

A Walk Thru
FAITH

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THE POWER OF BELIEVING



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Walk Thru the Bible



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Introduction

It helps us understand and causes us to be commended.

It makes us heirs of righteousness, leads us where we need to go, enables us to receive the miracles of God, and gives us a lasting legacy.

It blesses us, causes us to worship, and determines our identity.

It makes us unafraid and enables us to persevere.

It parts the seas and brings down walls.

It preserves us from judgment.

It enables us to conquer kingdoms, administer justice, shut the mouths of lions, quench the fury of flames, and escape the edge of the sword.

It turns our weaknesses to strength and gives us great victories.

It's as powerful as a resurrection and stronger than pain and death.

What is this mysterious substance? Faith. According to the writer of Hebrews, it can do all of the above and more. We're told in other parts of Scripture that faith can move mountains, silence storms, and open blind eyes. Faith is powerful stuff.

It's God who is powerful, of course, not faith itself. Just believing in something or someone isn't enough; people can have faith in the wrong person or idea and find their faith woefully inadequate. The object of our faith is crucial, and only God is worthy. But God chooses to relate to us primarily on the

basis of what we believe. For some strange reason, this is his condition for dealing with the human race. Without faith, we're thoroughly confined to the futility of life on a fallen planet. With it . . . well, see above. Faith in God taps into his wisdom, power, and love—all of his resources. It invites his intervention in our lives. It connects us to him in ways we can hardly understand.

That's why the Bible is so emphatic about what we believe. It contains well over six hundred references to "faith," "belief," and "trust." God has spoken a multitude of words to us, but they become applicable to our lives only when we believe them. Many of the great truths of Scripture are majestic, powerful, profound—and absolutely ineffective if we don't accept them by faith. As the writer of Hebrews emphasizes, "anyone who comes to [God] must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Heb. 11:6). Faith is an absolute necessity for anyone who wants to know God.

It's also an absolute necessity for anyone who wants to experience God's blessings. Those who believed in Jesus during his earthly ministry received the benefits of his love and power—forgiveness and healing, for example—but those who didn't miss out. The promises of Scripture are astounding in their scope, but they are available only to those who accept them by faith. Faith in God and his words seems to function as an invitation for him to step into our lives. In his mercy, he does.

Faith is often contrasted with reason, feelings, and doubt, as though it were the antithesis of all these challengers. But faith is not opposed to reason, feelings, and doubt. Although faith

extends beyond reason, it isn't unreasonable; though it isn't based on feelings, it certainly doesn't ignore them; and while it overcomes doubts, it isn't blind to them. On the other hand, there are some true enemies of faith: willful unbelief (different than doubt), fear, and mistrust. Scripture repeatedly portrays these attitudes as faith's opposition. The heart that seeks God must overcome them in order to believe.

The Bible speaks of faith in numerous situations and in different forms. On one hand, general faith is an attitude of trust that God is good, sovereign, and working on behalf of his people. This kind of faith is the foundation for our lives, the demeanor with which we approach our challenges and decisions in life on a daily basis. On the other hand, specific faith focuses in on a particular promise or truth and applies it to a particular situation. While general faith can be described as believing in who God is, specific faith is usually a matter of believing that he will do something he has said he will do. Both are integral parts of the Christian life—and both are necessary for us to relate to God the way he wants us to.

How to Use This Guide

The discussion guides in this series are intended to create a link between past and present, between the cultural and historical context of the Bible and real life as we experience it today. By putting ourselves as closely into biblical situations as possible, we can begin to understand how God interacted with his people in the past and, therefore, how he interacts with us today. The information in this book makes ancient Scripture relevant to twenty-first-century life as God means for us to live it.

The questions in this book are geared to do what a discussion guide should do: provoke discussion. You won't see obvious "right" answers to most of these questions. That's because biblical characters had to wrestle with deep spiritual issues and didn't have easy, black-and-white answers handed to them. They discovered God's will as he led them and revealed himself to them—the same process we go through today, though we have the added help of their experiences to inform us. Biblical characters experienced God in complex situations, and so do we. By portraying those situations realistically, we learn how to apply the Bible to our own lives. One of the best ways to do that is through in-depth discussion with other believers.

The discussion questions within each session are designed to elicit every participant's input, regardless of his or her level of preparation. Obviously, the more group members prepare by reading the biblical text and the background information in the study guide, the more they will get out of it. But even in busy weeks that afford no preparation time, everyone will be able to participate in a meaningful way.

The discussion questions also allow your group quite a bit of latitude. Some groups prefer to briefly discuss the questions in order to cover as many as possible, while others focus on only one or two of them in order to have more in-depth conversations. Since this study is designed for flexibility, feel free to adapt it according to the personality and needs of your group.

Each session ends with a hypothetical situation that relates to the passage of the week. Discussion questions are provided, but group members may also want to consider role-playing the scenario or setting up a two-team debate over one or two of the questions. These exercises often cultivate insights that wouldn't come out of a typical discussion.

Regardless of how you use this material, the biblical text will always be the ultimate authority. Your discussions may take you to many places and cover many issues, but they will have the greatest impact when they begin and end with God's Word itself. And never forget that the Spirit who inspired the Word is in on the discussion too. May he guide it—and you—wherever he wishes.

The Currency of the Kingdom

It was supposed to be a simple reconnaissance mission, a preview of good things to come. The team would walk through the region making observations about the cities, the people, the layout of the land, and the land's produce. The objective? To bring back information that would be helpful in developing Israel's strategy for conquering Canaan. Whether or not to take the land wasn't even on the table for discussion. After all, God had promised it. That was a given. No, the question was how to go about it. And for that, more information was needed.

But the twelve-member team didn't see it that way. Well, *most* of them didn't see it that way. When they saw how fortified the cities were and how intimidating the people were, they began to question the entire agenda. Sure, the land was fruitful and enticing, but its residents were rather large, militarily strong, and plentiful. Taking this land wouldn't be a piece of cake. In fact, it could get very messy or even humiliating.

So ten of the spies came back with fear in their eyes and a negative report on their tongues. They advised against any further advances into the territory. The other two spies reminded the people that the Promised Land was, in fact, the *promised* land. Yes, the inhabitants were large, powerful, and numerous, but God was bigger and he had already foretold the

outcome. If he was fighting on their side, they could defeat anyone, no matter how intimidating. Visible circumstances didn't matter, and neither did human reasoning; the only issue was which side God was on. And God had promised to be on Israel's side.

Sadly, the masses believed the negative report and began to despair. The ten spies seemed more sensible, realistic, and even wise. Despair led to complaining, complaining led to protest, and protest almost led to a coup that would have left Moses dead on the desert floor while God's people wandered in limbo, perhaps even back to Egypt.

Something strange happened to the promise after that episode. It became null and void for those who did not believe in it. Apparently the promise had been conditional on something called faith. Those who believed God could and would do what he said found his promise to be true. Those who didn't believe found his promise to be frustratingly irrelevant to them.

Most of God's promises are like that, much to our dismay. We would prefer for a promise from God to work its way out as a fatalistic destiny, inviolable once it is spoken. But God usually doesn't work that way. He promises salvation—but only to those who believe. He promises to cleanse us of our sins and impart righteousness into our lives—but only to those who believe. He promises to answer prayer—but only to those who believe. He promises miracles of various kinds in various seasons—but only to those who believe. It's true that God showers many of his blessings on both the righteous and the unrighteous; we say things like rain and food and familial love are evidence of his "common grace." But many aspects of

God's grace don't function that way at all. Whether we like it or not, faith is usually the condition for receiving things from God. It's the currency of his kingdom.

