

REACHING
NEW LEVELS

OF FAITH

CURTIS HARTSHORN, MBS

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14998 E. Reno

Choctaw, Oklahoma 73020

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FOREWORD

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” This is a common question we like to ask children because their answers can sometimes surprise us and they most often amuse us. “I want to be an astronaut” or “a fireman”, or “a baseball player” are common responses. One little boy simply responded, “I don’t want to grow up.” However, what if we were to ask “What does Jesus want you to be when you grow up?” The answers might be different, especially if we were asking Christians that question. Well the question is a valid one. While there may be variations to the answers given, I believe we all agree that He wants us to grow up! Numerous passages of scripture indicate that God expects us to grow. In Hebrews 5:12-14 clearly states that there comes a time when “we ought” to be teachers. But the recipients of that letter had need that someone come and teach them again the first principles. The Apostle Paul wanted to speak of spiritual matters with the Corinthians but could not for their spiritual immaturity (I Corinthians 3:1-3).

Every faithful Christian desires to grow spiritually; to reach new levels of faith. Strong faith to the Christian is like the hair of Samson in which his strength lies. It is his Moses rod that divides the seas of doubt. It is his shepherd’s sling to conquer his personal giants. Without faith it is impossible for the Christian to please God (Hebrews 11:6) but with it he can “move mountains” (Matthew 17:20). Therefore, there is nothing more important in one’s relationship with God than his faith.

In his book, Reaching New Levels of Faith, Curtis Hartshorn has addressed the subject of growing faith in a unique, simple and yet profound approach. He not only helps us to recognize the need for a growing faith but clearly defines for the reader the various stages involved in the quest for a mature faith. His description of the five levels of faith will open your eyes to where you are in your spiritual maturation and give you the tools to proceed to the next level.

Brother Hartshorn's use of biblical characters as examples of faith is both enlightening and inspirational. If you are looking to grow in Christ, to develop a mountain moving faith then this is the book for you. This book should be read, applied, savored and then shared with others.

Dr. David W. Hamrick,
President, World Bible Institute

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INTRODUCTION

For the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea,
driven and tossed by the wind.
- James 1:6

Do you ever grow tired of your own lack of faith? There are times when I feel like a tiny boat whimsically tied to the shore of Christ. Waves of doubt are perpetually knocking against my hull and tugging at my feeble moorings. Have you ever felt that way? Do you have trouble some days just keeping yourself from washing out to sea?

We flounder along through this voyage we call Christianity, tossed back and forth because our faith is not solid. James is comparing our faith to a ship driven by the wind, with little chance of getting back on course. Our rudders are broken. We don't know how to turn the ship around or even which direction to go as we wildly spin the helm. The context of James 1 verse 6 deals with asking God for wisdom. God is eager to grant His wisdom, but in order to receive it we have to "ask in faith." When we doubt God we start to rely on our own wisdom. That's when the big waves blind-side us. Life knocks us around. Satan gets us off course. Then it is only a matter of time before our vessel of faith gets dashed against the rocks.

Parallel James 1:6 with Ephesians 4:14.

As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming.

Paul, the veteran missionary, had seen his fill of young Christians dragged away from Christ by false teachings. He warned the elders in Ephesus that savage wolves would surely rise up after he departed and they would not spare the flock, Acts 20:28-30.

You've seen this happen, haven't you? A different wind of doctrine "blows" in and some of our number start chasing after it. To them it sounds fine, so they believe it until the next teaching comes along and then they chase that one. Back and forth they go, never growing up in their faith, no stability in their walk with God. Seeing such a sight is disheartening, but this Ephesian verse is assuring us there is a way to reach a point where the doctrinal battering no longer has an effect on what we believe. "We are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves." For those who grow to become rock solid in their faith, the waves of false doctrine are like water off a duck's back.

Shortly after my own conversion to Christ I began to wonder why some Christians grow in their faith and some do not. It is puzzling to me how some can listen to the same sermons, read the same Bible, maybe even grow up in comparable Christian households and yet some swim and some sink. My curiosity evolved into quest, studying the scriptures and combing the countryside for the hearts of those who were known in their churches and communities for pace-setting faith. In 1988 I

began teaching classes on faith development, which led to deeper discussions with some fabulously faith-filled brethren. I was invited to speak at other congregations. With each seminar on faith progression in different parts of the United States, the dots started to connect as to what makes faith tick. The answers are clearly laid out in the Bible. We just need to take the time to learn them.

Strong faith should be the aspiration of every Christian. Think of how much good you could accomplish with rock solid faith. Wouldn't it be great to have a faith like David or Moses or Joseph? Imagine a life of unwavering, unquestioning trust in the Almighty Creator of this universe. It tantalizes the spiritual taste buds. God the Father is searching the world over for souls who will trust Him. Hopefully this study will give you a vision for your own undiscovered spiritual potential.

One reason we do not grow in our faith is because we do not understand the process of faith development. In order for your faith to bloom you must first be well rooted spiritually. As we explore the various stages of faith development you will be able to determine exactly where you are in your walk with God. Once you discover that, you can know what steps to take next toward improving your confidence in God and His Word. Know this from the beginning; God never intended for His disciples to remain in a stagnant quagmire of mediocrity. God wants His children to grow, to blossom spiritually. God wants you to *Reach New Levels of Faith*.

This book is written for individuals. It is one Christian's attempt to inspire faith in other Christians. But since this subject serves well as a Bible class series, I have also adapted the chapters for

a class setting. There are discussion questions at the end of each chapter. These questions are designed to stimulate thought and conversation among believers who have read the same chapter.

The first seven chapters unite the readers with a common terminology. Each reader learns how to clarify and explain the levels of faith and the struggles associated with spiritual growth. This book will also guide each student to Bible verses dealing with the subject of faith. Beginning with chapter eight, the classes will take a different direction as the book delves into character studies and textual studies of passages that are immensely practical and insightful.

The pages before you represent a voyage, a journey to spiritual essence. Perhaps the same could be said of other books, but faith development takes a strong desire to want to please God. Prepare yourself to receive God's guidance. Relinquish your pride. The biggest fear in starting a voyage like this is all the unknowns. The path to deeper faith is often strewn with battles and obstacles, even the occasional sea monster. It is the testing of your faith that produces endurance, (James 1:3).

To examine your faith is to peer into your own soul. It drudges up spiritual issues that may have long been repressed. This transformation is going to be painful but wonderful at the same time if that makes any sense. To become Christ-like requires change. Before you begin, decide whether you are willing to let Jesus mold you and shape you. Pause for a moment and pray about this. As soon as you are ready, weigh anchor and hoist the sails. Your adventure awaits.

Curtis Hartshorn

1. Why Should I Develop My Faith?

The Christian faith provides the greatest opportunity on earth for personal growth. Nowhere else can a person find the knowledge and tools to improve every aspect of life, as one finds in a congregation that is guided by the standard of the Bible. That is why it seems so bizarre that there are believers who consider it a waste of time to study or work on faith development. As far as some are concerned, they are saved and going to heaven and that is all that matters. On the other hand, there are visionaries who long for a deeper relationship with the Father and are serious about doing everything they can to strengthen their faith.

The fact that you are reading this book means you are most likely in the latter category. Whatever your reason is for choosing a book on this particular subject, the journey before you is going to take a lot of motivation. Military recruits who go through basic training are put through a battery of mental and

physical tests. Not every soldier makes it. Some get washed out of the program. The ones who find a way to stay motivated are the ones who graduate and continue to their Advanced Individual Training. In the same way it takes motivation to steadily grow up in your faith, to blossom into the man or woman God is calling you to be.

I want to either give you a fresh motivation for growing in your trust in God or nurture the reason you already have. Before any consideration of what faith is or what makes it grow, let's consider the question of why one would want to grow stronger in their faith. There are many reasons for working on our faith. Here are eight good ones.

REASON #1

I should want to grow in my faith because God wants me to grow.

Is there a way to know how God feels about our spiritual development? God shows you how He feels about personal growth for His children when you study Matthew 17. As this chapter opens, Jesus is up on the Mount of Transfiguration talking things over with Moses and Elijah.

And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him.

- Matthew 17:2-3

Although their conversation was a private one, it is stimulating to imagine what they may have been discussing. Two things are

fascinating about this scene. One is that these are three spiritual giants, the most faith-filled men the world has ever known. Just to be in their presence would have been awe-inspiring. The second thing that is fascinating about this scene is that during the time it takes place, two of these three men have long been dead.

Only three of the apostles were invited to witness this meeting, Peter, James and John. Where were the other nine? They were back in the city having an adventure of their own.

When they came to the crowd, a man came up to Jesus, falling on his knees before Him and saying, "Lord, have mercy on my son, because he has seizures and suffers terribly; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water. And I brought him to Your disciples, and they could not cure him."
- Matthew 17:14-16

A member of the community had brought to the remaining nine Jesus-less apostles a boy who was demon possessed and having seizures. In Jesus' absence the apostles decided to press forward and heal the boy themselves. It was a disaster. Their attempts to heal him failed which upset the boy's father, not to mention frustrating and discouraging the apostles themselves. That was when Jesus returned from His journey.

"You unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you?" Matthew 17:17. Jesus was clearly upset with what had transpired. Whether these stern words were directed toward His apostles, toward the assembly or toward that entire "generation" the result was the same: Jesus was perturbed at

people's faithlessness. "You unbelieving ..." We know He was disappointed because after He rectified the situation and the crowds dispersed, the disciples approached Jesus hat-in-hand wanting to know what went wrong. "Why could we not cast it out?" Matthew 17:19, referring to casting out the demon.

He replied, "Because of your meager faith," (17:20). The Greek word used here means tiny or puny faith, faith that is incredulous. They failed because of a lack of confidence in God. The apostles were seeking an explanation and Jesus told them exactly what the problem was; small faith.

If your faith is miniscule, you are ill equipped to serve in God's kingdom because faith is the basis for it all. Christianity is undeniably faith based. Jesus continues, "I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move." In quoting this passage from the New American Standard Bible, the word "size" may not capture the true meaning Jesus intended. The original word used by the Holy Spirit doesn't refer to size. It is a word meaning "as, like or in comparison to."

Jesus is drawing a comparison between faith and a mustard seed. The translators have emphasized the characteristic of size, which is understandable, but doing so disrupts the course of Jesus' point. He just rebuked them for having small faith. To turn around and tell them that with small faith they could move mountains clashes with the flow of His instruction. It goes against His opening statement. No, the mustard seed comparison Jesus is making is not one of size but rather of growth. Faith needs to progress like a seed grows.

We learn from Matthew 13:31-32 that although mustard seeds start off small, they grow large enough to be considered as trees.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a person took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all the other seeds, but when it is fully grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that THE BIRDS OF THE SKY come and NEST IN ITS BRANCHES.

This parable in chapter 13 helps us understand what Jesus was trying to say in chapter 17. The emphasis Jesus is making with His mustard seed illustration in Matthew 17 is not on being small in faith, but that small faith should not stay small. It does not matter how small our faith is when it starts out. But it does matter if our faith remains small. Growing faith is what moves mountains. Growing faith is what God desires for His children.

What father does not look for growth in his children? Any parent who notices their child is not growing at a normal rate is certainly going to be concerned. They would not think, "Oh well, at least they are not shrinking." We expect growth in a child and have cause for alarm when we don't see it. In the same way, God looks for growth in His children and is concerned when we are spiritually stunted. So, if I love God and God wants me to grow, I should want me to grow also. That alone is motivation enough to work on our faith. We could stop here knowing we have a good reason to grow in our faith. God wants me to grow. But let's look at the other seven motivations anyway.

A second good reason for working on our faith is when it comes to faith there are only two choices.

REASON #2

We are either moving forward or we are moving backward.

If I am not moving forward in my faith development I am moving backward, whether I realize it or not. We would like to think we are just “holding steady”, but in principle this never happens. If one is holding a steady level of faith, this is actually negative progress. The reason being, from the day we are baptized we should be growing up in the Lord. The letter of Hebrews teaches us this.

Concerning him we have much to say, and it is difficult to explain, since you have become poor listeners. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the actual words of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unacquainted with the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to distinguish between good and evil.

- Hebrews 5:11-14

The statement “though by this time you ought to be teachers,” infers that there should be a steady progress of spiritual maturity among God’s children. Each child of God should be progressing toward being a teacher of the Word. If that progress is not taking place in our lives, then we are in fact digressing.

Christians should be continually training themselves to get off the milk and on to solid food. Imagine a kid in junior high or high school walking around sucking on a baby bottle and wearing diapers. If a child stopped growing emotionally, any parent would be concerned. If a child stopped growing physically, you would not think, “Well, at least he is not shrinking!” would you? No, that’s crazy. You would be alarmed that the natural process of growth had been disrupted, especially if it was your own child.

That is how God feels when He sees a child of His that has stopped growing spiritually. Are you a child of God? What would you expect God’s reaction to be if you go year after year never maturing in your faith? If you are not moving forward in trusting God and believing His Word, you are moving backward.

REASON #3

Life is boring without growth.

You might be a little skeptical about this point but think of it this way. Haven’t the most interesting times in your life been the times when you were growing physically, emotionally and spiritually? I have met some Christians who thought that Christianity was boring. You may have as well, but have you ever met a growing Christian who thought that Christianity was boring? Probably not. I certainly have not. Growing Christians say Christianity is challenging, maybe. Difficult, possibly. But never boring. Non growth is boring.

“For the word of God is living and active” (Hebrews 4:12). Anyone who is growing in the Word is “living and active,” vivacious and drinking deeply of life. Growth is what makes life lively. The very process of overcoming obstacles as we move

toward a closer walk with God is what gives life that pizzazz. Growth is exciting. It is fun. It can even be scary at times, but never boring.

REASON #4

It is essential for a growing church.

Without spiritual growth we cannot have numerical growth in our congregations, at least not sustained numerical growth.

It is possible to grow in numbers for a while without growing spiritually, but if you do not have spiritual maturity taking place in your congregation there will not be a strong enough base to sustain all the new Christians.

From whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part,
- Ephesians 4:16

Church leaders, may I have your attention please? If you are planning on baptizing a lot of new converts into Christ, but you have no plan for maturing the faith of both old and new members, you will not be able to sustain the growth. You may have numerical growth but without spiritual growth, eventually the numbers will drop back to where they were. If the body has not developed the necessary supporting joints “what every joint supplies” to account for the additional size, the numbers will shrink to a size that the spiritual strength of the congregation can support. Churches that pay attention to spiritual growth along with numerical growth have a lasting and fruitful increase because there is a motivation for each member to stay attached

to the vine (John 15:1-17). If adding souls to the kingdom of God means anything to you then spiritual growth has to be part of the game plan.

This fifth reason for working on our faith has to do with the realization that we are involved in a spiritual battle. Like it or not, there is a spiritual war waging for your eternal destinies. And in this war, you are in God's army or you are in Satan's army. This may be hard for you to accept, especially if you have had tolerance and neutrality preached to you since birth. We resist taking sides under any circumstances, but in this instance, we have no choice. The cold hard fact is that:

REASON #5

If God does not get you, Satan will.

Peter once gave this exhortation:

Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, so that He may exalt you at the proper time, having cast all your anxiety on Him, because He cares about you.

- 1 Peter 5:6-7

In simple terms Peter is urging us to enlist in God's army and never be A.W.O.L. (Absent Without Leave). Why? Because... "Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour," 1 Peter 5:8. Enlist your services to God or be devoured by Satan. We are either in the Lord's army or the devil's army. Jesus challenged His disciples,

The one who is not with Me is against Me; and the one who does not gather with Me scatters.
- Matthew 12:30

John explained in 1 John 3:7-10 that we can either be children of God or we can be children of the devil.

Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. No one who has been born of God practices sin, because His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin continually, because he has been born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother and sister.

There are “children of God” and there are “children of the devil”. There is no third option. There is no half a child of God and half a child of the devil. You are either one or the other. There is no neutral grounds in this battle. We’re all in the war zone. One reason for growing in our faith is so that we can stay out of Satan’s camp. When that final battle has been fought and the war is over, you want to be on the winning side.

REASON #6

**Without faith we can't even please God.
(Hebrews 11:6)**

Do you want to please God? Of course you do. This is what we as Christians live for. We long to know that our heavenly Father is proud of the lives we are living, but we cannot please God without faith. The Bible says it is impossible. "And without faith it is impossible to please *Him*, ..." God loves to see faithfulness. It pleases Him to see men and women aspiring to have a deeper trust in Him. The potential for doing what is pleasing to our Heavenly Father should be motivation enough to want to grow our faith.

The seventh reason for faith development is because we want Jesus' church to grow.

REASON #7

**If I want a healthy, vibrant church
I have to start with me.**

This is what is wrong with so many churches today. Everyone wants to be part of a strong congregation, but we think the way to attain that is for everyone else to get their lives straightened out. It is always somebody else's fault. The best thing you can do for your congregation is work on you.

Do you want your church to be strong? Start with strengthening your own faith:

from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by WHAT EVERY JOINT SUPPLIES, according to the proper working of EACH INDIVIDUAL PART, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.
- Ephesians 4:16 [Capitalization added]

Don't wait for others to improve their spirituality for you to start working on yours. Set the pace. Pledge to God that you are going to do everything in your power to help the church and ask your Heavenly Father to grow His kingdom starting with you.

Here is the eighth and final reason for spiritual maturity:

REASON #8

Faith development fosters healthy and harmonious relationships in the family of God

In the initial writing of this material, there were only seven reasons in this chapter. This eighth reason was the serendipitous result of doing a few seminars.

After following up with some of the congregations where we had implemented *Reaching New Levels of Faith*, several church leaders told me that they had realized an increase in patience among the members toward one another, which they attributed to this study, though no one seemed to understand why. It wasn't that hard to figure out.

The patience came from finally understanding the struggles that other members were going through. Members started to realize how hard it was for others to grow from one level of faith to another, or what it was like to go through some of the struggles they had learned about. By focusing their attention on the progress of spiritual maturity in others and doing their growing together, these brethren gained more respect, appreciation and love for one another.

As your faith grows you will relate to others who desire the same. This alone can be a motivation for trying to grow in our faith. By working together on our spiritual growth, we will foster harmony in our church family.

Take a moment to look back over these eight reasons for growing in God. You need to have a personal reason for wanting to grow closer to God. It may be through one or more of these motivations or by coming up with your own, but somehow you need to find a godly reason for wanting spiritual maturity in your life. So many Christians never progress spiritually because of a lack of righteous motivation. Any relationship takes time, effort and determination. As you now see, there are plenty of reasons for you to work on strengthening your walk with God. Choose one, write it on something you will see every day like your mirror or screen saver and get motivated!

NOTES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How many of the 8 reasons given in this chapter for working on our faith can you list?
2. Why do you think some Christians are not motivated to want to develop a stronger faith?
3. Can you see how it is God's desire for you to be growing in your faith? Talk about it.
4. How does growth take the boredom out of life?
5. What is going to be your personal motivation for wanting to grow in your faith?

2. What is Faith?

Let's start with the basics. Since we are going to be talking about faith throughout this book, it makes sense to be sure you as the reader, and I as the author, have a firm biblical grasp of what "faith" is. But before looking at some definitions, think about how you would define faith. What is your concept of faith? How would you explain it to a friend? Does faith mean to accept an idea without question? Is faith going to church, reading your Bible and praying? Have you thought about what it means to call yourself a "believer?"

My faith means everything to me. The decision to give my life to Christ at the age of 20 was the greatest accomplishment of my life. I love Christ and I love His church, but within the church I have met a few people with some strange ideas about faith; ideas that did not come from the Bible but more likely came from traditional patterns of thinking passed down through generations.

