trouble. If you see the other person as less mature, you become puffed up with pride. If you see the other as more mature, you can become discouraged.

Both pride and discouragement end up in the same place: a faith that's stuck in a rut.

There will always be people who are spiritually "above" you and "below" you. This shouldn't affect our attitude about our own spiritual progress. Humility is the better choice, and humility always considers the needs of others.

We are to always consider others better than ourselvesno matter what (see Philippians 2:3).

Progress is more important than position in comparison to others. It doesn't matter how far you've run, just make sure you keep running.

Are you playing the comparison game? How has this impacted your faith?

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