Why does God choose to relate to us on the basis of our faith? Perhaps because it's a demonstration of trust in who he is, the kind of attitude that can come only in the context of a meaningful relationship. Anyone can base his or her life on what is plainly visible, but trust in an invisible God develops over time and through experience—a dynamic foreign to those who don't have a heart for God in the first place. So in some ways, faith separates those who love God from those who don't. Only those who want to experience relationship with God will be able to have the kind of faith that pleases him.

Regardless of his reasons for insisting on faith, however, one thing is clear: it's vital. Scripture is full of it, from the call of Abraham through the second coming of Jesus. Those who come to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. That's how the kingdom functions. Faith is an identifying mark of those who are truly his.

“Surprising” Unbelief: Mark 4:35–41; 9:14–24

Jesus's interaction with his disciples gives us a glimpse into the kind of faith he expects us to have. On one occasion, he directs them across the Sea of Galilee—a large lake known for its sudden squalls—and a violent storm comes up. Apparently it's no run-of-the-mill tempest; it's “a furious squall” that relentlessly crashes waves into the boat and threatens to sink it. But Jesus sleeps. Unruffled, unflappable, and, from his friends' perspective, unconcerned. It's the kind of situation that would induce panic in virtually everyone. Human beings

consider a calm attitude in the face of sudden death to be abnormal. Regardless, after Jesus rebukes the wind and the waves into submission, he rebukes his disciples for their very normal human response. “Why are you so afraid?” he asks. “Do you still have no faith?”

Much later in his ministry, Jesus comes down from a mountain with three of his disciples who have just gotten a glimpse of his glory. While they have been gone, the other nine disciples have had their hands full. A man whose son is prone to fits of convulsions has brought the boy to be healed, but the disciples can’t cast out the spirit causing the problems. “Oh unbelieving generation,” Jesus laments, marveling at the lack of faith that has rendered his followers impotent against the demon. The father begs Jesus to help: “if you can . . . ,” he begins. But ability isn’t the question. Jesus assures him, “Everything is possible for him who believes.” The man does believe, but also admits a degree of unbelief and asks Jesus to strengthen his faith. Jesus casts the demon out of the son.

Discuss

- In both passages, Jesus’s miracles are somehow related to the faith of those who believe in him. In other words, faith is tied to results. Why do you think God chooses to operate on these terms? How have you seen this dynamic at work in your life?

HARSH WORDS

For most of us, unbelief seems like nothing more than a missed opportunity—a regrettable but understandable failure to have faith. But Numbers 14:9 equates unbelief with rebellion, and Hebrews 3:12 ties it to a sinful heart—or, as some translations call it, an “evil heart.” In both cases, the harsh words refer to those who received a promise from God and did not deem it worthy of acceptance. It’s a strong warning that there is no neutral ground for any who hear divine truth. Exposure to the light requires a decision about what to do with it.

The Way to Please God: Hebrews 11:6; 2 Corinthians 5:7

Hebrews 11 is a familiar passage to many—Scripture’s faith “hall of fame.” It’s a deep, rich text with a lot of powerful observations and insights, but one statement near the beginning seems particularly startling: “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (11:6). The writer doesn’t portray faith as an optional characteristic for Christians or an optional spiritual attitude for those who want to press on toward greater maturity. No, faith is essential. Without it, we can’t please God. It isn’t a sign of maturity, as though some Christians may not have it; it’s a necessary attribute for anyone who wants to belong to God. It’s the reason we are called *believers*: we believe.

In a discussion of the tension between our earthly condition and our heavenly dwelling, Paul sums up our spiritual

orientation: “we live by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7). In other words, Christians must choose to live according to the truth revealed by an invisible God rather than by what we discern merely from sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell. When revealed truth contradicts our own reasoning, we have a choice to make. Will we lean on our own understanding or God’s? Will we walk in a way that honors our own resources and wisdom or in a way that honors God’s yet-unseen promises? Will we walk by sight or by faith? This is a constant choice—a lifestyle—that defines how well we function in God’s kingdom.

Discuss

- Knowing that it’s impossible to please God without faith, how pleased do you think God is with your life right now? How many of your decisions would you say are based on faith rather than sight?
- In what ways do you sense the daily tension between living by sight and living by faith? In what ways do you think God will help you increase your faith if you ask him to?

A CASE STUDY

Imagine: In an unexplainable vision, you’re given a remarkable glimpse of heaven before the foundation of the world, and you overhear a conversation among the members of the Trinity. “If we show ourselves as we really are, people will obey and serve us out of fear and obligation—simply from being overwhelmed,” says one.

“What if we remain hidden?” says another. “Do you think

anyone would search for us?"

"We would have to reveal enough for them to want to seek, but not enough to force the issue."

RECKONED AS RIGHTEOUSNESS

Paul prominently discussed Genesis 15:6—“Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness”—as an example of justification by faith rather than by works (see Rom. 4:3 and Gal. 3:6, for example). Though Paul wrote of this righteousness in terms of ultimate salvation, the original promise to Abraham was specifically about bearing descendants through a son—evidence that God counts faith as “righteous” not only when it applies to our salvation experience but also in specific circumstances and as a way of life. At any time, in any situation, believing God is pleasing to him and evidence of a right relationship with him.

“Yes, we would draw hearts to us, but only relate directly with those who allow themselves to be drawn . . .”

“. . . those who believe even when they cannot see.” And after this brief exchange, your vision ends.

- Do you think this hypothetical conversation gives a plausible explanation of why God chooses to relate to us on the basis of our faith? Why or why not?
- How would you relate to God if he introduced himself by thoroughly overwhelming you with his awesome majesty? How would you relate to him if he only whispered and hinted at who he is? Which would be

easier? Which would be more meaningful? Which is closer to your actual experience?

- In what ways do you think our faith in God is related to our love for him?

SESSION 2

Evidence of the Unseen

Rees Howells, a Welsh missionary known for his life of intercession, was on his way to London in order to depart for the mission field in Africa. The problem was that he had only ten shillings—enough for his wife and him to get less than halfway there. Knowing how God had worked in the past, they assumed that some sort of monetary gift would come in the mail on their last day in Wales, but it didn't. Even so, they were convinced that God would provide. They made the first leg of the trip and then waited for provision at the next station. While waiting, it occurred to Howells that if he *really* believed God would provide—if he really walked by faith and not by sight—he would go ahead and get in line at the ticket window. He had long preached that God's promises for provision were as good as cash; now he had to back up his beliefs with his actions.

As he stood in line with empty pockets, his place drawing ever closer to the window, Howells fought mental battles over how ludicrous his position was. Was he presuming on God? Had he gotten himself into this predicament by spending unwisely in the days before the trip? No, he was sure; he was not being presumptuous, he was living by faith. When only two people remained in front of him, he was tempted to get out of line and save face. Still, he refused to let visible circumstances determine his actions. Suddenly, another man

farther back decided he couldn't wait any longer, stuffed thirty shillings in Howells' hand, and left. God had honored this bold faith at the very last minute. The Howellses made it to London and boarded a ship for Africa the next day.

That incident is representative of a generation of "faith" missionaries who learned to trust God for finances in the days before ATMs and online accounts, but the dynamic of trust applies to any believer at any time in history and in any circumstance in life. Even in the earliest pages of Scripture, God's people have had to base their actions on his voice rather than their own wisdom. Noah, for example, spent years building an enormous ark on dry land without any visible threat of abnormal rainfall. Why? Because God said to. He had no tangible reason to do so, no support group to help him sort out all the ridicule he must have received for his project, no sudden fulfillment so he wouldn't have too long to question whether he had heard God correctly. For years, he worked extremely hard on an apparently irrational undertaking.