Listening to a few Bible class discussions on faith gives the impression that faith is the opposite of fact. “You can study the evidence, or you can live by faith.” “Those who need proof just don’t know how to accept things by faith.” Is it ungodly to seek plausible answers to the basic questions about the existence of God, the inerrancy of His Word and the resurrection of Christ? Some are unwilling to put their faith in Jesus until they have adequate answers to these types of questions. Does that mean their faith is not genuine. Faith is not the blind acceptance of unfounded fables. So here is our first definition of faith:

FAITH IS TRUST BASED ON PREVIOUS EVIDENCE.

Faith in God is about trust. Some need to see the evidence before they are willing to trust. Now, if you are one of those who needs your questions answered, let me begin with a caution. Don’t expect exhaustive evidence. There is nothing wrong with seeking a sensible reason for that which you are going to base your life upon, but not every question you have is going to be answered to your fullest satisfaction. Be reasonable. Like a court trial, you can find sufficient evidence on which you can base what you hold to be true. True faith is something that is tried and tested. It is based on reasonable evidence which supports a specific conclusion.

I have faith that if I put my hand on a hot stove, it will burn my hand. This faith is based on the evidence of past experiences which have led me to this conclusion. Personal embarrassment prevents me from relating all the reasons I hold this conviction, but suffice it to say, I know for a fact a stove will burn human skin. Do you need exhaustive evidence to come to the same conclusion? Do you have to experience it yourself or can you accept the testimony of eyewitnesses in this case?

My faith is based on intelligent reasoning of the evidence. I have seen (and felt) what a stove is capable of doing. Likewise, I have faith in God based on what I have seen Him do in my life and the lives of those around me. I have faith in Jesus because I have learned of His way of life and teaching and I agree with them. Where other ideologies have failed, Jesus' way of doing things fixes real life problems. Witnessing the transition of people's lives strengthens your faith in God. Being obedient to Christ and letting Him change you for the good also strengthens your faith. This is evidence which supports the faith we profess. Faith is the judgment that something stated is the truth.

After this basis of faith is confirmed, then the believer is capable of "stepping out on faith." In other words, after a pattern of rewarded trust in God has been established, a believer is capable of carrying out a biblical command without needing a guarantee of the outcome. We should not have to have a confirmed reward for doing what the Lord of Creation commands us to do. That truly is where faith comes in.

Once when three young Israelites were going to be executed by fire for not bowing to a king's golden idol they replied,

If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to rescue us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will rescue us out of your hand, O king.
- Daniel 3:17

Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego had faith, bold-unshakable-calm faith, that God would deliver them. Was it blind faith? No. Their trust in God was based on evidence of God's propensity for deliverance. They knew what the furnace was capable of,

but their confidence was in Jehovah's ability to suspend the laws of nature when it served His purpose to do so.

Stepping out on faith also means the believer's trust does not have to come with a guarantee of immediate reward.

But even if He does not, let it be known to you,
O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or
worship the golden statue that you have set up.
- Daniel 3:18

It didn't matter whether God was going to rescue them or not. These young men were loyal to God's pattern of righteous living even if it cost them their lives. That is genuine faith. That's the kind of faith I want. How about you?

FAITH IS THE ABSENCE OF DOUBT.

Doubt is the opposite of faith, so the more doubt you can overcome the stronger your faith will be. You can't make yourself believe something without addressing the issues you have doubts about. There's an old proverb that goes like this: "A man persuaded against his will is of the same persuasion still." You can be persuaded to do something against your will. You can make yourself do some things you ought to do but don't really want to do, but if you keep thinking in the back of your mind that it is all a waste of time or you disagree for some reason, is that truly faith? You may have changed your actions but until your mindset changes, you still have not acted in faith.

People change their diet all the time. They lose weight only to gain it all back later. If you want to lose weight and keep it off,

you must change your appetite. Learn to like the foods you should eat. The same with faith. If you want your faith to grow, focus on the areas you are weakest in, what you have the most doubts about and let Jesus turn your weaknesses into strengths.

In what area do you have the most doubts about with regard to your Christianity? When the doubts come into your mind, the problem is you begin to believe those doubts. When you believe your doubts, then you start doubting your beliefs. You need to doubt your doubts and then; after conquering those doubts, you will be free to believe your beliefs. (Did you get that? You may want to read it again.)

FAITH IS PUTTING YOUR FULL WEIGHT DOWN UPON SOMETHING.

A missionary working with a secluded tribe of natives was trying to teach them about Jesus. They had no translation of the Bible in their language, so the missionary set out to provide them with one. As he began putting the Bible into their words, he discovered that they did not have an equivalent for the word “faith” in their native tongue. He kept asking in different ways, but the whole concept of belief or faith was foreign to them which meant he had no way to finish his translation of the Bible.

One day while traveling through the forest they came to a bridge made from ropes of twisted grass. They had to make sure it was safe to cross so one unfortunate soul was coerced into testing the bridge by gradually putting more and more of his weight on the bridge. When he put his full weight on the bridge, they had a word for that. When the missionary heard it he thought, “Aha, that’s the word I’ve been looking for.” Their translation of the Bible reads something like this in John 2:11:

This beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples [put their full weight down upon] Him.

Like the bridge, some believers test God a little, then a little more, but never put their full weight down on Him. They give God only a part of their lives. They follow part of the Bible. Genuine faith is expressed in the old hymn, "I Surrender All." Until total control is surrendered into the hands of Jesus a sojourner is really not "Living by faith." [Another great hymn.] Faith is putting your full weight down, trusting Him completely. We need to be like another old hymn we sing: "None of Self and All of Thee."

FAITH IS THE CONVICTION OF A RELIGIOUS TRUTH.

Whatever happened to conviction? Where are the disciples of Jesus who are willing to endure all for the sake of the gospel because of their conviction? Paul told Timothy,

For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory.

- 2 Timothy 2:10

The Lord's church today needs people with conviction. God needs men and women with a passion for the cause of Christ. He has enough pew warmers already.

Think of it this way. In the church we have plenty of beliefs, but don't seem to have enough belief. There is nothing wrong with

beliefs. Beliefs are doctrines and wise is the Christian, and especially the church leader, who is guarded about doctrine, 1 Timothy 4:16. Hold firm to sound doctrine but let's release within the church a revival of belief, of faith, of conviction. God needs men and women who are not afraid to make sacrifices for the cause they believe in. Be both strong to believe and strong in your beliefs.

FAITH IS RELIANCE UPON CHRIST.

Whenever we worry about our problems, or we struggle trying to handle life in our own way, our lack of faith comes to the surface. It takes true faith to accept Jesus' invitation:

“Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened,
and I will give you rest.”

- Matthew 11:28

It is not easy to leave our worries at the foot of the cross and let the Lord guide us. Deep down we know that relying on Jesus, instead of our own wisdom, is the wisest way to handle our problems. But it is easier said than done, isn't it?

Everyone has something they rely on in a pinch. When times get tough or an important decision has to be made, each individual seeks out a source for reliable direction. What is yours? The world offers many attempts at guidance for life's problems: psychology and man's philosophy, eastern religions, humanism, drugs and alcohol and other methods of escape. You have free will to choose any option you care to. But relying on a source other than Christ results in a spiral of missed opportunities and

bad choices. Place **ALL** your faith in Christ. Rely on Him to guide your every step.

The Bible says in Hebrews 11:1, “Now faith is the certainty of things hoped for, a proof of things not seen.” Is faith a blind acceptance of things that deep down we do not honestly believe? No, it’s assurance, “certainty of things hoped for.” What do we as Christians hope for? I have the hope that God can change my life. That is why I came to Christ. If I were unsure about whether God could change me, I would be displaying a lack of faith.

Paul once wrote to the church in Corinth,

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?
- 1 Corinthians 6:9

He went on to list sins like fornication, homosexuality and drunkenness. Then he said, “Such were some of you;” 6:11. Notice that he uses the past tense “were.” That means they used to be involved in those sins, but they were not anymore. If God can rescue the Corinthians from such demoralizing sins, He can change me too. I can be sure of that.

I also need the assurance that God can change others. Do you have a member at your church who is constantly coming forward, asking for prayers; always having the same struggles? Have you ever said something like, “So-and-so is never going to change.” Think about how those words sound in the ears of Jesus. That is a faithless statement. Our faith demands that we

see people for what they can become and not merely for what they are now.

Paul taught us how to have faith during the slow transformation of others when he prayed for the Philippians.

For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will complete it by the day of Christ Jesus.
- Philippians 1:6

The church in Philippi had struggling Christians the same as we have today and yet Paul was “confident” in their spiritual growth. That confidence was not founded on the ability of people to change themselves, but rather on Jesus’ ability to “complete” (perfect) a penitent sinner. Jesus’ always follows through on the “good work” He is accomplishing in us.

If we are to be certain of what we hope for, going back to Hebrews 11:1, we need to be sure that life in Christ is the best life available to mankind. This is part of what it means to have faith. In Hebrews 11:6 we read: “And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for the one who comes to God must believe that He exists, and that He proves to be One who rewards those who seek Him.” We generally have no problem believing that God exists, but do you believe that God “rewards those who seek Him?”

Faith involves understanding that there is a God who is greater than any of our problems. Even though we will have rough times, God is steadily improving the lives of those who are

steadily moving closer to Him. In the last chapter we explored Matthew 17:20

“if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move.”

Hebrews 5:12 says,

For though by this time you ought to be teachers.

Both of these passages infer that God intended for faith to be a continually increasing experience. If we continually grow in our faith like we are supposed to then we are continually growing closer to God and God is continually rewarding those who seek Him. That means life in Christ gets steadily better and better. This is one of the many assurances we have being in Christ Jesus. You can put your faith in that promise.

Faith is “the proof of things not seen.” Hebrews 11:1. Having faith means I believe there is a realm that cannot be seen. Not only are we to acknowledge the spiritual domain, we are to be convicted, to know with certainty that our eyes do not have to behold something in order for it to exist.

Jesus used the illustration of the wind in John 3:8 when He was trying to help Nicodemus understand the concept of being born of the water and the Spirit.

The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.
- John 3:8

We cannot see the wind. We can only see the effects of the wind. Wind is something we cannot see. Does that mean the wind doesn't exist? Likewise, we cannot see God, but we can see His effect in the world and the evidence of His creation and, therefore, believe. We cannot see love. That does not mean you are a simpleton if you believe in the existence of love. It is logical and reasonable to believe in something unseen.

Christian, you can be confident there is a God in heaven who cares about you personally. This same God inspired men to write the 66 books that make up our Bible and so you can trust what it says as well. The Holy Bible describes an eternal dwelling prepared for us, which we are not able to see with our eyes right now, but we can be certain of its existence.

This Bible also describes an evil force called Satan, who is bent on luring you away from God. You cannot see him either, but hopefully you have the conviction that he is as real as the people around you whom you can see. If we do not believe in Satan, we make a critical tactical error in our war against evil. Satan is very real and active in this world today. The evidence of that is abundant. Have faith. Believe in the unseen.

There you have it. Faith is trust based on prior evidence, the absence of doubt, putting your full weight down upon God, the conviction of religious truth and reliance upon Christ. By faith we have certainty of the things we hope for and proof about the things we cannot see. Faith exists in each Christian but in various amounts. Some have more than others and there is a distinct and biblical way to trace the evolvment of our spirituality. In the next chapter you will learn the basic stages of spiritual growth.

NOTES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Did you have a good biblical concept of what faith truly is before you read this chapter?
2. If not, do you have any idea how your erroneous concept of faith got started and can you see any impact it has had on your walk with God?
3. Do you see the connection between faith and conviction?
4. Do you struggle with having faith in something you cannot see or touch?
5. In your own words, what is faith?

3.

What are the Different Levels of Faith?

How long have you been a Christian? One year? Ten years? Fifty years? Each passing year should bring a greater amount of spiritual maturity, but that is no more automatic than it is with physical or emotional maturity. This world is populated with people who keep having birthdays but they never really grow up? There are physiological explanations for stunted physical growth. It could be poor care or a lack of proper nourishment. Emotional growth also has genetic explanations but may be the result of the lack of, or lazy avoidance of, the processes that lead to adulthood.

Spiritual retardation does not have any physiological excuses. Spiritual maturity is obtained through following the truth of God's Word plain and simple.

But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

- Hebrews 5:14

Any Christian who wants to grow in their faith is free to put into practice the principles taught in the Bible for developing greater faith. All one has to do is learn and apply what the Bible says. So the big question is, do you have the desire to grow up in your faith?

Beginning with this chapter you will learn the fundamentals of the progressive levels of faith. But it is up to you to apply the things you learn.

But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers,

- James 1:22

This study is all for naught if you do not put to use the insights learned from the scriptures we will be studying.

As Christians growing in our walk with the Lord, there are basically five levels of faith that we progress through. Think of them as stages of life. We start with infancy and grow into the toddler stage; then there is preadolescence, adolescence, etc. In the same way we pass through various stages of our faith as we grow up spiritually.

There are five basic levels of faith that we as Christians grow through. It would be helpful if you memorized these five levels since we will be talking about them throughout the book. These five levels are Imitating Faith, Affiliating Faith, Searching Faith, Solidifying Faith and Mature Faith.

The names of these levels are assigned for description only. They do not appear in the Bible, except for “mature” faith, but having a consistent terminology is how we can ensure we are saying and hearing the same thing. Learn the names of each level. As you are doing so, I will show you the scriptural basis for all five of them. Then in the proceeding chapters we can examine each level in greater detail.

The most basic level of faith is:

LEVEL 1

Imitating Faith

Those with Imitating Faith are learning by following the example of others. They see and do. They really don't understand the whys and wherefores. They watch and imitate. This is the faith of a child wanting to take the Lord's Supper because he sees others doing it, wanting to put money in the offering plate because others do. This is faith, but it is faith at its most unpretentious level.

Each of these levels of faith I intend to show you through biblical examples, but Imitating Faith is a difficult one to find in the Bible. It is essentially a child's faith. The Bible does not go into detail about the personal lives of children. Rarely would an

adult start at this level, but if anyone in the Bible exhibited such immature qualities, it was Simon the Sorcerer.

Are you familiar with the account in Acts 8 of how Simon the Sorcerer became a follower of Christ? While in Samaria Simon had the opportunity to hear Philip preach and watch him perform miracles. After watching Philip baptize several of the Samaritans into Christ the text says, “Now even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip,” Acts 8:13.

Simon believed the gospel. He was baptized into Christ, but he had much to learn. His faith was unstable and undeveloped. Simon appears not to have fully understood the driving motivation behind Christian behavior, because later in the text when Peter and John were imparting the miraculous manifestations of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of their hands, Simon offered to pay them for it.

Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, saying, “Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”

- Acts 8:18-19

His faith was imitating at this point. He did not fully understand what was going on. He saw what the apostles did and wanted to copy it.

The main distinction between Imitating and Affiliating Faith is that with Imitating Faith there is hardly any understanding of

the purpose behind the actions. Those with Imitating Faith do not fully grasp why Christians do the things they do. Imitating believers just watch and do what others are doing.

Clearly Simon did not understand what he was doing, or he would not have made such an audacious request, one for which Peter rebuked him strongly in Acts 8:20-23.

But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could acquire the gift of God with money!”

Simon had a very simple faith. I guess you could say he was the original “Simple Simon.” His faith was still faith, but it was faith at its most rudimentary level.

LEVEL 2

Affiliating Faith

At this level there is a basic understanding of why things are done, but it is still a copycat faith. It is faith based on who one affiliates with, rather than being based on the individual’s own seeking process. The faith is not really owned; it is borrowed from others. Herein lies the problem with Affiliating Faith. It is weak faith. The roots don’t go deep enough because listening to and accepting what others are saying does not provide enough footing for deep dependence on God. There is always the hesitation, the shadow of doubt, that prevents such a believer from turning loose and trusting God whole-heartedly.

Affiliating Faith is easy enough to see in the first century Christians. One of the better examples is in the Gospel of John. As a result of conversing with Christ about living water in

chapter four, the Samaritan woman came to believe Jesus was indeed the Messiah, sent from God. This woman returned to her village to tell her family and friends about Jesus. They acquired enough faith through their affiliation with her that they were willing to investigate Jesus for themselves. She led them to Christ through her affiliation with them, but once they met Christ personally the text says,

“It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world.”

- John 4:42

The town’s people came to Christ through their affiliation with the Samaritan woman. Affiliating Faith is the best way to lead someone to Christ. You most likely came to Christ through your affiliation with a parent, friend, teacher or preacher. There is nothing wrong with coming to Christ on this level, but it is important that we do not stay at this immature stage of faith our whole lives. The Samaritan townspeople went on to search out the basis for their faith. They grew to know Christ firsthand instead of relying on what someone else told them.

Too many Christians find themselves trapped in Affiliating Faith. The majority of church attenders are at the affiliative level. They are content with having others tell them what to believe. Centuries of this lazy approach to Christianity have resulted in hundreds of splintered groups naming themselves with different denominational names, dividing what Christ intended as one church teaching one faith, Ephesians 4:4-5.

Allow me to illustrate this condition for you. Imagine that you are an Affiliate Believer tied with an imaginary rope to another believer who is in turn tied to Christ. It is okay to come to Christ through an affiliation with someone connected to Christ. Almost all of us do. But as long as you stay in this position, there is a buffer between you and Jesus keeping you from having a deep personal relationship with the Savior. Everything you learn about Jesus is filtered through the one you affiliate with. The believer between you and Jesus cannot grow their own faith very well because they have to concentrate on the tie they have with you.

Helping another grow in their faith is, in itself, a growing experience, but the in-between disciple has the added responsibility of making sure you are nourished and neglects or gives less attention to their own personal relationship with Christ. (This is what causes burn-out with church leaders.) No doubt, that person should focus on you for a time until you are mature enough to stand on your own, but it is unhealthy when the condition becomes permanent.

This in-between disciple also cannot reach out to others as well because they are still “tied down” spoon-feeding you. You are also not likely to reach out to others either because you are not closely tied to Jesus. (Affiliating Believers are moderately evangelistic at best. Few share their faith at all.)

There is added danger if the in-between believer moves away, passes away or worse of all, falls away. You are going to have a struggle not to fall away yourself. Have you ever seen a preacher leave a congregation and several members stop attending and/or completely lose their faith?

Their relationship with God was dependent on their affiliation with the preacher. Christians should not have their relationships with Christ dependent on the spiritual wellbeing of others, no matter who it is. Each one should search out his or her own faith. Affiliate believers need to be pressing on to deeper faith and making sure they are connected directly to Christ.

LEVEL 3

Searching Faith

This is when we reach the point where we start investigating and seeking out what we believe. Searching Faith is reaching that level of maturity where we can no longer be content believing something because others do. There is a developed drive to search and own our faith for ourselves. Searching Faith breaks us out of the comfort zone because we are struggling to find out why we believe what we believe.

Many biblical characters exemplify Searching Faith. One of the most obvious examples is the Bereans. The Bereans in Acts 17 were commended because

they received the word with great eagerness,
examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these
things were so.
- Acts 17:11b

This is the very definition of Searching Faith. Their level of maturity was such that they did not base their faith merely on the affiliation they had with Paul and Silas. They pursued the doctrine of Christianity to the point it became their very own.

Young Christians will do this out of sheer love for Christ, if we allow them to. The problem is Searching Faith is often squelched by well-intentioned church peers and parents. Searching Faith looks like doubt because the young believer is questioning long-held beliefs. But if they are not allowed to search, they will resort to one of three options.

They may try to find another church where they can search out their faith. Considering some of the bizarre things that are done in the name of Christianity, for a young Christian to go “church hopping” is a frightening thought. Some religious groups may allow them the flexibility to believe what they want to believe, but without the guidance to stay within the safe borders of God’s Word. Some denominations have written doctrines and creeds that are not up for discussion as to whether they align with the Word of God. The searching process will not be fostered in that environment.

If not encouraged to search, some might give up and settle for long-term Affiliating Faith. Our church buildings are full of Christians in this condition. Their faith is stagnant and their religion brings them very little joy. God never intended for His children to remain in this premature stage indefinitely.