Faith often looks unreasonable, not because it actually is but because outside observers can't see the reasons for it. Moses's venture back into a hostile Egyptian court, for example, appeared as absurd as a suicide mission, even to the Hebrews he was about to deliver. That's because he was the only one who saw the burning bush and heard the voice that came out of it. But he is commended in Hebrews 11:27 for persevering "because he saw him who is invisible." Faith receives its vindication after the fact, not up front. In the interim, it can seem awfully foolish because it sees what normal eyes can't see.

That's the calling of every believer—to see what others

can't and follow the God who remains invisible. Or, as Paul put it, "We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18). In the life of faith, we repeatedly have to disavow our own resources in order to rely on a greater supply; to refuse to bow to the dictates of logical arguments in order to follow a voice that can't be heard; and to trust in both temporal and eternal promises in order to have peace in a fallen world. We divorce ourselves from the tyranny of the tangible and live life step-by-step according to the light we've been given. It isn't easy, and it isn't natural. But it's the way of God.

SEEING AND BELIEVING

One of the themes of the Gospel of John is the tension between seeing and believing. Dialogue in the Gospel often features those who believe in Jesus because of what they've seen, those who don't believe in spite of what they've seen, and those who believe to a point but don't fully entrust themselves to Jesus's teaching. The climax of this theme is Jesus's statement to Thomas after the resurrection: "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (20:29). This is followed by John's statement of purpose in writing: "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written *that you may believe* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:30–31, emphasis added). John seems to imply that it's okay to believe God because of what we've seen, but it's even better to believe him regardless of what we see.

Beyond the Tyranny of the Tangible: Hebrews 11:1; Romans 10:17; Ephesians 2:8

Many Christians express frustration over the invisibility of God and his promises for them, lamenting that they could believe if they could see evidence to back up their faith. And though God often gives glimpses of himself and his truth, faith is essentially "being sure of what we hope for and certain of what

we do *not* see" (Heb. 11:1, emphasis added). If we can see something clearly, it is outside the realm of faith—and outside the conditions on which God bases his work among human beings. While the rest of the world says, "I'll believe it when I see it"—whatever *it* happens to be, whether salvation or a specific promise from God—Christians are to say, "I'll see it when I believe it." That's what Paul meant when he said we live by faith, not by sight. Faith is an investment in invisible truth, the kind that only spiritual eyes can see.

How do we get faith? It's a gift. God doesn't simply order us to have faith; while that's an important instruction, it's one that we are powerless to fulfill on our own. He gives us faith by his Word and by his Spirit. "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17 NKJV). The more we immerse ourselves in the truth God has revealed, including the stories and testimonies of those who have believed and experienced him, the more our faith grows. God becomes bigger and more trustworthy when we focus on what he has done in the past and what he promises to do now and in the future. His Word is a vital aspect of that focus.

Ultimately, faith is given by God. Though we can and should cultivate it and immerse our minds and hearts in all the reasons we should have it, Ephesians 2:8 (as well as 1 Cor. 12:9 and Rom. 12:3) refers to faith as a gift. True faith must come from the Holy Spirit. It's rooted in God's faithfulness—a divine attribute that we can't see unless our eyes are opened to it. By the work of his Spirit in our lives, we become convinced of God's goodness, his utter reliability, his power, and his love. We have faith in him because he is faithful.

Discuss

- What do you think the writer means by “sure” and “certain” in Hebrews 11:1? What are some of the promises you have personally received from God through his Word and his work in your life? To what extent are you “sure” and “certain” of them?
- In what ways are we responsible for developing and cultivating our faith? In what ways is God responsible?

The Fruit of Faith: James 2:14–24

Nearly every biblical example of faith is accompanied by some sort of response. Noah had to actually build the ark; Abraham had to leave his homeland; Joshua had to march around Jericho’s walls; Christians have to declare their belief in Jesus; and so on. Faith is a matter of our heads and hearts, but if it’s real, it inevitably works its way out through our mouths, hands, and feet. In the realm of salvation, we are saved by grace through faith; but James clarifies that real faith results in action. Otherwise, it’s just a mental process that has no actual impact in our lives.

James uses Abraham as an example of his point. Although Abraham was declared righteous for his faith long before he offered Isaac on the altar, James points to the latter act as evidence of earlier faith. Abraham’s faith and actions “were working together”; his actions completed (or fulfilled) his faith. In this sense, faith is tangible. Jesus “saw” the faith of a paralytic’s friends when they lowered the invalid through a rooftop and into Jesus’s presence (Mark 2:5). It’s a visible expression of an internal attitude.

SKEPTICISM VS. TRUST

Two visits of Gabriel in Luke 1 juxtapose two different responses we can have to unseen truth. First, the angel announces to Zechariah that his wife will have a son to be named John. Zechariah's response, even though he has prayed for a son, is skeptical: "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years" (Luke 1:18). Gabriel rebukes him for his unbelief. In the next scene, Gabriel announces even more startling news to Mary: she will bear the Messiah and name him Jesus. She also responds with a question: "How will this be . . . since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34). Gabriel answers her question without any hint of rebuke. What was the difference? Zechariah doubted what was yet unseen; Mary believed but wondered how it was possible. The implication is that God doesn't mind questions that come from wonder but is displeased with those that come from unbelief.

The difference between the two kinds of faith James talks about is often portrayed as the difference between "head faith" and "heart faith." Head faith is a mental assent to a fact, an intellectual belief that something is true. Even demons have that, James asserts. But a full definition of the New Testament word for "believe"—*pisteuo*, in Greek—is closer to heart faith. It usually implies deep trust in, confidence in, and clinging to a truth or a person. Not only is it factual, it's personal.

Discuss

- If you believe in Jesus as your Savior, what evidence

from your life demonstrates your faith? If you currently have faith that God will answer a specific prayer of yours, what evidence from your life demonstrates that you believe he will?

Between Absurd Faith and Foolish Doubt:Matthew 14:22–33

The disciples are on the lake in the darkest hours of the night, and a violent wind is pelting the boat with strong waves. Jesus comes to them during the storm—exactly what one might expect from someone called “Savior”—but he comes in a manner that terrifies them. He walks on the water, unfazed by wind, waves, and physics. After Jesus speaks to them and tries to reassure them that he isn’t a ghost, Peter puts this strange apparition to a bold and somewhat impertinent test. “If it’s you,” he suggests, “tell me to come to you on the water.” Jesus complies with the request.

Peter puts feet to his faith—literally. He gets out of the boat and walks on the water. In front of him is Jesus; in every other direction he sees wind and waves. While focused on Jesus, Peter does the impossible, but when he focuses on the threatening circumstances around him, he begins to sink and cries out for Jesus to save him. Jesus does, of course; again, that’s what saviors do. But his first remark to Peter points out the key difference between walking on water and sinking: “You of little faith . . . why did you doubt?” (Matt. 14:31). Peter did the impossible when he had faith. He began to sink when he doubted. He exhibited faith by getting out of the boat and walking toward Jesus, and he exhibited doubt by looking at the waves. His focus determined his belief.

Discuss

- How certain do you think Peter was of not sinking when he got out of the boat? Do you think it's possible to exercise faith without some element of risk? Why or why not?

A CASE STUDY

Imagine: This relentless urge, this conviction has been building in you for a long time, and you can't resist it any longer. You've prayed about it and asked God to either confirm it or take it away. His answer? It has only increased. Your "calling"—you're convinced enough now to call it that—is to become the resident manager of a homeless shelter. You, your spouse, and your young children will have to move into a part of town most people desperately try to move out of. Few of your friends and family members understand; you've received blank stares, confused laughs, and even harsh accusations about putting your family in harm's way. "Consider the children." "Think of how much good you could do in a place of greater influence." "You've lost your mind." You've heard it all. Even committed Christians have assured you that God wouldn't lead you to make such a hard sacrifice. This will not only change your lifestyle; apparently, it will cost you some friends.

- In this scenario, what are you basing your decision on? What are your critics basing their opinions on? How does this situation illustrate the difference between walking by faith and walking by sight?

- If this was truly your calling—if you discerned God’s will correctly—what provision and protection could you expect from God? What are the risks involved in following God in this scenario? What guarantees does he give in this type of situation? How do you think God would respond if you misunderstood his will?
- In what ways, if any, is the faith life of any Christian—including yours—a dangerous mission?

SESSION 3

Everyday Faith

Craig asks a lot of questions, sometimes even out loud. Most of his questions, though, are the kind that echo deep inside and leave painful scars. Many start with “What if . . . ?” Others start with “Will I ever . . . ?” Some are simply “Why not?” They all come from worries about the future, nagging doubts about God’s goodness, and insecurities about whether he’s really loved. Whenever God gives a good gift, Craig enjoys it for only a moment before wondering how long it will last or questioning whether he deserves it. When a prayer lingers without being answered, Craig assumes God is holding out on him, mainly because that’s what God always seems to do. When hard times come, Craig laments the fact that life is an uphill climb and that God’s lessons never come cheaply. In his mind, grace is always painful and joys are sadly rare.

Craig’s young niece sees the world through different eyes. She enjoys all of God’s gifts for what they are as long as she has them, knowing that if one of them goes, God will give another one soon. When she prays, she knows there will be an answer—somehow, sometime, some way. When hard times come, she assumes they won’t last and that God will take care of her. In her mind, there’s always something to enjoy and be thankful for.

Those two pictures illustrate the difference between the faith

of a child and the disappointments and bitterness of someone who has lost sight of who God is and what he says. We may start out with the pure trust of a child, but life has a way of lowering our expectations and hardening us to the goodness of God. Our own fallen nature and our spiritual adversary raise powerful weapons against our trust in God—fear, discouragement, anxiety, insecurity, regret, doubt, and more. Sometimes we even get to the point of calling these attitudes “realism,” but they aren’t based in reality at all if we are children of God. That’s why in Scripture childlike faith in all its innocence and wonder is a sign of spiritual maturity. It looks past all the baggage we carry through life and recognizes the reality of God’s kingdom. Childlike faith is the kind of faith God wants us to have.

We may think of faith as merely an attitude to exercise at specific times for specific situations, but in many ways it’s a perspective on everyday life. God means for us to replace all of our anxieties, fears, insecurities, and stress with confidence and trust in his ability and willingness to care for us, meet our needs, and watch over our future. He doesn’t promise to keep us from hardship, but he does promise to be with us and to give us everything we really need in every situation we face. In addition, he promises fruitfulness and peace to those who love, trust, and depend on him. With such backing, it’s hard to understand why we wrestle with nerves and stress as much as we do. We have to train ourselves not to, constantly reminding ourselves of who God is and what he says.

SATAN’S PLOY

The first words spoken by Satan in Scripture were aimed

at undermining trust in God's goodness. "Did God really say . . . ?" he suggested to Eve (Gen. 3:1). The implication he would go on to make is that God somehow withholds good things from his people. This suspicion that perhaps God is holding out on us is the root of most of our fears, which is why the Bible repeatedly urges us to praise God for his goodness, to "fear not," and to trust in him. Though often we hardly recognize it as such, the issue of trust is a primary battlefield in every human mind.

Look at the Birds: Matthew 6:25–34

It's strange that we need to be commanded not to worry, but Jesus felt the need to do so. That's because human beings, even redeemed ones, have the tendency to take our eyes off the power of God and focus on the power of our circumstances. And even when we know God *can* protect and provide for us, we question whether he *will*. So we get preoccupied with our immediate concerns. We strive to achieve and maintain a certain lifestyle. We pay a lot to accumulate possessions and then pay more to insure them. We stress and strain over the relationships we so desperately cling to. We plan out our futures as specifically as we can so that our dreams will be fulfilled. But even when we do such things with the best of intentions, we tend to neglect a huge part of the equation: God, our sovereign Lord and compassionate Father, is watching our lives even more closely than we are. He has plans for us. He already knows all the setbacks and contingencies we think we need to compensate for, and he has promised to open his hand to those who ask him. He is

generous with his gifts—even the flowers of the field and the birds of the air seem to know that. We, however, are very forgetful.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul reminds us of essentially the same command: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (4:6–7). In fact, the most frequent command in Scripture is “Do not fear” or some variation thereof. God is very clear: he doesn’t want us to worry.

Why do we need to be told? Because we are always putting our faith in something—either the truth or a lie. We are either trusting that God is who he says he is and will do what he has said he will do, or we have fallen for some deceptive alternative. Scriptural commands to cease from anxiety, fear, and worry redirect us to the truth. We aren’t told to stop worrying because anxiety is bad for us, because God pities us for all the stress we’re under, or because he wants to shelter us from reality; we’re told to stop worrying because our anxiety is unfounded. Our worries are based on the lie that perhaps God won’t be there for us when we need him.

We see the contrast between fear and faith very clearly when a synagogue ruler came to Jesus for help with his dying daughter. Before Jesus could go to the man’s house, however, the report came: his daughter was dead. So what did Jesus tell this distraught father? “Don’t be afraid; just believe” (Mark 5:36). The man had been through a crisis, was just hit with devastating news, and Jesus still spoke words of comfort. The right response was faith, not fear. In the crises of our lives—

both the minor ups and downs and the major traumas—the right response is the same.

Discuss

- Do you think it's possible simply to stop worrying and trust God? Why or why not? What kind of decision or effort would it take in order to do that?
- Do you think the repeated scriptural command not to be afraid, anxious, or worried means that if we trust God, we'll never face negative circumstances? If not, then why shouldn't we worry? If we can't trust God to protect us from every hardship, what exactly are we trusting him for?

Fear vs. Trust: Psalm 56:3–4; Proverbs 3:5–6

David had been seized by Israel's archenemy, the Philistines. He had been fleeing from Saul, who was bent on murdering him, and he was now in the hands of an enemy king. He was safe neither in his homeland nor in Philistine territory. For a moment, in spite of God's past promises, the only question seemed to be which raging ruler would kill David first.

As he often did in a crisis, David wrote a psalm. He didn't sweep his trials under the rug. He acknowledged that he was being pursued, that quite a few people wanted him dead, that quite a few others mercilessly and publicly slandered him, and that he was genuinely and legitimately afraid. But he also acknowledged that these circumstances were minor compared to the God in whom he took refuge. "When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will

not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?" Without being naïve about his situation, David refused to deny God's power over it.

David didn't immediately default to trust and worship. Many of his psalms begin with despair and take time to arrive at the right perspective. Likewise, it takes time for many of us to get past our fears and into an attitude of trust. Perhaps that's why Proverbs 3:5 tells us that part of trusting God with all our heart means not leaning on our own understanding. We usually apply that instruction to matters of guidance and direction, and that's appropriate. But it also applies to our anxieties, fears, doubts, and insecurities. Why shouldn't we lean on our own understanding? Because our understanding is flawed. It's filled with misperceptions. When we assess a situation by what we see and feel, we cultivate worry. When we look at it from God's perspective, which is what David often did in the Psalms, worry fades away.