The third and worst potential response is they may abandon their faith altogether. You may know someone who was discouraged from developing their faith. Eventually they gave up trying. It was most likely a slow dimming of their gospel light, rather than a quick decision to leave. Whether fast or slow, today the light is out; they no longer serve and worship God.

None of these choices are good ones. That is why it is essential that we learn how to distinguish Searching Faith from spiritual digression and provide each Christian in our congregation with the environment to grow, grow, grow. The message the Lord's church needs to send to its members is that our assemblies are the place to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling." Philippians 2:12.

LEVEL 4

Solidifying Faith

There comes a point where the believer has searched through all the evidence and needs to piece the findings together. This does not mark the end of searching. As Christians, we will be searching the rest of our lives as far as discovering more about Christ, His kingdom and His Word. But there is a crucial stage of growth between Searching and Mature Faith where our system of beliefs needs to formulate stability.

As the search for answers progresses, we start arriving at some conclusions about what we believe and our faith begins to solidify. It is possible to get stuck at Searching Faith just like Affiliating Faith. You can search and search for a lifetime, but at some point you have to come to a decision. Do I believe it or not? Am I going to abide by this doctrine or has my research led me to the conclusion that it is false. Solidifying your faith is essential to spiritual growth. There has to be a point where we plant the tent peg and erect the tent of our personal world view.

This process of drawing conclusions is different from the initial decision to come to Christ and receive His cleansing through the waters of baptism. That is certainly an act of faith. The

acceptance of the Lordship of Jesus and belief in Him as the Savior is essential to the beginning of the faith journey, but Bible characters also display a period of congealing of the wisdom gained through examining the gospel, which leads to maturity.

Timothy is a worthy example of Solidifying Faith. His Searching resulted in a Solidifying of his understanding of who God was and what He wanted from him. Under the guidance of Paul, Timothy never stopped searching out the truths of God's Word. But during his faith journey he pieced together the evidence before him, determining what he would believe, practice and preach to the church in Ephesus. His faith was not quite mature, but he had many godly attributes.

Timothy's faith was sincere. Paul commends him for it:

For I am mindful of the sincere faith within you, which first dwelled in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am sure that it is in you as well.

- 2 Timothy 1:5

Paul exhorts him to "kindle afresh" his spiritual gift.

For this reason I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

- 2 Timothy 1:6

We must also put kindling on our faith to increase the flame.

The spiritual gift referred to here was a miraculous gift received by the laying on of the Apostle Paul's hands. There were many miraculous gifts mentioned in scripture. One of them was faith. "... to another faith by the same Spirit," 1 Corinthians 12:9. Imagine receiving a miraculous endowment of faith, divinely bestowed upon you by the Creator. Miraculous faith, faith beyond what is normally experienced. What a gift it would be to have faith beyond what one might attain by normal investigation. Just to be clear, I am not inferring faith was Timothy's gift. The text in 2 Timothy does not say what his gift was but it needed to be increased like a fire, "kindle afresh" by adding small dry sticks and blowing in the right place and in the right amount.

Anyone who has tried to ignite a piece of paper with a dashboard cigarette lighter can relate to Paul's illustration. The paper just smokes and smolders until you fan it or blow on it. Timothy had been searching out his faith under the careful tutelage of Paul, but now it was time to focus his search and piece together evidences he had uncovered. It was time to solidify his faith. There are other biblical examples we will look at later on, but for now, when you think of Solidifying Faith, think of Timothy.

LEVEL 5

Mature Faith

This should be the goal of every Christian. As we will see in later chapters, Mature Faith does not mean that one is "sinlessly" perfect. It is simply reaching that level of trust where nothing or no one can dissuade you from doing the will of the Lord.

For an example of Mature Faith, there are a number of biblical characters in both the Old and New testaments we could consider. But Paul is one of the easiest to identify with because we can see how his faith increased from the day of his conversion. His faith grew like a mustard seed to the point he was fully mature.

Toward the end of Paul's life when he was under arrest and being taken by ship to Rome to stand trial, the ship he was on was caught in a furious storm that lasted several days. Everyone on the ship lost hope of surviving, except Paul.

He reassured the others saying,

For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong, whom I also serve, came to me, saying, "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has graciously granted you all those who are sailing with you."

- Acts 27:23-24

The confidence with which Paul faced tribulation tells us the maturity level of his faith. This is what grownup faith looks like.

Zero in on his statement about "the God to whom I belong, whom I also serve." Paul knew who he belonged to and whom he was serving. While most who call themselves Christians claim to belong to God, the actions and choices of the individual can send a contrary message. Mature faith is when one has unwavering loyalty to Jesus, confirmed day in and day out by a righteous lifestyle. Paul was not perfect, but nothing was going

to dissuade him from obeying his Master. Paul is a great example of Mature Faith.

These five levels of faith will be the backbone of the following chapters. It would be wise for you to take a few minutes to memorize them and learn the basic meaning of each one. Have someone quiz you to ensure you know all five levels and find someone to discuss how the stages of faith are playing out in your life in a practical way.

If you look through the scriptures, you will find many other examples. In your daily Bible reading, be aware of the maturing faith of those you read about. The more you work with this model the more comfortable it will become and the more you will be able to accomplish with it in helping yourself and helping others progress toward deeper faith. Continually refer back to your motivation for doing this study (chapter 1). How much you get out of this study will depend on how motivated you are to deepen your relationship with your Lord and Savior. Get fired up. It's time to unleash for faith potential.

NOTES

Lined area for taking notes, consisting of 18 horizontal lines.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Practice saying the five levels of faith out loud until you can say them all without looking at the book.
2. What level of faith do you believe you are at right now?
3. Have you ever been discouraged from searching out your faith or have you ever discouraged someone else from searching?
4. If you have children, how can you encourage them to search out their own convictions without them drifting away from Christ?
5. Is it possible to be at different levels of faith in different aspects of your Christianity at the same time?

4.

How do I Graduate from Imitating Faith?

What are we dealing with when it comes to **Imitating Faith**? As we witnessed in the example of Simon the Sorcerer, it is possible for an adult to have a very immature level of faith, but for the most part Imitating Faith belongs to the children. Most everyone reading this book will not be at the Imitating Faith level, but your children might be or other children you know. So, let's take a chapter to look at how to assist a child during this stage of faith.

Children learn by watching and imitating. If your child's faith is essentially the replication of what he/she sees and hears, you as an adult should give careful attention to the Christianity you are modeling and proclaiming in their hearing. As a parent, you have the immense responsibility of guiding your son or daughter along their own faith journey. You are in a greater position than anyone to influence your child to dedicate their life to Christ.

That is both thrilling and humbling at the same time. Hopefully you want to do the best you can as a parent, teacher or whatever capacity you may find yourself in when working with children.

During the stage of Imitating Faith, here are four ways you can help a young one get off to a good start in their relationship with Jesus.

1. WATCH FOR OPPORTUNITIES TO TEACH THEM MORAL VALUES.

Parenting is about instilling strong Christian values in our children rather than merely controlling their personal conduct. You can manipulate behavior with enough discipline, but until children understand the moral reason for better behavior, they will behave only long enough to avoid punishment. Do not just teach them what is right and wrong; teach them WHY it is right or wrong.

Teach little ones the fundamentals of Christianity so that they are participants in the worship service instead of spectators. Children are naturally curious. When they want to know about the Lord's Supper tell them what it means and why we partake of this memorial. Talk to them about when they will be mature enough to take the emblems along with the rest of the congregation.

Practice "church" at home. Get one of the crackers and some grape juice and let them taste it. Don't tell them, "You can't take this till you get baptized." If you do, they'll want to get baptized just so they can take the Lord's Supper and that is not a good reason to get baptized. Do as much as you can to help them understand what we are doing and why.

Teach them the hymns and encourage them to sing along in worship. Give them a warm smile when you see them singing with the church. Explain the offering and allow them to put an amount of money in the plate, preferably a portion of what they have earned themselves.

Teach them to pray, to talk to God in their own words, to bow their heads and join in the public prayers. Teach them to listen to the sermons and Bible classes and talk to them about what they learned from each message. Look for opportunities to teach them about the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

Long ago, we were having breakfast one morning with our 10-year-old son. He was telling us the latest rumors about who liked who at school. He had been asked to pass notes back and forth for those too shy to talk face to face. In answer to his questions, we were able to talk with him about the problems we knew about when kids started dating at too early of an age. We talked about gossip and how listening was as wrong as repeating derogatory things about others. We read some Proverbs that talk about gossip and discussed them together, keeping it positive the whole time. We were not reprimanding him for anything. He didn't do anything wrong.

We commended him for wanting to help others but also talked about the risk of being the middle person in any relationship and helped him to see how it is best to let people deliver their own messages. Over breakfast an opportunity arose to teach our son godly life skills. We shared with him what the Bible teaches about these and other topics and tried to nurture his faith and encouraged him to talk to us about any other questions he might have. Teachable moments like that are so

precious. Be prepared to make the most of the time you have with a child when teachable moments pop up.

2. FOCUS ON LEARNING RATHER THAN TEACHING.

The education of your child does not depend so much on how well you are teaching them. It depends on how well they are learning. Communication is not what you say but what they hear. Since we are talking about communicating FAITH to a child, the most important attribute they will ever acquire, this should be done with the utmost care. Study your child's learning strengths and tailor your education methods to fit your child. Learn which ways help your child to learn better.

Some learn better by hearing. Some do better if they see or experience a message. Share your findings with your child's Bible class teachers and ask them if they would help your child to get more out of each lesson by implementing these techniques. Communicate to your child that Jesus means everything to you. If you are sincere, they will get the message.

3. NURTURE YOUR CHILD'S NATURAL HUNGER FOR LEARNING GOD'S WORD.

Every child grows up with a curiosity about where they came from and why they are here. Ecclesiastes 3:11 explains that God has placed eternity in the heart of each individual.

He has made everything appropriate in its time.
He has also set eternity in their heart.

We are born knowing there is more to life than just this world. If you place the truth about God through His Word before your

child, they will feast on its wisdom. They will devour it with a desire for more.

Never before have so many tools been available for parents and teachers to teach children the Bible. Read the Bible together with your children. Watch movies based on the Bible and discuss them with each other. Find a good dramatized recorded version of the Bible and listen to it for family night once a week or more often if you can. Give your child the gift of a knowledge of God's Word. When they know the Word for themselves their faith has the most essential tool it needs for growth.

So faith comes from hearing,
and hearing by the word of Christ.
- Romans 10:17

4. MAKE WORSHIP SERVICES AS ENJOYABLE AS POSSIBLE.

How many people do you know who don't want to go to church because when they were young their parents "made them go"? What they mean is that church was a drudgery. Church meant fussing around Sunday morning trying to get ready. It was a hassle getting there and they couldn't wait to leave when it was over. It was a place where they had to sit still on hard pews with their eyes facing forward all the time; dull and uneventful. Does church really have to be that way for children?

Matthew 22:2 says,

“The kingdom of heaven is like a king who held a wedding feast for his son.”

Jesus is not talking about heaven here. He is describing the kingdom of people who are going to heaven. He is describing the kingdom, which is made up of everyone who is subject to the king. That's us, Christians. And when Christians get together to worship the King it should be a joyful occasion like a great wedding feast. Christianity should be enjoyed, not endured. Is your child getting that message or are they getting another message entirely?

Teach your children to participate in the singing and prayer. Doing so will lend meaning and purpose to what they are doing. Let them know that church is for them too. You do not want your child to be unruly and distracting to others but allow them some leeway whenever possible to change positions and look around moderately at what others are doing. Find ways to make the church service a positive experience for your child and nurture their desire to know God for themselves.

Think of it this way. Your child has Imitating Faith. They are going to imitate you whether you want them to or not. The best way for them to learn Christianity is if they see it modeled in you. Teaching our children about God is one of the most important jobs we have in the Lord's church. These young souls are so precious. If we want them to carry on the Lord's work after we are gone, we must show them that Christianity is a gift they can treasure for a lifetime.

NOTES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the difference between Imitating Faith and Affiliating Faith?
2. Have you recently had an opportunity to teach a child something about your faith? How did you handle it?
3. If you have children, would you say your child learns best by seeing, hearing or experiencing a concept?
How can you use this knowledge to help them learn?
4. What can you do to help your child learn God's Word?
5. Do the children in your congregation enjoy going to church? What can you do to make it more enjoyable without being disruptive to other members?

5.

How to Recognize Affiliating Faith

Affiliation. You have affiliation with those you associate with frequently. When we first start to formulate our faith, those we are closely connected to have a major impact on the things we believe.

In chapter three we looked at a biblical example of **Affiliating Faith** from John 4. It was the town's people, whom the Samaritan woman led to Jesus through their relationship with her. In this chapter we will go into more detail about how to identify this level of faith in yourself and in others.

Determining Affiliating Faith within yourself should be easy enough to do. If you believe what you believe because others believe it, you have Affiliating Faith. All it takes is some honesty with yourself. That's the hard part. Admitting your faith is based on what has been passed down to you by your peers. But if you can tell yourself the truth you can know whether you are an Affiliate believer or not. Have you truly searched out for

yourself the beliefs you currently hold, or do you believe what you do because of what others have told you? That is the acid test.

It is rather easy to tell if you have Affiliating Faith. But seeing Affiliating Faith in other believers is more arduous because we have to rely on external indicators. Jesus could see into people's hearts and know what degree of faith each had. You and I do not know what is in people's hearts. We have to rely on the peripheral signs to determine where another disciple is in their walk with God. For that reason, we need to learn the external indicators of Affiliating Faith.

A word of caution before we learn these indicators. There is a potential danger with learning this terminology and relating it to members of your congregation, that your motive could be wrong. What are you going to do with the skill I am about to teach you? Please do not use these skills to "pigeon-hole" church members. Do not take the levels of faith you are learning and use them to categorize people by over-simplifying their walk with God.

There are two problems with doing that. First, faith is not that simple and second, people do not like being labeled. The purpose of this material is to enable church leaders (in particular) to know where the members, over whom they have influence, stand regarding their faith. Please use this for good and not for harm. Learn to recognize Affiliating believers so that you can give them some encouragement and guide them to search out their faith.

There are three basic external signs that help us to recognize Affiliating Faith in one of Jesus' followers.

SIGN #1

Monotonous prayer

The way a person prays and the things he or she prays for says a lot about their faith. Affiliate believers lack freshness and spontaneity in their conversation with the Creator. Their prayers are repetitious to the point you could probably mouth what they are going to say next right along with them.

You can tell by listening to them pray that their walk with God lacks depth and intimacy. Jesus told us,

“And when you are praying, do not use thoughtless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.”

- Matthew 6:7

The Greek word for “repetition” means babbling, to utter empty words, vain repetitions, to repeat the same thing over and over. Jesus warned us not to do this and yet some denominations today encourage repetitious prayer to the detriment of their members. They teach rote sayings to be mindlessly uttered during a worship service or in individual prayer. Doing so hinders the worshipper from having a more personal relationship with the Father. God doesn’t want to hear the same thing a hundred times with no thought behind what is being said.

In this same passage some have taken the example prayer that Jesus gave to us, known as the Lord’s Prayer, and used it for what Jesus just warned against. Jesus said in Matthew 6:9,

“This, then, is HOW you should pray,” [emphasis mine], not, “This, then, is WHAT you should pray.” Memorizing Jesus’ prayer is fine but repeating it over and over to God does not make any sense. God doesn’t need to hear it over and over. He wants to hear our personal, sincere thoughts. Prayer is just talking to God.

Since Affiliative believers are not searching out a deeper relationship with the Father, they prefer memorized prayers and you can tell as you listen that they are relying on what is commonly prayed by those around them. Affiliating believers are also not likely to pray about things that are beyond the realm of human possibility. Their faith is often too shallow to ask God to do something that is supernatural. They pray for things that, given time, are likely to happen naturally.

Now, here is where the warning about pigeon-holing someone comes in. If you hear a brother leading a prayer during worship and you notice he has a tendency to say the same things each time, it does not automatically mean he has Affiliating Faith. It is not as easy as it looks to get up and lead prayer in front of the whole congregation, and if the one doing the praying is nervous, it is natural to fall back on what is familiar. Cut him a little slack.

It is good to encourage prayer leaders not to be vainly repetitious when praying in front of the congregation. Unfortunately, when recruiting those who serve during worship, most congregations are just glad there is someone willing to serve in each capacity. Ideally, prayer leaders should have spiritual maturity and should lead a heart-felt prayer, but that doesn’t always happen. As a general rule, the way an individual talks to God can tell you quite a bit about that person’s relationship with Him.

SIGN #2

Resistance to change

That means change of any kind. Any mature Christian will resist changes that are unscriptural, but Christians whose faith is based on affiliation are caught in a trap of familiarity. Even scripturally sound change appears as a threat and the Affiliating Faith members will be opposed to change even if it is for the good of the congregation. They cannot differentiate between righteous change and unrighteous.

But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to distinguish between good and evil.
- Hebrews 5:14

Jesus told the Pharisees that you cannot pour new wine into old wineskins, Mark 2:22. When Jesus started changing the way things were done in Israel, the Pharisees were the primary force that tried to stop Him. Guess what kind of faith the Pharisees had. The system by which the Pharisees received their training fits the description of Affiliating Faith.

Every Pharisee went through rigorous training under a faculty of Jewish scholars known as the Tannaim. Rabbinical oral traditions had been passed down and recorded in scrolls known as the Mishnah. The Pharisees were taught from the Mishnah rather than directly from God's Word. They didn't search the scriptures for themselves. If the Pharisees had searched the scriptures, they would have recognized Jesus as the coming Messiah and welcomed His changes. Some, like Nicodemus, actually did search and discover the false doctrines ascribed to

the Messiah. Most of them did not. They stayed at Affiliating Faith. They saw Jesus' teaching as a contradiction to their long-held traditions and opposed His changes.

In the same way, Affiliate believers in our day oppose change of any kind. Why? Because they have not studied through what they believe thoroughly enough to be comfortable with any variance from the norm. If you want to find out who has Affiliating Faith in your congregation, just change the order of the worship service. Have four prayers instead of three. Have the Lord's Supper after the sermon instead of before or vice versa. Announce that next Sunday the congregation is meeting at 3:00 in the afternoon instead of 11:00 in the morning.

None of these are unscriptural changes, but those with Affiliating Faith are less likely to believe that. The Christians who have searched out their faith will acknowledge that the change is biblical and may oppose it for some other reason. The Affiliate Christian will not be able to give a scriptural objection to the change but will oppose it anyway. You will soon find out who knows why they believe the things they believe.

SIGN #3

Canned comments

Here are some examples of canned comments to common church questions.

“What is a parable?” “An earthly story with a heavenly meaning.”

“What is faith?” “The evidence of things hoped for; the assurance of things not seen.”

“What is the gospel?” “The death, burial and resurrection.”

“What is hope?” “Desire plus expectation.”

Affiliate believers rely on regurgitated answers to typical Bible questions because for them, no searching is taking place outside of the church assemblies. Bible learning in church assemblies (class and worship) is where their affiliative foundation lies.

Those with Affiliating Faith will frequently say things like, “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” “We speak where the Bible speaks and we are silent where the Bible is silent.” “Lord willing and the Creek don’t rise.” “Separate and apart from the Lord’s Supper.”

These canned sayings are correct. There is nothing unscriptural about any of these, but they can be mindlessly repeated without any real learning taking place. It is like a student in school who memorizes the answers just long enough to write them on a test and then forgets about it. No learning is taking place.

Those with more mature faith are able to come up with freshly insightful comments in the class setting. If you want to find out who has Affiliating Faith just listen. By listening to the comments that are made in Bible classes and group Bible studies you can tell who is spending time in God's Word strengthening their relationship with the Creator, and who is merely repeating what they hear others saying.