Discuss

- What can we do to change our perspective about our circumstances? How can we see them from God's perspective rather than from our own limited understanding?

Faith Wins: Psalm 125:1; 1 John 5:4

Our faith does not assure us that the world around us will never be shaken. It only guarantees that when the world is shaken, we will remain standing. Those who trust in the Lord will endure forever, we are told. Though trials come and go,

though we experience life in a fallen world just as everybody else does, our trust in the Lord keeps us firmly fastened to him. He has given us ample assurance that when all is said and done, we will still be upheld by his hand.

HOW THE RIGHTEOUS LIVE

Romans 1:17, a verse that figured prominently in the Reformation, was a quote by Paul of Habakkuk 2:4. Depending on how the verse is translated, it can have the following meanings:

1. Salvation—that is, right standing before God—comes through faith (Paul’s usage).
2. A faithful attitude will cause someone to live righteously (perhaps Habakkuk’s original meaning).
3. The righteous will exhibit faith in God (used in this sense in Heb. 10:38).
4. Those who have faith will survive an impending judgment (also a possible meaning intended by Habakkuk).

In each case, righteousness and faith are inextricably tied together; the two go hand in hand. Faith gives people a right standing before God, and righteousness is characterized by faith.

That’s why John was able to say that those who believe in God are overcomers. Earlier in his letter, he wrote that the world and its desires pass away (1 John 2:17). But “everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith” (5:4). We may live in territory that is hostile to the kingdom of God, but we are not

victims. In response to our faith in Jesus, God demonstrates his power to overcome the evil in our lives and lead us to victory. No matter what happens, his grace will be more than sufficient for us.

Discuss

- In what ways, if any, do you feel defeated? What does it mean for our faith to overcome the world? What do you think “overcoming” looks like in your life?

A CASE STUDY

Imagine: In a slow economy, you get laid off from your job and have a hard time finding a new one. During your job search, you find out that you have a chronic medical condition that, while not serious at the moment, could develop into something bigger. You’re already in some debt—that happens when you’re living without a paycheck—and your medical treatment will certainly add to your expenses. And all the stress of your circumstances is only adding tension to your family relationships. Life has gotten complicated, and you don’t see the light at the end of the tunnel. You’re growing more discouraged by the day.

- To what degree do you think worry and stress would take over your life? How preoccupied would you be with the future?
- How would you respond to someone who blithely said to “trust the Lord”? How would you respond to Jesus if he told you to trust in him?
- What specifically can you do to switch your mind from

fears to faith?

Ask and Receive

George Müller had a policy of never asking anyone for contributions. His only plan for bringing in all the necessary resources to operate his orphanages was to pray. Absolutely convinced that God would answer, Müller would pray until the needed provision came—often just in time for the next meal. One morning, about an hour before lunch, an assistant expressed concern that there was not enough food to feed the children. Müller responded simply that it wasn't noon yet; his prayers had been heard and help would come. Within minutes, an unsolicited delivery from a donor was dropped off at the orphanage's door, and everyone had plenty to eat. Such divine intervention was commonplace. Müller ran the institution from his knees, asking God alone for whatever was needed and watching him provide one meal at a time. Over the course of sixty-four years, more than eighteen thousand children were cared for and educated by faith alone.

Müller was just as effective in his prayers for people. Toward the end of his life, he made a remarkable observation. In all of his praying for people's salvation, no one whom he had prayed for had ever died without coming to Christ. Some had required several decades of praying, and some decisions were still pending, but none had died without receiving salvation first. The key, thought Müller, was praying with both faith and

persistence—always believing, never giving up. “I have joyfully dedicated my whole life to the object of exemplifying how much may be accomplished by prayer and faith,” he once said. He clung to the promise of Psalm 81:10: “Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.” Müller lived with a wide-open mouth, always expecting God to meet the spiritual and physical needs of his servants.

As we saw in session 3, God means for us to live with a general faith that he is watching over us and providing for our needs. But sometimes faith gets quite specific. If we have a need and pray about it, we need to have faith in him for that particular request. In such cases, we appeal to the promises he has given us in Scripture, “fully persuaded” that God has the power to do what he has said (Rom. 4:21). Not only must we believe in God’s ability to do what he said but also in his willingness to do it. That’s the kind of faith we see in Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Hannah, David, Peter, Paul, and many more biblical heroes. God meets our specific needs with his specific provisions.

Great Faith: Matthew 8:5–13; 15:22–28; Luke 8:43–48

The servant of a Roman military commander is paralyzed and in pain, and though Romans don’t normally interact much with common Jews, this commander feels compelled to seek out the miracle worker from Nazareth. Jesus is more than willing to come heal the servant, but the Roman seems to understand how authority works, even in the spiritual world, and doesn’t think a personal visit is necessary. Jesus can surely heal the servant with just a word, the soldier says. And Jesus responds with astonishment: “I have not found anyone in Israel with

such great faith” (Matt. 8:10).

Some time later, Jesus and his followers are in Gentile territory, and a Canaanite woman begins making a scene. She cries out desperately for help. Her daughter is cruelly demon-possessed—and the compassionate Son of God doesn’t answer her at all. The disciples urge him to at least send the woman away; she’s embarrassing them. Still, the woman persists. When Jesus finally does answer, it’s with discouraging, even insulting, words. That doesn’t faze her. She absorbs the snub and asks again anyway. So how does Jesus respond to such pestering? With affirmation. “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted” (Matt. 15:28).

A woman has been bleeding for twelve years. Even though she is considered unclean and polluted, she presses through a crowd anyway to touch a man considered holy. It’s inappropriate, but she’s desperate. Jesus feels the power go out of him through her touch and exposes her act. Trembling, the woman confesses that it was she who touched him, tells how she has been healed, and braces herself for a rebuke. But no rebuke is given. Jesus tells her, as he has told many others, “Your faith has healed you. Go in peace” (Luke 8:48).

Discuss

- In the above examples, Jesus healed two Gentiles and a ritually unclean woman on the basis of faith alone. What does that tell us about his conditions for answering our prayers?
- The Canaanite woman repeatedly asked Jesus for help, even after he had seemingly turned her away. How does Jesus’s affirmation of her faith relate to our prayers?

How long should we pray before giving up? How should we respond when God seems to be silent or even to indicate a “no” answer?

Pure Faith: James 1:5–7; 5:15–18

In the context of asking God for wisdom, James makes a statement with much broader implications. Our asking should come without any doubting in it. Those who doubt are “blown and tossed by the wind,” “double-minded,” and “unstable.” The picture is literally of a “double-souled” person—someone with internal contradictions who constantly wrestles with competing thoughts and opinions. A person who doubts, says James, shouldn’t expect to receive anything from the Lord.

Those are harsh words, but James reiterates the thought in a later passage. “The prayer offered *in faith* will make the sick person well,” he says confidently (5:15, emphasis added). An example of such power in prayer is Elijah. He prayed that it wouldn’t rain, and the land was drought-stricken for three and a half years. When this time was up, he prayed again and God responded to his faith by sending rain. Likewise, the prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective.

LIMITED MIRACLES

It's one of the most surprising statements in Scripture: "He could not do any miracles there" (Mark 6:5). Jesus had visited his hometown and taught with impressive wisdom, but the locals knew him only as a guy they had grown up with. They were offended at the thought of him as an extraordinary person, so he left without doing many miracles other than the minor healing of a few sick people. The text doesn't make it clear why he couldn't do miracles there. Did faith actually enhance his power? Or was their unbelief simply contrary to his terms for working miracles? Either way, faith was the key. If they had it, he would have done more. They didn't, so he left without meeting their needs.