These three indicators are nothing more than indicators. They indicate who MIGHT have Affiliating Faith, but they can be helpful in identifying which church members need encouragement to search out their faith. This skill can be productive but, it can also be detrimental if you use it the wrong way. Let me warn you one more time. Whatever you do, do not exploit this information by branding or pigeon-holing people.

This instruction is not designed to give you labels to use to faction the church. I am teaching you this terminology so that you will be equipped to enhance your own spirituality. Work on your own faith first. Make sure the log is out of your own eye. Then you can assist others in growing their faith. Working with others on spiritual growth requires a constant evaluation of our own motives. Use this knowledge to do good and not harm.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you know whether you have Affiliating Faith or not?
2. What are the three outward signs that someone you are working with might have Affiliating Faith?
3. What kind of faith did the Pharisees have?
4. Why do Affiliating believers resist change?
5. Without looking, can you list the five different levels of faith?

6.

How do I Acquire Searching Faith?

For as long as you have been a Christian, you have been counseled to go to church, read your Bible, pray, and have fellowship with others in the kingdom. These are good habits for life, but it is so crucial for us to not only know the right things we should be doing but also the reason for doing them.

Understanding the process and importance of faith development provides you with an incentive for forming these good habits. Your faith needs to be growing. Remember your motivation that we talked about in the first chapter. God wants you to grow. Know why you want to grow in your faith.

It is not enough just to say you have faith. The Jews that Jesus spoke to in John 8:31 believed in Him:

“So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, ‘If you continue in My word, then you are truly My disciples;’”

By using the word “if,” Jesus inferred that they were not continuing in His word and not yet disciples of His although they believed in Him.

In the next verse He further explains, “and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Note His use of the future tense. In the future they would know the truth. That meant they did not have the truth yet. In the future, the truth would set them free. Implication: they were not free yet.

These Jews understood fully Jesus’ point that they were not freed by the truth yet and they had objections about it in verse 33. “We are Abraham's descendants” ... “how is it that You say, 'You will become free'?” The Jews were thinking of physical bondage, but Jesus was speaking of freedom from sin and said so in verse 34: “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.” He was offering to set them free from their slavery to sin, “yet you are seeking to kill Me, because My word has no place in you.” 8:37.

These Jews believed in Jesus. They had faith, but when He admonished them to search out the truth and know it, they rejected the deeper faith He was offering and wanted to kill him. What happened to their “faith?”

They believed Jesus was the Messiah, but did not trust Him enough to accept His path of truth. They didn’t want to break out of their comfort zones and find out the truth about how shallow their relationship with God truly was. Consequently, they never experienced the freedom that comes from knowing the truth, v. 32.

Are there people today who believe in Christ, but are not saved because their lack of faith is preventing them from fully accepting the truth? You know the answer. This spiritual condition is not only probable, it's unexceptional. Is this the condition you find yourself in today? It may be time for you to venture out on the limb and take a closer look at where you are at in your walk with God. You may have faith, but have you ever searched out your faith and owned it for yourself?

Many honest Christians will come to realize they have Affiliating Faith. It's hard to admit they have never searched out their own system of beliefs, but it is often true. Rather they base their beliefs on doctrine received from others.

If you have come to realize your faith is most likely Affiliating Faith than it is time to move on to a higher spiritual plain. Here are steps you can take to graduate to that next echelon, Searching Faith. First ask yourself three questions.

1. Put foremost in your mind the person who has had the greatest impact on you spiritually. It could be a church leader, a parent, a spouse, the person who led you to Christ... This should be someone you believe to have rock-solid faith. Do not read any further until you have a specific person in mind.

Now ask yourself, **"If this person stopped coming to church, would I keep going?"** Perhaps it is inconceivable to you that this person could walk away from the Lord, but that's not the point. If they did lose their conviction to follow God, could you go on without them? As unthinkable as this might sound, you have to put yourself in a position so that your relationship with Jesus is not dependent on the spiritual well-being of any other individual.

That doesn't mean you don't need other Christians involved in your life. You and I do need each other, or God would not have created the church. But as long as your walk with God depends on how well another soul's walk with God is going, you are at risk of losing your faith.

What was Christ trying to make us understand when He said,

“If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple”
- Luke 14:26

Jesus certainly did not mean we must despise or look down on our family members, which is part of what our English word “hate” means. No, the word the Holy Spirit inspired Luke to use here refers to a comparison of relationship.

If you want to be a disciple of Christ, He needs to be loved by you far above all other relationships in your life. If you do not make that commitment, Jesus Himself says you cannot be His disciple, period. It won't work. We appreciate the affiliations we have within the Lord's body, but in order to have Searching Faith you have to be willing to go on with or without the support of others. Prepare yourself to press forward no matter what others may do.

2. Ask yourself this question: **“I know what I believe, but do I know why I believe it?”** Have you honestly thought through what your beliefs are based on? Coming to Christ, you received instruction through some type of affiliation but now that you are older in the Lord it is time to search God's Word and make

God's Word what your belief system is based on. Until you are willing to examine the doctrines you hold to and own them for yourself, you will continue to have Affiliating Faith.

3. Ask yourself, **“Am I willing to change what I believe if the Bible says differently?”** Our own stubborn pride is what prevents us from growing up spiritually. We hate to admit when we are wrong. If you are confident that God's Word is right and it contradicts what you believe, then guess what? You need a faith lift. Either the Bible needs to change or what you believe needs to change, and the Bible is not going to change.

It's time to take a Berean approach to your faith.

Now these people [the Bereans] were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.

- Acts 17:11

The Berean progression of Searching Faith means you search the Scriptures humbly admitting you could be wrong about traditions you have long held to be true. You don't have to abandon all that you believe and start over. Just decide that nothing is sacred except the Holy Word and that alone must be the determining factor for what you believe.

After you have dealt with these three questions, you are ready to start moving forward in your Searching Faith. The greatest single thing you could do to strengthen your faith is to learn to share it with others. There is no better way to get young

Christians to grow than by encouraging them to talk to others about Christ. There is nothing that gets older Christians pumped up and excited about Jesus as much as when they extend to others the opportunity to know Christ. Whether you are a young Christian or you have been a Christian for quite some time, you need to be sharing your faith.

When Paul was spiritually nurturing the faith of his young comrade Philemon, he told him,

I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.

- Philemon 1:6 NIV

When we share what we believe with others, we often find ourselves having to confirm our beliefs to those we are studying with. That causes us to search for ourselves the things we believe.

When I was a young Christian in college I was trying to reach out to a classmate and encourage him to come to church with me. He told me that he believed God was in his heart, and that he didn't need to go to church to worship God. I really didn't have a good answer for him at the time. I had to go back to God's Word and search out the purpose of attending church services, and the next time that subject came up I was prepared to explain from scripture why assembling with God's family was so important.

Sharing your faith makes you search, which causes you to grow. Whether we are talking spiritually or physically, feeding others

is a sign of true maturity. Newborn babies cannot feed themselves. They need others to look after them and keep them alive. As we mature, we learn to feed ourselves and eventually how to feed others. When you have participated in leading a lost soul to Jesus you are feeding others. Nothing will be more faith building to you than seeing that person surrender their lives to Christ.

Learning to talk with people about spiritual subjects will help you acquire Searching Faith. The experience of others gives you food for thought and more motivation to go back to the Word and check out what is consistent with scripture and what is not.

This does not mean using your beliefs as a basis for starting arguments. Decide right now that any time you are communicating with another person on a spiritual subject you will not let it digress into an argument. Philippians 2:14 says, "Do all things without complaining or arguments." "All things" certainly includes talking to others about Jesus. Discuss, listen and learn. Don't argue.

The best place to talk to people about Jesus is at church assemblies, at least it should be. During fellowship times, before and after services, ask others about how they are doing spiritually. Find out what others are studying in the Bible and if they are reaching out to any of their friends. Ask if you can be praying for them about anything.

There is nothing wrong with talking to Christians about weather, sports, work, etc., but if that is all we talk about, how deep is our faith? We need to have the kind of relationships with brethren that we can converse on a spiritual plain. If we cannot do that at our assemblies, where are we going to do it?

Talk to brothers about Christ so you can talk to others about Christ.

Another way to help yourself grow as a searcher is to read some good books and listen to some good recorded messages. Extra-biblical material is not the same as God's inspired Word, but good books can help you explore new ways of thinking about God. Recorded sermons and classes can challenge you to look at an old favorite scripture in a new light. If you disagree with the speaker or writer, you can search out the reasons why you disagree.

I have read books, some by authors I don't necessarily agree with, and gained insights or learned ministry skills that have been greatly beneficial. When you read books or listen to speakers you want to be open to some different ideas but be careful you do not accept ideas that are contrary to God's Word. It is prudent to keep in mind that old proverb: "Do not be too open-minded or your brains will fall out."

Anyone with Affiliating Faith needs to avoid questionable books and recordings altogether. They are at greater risk of affiliating with a potentially damaging doctrine. We should try to protect affiliating believers from false religions as much as we can. But I am not as concerned about those who are spending quality time searching God's Word for truth and are prepared to weed out false doctrine allowing them to benefit from the insights of extra-biblical writing.

One of the worst mistakes you can make with regards to your spiritual growth is to wait for someone else to stir you to growth. Take matters into your own hands and be responsible for how you are doing spiritually.

Test yourselves *to see* if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you – unless indeed you fail the test?
- 2 Corinthians 13:5

Take personally Paul’s admonition to the Corinthians to test yourself. Don’t wait for something to happen to you or someone to get you off the fence. Set out on a course of introspection to see where you are in your relationship with Christ. Test the doctrines you have come to accept and see whether they can truly be supported by Scripture.

Finally, make sure your searching is focused on getting to know Jesus in a deeper way. You need to keep clear in your own mind what the objective is here. What are you “searching” for? The book of Hebrews was written initially for Jews (Hebrews) who had become Christians but had lost sight of their goal. They were even thinking about going back to Judaism. After explaining why it would be spiritual suicide to leave the Christian faith, the Hebrew writer then describes the benefits of,

fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.
- Hebrews 12:2 (NASB95)

“What if searching leads me off on a wild tangent and actually weakens my faith?” The answer to that is simple. Fix your eyes on Jesus. He is “the author and perfecter of faith.” When your

focus starts drifting away from the center and main objective of your searching, draw your eyes back to Him. If searching weakens your faith, you're doing it wrong. Seek to know Him in a deeper way.

There you have it. So now you know what you need to do. Ask yourself if your relationship with Christ is overly dependent on relationships you have with others. Share your faith. Talk to fellow Christians about spiritual matters. Read some good books and listen to some good messages.

Most importantly, focus on growing closer to Jesus. He's the reason we are doing all of this. Were it not for Jesus, searching would be meaningless. Do these things and your faith will grow from Affiliating Faith to Searching Faith.

NOTES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is your personal motivation for wanting to grow in your faith?
2. How much does your walk with God depend on the spiritual well-being of others?
3. Can you honestly say the things you believe are founded on scripture, the plain Word of God, and not merely the teachings of men, Mark 7:7?
4. How would reaching out to non-Christians help you grow in your faith?
5. On a scale of one to ten, how spiritually based would you say your conversation is with other Christians when you attend services?

7.

The Struggles of Searching Faith

What comes to mind when you hear the word “struggle?” The word carries a negative connotation for most of us. When two people are fighting, we call it a struggle. When an assignment is difficult, we say we are struggling to get it done. But struggle is not always bad. In fact, it can be beneficial.

Struggle means we are alive and kicking. Life itself is a struggle. The salmon struggle upstream from the ocean so that they can spawn where their offspring are able to grow up safely. By struggling out of a cocoon, a butterfly develops the strength it needs in its wings so that it can fly. A mother endures the pain of childbirth to bring a new child into the world. Life is all about struggle.

God’s children have an ongoing struggle against evil.

You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving [struggling] against sin;
- Hebrews 12:4

The Hebrew writer takes for granted that Christians are struggling against sin, because that is what Christians do. If we are struggling against sin, that means we are not giving in to it. Are you a struggling Christians? Praise the Lord! Keep struggling.

Faith takes energy, it takes effort.

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling;
- Philippians 2:12

This was written to Christians who already had salvation. How do saved people work out their salvation? Paul was instructing them to work on maintaining their salvation, stay in a perpetually saved condition. Growing faith assures us our salvation is intact. Growing faith is a struggling faith. All this to say, do not assume that because you are struggling you are doing something wrong.

Searching Faith in particular is impossible to accomplish without some kind of struggle. We don't all wrestle with the same issues, but we do all have our struggles. There are four basic categories of struggle one experiences during Searching Faith. By learning these four basic struggles you will be able to help yourself understand the course your own searching needs to take and you will be able to assist others better in their search.

The first one (and these are in no particular order), is:

THE INTELLECTUAL STRUGGLE

This is the struggle to answer the question, “Is it true?” This was my personal struggle as a college student. With a surfeit of professors who were evolutionist, humanist, agnostics and pantheists and I holding to an atheistic mindset, it required proof of the truths of Christianity before I would yield. Like Thomas, my attitude was,

“Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails,
and put my finger into the place of the nails, and
put my hand into His side, I will not believe.”
- John 20:25

Are you a Thomas too? Some of us are and some are not. Not everyone struggles intellectually. Some do not need a course on Christian apologetics. It is not every searcher who has to be reassured of the existence of God, the evidences for a resurrected Christ or the authentication of the 66 books of the Bible, but some have that struggle and their search is for answers to these questions. If yours is the Intellectual Struggle there is a solution. The solution is, go ahead and test the Bible. Place it under the microscope. Check, re-check, research to your heart’s content. The Bible has withstood harsher criticism than any other book in history. It will satisfy your longing for truth as long as your heart is in the right place.

Yes, your heart needs to be soft enough to hear the answers or you will not learn its truth. It is fine to approach the Intellectual Struggle with some skepticism but if you are not careful you can be so closed-minded nobody can convince you of anything. It is unrealistic in a finite world with finite minds to expect

exhaustive evidence. You will not find every answer to every question in your mind about an eternal, omnipotent God, but you can find sufficient evidence to base your conclusion on.

After Searching Faith I'm going to teach you about Solidifying Faith. In that stage you solidify your convictions about the answers you have been searching for. You will conclude whether you believe the evidence you have been sifting through or not. If you keep your heart right and keep truth as your goal, you will find enough evidence for a favorable verdict.

For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of mere men, but as what it really is, the word of God, which also is at work in you who believe.

- 1 Thessalonians 2:13

If the Intellectual Struggle is your struggle, then search. Search out the answers for yourself so you can be confident that when God is telling you something from His Word it really is God's word, and not just man's ideas.

THE PRACTICAL STRUGGLE

Some go through the *Practical Struggle*. This is where the believer is struggling with whether or not it is practical to follow God. "What good is my faith?" Unlike the Intellectual Struggler, this believer does not have doubts about the existence of God or the Bible being His Word. This Christian's issue is not, "Is it true?" but "Does it work?" Does Christianity accomplish the right results when I do things God's way? If I

keep turning the other cheek, what will happen to me? Will Christianity enhance, improve my life or waste it? Is it worth the sacrifice to dedicate one's life to the Christian ideals?

The Practical Struggle often asks the question, "If bad things can still happen to me, what good does it do to follow God?" This is a common struggle for those with Searching Faith. Job was the epitome of the Practical Struggle. (Chapter nine will be devoted wholly to a study of Job so we will hold back saying more about him here.)

The solution to this struggle is to weigh the pros and cons of being a follower of Jesus. Count your blessings and see if the blessings don't outweigh the inconveniences. You have to look at the overall effect of Christianity on your life because to be truthful, it does take sacrifice to walk the Christian walk. Sometimes it feels like you're walking backwards. Things are not always easy, and you may struggle with whether the cons are greater than the pros. If yours is the Practical Struggle, then let your search take you through a discovery of the blessings and detriments of living Biblically. Look at the big picture.

THE EMOTIONAL STRUGGLE

Another common struggle during Searching Faith is the *Emotional Struggle*. This is where we find ourselves emotionally attached to a habit or object and start asking, "How can I let go of this?" As disciples we do have to let go. You may not want to hear that, but Christ does not permit us to come to Him without total release of all that we have into His hands. There is no sanction for drawing lines in the sand when it comes to following Him. We have to surrender everything. Christ said, "So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up

all his own possessions.” (That is Luke 14:33. When you get a chance read starting with verse 25 to get Jesus’ entire point). Emotionally, our natural tendency is to hold back. We have things in this world we get way too attached to and it is hard to let go. It’s a struggle.

The rich young man struggled with letting go of his riches.

“If you want to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.”

(That is Matthew 19:21 but if you want the whole story read verses 19:16-22). He longed for salvation, but he was too emotionally attached to his money and Jesus knew it. Jesus didn’t tell him to give up his relationships, his hobbies or his vocation. It was his possessions, his money that was going to stand in the way of him being fully devoted to being a follower of Christ. So our Lord gave him an ultimatum. “Choose between the two. Which will be first in your life?” Unfortunately, that young man lost the Emotional Struggle and walked away without receiving the eternal life he was seeking. How sad.

The solution to the Emotional Struggle is to apply the faith you have. Try letting go, surrendering to Jesus as much as you can. Trust Him to be your guide. Read what His Word teaches about how to handle temptation and apply what you learn. When you see how well that works, surrender a little more and a little more. Keep doing that until you can honestly sing “I surrender all.” If that sounds like hard work, that’s because it is. It is a battle; a battle for your soul. Go ahead, struggle.

THE MORAL STRUGGLE

The fourth common struggle among searchers is the *Moral Struggle*. This is when you wrestle with the question, “Am I too sinful for God?” It is normal to feel a strong guilt about the sins we have committed in the past. We should feel guilt. We should be cut to the heart realizing our sins caused Jesus to have to go to the cross, Acts 2:37. But some become so guilt-ridden it paralyzes them spiritually. They feel like they have done things that are so repulsive, there is no way God could ever forgive them. They have decided they don’t deserve to be forgiven. And even if they are forgiven, Christianity is too hard and they could never change. We might feel the way Peter did when he said,

“Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man,”
- Luke 5:8

What makes the Moral Struggle hard is that there is a lot of truth to it. We ARE too sinful to be in the presence of God. There is no way we DESERVE eternal life. If not for the blood of Christ, we would be hopelessly lost in our sins. So the solution to the Moral Struggle is to realize that we cannot change but we can be changed. We cannot change ourselves, but God can change us if we will let Him. Whether we understand it or not, God is willing to forgive the vile sins we have committed. You don’t have to understand it, but you do need to accept it. Until you accept His forgiveness you will be stuck in your faith, in Affiliating Faith. Searching makes you face your insecurities.

A similar problem encountered during the Moral Struggle is in refusing to forgive ourselves. The Holy Spirit convicts us of our wretched condition and our own remorse can be

overwhelming, but godly sorrow leads to repentance; not depression, 2 Corinthians 7:9-11. Do not set your standards higher than God's. If God can forgive you for that sin you committed, why can't you forgive yourself? Are your righteous standards higher than His? Forgive yourself and move on in your faith. You need to LEARN how grace works and then you need to ACCEPT the way grace works. Let grace have its effect on you and the Moral Struggle will fade into the night.

So, those are the four basic struggles of Searching Faith. The Intellectual Struggle, the Practical Struggle, The Emotional Struggle and the Moral Struggle. Should you memorize these? That's a great idea! Yes, commit these four struggles to memory and have a workable understanding of what each one means.

Is it possible to go through more than one of these struggles when we are searching? Absolutely! You may go through two of them, or three or even all four. But it is impossible to search without going through at least some kind of struggle. If you are just beginning your search, identify the struggle or struggles you are having and work on the solutions just explained to you in this chapter.