Discuss • In what ways can you relate

- In what ways can you relate to being "double-souled" about God's promises to answer prayer? What questions or doubts keep you from believing simply and fully that God will answer? Why?
- Do you think James is implying that it's never okay to ask questions about what's true or not? Why or why not?

"Whatever You Ask": Mark 11:22–24

It's a sweeping promise with inexhaustible implications. We

pull together other aspects of Scripture to put qualifications on it—after all, it certainly seems as if there should be an asterisk pointing us to some fine-print disclaimers at the bottom of the page. But the text itself contains no such disclaimer. “Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” (Mark 11:24). And quantity of faith isn’t the issue; in a similar passage, Jesus tells his followers that they only need faith the size of a mustard seed (Matt. 17:20). There’s a difference between large faith and pure faith, and Jesus always emphasizes the latter. The object of our faith—God himself—is big enough. Our goal is to make sure that the small faith we have isn’t mixed with impurities.

Some people take such passages as carte blanche to demand whatever we want from God—the approach we often refer to as “name it, claim it.” While that’s a counterfeit method, the biblical prayer of faith isn’t completely opposite. If God is the one who names it, we can claim it. Whatever he has designated in his Word as a priority, whatever he has specifically promised to provide, and whatever he has truly put into our hearts by his Spirit, those are the things we can ask for in complete faith. If he has called us to move mountains, our prayers can move them. If he has led us into an impossible situation, he can lead us out. God will provide whatever it takes for us to fulfill our part in his mission if we ask him. The “whatever” in Jesus’s promise may have some unspoken limitations, but it’s still an audacious, far-reaching word. Jesus means for his disciples to dream big, ask confidently, and do great things for his kingdom.

Discuss

- What limitations, if any, do you think Jesus had in mind when he spoke the promise of Mark 11:24? What kinds of prayers—in terms of both size and agenda—do you think he wants us to pray?
- Which verb tenses do you notice in Mark 11:22–24? What do those time elements tell us about the dynamics of praying in faith?

A CASE STUDY

Imagine: You have a longtime dream, a vision of God's Spirit shaping the culture through powerful movies about his ways and his people. And it seems that because of your passion for this dream and your God-given gifts and interests, you are to play a part in accomplishing God's purposes. You even have an inspired idea and a working screenplay for the first film. The problem? You don't have a production budget—or even a balanced checkbook. You don't have the right equipment to make a movie, you don't live in a city where actors can easily be found, and you don't have many people around you who support this idea. You have a huge dream and mountains of obstacles—no money, no personnel, no encouragement. Yet the idea keeps burning within you.

DAVID'S BIG REQUEST

David was dissatisfied that the ark of God was sitting in a tent while he, the king, lived in a palace. His deep desire was to build a temple for God. God made it clear that the temple would be built not in David's lifetime but by his son (2 Sam. 7:12–13), but that didn't quell David's passion. He

believed in the promise and wrote often of the temple as though it was already a fact. Why? Because if God had promised, it was. So David stated his desire to seek the Lord in his temple (Ps. 27:4); looked forward to kings bringing gifts to the temple (Ps. 68:29); spoke of the blessings of being near God's temple (Ps. 65:4); and even wrote a song for the dedication of the temple (Psalm 30). He seems to have been an Old Testament picture of Mark 11:24: "Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you *have* received it, and it *will* be yours" (emphasis added).

- How would you discern whether God had actually put this passion in your heart—that is, whether your idea was truly God's will?
- Once you determined that it was most likely God's will, how specifically would you pray? What aspects of the situation (amount of resources needed, closed doors, delays, and so forth) would be most likely to stir up doubts in your mind? What would you do to stir up your faith and keep it strong?
- What as-yet unanswered prayers are stretching your faith right now? How do the Scripture passages in this session apply to those situations?

SESSION 5

Faith Anyway

A nurse slipped a booklet of the four Gospels to Corrie ten Boom during a brief hospital visit, and Corrie read it again and again in her prison cell over the next few months. These were hard times, and they would only get harder when she was moved from the prison in Holland to a concentration camp in Germany. But God was sustaining her with his Word. The suffering of Jesus took on new meaning for Corrie as she read the Gospels. She drew strength and encouragement from seeing how God's plan for redemption came through such hardship and pain. She took comfort in the idea that her suffering might also have a greater purpose.

Some people are drawn closer to God in hard times, while others are driven farther away. What's the difference? Faith. It gets tested, and some people lose sight of God in the process. Their faith doesn't last. But those who are able to hang on to faith in the darkest times find that their faith comes out purer and stronger than ever. They experience God in greater, clearer ways when they have been able to believe him without being able to see at all.

Every biblical hero of faith went through hard tests: Abraham suffered enormous delays and detours; Joseph spent years in prison before God's purposes began to unfold in his life; Job went through agony without any explanation of why;

Daniel endured numerous tests and trials in a hostile, pagan land; Paul was shipwrecked, beaten, stoned, and imprisoned on numerous occasions . . . and the list goes on. In fact, this seems to be God's normal way of dealing with his people—or at least those in whom he wants to develop heroic faith. They all had to persevere through extreme hardship when they couldn't see evidence of God's purposes.

Why is that surprising to many Christians? We forget that faith, by definition, involves what we *can't* see. It's only natural that God would occasionally turn out the lights we used to live by so we'll have to exercise our trust in him. It's one thing to believe God when all is well and we're cruising through life, but our faith in hard times seems to be more precious to God. During those times we hear lies about God's goodness that cause us to doubt whether we even belong to him. When we have faith to go through those difficulties rather than over or around them—faith to persevere even when we have no answers or explanations for our troubles—God is honored. We prove ourselves capable of seeing with spiritual eyes. When darkness falls, faith is the only light we have. According to God's dealings with people in Scripture, walking in the light of faith glorifies him in ways we can hardly begin to grasp.

Much of life involves believing God in normal circumstances as well as in great and exciting endeavors. But part of our life, sooner or later, will involve going through deep valleys of pain and darkness. In those times, we are urged to believe God any way, in spite of every voice—whether internal or external—that tells us our faith is futile. Real faith, the kind most precious to God, hangs on when the world, the flesh, and the devil give us every reason not to.

Faith in the Dark: Job 19:25–27; Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28

Job is confused and sinking deeper into despair. And who could blame him? He has lost virtually everything—his possessions, his children, and his health—without any explanation from God. He doesn't know how his story will end. For all he knows, he is about to die. His flesh is being eaten away by disease, and the friends who have come to see him can hardly recognize him. Still, in spite of his excruciating pain and deep distress, he utters a landmark statement of faith: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth" (19:25). He believes he will see God with his own eyes, and his heart yearns for the day. He chooses not to give in to his despair.

JOSEPH'S CHILDREN

Joseph went through years of hardship and pain after his brothers sold him into slavery. It was only much later that he began to see God's purposes for his trials. In honor of God's ability to redeem suffering and use it for his purposes, Joseph named his two sons Ephraim ("one who causes to forget") and Manasseh ("twice fruitful"). The first points to the temporary nature of suffering, and the second to God's ability to more than make up for trials and even bear fruit through them. These names represent a profound principle: that one day the blessings of God will easily overshadow whatever we had to go through to receive them. Knowing this is how God works among those who trust him, we can go through difficult times with

complete faith that the future blessings will be worth the present cost.