It is important to match your path of searching to the struggle you are having. If you are having an Emotional Struggle, the Intellectual solution will not help you. If you are having a Moral Struggle, establishing the practicality of Christianity is not going to do you much good. Left to your own devices, you will do this automatically. However, others around you may innocently try to steer you a different direction. Your struggles may be different from other disciples, so seek strength for your faith in the areas you need strength in the most.

Struggle is good. You will need to remind yourself of that every so often. Strengthening your faith takes effort but it is so worth every ounce of energy you will expend. Think of it as receiving discipline from your Heavenly Father.

All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

- Hebrews 12:11

Struggle is never pleasant, but the end result, “the peaceful fruit of righteousness,” makes it worth it.

The “discipline” of developing your spiritual strength will drain you and train you at the same time. Spiritually speaking, it is time to hit the weight room. Your faith has become fat and flabby. It’s time to do something about it. Don’t listen to discouragement whether it’s coming from others or inside your own head. God’s spiritual health program gets results. You can do this.

HOW DO I ACQUIRE SEARCHING FAITH?

NOTES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Can you name the four basic struggles of searching faith and briefly explain each one?
2. Do you see how struggle can actually be a good thing? Can you think of any other benefits of struggling?
3. A biblical example was given in this chapter for each of the four struggles. Can you think of more biblical examples for any of the struggles?
4. The moral struggle is a difficult one because we are not worthy of God's grace. How would you help someone going through this struggle?
5. Which of the four Struggles of Searching Faith do you identify with the most?

8.

How Did Peter Search Out His Faith?

Up to this point in our study, we have done little more than learn the structural terminology of faith development. You have a basic understanding of the five levels of faith and now you know the four struggles of Searching Faith. This is merely an academic exercise unless you learn how to apply these principles to your own faith.

Through the amazing book we call the Bible, the Holy Spirit has provided stories of the lives of real people who put their faith in Almighty God. We can gain practical application by studying the examples of these Bible characters. In this chapter we will be learning about how the faith of Peter grew during his years with Jesus. If you observe closely, you may find that you and Simon Peter have a great deal in common.

Peter came to Christ the same way most of us do. He started with Affiliating Faith. He had his brother Andrew to thank for introducing him to Christ (John 1:40-42). As soon as Andrew discovered Christ for himself, the text says,

He found first his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah."

- John 1:41

It should be the most natural thing for a believer, after coming to Christ, to want to share the good news with others. Through this sibling affiliation Simon Peter was blessed to make acquaintance with the Savior of the world. Andrew loved his Brother, Peter, so much, "He brought him to Jesus." 1:42.

Let me fast-forward here to make a point. It was Peter, and not Andrew, who got the attention in the four gospel accounts, right on through Acts and the letters. Peter developed into a great apostle, a leader among the twelve. But before we leave Andrew, there is something worth learning from his example. We would not have Peter if not for his quiet brother who took the time to introduce him to the Lord. You may not be a "Peter" in the kingdom. You may be more of an "Andrew." Perhaps you stay in the shadows and do the unobtrusive, unnoticed jobs the Lord needs done, but if you can reach just one "Peter" in your lifetime and lead him to the Lord, think of the good you could do for the kingdom.

Now back to Simon Peter. Let's see how his faith grew after Andrew introduced him to Jesus. The scriptures describe how Simon's faith grew quickly and just like the rest of us, he had his

struggles. Jesus worked with him and taught him how to bring peace and order into his life through faith.

In John 6 some disciples thought Jesus' teachings were too hard.

So then many of His disciples, when they heard this, said, "This statement is very unpleasant; who can listen to it?"

- John 6:60

Not just a few, "many of His disciples" were unhappy with the message Jesus was preaching. They were so unhappy they left. They stopped following Jesus.

Picture yourself being one of the apostles that day hearing Jesus preach. Suddenly almost the entire congregation gets up and leaves. All that work getting them to come put their faith in the long-awaited Messiah and they just tossed their faith in the trash like it was nothing and left Jesus. Then Jesus asks you (imagine you're one of the twelve apostles), "You do not want to go away also, do you?" John 6:67. Silence. What would you say? I know what Simon Peter said that day. "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life." 6:68.

Think back to what you learned in the last chapter about the Practical Struggle. During the process of Searching Faith, some believers struggle with whether or not it is practical to follow Jesus. Clearly Peter did not have the Practical Struggle. He knew that following the Lord was well worth whatever discomforts or sacrifices he might have to make because Jesus was the only way to obtain the eternal life Peter desired. That's faith.

Peter also did not have the Emotional Struggle. This struggle asks the question, “How can I let go of _____?” In our previous chapter, chapter 7, the Rich Young Man served as our example of the Emotional Struggle.

“One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.”

- Mark 10:21

In the case of the Rich Young Man, he turned away from the Lord because he could not let go of his earthly possessions. He was too emotionally attached to his money.

Peter was there that day. He watched that young man who has so much potential turn down the richest possession he could have ever had. Then Peter looked into his own heart. “Am I holding back from Jesus? Do I have anything I am not surrendering?” That’s when Peter said to Jesus,

“Behold, we have left everything and have followed you,”

- Mark 10:28

If Peter had trouble giving up something to follow Christ, he had apparently dealt with it by this point. There was nothing in his life that Peter was so emotionally attached to he would not part with it for the sake of Christ.

So I guess Peter didn’t have any struggles. He went right through Searching Faith without any battles. No scraped knees.

Right? Wrong. Nobody goes through Searching Faith without a struggle.

Jesus told Peter one day,

“Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Simon responded and said, “Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but I will do as You say and let down the nets.”

- Luke 5:4-5

They caught so many fish the nets were breaking, both boats filled to the top rail with fish. After witnessing this miracle, this undeserved gift, Simon Peter utters these words: “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!” 5:8.

You can almost hear the shame in Peter’s voice as he pours out his embarrassment over his lost and retched condition. He bears his soul. Anyone who has been through the Moral Struggle can empathize with the turmoil behind those words. Yes, Peter went through the Moral Struggle.

Those with the Moral Struggle reach a point where it finally sinks in just who Jesus is and what He has done for us. If you have ever felt like you are completely unworthy of the goodness you have received from the Lord, undeserving of His precious gift of spiritual cleansing, don’t feel alone. Peter went through that struggle. Many of us do.

Feeling unworthy is not the problem when it comes to the Moral Struggle. We are unworthy. The problem is when we want

Jesus to “go away” from us because we believe our immoral condition is too ingrained in us to ever be washed away even by His blood. Searching reveals even more about our sin than we realized prior to being baptized. The reaction sometimes is “There is no way I could be saved after what I have done.” That’s the problem.

Peter is a great example of growing faith for us because we can relate to so many of his experiences. What is it about Peter’s walking on the water that intrigues us so? More sermons have been preached from that text than any other in the Bible. It’s stirring. It’s convicting. It’s motivating. It’s also a bit humorous.

The event took place when “the boat was already a long distance from the land,” Matthew 14:24. The waves were high and “the wind was contrary.” Jesus came to them walking on the water. They thought he was a ghost and so He assured them, “Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.” 14:27. It was Peter’s idea to walk out to Jesus. “Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.” 14:28. Peter’s confidence in the Master was so strong, all Jesus had to say was, “Come!”

Peter actually walked on top of water. This is not a fairy tale. Let it diffuse into your brain that Peter experienced what is physically impossible because he trusted Jesus. Do you have any idea how much faith it requires to walk on water? Yes, he also faltered at one point. He sunk down in the water because his faith wavered. That’s true, but he still walked on water. The other apostles didn’t even want to get out of the boat, but Peter walked on water. He was eager to test his faith.

Of all the lessons we could learn from that windy evening on the Sea of Galilee, the most precious one is this: Be brave enough to

venture out but keep your eyes on Jesus. Peter learned a lesson that day about the importance of staying focused.

The next titillating event in the progress of Peter's growth was his incident in Matthew 16. Jesus was trying to get away from the crowds and spend time with only the twelve in the northern region of Caesarea Philippi. He asked the question, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" Matthew 16:13. The apostles offered some of the rumors they had heard. It was obvious from these guesses that the commoners still did not know who Jesus was. "But who do you yourselves say that I am?" 16:15. It was one thing for the general public not to know who Jesus was, but these men had been following Him. Bet you could have heard a pin drop after Jesus asked that question. These were His hand-picked apostles. They should have known the answer.

It was Peter who bailed them out. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 16:16. Atta boy, Peter! From the ensuing response Jesus gave, it was obvious He was pleased with Simon Peter. "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven." 16:17. Jesus commended Peter's theistically inspired observation and blessed him. Then six verses later Jesus is telling Peter: "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's purposes, but man's" 16:23.

Peter went from hero to heel and it only took him six verses. Jesus had to rebuke him for being a stumbling block. What happened?

Peter was so confident (maybe even a little cocky) from his great accomplishment that when Jesus began to explain how He was going to die in Jerusalem, Peter pulled Him aside to rebuke Him. The text says,

“From that time Jesus began to point out to His disciples that it was necessary for Him to go to Jerusalem and to suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and to be killed, and to be raised up on the third day. And yet Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You!’” 16:21-22.

That’s right. Peter was now so spiritual he could even rebuke Jesus Christ. Jesus had to put him in his place. “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me.” 16:23.

Peter received another helping of “humble pie” that day. Bible readers through the ages have all had a good chuckle at Peter’s expense. But before you laugh too loud, consider this. Peter was making mistakes, but at least he was trying. He had his highs and lows but he was growing because he was putting his faith into practice.

During high school, we had a player on our basketball team who had no turnovers. He never made a bad pass, never even missed a shot. Do you know why? He never played. If you are scared to make a mistake, the only way to avoid it is to do nothing. But if you choose to do nothing, do not expect God to bless your life. He has no appreciation for those who bury their talents, Matthew 25:18. Disciples of Jesus are to be active and

productive. God has a tough time guiding someone who is not moving.

Read Matthew, Mark, Luke and John looking specifically at Peter and you will see how his faith progressed. For instance, in Matthew 17 only three apostles were invited to the Mount of Transfiguration. “Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves,” 17:1. While on the mountain, “Moses and Elijah appeared to them,” 17:3. They were there to have a talk with Jesus. An oddity that should be pointed out is that Moses and Elijah had been dead for a long time when this event took place.

Simon Peter had this great idea about building three great monuments in honor of these three great men. “I will make three tabernacles here: one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah” 17:4. It probably seemed like a good idea at the time. God, however, did not think it was a good idea. “While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them,” 17:5. God interrupted Peter. He didn’t want to hear the rest. Then God said to Peter, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him!” 17: 5. The thrust of God’s message to Peter was LISTEN TO HIM! “Do you get it, Peter? You lost your focus again, just like you did when you were walking on the water. Stay focused on my Son, Jesus. Listen to Him.” Again, Peter ventured out. Again, Peter was in the wrong, but again Peter learned more about his own faith because at least he was applying the faith he had.

Let’s turn the pages to the Gospel of John. Do you think Peter learned anything the night Jesus was washing the disciples’ feet in the upper room before the Passover? In John 13 the towel clad Master washed feet. He moved meekly from one dirty foot

to the next until he came to the soiled soles of Peter. “Lord, do you wash my feet?” John 13:6. That should have been obvious, considering what Jesus had just done to the other apostles? Of course He was going to wash his feet. Unless Peter meant, “Lord, do you wash MY feet?”

Perhaps Simon Peter felt unworthy, still having a bit of that Moral Struggle. Here is the King of kings kneeling at his feet doing the job of a slave. This sounds similar to the inner turmoil Peter faced in Luke 5:8: “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!” The thought of the Master washing his feet was unbearable.

Peter said, “Never shall you wash my feet” John 13:8. There, that settled it in Peter’s mind. This cannot, will not happen. Of course, Jesus knew Peter needed to deal with this weakness of faith. “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.” 13:8. Jesus put Peter in a position where he had to face his struggle head on. Since Jesus was putting it that way, “Lord, then wash not only my feet, but also my hands and my head.” 13:9.

Peter. You gotta love him; always swinging from one extreme to the other. I’m so grateful the Holy Spirit included this account in the Bible. Jesus was teaching him; molding him into the pillar of faith he would later become. In the end Jesus washed his feet and Simon Peter learned how to work through the Moral Struggle. That Moral Struggle is not an easy one to deal with. Watch out. Sometimes it comes creeping back on you.

It is fascinating to watch the way Jesus shaped and molded Simon. You can tell that Jesus loved this fiery young disciple very much. “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded

permission to sift you like wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail.” Luke 22:31-32. Peter’s reaction to Jesus’ message reminds us so much of ourselves. Rather than thank Jesus for praying for him, he reacted offensively to Jesus’ suggestion that his faith might actually fail. “Lord, with You I am ready to go both to prison and to death.” 22:33.

It is good to be confident in your relationship with Christ. Peter believed he had Mature Faith where nothing could dissuade him from following the Savior. Many Christians thought the same thing Peter did. “I’ll die for you, if that is what it takes, Jesus.” The truth is Peter was not as ready as he thought he was. “I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow today until you have denied three times that you know Me.” Luke 22:34. Even after Jesus told him that he would deny his Lord three times, he did not believe it.

In the first half of this book you learned the five levels of faith. In chapter three I explained why I believe the majority of our members are at Affiliating Faith. When you read that part, did you catch yourself saying something like, “Yup, most of these church members are at Affiliating Faith but I know I am higher than that”? Let me caution you, with Peter as an example, do not think of yourself as having a faith more mature than it actually is. You may be dreadfully disappointed with yourself the next time your faith is tested. In order for this study to be of benefit to you, you have to be willing to be honest with yourself. Look at what happened to Peter.

“After about an hour had passed, another man began to insist, saying, ‘Certainly this man also was with Him, for he is a Galilean too.’ But Peter said,

‘Man, I do not know what you are talking about.’
Immediately, while he was still speaking, a rooster
crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. And
Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He
had told him, ‘Before a rooster crows today, you
will deny Me three times.’ And he went out and
wept bitterly.”

- Luke 22:59-62

After Peter denied three times that he even knew Jesus, the Luke account observes that Jesus was looking straight at him, 22:61. What was in Jesus’ look? “I told you so?” No, not from Jesus. “I’m disappointed in you?” No, Peter already had enough of those kind of looks. “I still love you.” Yes, that was likely the message written on Jesus’ face as He saw Peter fail to stand up for his Lord.

How crushing that must have been. How humiliating. But humility is not a bad thing. It is actually essential to maturing in our faith. Pride weakens our faith and leads us further away from God. If you think you have Mature Faith, you could be right. But keep in mind that Peter thought he had Mature Faith. Beware of your own pride.

Jesus worked with Peter and taught Him how to be a disciple. It took time but watch as Peter was transformed into one of the strongest believers Christianity has ever known. After Peter had denied Jesus when the resurrected Lord asked Peter if he truly loved Him, Peter was guarded, careful not to overstate his loyalty again. “Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?” ... “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” John 21:15. When Christ inquired about the level of Peter’s love, He asked

about **agape** love, the unconditional love which Christ had showed to Peter by dying on the cross. But Peter replied by pledging **phileo** love, friendship love. “Simon, do you love me [unconditionally] more than any other disciple” “Yes, Lord; You know [I am your friend.]” That was not what Jesus asked. He didn’t ask if they were friends or not.

“He asked him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love **[agape]** Me?” ...’Yes, Lord; You know that I love **[phileo]** You.” 21:16. Long gone is the swaggering, haughty, self-appointed leader of the apostles. The new Peter was careful not to overstep his spiritual limitations, but he was still not giving Jesus the answer He was looking for.

“He said to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love **[phileo]** Me’” (21:17)? This time Jesus used the word **phileo**. “Simon, are you even my friend?” Ouch! This conversation may sound insensitive, but time had run out for babying Peter along. Jesus had to know if this man was going to carry on the work of the kingdom. It was time to suck it up and be a man. “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love **[phileo]** You.” 21:17. In other words, “Lord, you know I am at least your friend.”

It is better to think less of yourself, than more of yourself. It takes more spiritual maturity to see your own inadequacies and admit you have some growing to do. I don’t mean some false humility, saying you are not that great but deep down believing you are better than others. “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.” 1 Corinthians 10:12. Like Peter, we set ourselves up for a fall when we assume we have Mature Faith and really we are not even close. It doesn’t do any good to beat yourself up and think you are worthless,

but do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, Romans 12:3. Be patient. Stay humble.

Through the life of Peter we see that spiritual growth is a struggle, but if you have read the book of Acts then you know that in those early years the church was richly blessed because Peter developed into the rock solid disciple Jesus knew he could be. Through the life of Peter we can see how the five levels of faith come into play as well as the four struggles of Searching Faith. Now that you know what to look for, you can identify these stages through the lives of other biblical characters. This will give you a fresh new way to approach your personal Bible study. Read the Word daily and watch for the progression of faith in Bible characters. Most importantly, apply what you learn to your own life.

NOTES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Are there any similarities between the way you came to Christ and the way Simon Peter learned about Jesus?
2. Which of the four struggles of Searching Faith did Simon Peter have the hardest time with?
3. Visualize yourself stepping out of a boat to walk on top of the water. What kind of faith would it take for you to do something like that?
4. In your own life, have you ever felt like you were sinking because you took your eyes off of Jesus?
5. Can you think of any other biblical characters who exemplify the five levels of faith or the struggles of Searching Faith?

9.

Job and the Practical Struggle

One of the saddest declining statistical numbers in Christianity is the percentage of believers who have read the entire Bible. We have allowed Satan to convince us that we do not have time to read God's Word or that it is too complicated to understand. If you have not read the book of Job before, I would like to recommend you set *Reaching New Levels of Faith* down for a time and first read this marvelous Old Testament book. I assure you, it is not too difficult to grasp and you will gain much more from this chapter if you have a general picture of the entire book of Job.

The Bible has more examples of Searching Faith than it does of the other four levels combined. You may have noticed in the glossary more chapters in this book are devoted to Searching Faith than to the others. Searching Faith is a pivotal point in our spiritual progress. It is the point that makes or breaks us on the

journey to maturity. It is a period of critical transformation as we think and rethink our doctrinal positions and our understanding of who God is and what He wants from us.

Of the four struggles of Searching Faith, the Practical Struggle is the only one auspicious enough to have an entire book of the Bible devoted to it. The 42 chapters of the book of Job focus on the Practical Struggle of one man; the questions provoked through his struggle and the way he found his answers. Job is a diagram of the anatomy of the Practical Struggle. A clear path is laid out showing the way closer to that deep relationship with God which we all long for. In order to reach that deeper relationship with our Father, some of us need an answer to the question, "Is it practical to be a follower of God?"

Job loved God. Job was by no means perfect, but he went to great lengths to please God as the first five verses of the book verify. Job was described as "blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil." Job 1:1. Anytime his children decided to hold a feast, Job would offer sacrifices to consecrate his family. He was not the kind of man to glibly do anything that might be offensive to God.

Job was wealthy and quite influential in his part of the world, Job 1:3. And he used his wealth and his wisdom for the betterment of mankind. In Job 4:3 Eliphaz brags on Job, "you have taught many, And you have strengthened weak hands." People turned to Job for advice and he was supportive of his fellow man. "Your words have helped the tottering to stand, And you have strengthened feeble knees." 4:4.

His adversary, Satan, despised Job because of his loyalty to the Creator. But Satan believed that Job's faithfulness was the result of his sheltered lifestyle.

Have You not made a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land,
- Job 1:10

Satan also believed if Job were to suffer loss and hardship his faith in God would crumble. "But reach out Your hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face," 1:11.

In Satan's mind this would prove that evil triumphs over good, but he was wrong, just as we are when we believe the same thing. The dissolving faith of God's children is certainly a victory for Satan, but it in no way proves that evil is greater than good. It only confirms the negative effects of sinful corruption.

If you believe an atheist becoming a Christian is proof of the existence of God, you are right only to a point. It certainly is a victory and there is cause for rejoicing, but when a Christian becomes an atheist does that mean God does not exist? No. God exists whether people put their faith in Him or not. The progression or digression of our spiritual condition does not increase or decrease the power of Satan. He does not gain strength by weakening our faith. Nobody benefits from weaker faith. The Devil will never be more powerful than God. The book of Job makes that clear. Who is asking whom for permission to pester mankind?

God grants Satan permission to take from Job his wealth, his family, his earthly security. If you just now read Job for the first time, as I requested at the beginning of this chapter, what was your first impression of this opening dialogue between God and Satan? Did your heart go out to poor Job? Were you a bit shocked that God would allow Satan to harm a believer in such a way?

Keep in mind that what you are reading is inspired by God's Holy Spirit. The book of Job intentionally starts off showing how we often don't understand why God does the things He does. Nowhere in these opening chapters does God defend His decisions to us. He doesn't have to. The Holy Spirit wants us to think about why things happen and what God's part is in the process. He wants you and I to engage and interact with the Practical Struggle. Then gradually our mind is turned to see the sovereignty of God. None of that journey happens by accident. This is the Divine Spirit of God guiding us through a common faith struggle.

Satan left heaven with permission to torment Job. Satan robbed him of his crops, herds, home and children, yet Job did not turn away from God. Would you have been as loyal? If you suffered losses to such a degree as this man, can you honestly say the first thing you would have done is "fell to the ground and worshipped" Job 1:20? When God told Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth," 1:8, you can see why God was so pleased with Job and his enduring faith.

Note that God was not angry at Job. He was proud of him. He was bragging on Job. This is not about punishment for wrongdoing. The book of Job is about human suffering and

some possible answers as to why it happens. And you may not agree with all God's methods but move your focus further back. Go wide angle on this whole scene. Bring eternal life into the picture. See the grand scheme of things. Hopefully you will respect the fact that God knows how to bring about spiritual growth in the lives of His children.

In the second chapter of this book, Satan received permission to strike Job's physical health, which he did causing painful boils to break out all over Job's body. This is not some ancient condition. People today, still suffer from outbreaks of boils. The condition is called carbuncles. It is quite painful and debilitating. It is surprising that Job still did not betray God. Satan was wrong. Hardship alone did not dissuade Job from believing in His Creator. But the hardships did cause Job to struggle with the practicality of following the God he loved.

Although Satan was the inflictor of hardship and pain, God was involved and could have stopped this pointless suffering (at least, pointless in Job's mind). Job had obeyed God and yet he still suffered misfortune, which raised the question: what good did it do to follow God, if one still suffers in the process? Was it practical for all intent and purpose for Job to serve the Lord? Can you relate?

To understand the answer to this challenging question we first must be aware of how suffering impacts us spiritually. People react in different ways to misfortune, but there are some common thought processes we experience. If the suffering is taxing enough, we sometimes feel like God is pushing us beyond our ability to bear up. Job felt this way and expressed it in chapter six.

“What is my strength, that I should wait?
And what is my end, that I should endure?”
- Job 6:11

We by nature look for scapegoats to blame for our suffering, as Job did.

“For the despairing man there should be kindness
from his friend;
So that he does not forsake the fear of the
Almighty.
“My brothers have acted deceitfully like a wadi,
Like the torrents of wadis which vanish,”
- Job 6:14-15

Job told his friends they were no better than intermittent streams, thirst-quenching one day and dry the next. It is somebody else's fault. Job took it out on his friends who came there to comfort him. Sometimes we use God as our scapegoat, blaming Him for things that cause us hurt and suffering. It is surprising that Job did not do that.

Job questioned God, but he never blamed Him for his losses. He wanted to know why God allowed injustice to persist in this world “I am a joke to my friends, The one who called on God and He answered him; The just *and* blameless *man* is a joke....The tents of the destroyers prosper, And those who provoke God are secure, Whom God brings into their power,” Job 12:4,6. Job questioned why righteous people suffer while the ungodly received no apparent punishment for their disobedience? This perception (or misperception) fueled the fire of Job's Practical Struggle, as did his faulty theology.

The way we perceive God, our theology, has a profound effect on how well we handle the questions surrounding the practicality of Christianity. As you observe the way Job speaks to God, you realize that he sees God as a mean and vindictive God, anxious to punish and slow to forgive. Job knew God loved and cared about him:

“You have granted me life and lovingkindness;
And Your care has preserved my spirit.”
- Job 10:12

But during this period of suffering Job did not believe God was following through with genuine compassion:

“Yet these things You have concealed in Your
heart;
I know that this is within You:
If I sin, then You would take note of me,
And would not acquit me of my guilt.”
- Job 10:13-14

Job had faulty theology. He was wrong about who God is and how He thinks. God is eager to acquit anyone of their guilt if we are but willing to repent.

Should my head be lifted up, You would hunt me
like a lion;
And again You would show Your power against
me.
- Job 10:16

Wrong again, Job. Faulty theology. This was a faulty perception of God. God doesn't hunt us down like a lion. That's Satan that does that, 1 Peter 5:8.

Job's misconception, his faulty theology made dealing with his loss and pain a whole lot harder than it needed to be. During his time of grief if he had in his mind that God is "a God of forgiveness, Gracious and compassionate, Slow to anger and abounding in mercy," Nehemiah 9:17, this would have been a comfort to him.

These things did not happen to Job because God was mad at him. We know that because we have the advantage of listening in on God's conversation with Satan in the first two chapters. God was singing the praises of Job for his loyalty and righteousness. God loved Job and Job should have known that. Perhaps he simply forgot. As believers we sometimes do.

Job's friend Eliphaz also had a faulty theology which hindered him from being a comfort to Job. We get the impression from Job 22:4-10 that Eliphaz believed all suffering was the result of sin. "To the weary you have given no water to drink, And from the hungry you have withheld bread." 22:7. Eliphaz had no evidence these things were true. He was fishing for some charge against Job. "That is why snares surround you, and sudden dread terrifies you," 22:10. "You've been sinning, haven't you, Job. That's why bad things are happening to you." Eliphaz was trying to get Job to 'fess up when in fact Job's suffering had nothing to do with sins he had committed.

This was a common Jewish misconception. When you read Luke 13:1-5 where Jesus had been informed about Pilate killing a bunch of Jews and mixing their own blood with the blood of

their sacrifices, a demoralizing way to die, Jesus asked these informants, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans just because they have suffered this fate?” Luke 13:3. Those who suffer the worst must have sinned the worst is what seemed to be the prevailing attitude. But Jesus explained, “No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” 13:3. It is not earthly suffering that is avoided by repenting, turning away from sin. It’s perishing eternally that is the consequence of unrepentant sin.

Then Jesus brought up another example of the Jews believing that since a tower fell on some people it must have been because they sinned greatly. Jesus repeated, “I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” Luke 13:5. Sometimes towers fall on people. It doesn’t mean it was because they sinned.

Read John 9:2-3. Jesus’ own disciples believed that because this man was born blind it had to have been because he sinned or his parents sinned. Jesus corrected their false theology.

“It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

This very misconception is one that unfortunately still exists today. Merely because one suffers does not mean his soul is being punished for sin. Sin can and does bring about suffering, and God uses suffering as a punishment for sin at times, but this cataclysmic world we live in brings about events that are not

anyone's fault. God is not running around trying to punish people with hardship. There are natural catastrophes.

We all know God is fully capable of overcoming nature. That is true. But just because He chooses not to, does not mean He is deliberately trying to punish someone. Those who don't understand this basic biblical truth suffer needlessly during times of grief. Continuously trying to second guess God's message to us in every hurtful circumstance causes needless guilt and depression. If you suffer it does not mean God is out to get you.

You can drive yourself crazy trying to second guess God's intention behind every little thing that happens to you. Your efforts are far better spent on His more dependable way of communicating with you. He speaks to you through His written Word, the Bible in plain language. Stop reading gloom and God's disappointment into every trial you face. Read the Bible instead.

“Oh that I were as in months gone by,
As in the days when God watched over me;
When His lamp shone over my head,
And by His light I walked through darkness;”
- Job 29:2-3

What Job is doing in this chapter is reflecting on the good times. This can be very healing for anyone struggling through the practicality of faith in God. If you have tasted the goodness of knowing God use it to counteract the negative attitudes of the Practical Struggle. Dwell on the benefits of following God. Following God is not all rosy. There are hard times, but there

are rewards as well. And by weighing the pros against the cons we can answer the question “Is it worth it to follow God?”

In the book of Job Elihu was a younger man who waited until the others had spoken before he had a comment about Job.

For he has said, 'It profits a man nothing
When he is pleased with God.'
“Therefore, listen to me, you men of
understanding.
Far be it from God to do wickedness,
And from the Almighty to do wrong,
- Job 34:9-10

Job had already verbalized his Practical Struggle. In his opinion, it profits a man little to seek the favor of God. Yet, Elihu points out, God is not in the business of doing harm or evil to anyone. “God is love,” 1 John 4:16.

Everything that God does is based on love. So when we lose something that God gave us in the first place He is not being unfair. Job did not lose a single thing that was not given to him by God. All that we have truthfully belongs to the Master. We are merely stewards of it for a little while. So if God takes back the wealth, health, possessions or relationships He gave us, God is not being unjust. It was His in the first place.

It is our own stubborn pride that causes us to hold on to things that are not rightfully ours. Pride is what makes the Practical Struggle so difficult for us. Job received a healthy dose of humility by the end of his trial and it was the medicine he needed. By the end of Job, he understood the sovereignty of

Jehovah. Then, and only then, did he find the solution to the Practical Struggle. Is it worth it to follow God? Most definitely! Although things don't always go our way and following God can be difficult at times, in the end it is by far the best lifestyle choice. It is worth the trials we may face in this world. But if you are going through the Practical Struggle you have to reach that conclusion on your own, just as Job did. Nobody can do it for you.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do we find more information in the Bible about Searching Faith than any of the other four?
2. What was the difference between the way God felt about Job and the way Job thought God felt about him?
3. When you encounter suffering, do you ever catch yourself looking for scapegoats, maybe even blaming God?
4. Is there room in your theology to accept the belief that sometimes things happen, and it is not anybody's fault?
5. Do you believe Job's suffering was pointless? What did he gain from going through this trial?

10.

How do I Start Solidifying my Faith?

You now have a couple of character studies under your belt. Hopefully you understand what faith progression looks like and how to see it in the men and women of the Bible. Now let's transition back to the way you can personally develop a stronger faith.

Once you reach the stage of Searching Faith, your next step should be Solidifying Faith. Solidifying Faith is making your faith solid. It is where you piece together the answers to the questions you have been searching out. In a sense you will always be searching for and learning new things but at some point you have to take what you have learned and make it solid; building the belief system on which you intend to base your thought process and pattern for living.

Solidifying Faith was something I got a sense of early in my own spiritual development, just before I became a Christian. After spending several months studying the Bible and learning what

it said about my lost condition, I still had not given my life over to Christ. I was a sophomore in college at the time. During my teen years I heard conflicting traditions about how a person becomes a Christian and so I needed to search out for myself what the Bible said. But all my searching was a waste unless I acted on what I had learned and submitted to the Lordship of Jesus. I knew what the Word taught. It was time to decide whether I was going to obey it or not. At some point we have to act upon what we have searched out or it all becomes meaningless.

When the royal official came to Jesus to ask for the healing of his son, Jesus did not go to see his son but merely said, "Go; your son lives." John 4:50. The text says, "The man believed." He took Jesus at his word. But after he learned for certain that his son was healed, the Bible says, "he himself believed and his whole household." 4:53. I thought this man already had belief (faith), so what does this scripture mean when it says, "he himself believed"? It means his faith increased to a new level. "So he inquired of them the hour when he began to get better. Then they said to him, 'Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him.'" 4:52. The confirmation that his son was healed at the same moment Jesus spoke the words solidified his faith.

In Mark 9 we have another father who wants his son to be healed. This man said to Jesus, "But if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us" Mark 9:22. His words betrayed his lack of faith. He said, "**IF** You can." He apparently had some doubt about Jesus' ability. Jesus even called attention to the man's choice of words. "If You can?" All things are possible to him who believes." 9:23. This man apparently didn't realize whom he was speaking to. There is no "if" when it comes to Jesus' part in

the healing process. It is our lack of faith that prevents us from receiving the good things Jesus wants for us. Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help my unbelief." 9:23-24.

Solidifying your faith is pushing aside your doubts once and for all. It is not that we do not have faith before solidification. We do, but we still have weaknesses in the structure of our faith which need to be shored up or maybe torn down and reconstructed. In the same way you would make the foundation of a house solid, your faith has to be stabilized, and it is best to start with your spiritual foundation, Luke 6:48.

Reaching Solidifying Faith is about coming to some conclusions. After examining the evidence, what is the verdict? Either you believe it, or you do not. That is what it boils down to. Are you willing to accept God's will for your life? Paul resisted God's will for a time regarding his "thorn in the flesh". Three times he pleaded with God to remove it. When he finally accepted the fact God was not going to, he resigned himself to God's will and was content with God's grace. "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." 2 Corinthians 12:9. This is what maturing spiritually looks like. At some point we all have to decide whether we are going to trust God or not, whether we are going to comply with His will or not.

As you are solidifying your faith you also need to realize that some questions may have to go unanswered until we get the opportunity to ask God in eternity. "Where is heaven?" "How could God have no beginning or end?" "Why did God make the pits so big in avocados?" There are certain problems you may never find the answer to. The purpose of the Bible is not to answer every question or teach us everything we want to know.

It does teach us everything we NEED to know for life and godliness, 2 Peter 1:3. When you and Jesus are relaxing in heaven sipping lemonade, you can ask Him about the rest.

For now there are, as Job said, “things too wonderful for me, which I did not know,” Job 42:3. An infinite God is difficult to grasp with our finite minds. God’s Word teaches us in Deuteronomy 29:29 that there is knowledge that belongs only to God. We learn what we can and do what we can and trust God to take care of the rest.

It is best for us to remain innocent about some things.

“Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be as wary as serpents, and as innocent as doves.”

- Matthew 10:16

(Pay close attention to each of these scriptures. Look them up in your own Bible when you get the chance.)

The stage of Solidifying Faith is marked with an increase in personal conviction by the believer. Something we can do to help solidify our faith is pray for a spirit of conviction. There seems to be so little conviction in the church today. Christians are opting for the nominal position of half-hearted allegiance to God, which is really not an “allegiance” at all. Think about it. If Jesus is the Lord of your life that means He calls the shots. Is Jesus truly in control of your life or are you in control? Is He the one deciding how you spend your time, your money? Is He in control of your relationships and the way you treat people? Is He reigning right now over your thoughts and your tongue, or

are you? We cannot say Jesus is our Lord and yet continue to do whatever we want to do and say whatever we want to say. Jesus is Lord of all or He is not Lord at all.

When you think about it, half-hearted Christianity is a waste of time. Jesus told us the greatest commandment was to

“LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL
YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL,
AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL
YOUR STRENGTH,”

- Mark 12:30

You love God, but do you love Him with ALL your heart? If you are going to have a solid faith, God needs ALL of your heart, soul, mind and strength.

Now would be a good time to pause and pray. Talk to God about knowing Him more deeply. Ask God to instill conviction in you, life-changing conviction. The Lord needs warriors who are ready to make Christianity a life commitment instead of a weekend hobby.

One last thing that will help you solidify your faith is to start a prayer journal. When we write something down, as opposed to just saying it, we force ourselves to put more thought into it. Also, with a written record of your prayers you can glance back from time to time to see how God is answering you. It is truly a faith-building experience; one that will help you all the more in solidifying your faith.

Before closing this chapter let me caution you. One of the common mistakes made among Christians when it comes to Solidifying Faith is that we tend to want to put a timetable on things. When it comes to spiritual maturity, do not place time restraints on yourself. You cannot say, “By such and such a time I will move on to Solidifying Faith,” anymore than you can say, “by such and such a time I will be mentally developed or physically taller.”

Growth takes time and the best you can do is work toward maturity in your personal walk with God and welcome it when it comes. It is good to be eager to grow up spiritually, but it is not wise to overburden yourself with unrealistic expectations. Work on the biblical principles this book is teaching you and be patient.

In this chapter you learned about solidifying your faith by coming to some conclusions about what you do and do not believe. You learned that not all your questions will be answered in this life. You are going to have to press on without some of those answers. You were encouraged to pray for a spirit of conviction and keep a prayer journal to see how God is answering your prayers. Apply these principles to your life and be patient. The growth will come.

NOTES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In your own words, how would you explain the difference between Searching and Solidifying Faith?
2. Do you think this is an important step on the road to maturity?
3. Is there an unanswered question that is holding you back from spiritual growth?
4. Have you caught yourself putting time limitations on your spiritual growth?
5. Do you keep a prayer journal? If not, what would you think about starting one?

11.

Up-Again, Down-Again Faith

“I don’t understand myself sometimes. One day I am on fire for the Lord and doing great. The next day I feel like God is a million miles away. For a while my life seems balanced. I am reading my Bible and active in sharing my faith. My relationship with the Lord seems like it could not possibly get any better and then I hit this skid where I feel my faith slipping and my old temptations start coming back. What is wrong with me?”

Have you ever heard these words, maybe even felt this way yourself? As much as we would like for faith to be a steady ascent of Mount Zion, in reality the journey is almost certain to have its peaks and valleys. Nearly every Christian goes through a period of back-sliding. It is embarrassing and frustrating. Thank God for His amazing grace.

Many Christians go through Up-again, Down-again faith. You are not some rare exception. This spiritual roller coaster ride sells lots of tickets. We all are going to have our peaks and valleys, our mountain top experiences and our pits of despair.

But for some it becomes an addictive cycle, a love/hate relationship with the different aspects of the Christian walk. That is not good for your spiritual health.

Christians the world around get caught up in this cyclone of Up-again, Down-again faith. When you talk to someone in this pattern you are not sure which slope they are going to be on. Will it be the up-slope, where they are eager to serve the Lord or a period of decline, when it is best not to bring up the subject of serving God? Read your Bible and you will discover believers back then had the same problem.

As soon as God called Abram to leave Ur in Genesis 12, Abram went, no questions asked. He uprooted his whole family, sold the farm and started down the highway. He did not even know where he was headed, Hebrews 11:8, but he went because God said go. Genesis 12:1-4. Abram's faith was definitely up. But later on when he was forced into Egypt because of a famine, he feared for his life because his wife Sarai was a beautiful woman, so he lied and said she was his sister, 12:10-13. This was obviously not by God's design. He acted contrary to his faith and things turned out badly. His faith was down.

When Abram was settled in the Promised Land, life was good again until his herdsmen started fighting with Lot's herdsmen over the land. The conflict was serious enough they had to part and go their separate ways. Abram told Lot to choose whatever land he wanted and he would take what was left to him, Genesis 13:5-12. Abram did so in faith knowing that God had promised him all the land of Canaan. His faith was up again.

In Genesis 13:16, God promised Abram that his family would become a strong nation and his offspring would be too

numerous to count, “like the dust of the earth.” The only problem was he and Sarai did not have any children yet. When God gives a promise, we, His children should trust Him and know that He always makes good on His promise. Abram and Sarai did not do that. They thought they needed to help God out.

Sarai had the brilliant idea of giving her maidservant, Hagar, to Abram so he could have children through her and Abram went along with the idea without consulting God. Abram got Hagar pregnant. Hagar despised Sarai. Sarai abused Hagar. It was a big mess. This was another spiritual valley for Abram. His faith was down again. He did not allow God to guide him. Abram, a man known historically for his incredible faith, had Up-again, Down-again faith.

There are other biblical examples as well. The Israelites as a nation, suffered from Up-again, Down-again faith. When Moses led the tribes of Israel out of Egypt their faith in God was at an all-time high. God had delivered them after 430 years of Egyptian slavery. They had seen the plagues and how God Almighty had delivered them from the tight grip of Pharaoh. Their faith was up.