Those who have seen the end of their painful struggles have been able to look back and see God's hand along the way. Joseph, for example, had spent years as a slave in Egypt after being betrayed by his own brothers. Much of that time was spent in prison. But God was crafting an amazing plan, and Joseph was eventually able to see the purpose for it. "You intended to harm me," he told his brothers, "but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen. 50:20). It's the same perspective we get much later from Romans 8:28—"that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Regardless of how discouraging life gets, we are promised that it fits into a purpose and that we have a rock-solid reason to hang on to hope.

Discuss

- Are there disturbing aspects of your life right now that don't seem to fit any overall plan or purpose? If so, what reassurances do the lives of Joseph and Job give you?
- In what ways have you seen evidence of the truth of Romans 8:28 at work in your past?

From Darkness to Light: Psalm 27

The circumstances behind Psalm 27 must have been disheartening, even terrifying. David speaks of numerous adversaries, evil men coming to devour his flesh, an army set to besiege him, false witnesses rising up against him, and his mother and father forsaking him. Yet even in the midst of such chaos and threats, he turns his heart and his mind back to the one who has promised to keep him. Instead of trembling with fear, he chooses to seek the Lord's face, and he is confident that he will see the goodness of the Lord—not just in the age to come, but “in the land of the living” (27:13). He acknowledges his trials and hardships, but he focuses on God. Though his life is in danger and though he can't see a way out, David trusts that God will deliver him anyway.

Discuss

- In the midst of hard and painful circumstances, is it more natural for you to focus on what's wrong or to focus on God? In other words, which seems bigger: God or your problems? What can you do practically to cultivate a perspective of faith?

Overcoming Fear: Joshua 1:1–9

If anyone has a right to be overwhelmed, Joshua does. Moses, Israel's leader for the last forty years, has died. Joshua is left with the monumental task of not only succeeding Moses and earning the people's respect but also leading his people into a land occupied by armies of hostile enemies. And the future of God's people is at stake. Moses's understudy has the daunting task of overthrowing walled cities, driving out multitudes of inhabitants, and securing a land that was promised long ago to Abraham and his descendants. It seems impossible.

DON'T BE SURPRISED

Peter wrote to Christians who were going through a crisis of persecution. "Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you," he told them (1 Peter 4:12). The writer of Hebrews likewise indicates that faith necessarily requires perseverance and the stamina not to "shrink back" (Heb. 10:35–39). In fact, both the Old and New Testaments are full of references to the endurance required by people of faith when they suffer. The implications are that hard times are

normal, faith must be able to withstand them, and these situations are often when faith becomes most visible and honors God most clearly. Throughout Scripture, God seems to have a special affinity for those who trust him even in the worst of circumstances.

In the short space of nine verses, God twice assures Joshua of his presence, twice reminds Joshua of his promises, and three times says to be strong and courageous—followed by a command to not be terrified or discouraged. We can assume God is not speaking such words to a highly confident warrior who hasn't given a second thought to the danger of his mission. No, God is clearly speaking to a man who is overwhelmed at the responsibility that has fallen into his lap and is wrestling with doubts and fears. When life engulfs us with too many burdens, we tend to feel paralyzed. God's words to Joshua are meant to strengthen him, encourage him, and move him forward.

Discuss

- What is your most natural reaction when circumstances and issues overwhelm you? To what extent does fear war against your faith?
- If God appeared to you in the midst of a crisis as he did to Joshua, what do you think he would say to encourage you?

A CASE STUDY

Imagine: You had your life pretty well planned out, but God just pulled the plug on your plans—or at least allowed them to be unplugged. Either way, the sovereign Lord didn't prevent the crisis that changed everything for you. Now the person you were closest to—the one with whom you were going to spend the rest of your life—is gone, and you're left picking up the pieces. A mountain of responsibilities has fallen to you. There are bills to pay and people to take care of, and you can hardly imagine going on without losing your mind. But you have no choice. Life doesn't afford us the option of not going on. No matter how stuck you feel, no matter how uncomfortable and painful it gets, you have to press ahead with whatever resources and strength you have.

- How do you see God in the midst of this kind of crisis? Through what lenses do you interpret his will? To what degree might you question his goodness and love? To what extent might you experience anger that he allowed you to suffer?
- Do you think it's possible to have great faith in the

midst of extreme grief? Why or why not?

- Do you think it's possible to have great faith without understanding why things happen or what God is doing? Why or why not?

SESSION 6

Between Promise and Fulfillment

Twenty-five years. That's how long it took between God's promise to Abraham and the fulfillment of that promise. The long-awaited son finally came, but not before Abraham took lots of detours, suggested several alternatives, had his faith tried and sifted and purified, and endured the dictates of delays and impossible circumstances. For a God who is concerned with the purity of our faith, this is business as usual. But for people who want God's fulfillment to come as quickly as possible, it can be a stressful and even painful ordeal.

Faith gets tested—that's a given. Sometimes we get immediate answers to our prayers, and sometimes God fulfills a promise without any delay. But most of the time, there's a gap between the promise and the fulfillment. That's certainly the case with our ultimate hope for God's kingdom to come; Jesus's victory happened nearly two thousand years ago, but we still look forward to the promise of his return. It's the same dynamic on a lesser scale whenever we await an answer to prayer or apply a scriptural truth to our present lives. We might not see right away what we know to be true. In the meantime, our faith must learn to endure.

While We Wait: James 1:2–4

According to James, our faith is tested by “trials of many kinds” (1:2). From the evidence in Scripture, these can include long delays (Abraham, for example), naysayers and skeptics (Nehemiah, Paul), adverse circumstances (Moses, Daniel), general persecution (Paul, Peter), impossible situations (Abraham, Moses, Hannah), and outright opponents (Esther, Jesus). These are intimidators of faith, and many Christians are tempted to see them as evidence that we are on the wrong track. We frequently assume that if God is on our side and we are in his will, things will go smoothly. That isn’t the testimony of those in the Bible who lived by faith. No, true faith is almost always contested by time, circumstances, our own thoughts, and spiritual opposition. We have to contend for the truth God has revealed and the promises he has given.

That’s why James tells us to consider it joy when we encounter various trials. These adversaries of our faith serve a divine purpose. The testing develops perseverance, and perseverance produces maturity. The result is faith and character that are pure and complete.

Discuss

- What are your goals for the kind of faith you want to have? How do trials help you reach those goals?

WHEN JESUS WAITED

Jesus had heard that his friend Lazarus was sick (John 11). But the Savior who had so compassionately healed other sick people decided to stay where he was for two more days. By the time he finally got to Judea, Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. It's clear from the comments of Mary and Martha, Lazarus's sisters, that they have been wrestling with their faith. "If you had been here, . . ." they both say. They knew Jesus could have healed Lazarus, but he hadn't shown the willingness. In his conversations with his disciples and the sisters, Jesus repeatedly emphasizes faith. He is glad he wasn't there "so that you may believe" (11:15). "Whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (11:26). "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" (11:40). His purpose throughout is clear: Jesus often delays his work intentionally and allows huge obstacles in order to cultivate deeper faith in his people and reward it in greater ways.

Patience: Hebrews 6:12; 10:35–36

Faith isn't effortless. It takes stamina and focus to go against the flow for long periods of time. So the writer of Hebrews urged those who were tempted to give up to learn from those in the Bible who inherited God's promises. They didn't do it simply through faith. They inherited God's promises through faith *and patience*.

If God deals with us as he did with people in Scripture, he will train us in the ways of faith by allowing us to run up against overwhelming obstacles and excruciatingly long delays. During the wait, we are to tenaciously hang on to what God has said. “Do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded” (10:35). When we have persevered and done the will of God in the interim, we will receive what he has promised (10:36). God is pleased not with those who shrink back but with those who press boldly ahead in faith.

Discuss

- Have you made false assumptions in the past about the ease or difficulty of faith? In what ways has God taught you what true faith is like?
- Are you currently waiting for God to do something he has promised? How long do you think he wants you to hang on before giving up?

The Battle: Romans 4:18–21; Ephesians 6:14–18

“Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed . . .” (Rom. 4:18). That’s our model, the prototype God gave to anyone who would live by faith—that is, anyone who wants to know him personally. Our faith must get to the point of resisting all obstacles and even overcoming them. Like Abraham, we must “not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God” but be strengthened in faith, give glory to God, and be fully persuaded that he can do what he promised (4:20–21). This is the kind of faith God is pleased with.

Because our minds and hearts are such a hotly contended battlefield, we are to lift up “the shield of faith” (Eph. 6:16). That’s how we extinguish all the lies of the evil one—those lies that question God’s goodness, that tell us we’re on the wrong track even when we’re following God’s will, that undermine our identity in Christ, or that destroy our confidence in God’s plans and promises. The enemy is constantly seeking to confuse our beliefs, and faith is the shield against his attacks. Through faith, as 1 John 5:4 tells us, we can overcome anything.

Discuss

- What thoughts, circumstances, relationships, delays, and so forth, are contesting your faith right now? How do you think God wants you to respond to them?

A CASE STUDY

Imagine: Long ago, God placed a dream in your heart (well, you’re 99 percent sure it was him) and you’ve held on to it ever since. By human standards, the odds are against it; your visible circumstances keep reminding you that it probably can’t be done. So do your “concerned” friends. But you aren’t dealing with a God who is subject to the odds, so you’ve kept the faith. At several points in your life, your dream has seemed to come close to reality, only to slip back again into the “maybe one day” recesses of your heart. Your hopes have been built up and then dashed so many times that you’re almost afraid to hope anymore.

THE ULTIMATE HOPE

The ultimate wait of faith is still in process for all of God's people. Jesus told his followers that he will come again—and to be ready at all times. Even in the first century, many began to give up. Peter had to remind them that with the Lord, a day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as a day; that the Lord will come as surprisingly as a thief does; and that we are looking forward to something as monumental as new heavens and a new earth (2 Peter 3:8–13). In other words, this could take some time. Nearly two thousand years later, we are still waiting. So what should we do in the meantime? Hang on to faith and live “holy and godly lives” (3:11). No matter how long it takes, God’s promise is certain.

- In what ways are you likely to second-guess yourself? Do you wonder whether your dream was really from God? Whether you somehow blew your shot at it along the way? Whether God is really able or willing to deliver on his promise? All of the above?
- How long do you hold on before you finally give up? What criteria would you use to determine whether you should give up?
- How would you feel about God in the process? How would you feel about him on the day your dream is fulfilled?

Conclusion

Faith has led people into dismal slums and dark jungles for a cause greater than themselves.

It has sustained people through life-threatening diseases, helped them overcome addictions, and shown them God's provision in the midst of poverty.

It has released captives and been a testimony to captors.

It has vanquished the power of grief and death.

It has prompted God to do miracles of healing and deliverance.

It has given God's people the power to endure hardships of any kind.

It has opened doors that were impossibly shut and started movements that can't be explained by natural means.

It has rescued people from fear, despair, and emptiness.

It has healed broken relationships and inspired great dreams.

It has produced heroes of whom the world is not worthy.

It has given many a new life and a fresh start.

Perhaps that's how the writer of Hebrews would continue to list the power and benefits of faith if he were still writing today. Church history is full of the kind of examples found in Hebrews 11; the great cloud of witnesses has continued to multiply throughout the ages. This spiritual attitude has prompted hosts of believers to join with God in doing the work of the eternal kingdom. Faith has continued to prove powerful against all odds.

The power of faith lies in the power of the faithful one. God has affirmed throughout Scripture that he cannot lie; that he is worthy of our trust; that his Word stands forever; that he has given us many great and precious promises and that he fulfills them; that he strongly supports those who love him and shows his favor to those who trust him; and that there is no limit to his power, his wisdom, or his love. Faith can't grow in a heart that does not know these things, but when we immerse ourselves in God's truth and the history of his works, our ability to believe grows strong. We have faith because he is faithful.

The last time Jesus appears on the scene in Scripture is before the final defeat of evil (Rev. 19:11ff). He rides a white horse and wears crowns on his head. His eyes are like flaming fire, and he is called by two key descriptive adjectives: "Faithful and True." The warrior who has come to save us is trustworthy, reliable, upright in his judgments, and thoroughly incorruptible. And his kingdom is eternal. Those who have believed in him—those who have had faith that he is who he says he is and that he does what he has said he will do—will share in that kingdom forever.

Leader's Notes

Session 1

A Case Study. This conversation is purely hypothetical, of course, and it frames divine decision making in very human question-and-answer terms. Help participants focus not on whether God actually speaks like this—we can't know the answer to that, even though the Bible often portrays his thoughts in human terms. Instead, steer the conversation toward God's possible rationale for relating to us on the basis of faith.

The issue up for discussion is why faith is such a priority in his kingdom.

Session 3

Matthew 6:25–34, first set of discussion questions. Most Christians will rightly observe that trusting God doesn't immunize us from hardship. This is why most of us continue to worry even when we've been told not to. It isn't that we don't trust God to be with us in our trials; we just fear the trials in the first place. It may help the discussion if participants explore what deeper fears lie beneath the surface of our worries. For example, if the topic of finances comes up, the surface concern is economic hardship. But what's beneath that worry? Fear that God will abandon us? That he'll allow us to starve? That we'll end up with a mountain of debt so huge we'll never get out from under it? Clear biblical promises address those issues. When our deepest fears come to the surface, it's much easier to find scriptural assurances to counteract them.

Session 4

Matthew 8:5–13; 15:22–28; Luke 8:43–48, first discussion question. This may seem obvious on the surface, but a lot of Christians believe God answers our prayers on the basis of our righteousness, our works, our maturity, and more—in addition to our faith. And there are places in Scripture that indicate sin is a hindrance to answered prayer. It may help the discussion to give a few hypothetical examples: for instance, a

rebellious sinner with cancer who prays and believes he will be healed but has no intention of repenting. Will God heal him on the basis of his momentary faith alone? Participants will probably think of several scriptural conditions for answered prayer other than faith. But the point of these passages in the Gospels is that Jesus emphasized the priority of faith for those who come to him. He made it clear in these instances that faith was the key to the answer.

James 1:5–7; 5:15–18, second set of discussion questions. There seems to be a difference in Scripture between genuine doubt (asking honest questions about truth) and willful unbelief (choosing not to accept what God has revealed). Some Christians think faith without doubting means blind and oversimplified acceptance of revelation; others endlessly second-guess every truth claim without ever being convinced that it's from God. Participants will likely see the fallacy in both extremes, but trying to find the balance between them can make for an interesting discussion.

A Case Study. This scenario is loosely based on the story of Sherwood Productions, the filmmaking ministry of Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, Georgia, that has produced *Facing the Giants*, *Fireproof*, and *Courageous*.

Session 5

A Case Study. There's a good chance that at least some members of your group have been in this situation—the death of a spouse, an unexpected divorce, the sudden death of a parent, or a similar crisis. Their experiences will be most valuable to the discussion, even if they haven't yet experienced healing from the crisis. If a participant is currently going through hardship, steer the discussion toward a time of encouragement. Reassure those who are hurting with the certainty of God's promises and the support of other members of the body of Christ.