But when they saw themselves trapped against the Red Sea by Pharaoh’s army they were angry at God for not leaving them in Egypt, Exodus 14:11. In such a short time their faith plummeted. Then when Moses parted the Red Sea the Israelites once again trusted God and walked through on a dry sea floor. There was no mud oozing between their toes or bogging down the wheels of their carts, 14:22. Only God could have made that possible. There were walls of water on both sides. That took some faith just to pass between those walls of water. Their faith was up.

Later when the Israelites noticed they were running out of water in the Sinai Peninsula they began to panic. They found water but it was bitter, undrinkable, so they panicked even more, Exodus 15:22-24. Their faith in God was down again. You can trace this pattern of highs and lows all the way through the Bible with the Israelites. They had Up-again, Down-again faith.

Let us look at a third example. You can see this pattern of Up-again, Down-again faith with Elijah who faithfully and boldly challenged 850 false prophets of Baal to a sacrifice showdown, 1 Kings 18:19-24. They failed to incite their god to answer by fire, but Elijah called on God who burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones on the altar and the water in the trench, 18:38. He confidently showed why God was God and his faith was up.

Shortly after this, a woman named Jezebel was told about how Elijah had defeated and had killed the prophets of Baal. She sent a message to Elijah saying she was going to kill him and Elijah ran scared for his life, 1 Kings 19:3. His faith plummeted.

Or how about John the Baptist? We see him confidently proclaiming that Jesus is the prophesied Messiah, John 1:29-34. Later on, however, he is asking, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Matthew 11:3.

In most of these cases of Up-again, Down-again Faith you could argue that circumstances had an impact on how strong their faith was. Granted, but should circumstances dictate the strength of our Christian faith? As was pointed out in the last chapter, we either believe God and trust Him or we do not. The circumstances we find ourselves in can and do change at any time. True faith is not swayed by circumstances. Our faithless

nose-dives have more to do with how prepared we are to take on the challenge than they do with our circumstances.

Mature Faith does not waiver with changing circumstances. It holds firm in the fiery onslaught of Satan's attacks. Those, however, who do not solidify their faith (chapter ten), are vulnerable to the terrorist style attacks of Satan and his cohorts. There are spiritual choices we make that weaken our defensive position and cause our faith to waiver. Up-again, Down-again faith is preventable.

One thing we do to cause Up-again, Down-again faith is we set ourselves up for disappointment. We do this first by having a:

FALSE EXPECTATION OF OURSELVES

When that frustrated father brought his demon possessed son to Jesus' disciples to be healed in Mark 9, the disciples honestly thought they could heal him. They believed they could do something without Jesus, because they saw Him do it.

All they had to say is, "Let's wait until Jesus gets here." But they arrogantly believed they could handle casting out a demon without the Lord. After all, Jesus made it look so easy. We should not blame others for our Up-again, Down-again faith. We do it to ourselves when we have a false notion of what we can and cannot do; how much we can cram into a weekly schedule, the amount of financial debt we can pile on without busting the budget. It is nobody's fault but our own. We have false expectations of ourselves.

The unsuccessful attempts to heal the boy only served to further frustrate this father.

“I told Your disciples to cast it out, and they could not do it,”
- Mark 9:18

The apostles set themselves up for disappointment because they had a false expectation of their own abilities. But the father also set himself up for disappointment because he had:

A FALSE EXPECTATION OF OTHERS

The father did what so many of us do today. We enter into a relationship expecting things to go a certain way and when it doesn't happen that way, we are disappointed. We are upset and our faith, our confidence in the success of living for Christ takes a step backwards. When you put your confidence in what others are going to do for you, you run the risk of facing disappointment. News flash: people don't always do what they are supposed to do.

Learn to trust people without putting your trust in people. Trust people, the ones who can be trusted. Put your trust in God. Do not listen to Satan. His message is that if people don't do what they are supposed to do, this somehow infers God is no longer on the throne, or that you no longer have to do what you are supposed to do.

Long ago I decided not to let it surprise me when people don't do what they are supposed to. Yes, Christians should be obedient to God and follow His Word. Yes, they should realize that their hypocrisy is a detriment to the kingdom. But can you always count on people to do what they ought to do just because it is right? Do not set yourself up with this crazy

disillusionment. If you do it will lead you to Up-again, Down-again faith.

Here's another common trick we play on ourselves. You can set yourself up for disappointment by:

HAVING A FALSE EXPECTATION OF GOD

God can do anything, but that doesn't mean because you want Him to do something, that He is obligated to do it. When you decide God is obligated to do certain things that He never promised He would do, then you will be disappointed when He doesn't do it.

“God is going to give me what I want and if He doesn't...” When things do not happen the way you think they should, you are going to be frustrated and your faith will falter. Hopefully you are thinking right now about how silly that idea is and how unnecessary it is to put yourself through that kind of stress. One of the saddest things about Up-again, Down-again faith is we bring it on ourselves.

A fourth cause of Up-again, Down-again faith is:

NOT HAVING OUR DOUBTS REMOVED THROUGH ENDURANCE

...knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have *its* perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.
- James 1:3-4

The experience of going through a trial and relying on God to get you through it, gives you the stability you need so that you do not stumble at every temptation. The experience will solidify your faith leading you to maturity, making you complete. Many Christians dodge this strengthening looking for the easy way out. When Christians choose to medicate their problems or hide them rather than deal with them, the result is spiritual sickness.

Sometimes Up-again, Down-again faith is the result of:

UN-DEALT WITH SIN IN OUR LIVES

Bring to your mind for a moment Jesus' *Parable of the Sower*. The farmer scattered seed on various types of soil. The seed represents the Word of God, Matthew 13:19; Mark 4:14; Luke 8:11. The types of soil, represents types of hearts of the individuals as they hear the Word. One was the rocky soil. "The one sown with seed on the rocky places, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no *firm* root in himself, but is *only* temporary, and when affliction or persecution occurs because of the word, immediately he falls away." Matthew 13:20-21.

We are not told what the rocks in the soil represent in this parable. We know that rocks have to be removed from soil before planting in order for the roots of the plants to sink deep in the soil. Since the soil represents our hearts and the seed represents God's Word, sin is a logical parallel to the rocks in this parable.

We know we need to remove sin from our hearts so that God's Word will sink deep. When we hold back on dealing with certain "pet" sins, God's Word is only able to grow in us until that sin stops it. Sin stops God's Word from taking a deep root in our lives. Then "when affliction or persecution comes" we experience Up-again, Down-again faith.

Sixth, and finally, this condition of Up-again, Down-again faith can be caused by:

DISTRACTIONS IN OUR LIVES

This same Parable of the Sower talks about "the anxiety of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth," Matthew 13:22. We worry too much about the bills, sports, video games, computers, cell phones, jobs, and so on. These receive a disproportionate amount of our time and attention. In this 21st century there are so many worldly things competing for our focus. Worldliness restrains us from having a steady walk with God. It is difficult to stay focused on our Lord.

We focus for a while and then something comes along that needs our urgent attention. After the distraction is dealt with, we come back to the Lord. Then we get preoccupied once more. The result is speed-up, slow-down Christianity; Up-again, Down-again faith. I get spiritual car sickness just thinking about

it. This can't be the way God intended for us to live. The cure is keeping your priorities straight and your life balanced. Do not get caught up in the things of this world.

These are the things that cause Up-again, Down-again faith. If you know the causes you can head off these obstacles in your life and smooth out the humps. You are going to have your good days and your bad days. We all do. That is understandable. But what you want to avoid is a pattern of spiritual climbs and dives that do not seem to get better. If you see this happening in your life right now, then study and take to heart the scriptures in this chapter. Get off the roller coaster and train yourself to make smooth, steady progress in your spiritual maturity.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Can you think of any other biblical examples of Up-again, Down-again faith?
2. How much do you let circumstances dictate how strong your faith is?
3. Have you ever set yourself up for disappointment by having a false expectation of yourself, others or God?
4. Can you see in your own life how worldly temptations compete for your time, time you could spend growing closer to God?
5. How do you plan to put what you have learned in this chapter into practice?

12.

What's so Great about Abraham's Faith?

Christians pray for the patience of Job and the faith of Abraham. But what was so great about Abraham's faith? He had his faithless moments, as we learned in chapter 11. He was, at times, apathetic about the will of God and self-reliant. What was it about this man that gained him the reputation of having such great faith?

First understand that when Abraham is referred to as the "father of our faith" it is not necessarily a reference to a degree of faithfulness he had obtained. There is another definition of faith used in the Bible - one which we did not deal with in chapter two. Faith can also mean a system of religious beliefs. Abraham was the "father of our faith" in the sense that he was the origin of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic religions.

These three look to Abraham as an important figure when they call him the father of their faith. Nevertheless, Abraham was a man of exemplary faith, the kind that means confidence in God.

Abraham was willing to leave the comfort of his native land when God called him to go. He was commended for this in Hebrews 11:8-10. The Bible says,

By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he left, not knowing where he was going.
- Hebrews 11:8

Keep in mind that Abraham was a farmer. Farmers just don't up and move to a new place very easily. What he did took notable faith. Unlike modern day disciples, who move to a new location for jobs or better living conditions, his move was based purely on spiritual reasons. He moved because God wanted him to.

When was the last time you heard of someone making a decision to move because it was best for the kingdom? Nowadays changing locations is based on financial, physical or familial reasons. Believers hardly consider whether God wants them to make the move or not, whether there will be a strong church at the new location or whether their family will do well spiritually. The typical motivation for moving is follow the money and hope God will be there when you arrive. Abraham did not make his relocation based on worldly reasons. He walked by faith. Hebrews 11:10 says, "for he was looking for

the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”

Abraham had great faith because he took God at His word.

Then he believed in the LORD; and He credited it to him as righteousness.
- Genesis 15:6

God said it. That settled it. The context for this verse is God promising him that his descendants would be numerous. Abraham believed even though he did not know how God was going to accomplish His promise. Abraham even tried to aid God in fulfilling His promise by impregnating Hagar. That was not at all what God had in mind. But he did not doubt that God would somehow do what He said He would do.

Abraham’s faith was also great because of the way he passed his beliefs on to his children. He invested time in Isaac teaching him the ways of Jehovah. He was doing what God commanded him to do in Genesis 18:18.

“For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD...”

Those who strive to pass their faith on to their children show how deeply they care about both their children and their faith. Any father or mother who teaches their children to serve God faithfully exemplifies their own great faith.

Abraham also had the kind of faith that motivated him to intercede on behalf of others. When the Lord shared with him what He was planning to do to Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham pleaded for those people.

Suppose there are fifty righteous people within the city; will You indeed sweep *it* away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it?

- Genesis 18:24

He bargained with God all the way down to ten righteous people.

Let me ask you a question and I want you to be truthful. Do you think you could honestly carry on a conversation like that with the Almighty? Most of us would have “lock-jaw,” unable to utter a single word. Who, but Abraham, would have such rapport with the Lord he could have a discussion like this? Only a child of God with great faith could speak with God in such a way. His great faith allowed Abraham to have that kind of relationship with the Heavenly Father.

Because of his faith, Abraham was able to see many wonderful works of the Great “I AM”. He witnessed the miraculous birth of his son Isaac - a child born when both he and Sarah were well past the age of childbearing. This happened because of his faith according to Hebrews 11:11-12. “By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. Therefore even from one man, and one who was as good as dead at that, there were born descendants who were just as the stars of

heaven in number, and as the innumerable grains of sand along the seashore.”

The ultimate test of Abraham’s faith was when God told him to offer up his son, Isaac.

“Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.”

- Genesis 22:2

This single event is the one which sealed his induction into the Hall of Faith. There was nothing on earth Abraham loved and cherished more than Isaac. God could not have given him a more difficult test, but Abraham passed the test. He did exactly as the Lord asked him to do, to the point that God had to stop his hand.

“Do not reach out your hand against the boy, and do not do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.”

- Genesis 22:12

When you are ready to give up your most prized possession just because God asks it of you, then you know your faith is great.

Abraham was not a perfect man. He struggled with doing the right thing just like we do, but he trusted God. Do you think this would be a good time for you to pray again? You could ask God to give you faith like Abraham. Abraham was blessed because he trusted Jehovah enough to follow His guidance. That is what faith is all about. Studying the faith of characters in the Bible like Abraham gives us a clearer understanding of what God expects of us. God truly does love you. He will recognize and reward your efforts to serve Him.

NOTES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you still remember your motivation for wanting to grow in your faith?
2. What do we mean when we refer to Abraham as the father of our faith?
3. The last time you moved, what was the reason for moving? Did you take into consideration whether God wanted you to make that move or not?
4. Can you picture yourself standing face to face with God bargaining for the lives of the people of Sodom? What kind of faith would it take for you to do something like that?
5. If God asked you right now to give up something or someone that you love dearly, could you do it?

13.

Can I Reach Mature Faith?

It never fails. Every time the subject is breeched about Christians having spiritual maturity there are those who believe mature faith is some lofty, unattainable plateau they will never reach. What is it about a discussion of fully developed faith that flips the shut-off switch in the minds of the saints? Where does that mind-set come from? It certainly does not come from the Bible.

The scriptures emphasize, even demand spiritual maturity. Jesus' thoughts on this were covered in chapter 1. One of the reasons given for growing in our faith is because God wants me to grow, Matthew 17:14-20. God wants our mustard seed faith to grow into fully developed trees. James 1:2-8 explains how trials are actually for the good because they eventually lead to our maturity.

“But you must let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing” 1:4, ISV

In Colossians 4:12 Epaphras was praying for the faith of the brethren in Colossae that they might reach maturity.

“...always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God” (ESV)

And the Hebrew writer was strikingly disappointed with the lack of growth he was seeing in the Christians of his time.

“Concerning him we have much to say, and it is difficult to explain, since you have become poor listeners. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the actual words of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unacquainted with the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to distinguish between good and evil.”

- Hebrews 5:11-14

Throughout God’s Word we are urged to strive for maturity. It is unquestionably God’s desire for His children that we grow up to be mature. Now wouldn’t God be a cruel God to urge us to obtain the unobtainable? If Mature Faith is unreachable for

God's children, why would He tell us repeatedly to reach for it? God would not do that. Mature faith is a reachable goal or our Heavenly Father would not ask it of us.

Mature faith often appears to be out of reach because of these common misconceptions.

1. WE ARE LOOKING AT OUR OWN STRENGTH INSTEAD OF RELYING ON THE STRENGTH OF THE ALMIGHTY.

Seeing nothing but yourself, makes the mountain of progress in front of you seem beyond the realm of possibility. You feel helpless, feeble to achieve these spiritual goals. But if you can envision God working through you, there is no mountain too high to climb.

There was a man named Gideon in the Old Testament who at first did not understand the strength of God. The first time Gideon was introduced to us in Judges 6:11, he was hiding out in his winepress separating his wheat from the chaff there because he didn't want the Midianites to find it. He was fearful and intimidated, yet an angel came to him and saying, "The Lord is with you, valiant warrior." Judges 6:12. Valiant warrior? Gideon was valiant or much of a warrior. He must have thought the angel had the wrong guy, but God had a vision for this man and put him in command of the Israelite army.

When Gideon went out to fight the Midianites with 32,000 men God did not want them to think the battle was going to be won by their own strength. The Amalekites teamed up with the Midianites to defeat Israel. Even at 32,000 they were hopelessly outnumbered. When the Israelites saw them in the valley they

were “as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as numerous as the sand on the seashore.” Judges 7:12. Yet God told Gideon to announce to his army that anyone who was fearful could go home and 22,000 of them did.

Now down to 10,000 soldiers, God said that was still too many. He had Gideon take his men to the river for a drink and those who went to their knees and lapped water like dogs were to go home. That eliminated another 9,700 men. Then they were ready. With 300 soldiers and a timid commander, God wrought a great victory that day.

Why are these events recorded in our Bible if not to inspire us to believe God can do anything through a willing heart? This is not about you and your abilities. On your own, you will not reach mature faith. Spiritually speaking, you can accomplish nothing on your own, John 15:5. But put your trust in God and you will experience the richness of His power in you.

There is a second common misconception that causes disciples to think Mature Faith is unobtainable.

2.

IT IS BECAUSE WE EQUATE MATURE FAITH WITH SINLESS PERFECTION.

“I will never have mature faith because I am only a sinful human.” We know we will never be perfect, completely without sin, and we think that is what Mature Faith is, but it is not.

Think about it. Abraham had mature faith. So did Noah, Moses, Samuel, David, Paul, etc. Were they sinlessly perfect? No. That same group of men committed sexual immorality, drunkenness,

lying, idolatry and murder. They were sinners, like the rest of us, but they had great faith. They reached Mature Faith, but they were not perfect. At least not in the way we mean “perfect.”

The original word the Bible uses for “mature” can also be translated “perfect” or “complete.” For instance: Matthew 5:48 says “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (NASB). There is also Matthew 19:21, “Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go *and* sell that thou hast, and give to the poor,” (KJV). And Romans 12:2, “and ye may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (ASV). Then 1 Corinthians 2:6 says, “However, when we are among mature people, we do speak a message of wisdom,” (ISV). 1 Corinthians 13:10 says, “but when what is perfect comes, then what is partial will disappear” (GNB). Then there’s Ephesians 4:13: “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,” (ESV). Finally James 1:17 adds, “Every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father who created all the lights in the heavens” (CEV).

The reason I am using several translations here is to show that the translators confirm the versatility of this Greek Word. These verses show that God wants and even expects us to have maturity/perfection/*telios*. There were several Christians in the New Testament who were accredited with having already obtained Mature Faith (Therefore, all who are mature, let’s have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that to you as well; Philippians 3:15. Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are

passing away; 1 Corinthians 2:6). Since Jesus was the only one to walk this earth without having sinned, then maturity is something that can be obtained and it is not equivalent with being absolutely free from sin. So when we talk about having mature faith we are talking about a reachable and hopefully a desirable goal.

One final misconception that causes believers to be afraid to strive for Mature Faith is that:

SOME BELIEVE BY OBTAINING IT THEY MIGHT BECOME PRIDEFUL

There is no reason to worry about this happening to you because the one excludes the other. The very process of striving to know God in a deeper way filters all the prideful and haughty attitudes out of your heart. It is like passing through a sifter. Pride leads us away from God. Humility leads to maturity and intimacy with the Father. If and when you reach Mature Faith, you will find your pride left in the dust somewhere. To bask in pride is to forfeit spiritual maturity.

Mature Faith is certainly a plateau that you and I can reach with the help of God. Let your heart be at ease and encouraged. As a child of God you should have your sights set on the highest level of spiritual maturity you can possibly attain. Rid your thinking of the faulty ideas that hold you back. Mature Faith should be your dream. There is no reason why you cannot reach it.

NOTES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think it means to have Mature Faith?
2. Was there anything mentioned in this chapter that swayed your view of what Mature Faith actually means?
3. Do you believe it is possible to jump from Imitating or Affiliating Faith right to Mature Faith?
4. Why is it possible to have Mature Faith without being sinlessly perfect?
5. Do you honestly believe you can reach Mature Faith?

14.

How do I Reach Mature Faith?

There is no reason why 21st century Christians cannot reach Mature Faith. It is the will of God that His children strive for maturity and any child who wants to please the Father will be dedicated to the process of reaching maturity. So what is necessary for maturing one's faith?

There are six scriptures we will be studying in this chapter that illuminate the path to Mature Faith. In the process of explaining the other four levels of faith we have discussed many steps that lead us to maturity. The steps of growth soon to be discussed would be good advice for any disciple regardless of their level of faith, but the points in this chapter are specifically for those who have obtained Solidifying Faith and are prepared to take faith to that next and highest level.

The first key to reaching Mature Faith is found in a passage we have already discussed. When the Hebrew writer rebuked the Israelite Christians for their immaturity, he explained that,

For though by this time you ought to be teachers,
 you have need again for someone to teach you the
 elementary principles of the actual words of God,
 - Hebrews 5:12

He is drawing a direct correlation between spiritual maturity and **becoming a teacher** of the gospel.

At some point in your spiritual progress, you ought to be able to teach others about Jesus. Some are gifted at teaching large groups. Some have a passion for teaching one on one. Some work great with children. Whatever works or whatever the greatest need is where you are, find some way to be a teacher of the Word.

One sign of physical maturity is reaching the point where you no longer have to be spoon-fed, but rather are able to feed yourself and to help others eat. As a baby you are dependent on others to make sure you get the proper nourishment, but as you grow older you learn how to feed and look after yourself. A greater stage of maturity is when you are able to feed and care for others. In the same way, being able to feed spiritual food to others is a mature thing to do. A teacher has to have something he or she can teach and so teaching makes you study and learn. Being a teacher causes you to care about the well-being of your pupils, or at least it should. If you want to be mature, learn to teach the gospel to someone.

One of the most enriching studies of God's Word I have ever done is a study of the concept of being fruitful. On the one hand, bearing fruit sounds like something you do within yourself; the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5. On the other hand, fruitfulness

seems to have an evangelistic meaning to it “just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing,” Colossians 1:6. When you put both hands together, the conclusion is that bearing fruit has to do with reproducing Christ, both in your own life and also in the lives of others. Being mature involves being fruitful in the fullest sense of the word. If you want to have Mature Faith, it is essential that you find a way to teach God’s Word to yourself, and by all means, develop the habit of teaching it to others as well.

Secondly, this same chapter says,

But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil,
- Hebrews 5:14

Another key to maturity is **training yourself to know right from wrong**. You do this by “practice,” continually trying and applying your faith over and over. Train yourself by your daily experience to perpetually seek that which is good and true while at the same time pushing evil out of your life. Think of an athlete in training. Athletes work on their skills over and over until the motion becomes second nature. They cast off habits and motions which hinder their effectiveness. To become a mature Christian, you must be able to distinguish good from evil in your own life and also in the lives of others.

The third facet leading to Mature Faith is **letting go of worldly passions**. As long as you are emotionally attached to your worldly possessions, Satan has a way to distract and frustrate you.

Do not love the world nor the things in the world.
If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father
is not in him.
- 1 John 2:15

Love for the world pushes out love for the Father. There is not enough room for both.

If you love your money, boats, cars, houses, etc. and place them above God and His kingdom, they will be a constant thorn in your side as you strive for a closer walk with God. Eventually you will stop striving to know God. In my research I have talked to many Christian who are considered by their peers as having Mature Faith. They are, without exception, the most unworldly people you will ever meet. Some are rich and some are poor, but each sees the things of this world for what they truly are; just items that will someday perish.

In case you missed that point, let me state it again. Some mature Christians today are unworldly and rich at the same time. It is not that you have to get rid of money, boats, cars, ... You may need to if you can't keep your priorities straight. But it is not money that is the root of all evil but rather the love of money that is the root of all evil, 1 Timothy 6:10. Jesus told the rich young man to sell his possessions because he was too attached to them, but he did not tell others with wealth to give up their possessions. Zaccheus was a rich man. He offered to give up his possessions. All Jesus said was that salvation had already come to his house, Luke 19:1-9. If you have the gift of being wealthy without giving into the temptations of selfishness and independence then may God bless you as you use that gift to His glory.

For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.

- 1 John 2:16

We certainly should pay attention to our jobs, schooling and handling of earthly matters, but if your primary focus is on this world then it is not on God. “The world is passing away, and *also* its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.” 2:17. You have to be smart enough to look down the road to the end of your life and think about what is going to matter in the end. The immature have to play with toys. If you are still emotionally attached to your toys, it’s time to put things in perspective and start growing up in your faith.

This leads to our fourth key to maturing in your faith. If you want to have Mature Faith you need **to stop acting like a child**. That is what Paul was teaching in 1 Corinthians 13:11.

“When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.”

This sounds so obvious, but if you want to be mature you have to stop thinking like a child. If you want to be mature you need to stop acting like a spoiled kid whenever you don’t get your way.

The leaders of your church are not responsible for appeasing everyone and keeping all the members content, like babies in a nursery. Their job is to help you grow up.

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;
- Ephesians 4:11-12

Mature disciples are the ones who figure out they don't always have to get their way. We work together

until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.
- Ephesians 4:13

God is calling you to be the "mature man"/woman. Maybe you would prefer to stay a spiritual baby your whole life. That is certainly not the will of your Father.

An eagle will push her eaglets out of the nest when the right time comes. It sounds cruel but it is necessary or the eaglets will not learn how to fly. Do you have a church leader who is nudging you to try out your wings? Rather than giving that minister or elder a hard time you should be thanking God for them. Put the childish ways behind you.

A fifth facet of maturing spiritually is that you have **to forget the past and press on**. As Paul was striving for maturity he had a difficult time forgetting his haunting past. He shares

“even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor...;”

- 1 Timothy 1:13

“For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”

- 1 Corinthians 15:9

Paul ordered Christians to their death. Try living with that on your conscience. He had to put that all behind him in order to be a useful vessel in the hands of God.

“[B]ut one thing *I do*: forgetting what *lies* behind and reaching forward to what *lies* ahead,”

- Philippians 3:13

Paul once devoted his life to putting a stop to the Christian movement. He ordered the imprisonment, torture and death of many believers. (And you thought your past was difficult to overcome.)

The past weighs us down. We all have skeletons in the closet reminding us of a time when we lived in disobedience to our Creator. There is nothing you or I can do about the past. If we don't forgive ourselves for things we have done, the past will become a ball and chain preventing us from running the race like we should. If you say you have done things you cannot forgive yourself for, here is something to think about. Are your righteous standards higher than God's? God is able to forgive you. He says He will and He does. Are your righteous standards

so high that you cannot forgive that which God can forgive? That is immature thinking. Grow up. It is time to get past your past and move forward with your life.

The sixth and final biblical facet of maturity is somewhat a repeat of the first point. It has to do with **learning to share our faith**. All the examples of spiritual maturity that I know of in the Bible are soul-winners. Paul's goal was to "win as many as possible." 1 Corinthians 9:19, (NIV). Of the Christians I have talked to who are considered the most mature by their congregations, every one of them is active in leading others to Christ. I believe there is a cyclic reason for this.

On one side, there is nothing more faith building and encouraging than watching someone you have shared the gospel with come to Christ. When you teach the gospel to others it stimulates your faith. On the other side, the more mature you are in your faith the more desire you have to want to see others partake of the salvation you have found. This pattern spirals upward as your faith in God grows stronger. As you become more mature spiritually you naturally become more evangelistic. Sharing your faith spawns a cycle of growth that is a wonder to behold.

God's Word shows you a clear path to the spiritual plain He wants you to be on. Most of us as Christians have no idea how strong our walk with God could be. We hold back, for God-only-knows what reason. If you will patiently and persistently follow these biblical guidelines you can and will reach Mature Faith. You know it is God's will for you to become more mature. Now you need to make it your will to do His will.

NOTES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Without looking back at this chapter, how many of the six facets for obtaining Mature Faith can you list?
2. Have you ever thought about what it means for a disciple to be fruitful? Are you bearing fruit for Christ?
3. We are commanded in 1 John 2:15, "Do not love the world." How attached are you to this material world?
4. Have you experienced problems with your past haunting you and holding you back from being effective for Christ?
5. When was the last time you felt the faith-building joy of seeing a soul one to Christ through your personal ministry? In what way does such an experience reaffirm your convictions for the cause of Christ?

15.

How Does Satan Attack Faith?

Satan is not stupid. It is naïve for us to think that he is. Satan knows exactly what he is doing. He is sophisticated and conniving. Though he is pure evil, he has many centuries of experience in disrupting the faith of the followers of Christ. Look around you. Watch the news.

Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.
- Ephesians 6:11

Satan has schemes/plans. And his plan is to bring you down.

Satan is relentless and he knows your weaknesses. Since “faith is the certainty of *things* hoped for, a proof of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1), all Satan has to do is make you uncertain or compromise your convictions. He does not have to destroy your faith to win the battle. He does not have to make you curse

the Almighty to win back your soul. If Satan can convince you that something else or somebody else is more important than your relationship with the Christ, he's got you.

Have you played any sports, especially team sports? Did you ever get a scouting report on the opposing team? You needed to know the other team's weaknesses and strengths; where they had their success in winning games and how they could be defeated. This was valuable information. If their strengths were able to exploit your weaknesses, then you knew what you needed to work on in practice that week. You need a scouting report on Satan.

You need to know what his objective is and where he is vulnerable. You are in a war for your soul. His whole objective is to get you to compromise your faith. He strives to weaken you by sending faith-attacking messages through media, education, music, friends and even family. He will use any tool he can to plant seeds of doubt in your mind. He doesn't even have to get you to stop attending church. His goal is for you to have stagnant faith; no growth, no reaching out. He wins if he gets you to settle for nominal church attendance.

So let's get the scouting report on the enemy and his team. We know from scripture that Satan is in the business of ***providing temptation***. He cannot make us sin, but he can make sure we have ample opportunity to do so. He was called "the tempter" when he tempted Jesus in Matthew 4. In this passage we have the tempter offering things to Jesus that sounded attractive but resulted in sin and disobedience to the Father. "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread" Matthew 4:3. The Devil was tempting Jesus. Jesus had been fasting for

forty days. When your body has been deprived of food that long, you will do anything for just one bite.

The Tempter doesn't tempt you with things you're not interested in. He is intelligent enough to provide temptations in the areas we are weakest in. He will keep that temptation in front of you until you demonstrate that it is no longer a temptation. When you conquer and overcome a temptation in your life Satan tries something else. He is not so ignorant as to try to tempt you in something you do not have a struggle with.

If Satan knows you struggle with sexual lust, than that is the area he will target. This has been one of his favorites for years, and he has a new weapon he has added to his arsenal. It is internet pornography. It is easily accessible and nobody even knows you are doing it (or so you think). It fits perfect with Satan's scheme. The poison is administered through the eyes and into the soul. The Christian dies on the vine with few, if any external signs. Attendance, Bible study, prayer, outreach,... Everything looks good on the outside but a killer lurks on the inside and the end result is separation from God.

Internet porn works like a drug overloading your brain with the pleasure chemicals, endorphins. So the brain compensates for the additional stimulus. Eventually a tolerance is developed. Porn viewers transition from wanting porn to needing it. Porn gives viewers a skewed and negative perception of the opposite sex. The desire for "real" relationships decreases. If you are married, your interest in your spouse decreases and you are three times more likely to have an affair than those who abstain. Porn is one of Satan's tools he uses to destroy the faith of believers. It will destroy your relationship with God unless you stop it.

Satan also attacks our faith by ***providing hardships***. We learned this strategy from the book of Job in chapter nine. If Satan believes you can be led astray through hard times that is what he will use. Picture a young committed couple who falls into financial hardship. She gets a job to help make ends meet. Maybe he gets a second job. Before long they don't have time to read the Bible or pray together like they used to. One or both of them get scheduled to work on Sundays or Wednesday nights. Before long they are not getting the spiritual nourishment they need for a healthy and vibrant walk with God and they begin to wither on the vine. Satan has once again done his job.

Or picture a couple with a young child. They love their child deeply but one day that child is taken away through a tragic accident or disease. Seeds of doubt come as a result of this hardship. "If God really loved us, why would He allow our baby to die?" They feel betrayed by God. Satan will use hardship if he thinks it will pull us away from God. Do a little introspection. Would hardship pull you away from God if you had an experience like this?

The other side of the coin is Satan can attack our faith by ***providing affluence***. If the tempter cannot cause you to denounce your faith by taking money away, he sometimes causes people to lose sight of Christ by providing them with more money than they can handle. Your company offers you a promotion, but it means locating to a place where there is no church or where you and your family will not do well spiritually. Or through your affluence you become pridefully independent, feeling like maybe you don't need God as much since you have worldly success. Affluence can be a curse rather than a blessing.

Open your eyes to the possibility that the enemy can lead you away from Jesus by providing you with financial success.

Agur the son of Jakeh had something to say about this subject.

“Give me neither poverty nor riches;
Feed me with the food that is my portion,
That I not be full and deny You and say,
‘Who is the LORD?’
Or that I not be in want and steal,
And profane the name of my God.
- Proverbs 30:8-9

When was the last time you turned down a job or a promotion because it offered too much money? Hopefully being in Christ has changed the way you think about money. It is not always a blessing. Satan can work through affluence to pull you away from God.

Sometimes Satan attacks our faith by ***providing destructive messages***, particularly with regards to home and family. See if you recognize some of his messages. “Marriage doesn’t have to last a life time. If your marriage isn’t working, just get a divorce.” “Sexual purity and virginity is boring. Get out and live it up.” “No one needs to be the head of the household.” “The Bible was great during its time, but it just doesn’t apply today.” These thoughts do not come from God. They are messages from Satan and he uses them to weaken our faith.

If you are a “Lord of the Rings” fan, you may remember a character named Grima Wormtongue who had lulled King Theoden into a miserable funk by whispering destructive

messages into his ear. Lucifer is also quite adept at getting his disparaging missives into the hearts of those who make little to no effort to block out this world's malevolence. Don't listen to him. Hear the voice of God.

One final trick of the Devil is he sometimes leads us to believe ***that talk can take the place of action***. We can talk all we want about being pure, but until we take action against our sin nothing changes. We can talk about evangelism and all the different ways to get it done, but until we actually do it, nobody gets saved. Talk is cheap.

If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?

- James 2:15-16

Thank God for the book of James. This is pure spiritual common sense. What good does it do to talk about helping someone if you never actually help them? What good does it do to go to church and Bible class and talk about how to be pure and deal with our sin but then never take action? Do not be fooled. Do not live in the land of good intentions. Stop merely talking about living God's way and start doing it. Talk does not take the place of action.

We could go on. Satan has many ways to attack your faith. He can provide temptation, hardship or affluence. He can lead you astray with his destructive messages or lull you into believing that talk takes the place of action. Whichever poison he happens

to be serving to you today, be wise and avoid the traps he has set.

This is spiritual warfare, and Satan is out to tear down your faith. Don't let him. If you lose your faith, you lose your most precious possession so guard it fervently. Set your jaw right now and decide Satan will not have the victory over your life. These are only a few of Satan's tactics. It is up to you to figure out how he is getting to you. If you rely on God you have nothing to fear from Satan. Keep your guard up, resisting Satan's deceptive strikes. If you do he will flee from you (James 4:7).

CAN I REACH MATURE FAITH?

NOTES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever participated in a sport where the scouting report was helpful to you?
2. How has Satan been tempting you lately and what are you doing to counter that temptation?
3. In the area of sexual temptations, what are you doing to keep your mind pure and focused on God?
4. If you are not content with your income, do you see how Satan can manipulate your dissatisfaction for his own twisted purpose?
5. In a practical way, what are some steps you can take this week to guard your faith against Satan's attacks?

16.

Do I Trust God?

In the end, this is what it boils down to. Do I trust God? It is a fair question. Faith seeks the truthful answer. Am I willing to place my life in His hands? Am I going to stand on the promise that my Heavenly Father will do what He said He was going to do? Do I trust Him enough to do what He tells me to do whether I understand it or not? This is and always has been what God wants from His children.

When Jehovah directed Moses to lead the Israelite nation out of Egypt into the desert of Shur, they were completely dependent on God for everything. For three days they walked through the desert with no water. When they finally found water at Marah, it was bitter, non-consumable.

So the people grumbled at Moses, saying,
“What shall we drink?”
- Exodus 15:24

Going without water for a long time and then finding a pool that was undrinkable would cause the average person to grumble some, but it was nothing God could not handle. He had already changed all the water in Egypt to blood and back again before their eyes. He had parted the waters of the Red Sea so they could walk through on dry ground. Was this really too big a problem for the Creator of heaven and earth?

The Lord showed Moses a tree and when he threw the tree into the water it changed so they could drink it. Why not put the pool closer so they would not have to walk so far without a drink? Why not have water in the pool that is drinkable to begin with? Why go through this ordeal of throwing a whole tree in the water when a touch from Moses' staff could have purified the water? What was Jehovah's message in all of this? "Trust me!"

After they got the water they needed food. The people grumbled.

"Would that we had died by the LORD'S hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

- Exodus 16:3

They had it all figured out, didn't they. They just knew God went to the trouble of sending the ten plagues on Egypt, drowning the Egyptian army and leading them across the desert just so He could starve them to death. What?

How slow we are to realize the merciful love of God. God provided manna. It simply fell from the sky. They didn't have to grow it. They didn't have to hunt it. All they had to do was go out and pick it up.

“Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether or not they will walk in My instruction.” 16:4.

He told the Israelites to only gather enough for one day because the next day He would provide for them again. “No one is to leave any of it until morning.” 16:19. Did they trust Him? Did they follow His instructions? Did they only gather enough for one day like He said? No! They gathered extra just in case God couldn't handle providing for His children two days in a row. Overnight the manna spoiled and it was full of maggots the people had to throw it out.

Then on the sixth day God told them to gather enough for two days. The same manna he told them not to keep overnight before, now He was telling them to gather enough for two days. Yes, keep it overnight this time. He was not going to send food on the Sabbath, the day of rest. They gathered enough for two days and the manna did not spoil overnight. What was the point of this whole exercise? God was saying, “TRUST ME!”

How about it? Do you trust God? As we draw this study to a close it is time to be painfully honest with ourselves. God's kingdom is desperately in need of disciples who are truly FAITH-FULL. He doesn't need any more of the quasi-religious. The world is full of people like that. The church needs men and

women who are sincerely seeking God, who trust the Father implicitly and stand on His precepts. Does your heart yearn to please Him? Will you answer the call? The following six statements are a test of faith. Read and consider each one carefully. Decide whether each one is a statement you can make in all good conscience.

- I TRUST GOD to forgive me for everything I have done. I also forgive myself.
- I TRUST GOD to forgive my brother for everything he has done. I also forgive my brother.
- I TRUST GOD'S ways over my own. I will obey Him even when things don't go my way.
- I TRUST GOD to set the standards and guidelines for all of my relationships.
- I TRUST GOD to place me wherever He wants me. I will be content with whatever circumstances He puts me in.
- I TRUST GOD with all that I am and all that I have. Every day, I place my life in His hands.

No matter what level of faith you are at right now, no matter what type of struggle you are going through, trust God. That's all you have to do. Trust God. Learn to trust Him more and more. You now know how to recognize where you are in your walk with God so you can visualize what it is going to take to become mature in your faith. It is my prayer that you will use this material first to improve your walk with God and secondly to assist others to grow in their faith.

And now this study has come to a close. Whenever I read a book like this one, I often find myself wishing I could speak with the author to ask questions. I want you to know that I am willing to make myself as available as I possibly can to help you reach new levels of faith. I have dedicated my life to the spiritual development of others and if there is anything I can do to help you grow closer to God I am more than happy to help.

God will bless you richly in your search for deeper faith. Trust God. Turn to His word for your answers. Do not give in to Satan's lies. Pray always and grow in your faith. I close with the question Jesus asked recorded in Luke 18:8:

“However, when the Son of Man comes,
will He find faith on the earth?”

NOTES

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Curtis Hartshorn has been a minister for 40 years. He works primarily in preaching and teaching. He leads evangelistic Bible studies. He has also taught college level courses on *Principles of Marriage* and *Death and Dying*. He has written various Christian education materials, including three other books: *My First 52 Days in Christ*, *The Essence of Revelation* and *From Atheist to Preacher*. Brother Hartshorn has his Bachelor of Arts degree in English and a Masters of Biblical Studies from Bear Valley Bible Institute of Denver with an emphasis in Biblical Counseling.