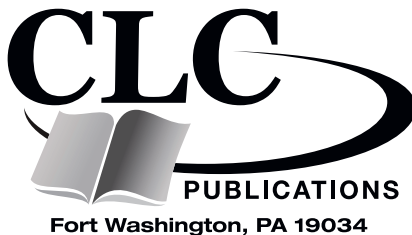


# **OVERCOMING SPIRITUAL VERTIGO**

**The Journey from Doubt  
to Courageous Faith**

**DWAYNE E. MERCER**



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## **Dedication**

To my six amazing grandchildren, Noah, Owen, Piper, Elspeth, Gwynn, and baby boy Mercer. May all of you live lives of courageous faith!

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Thank you to my wonderful wife, Pam, who has steadfastly journeyed beside me through times of both spiritual vertigo and courageous faith!

## Introduction

### *Read This First*

**I**t was the middle of a typical hot summer night at our home outside of Orlando. My wife, Pam, and our two younger children were visiting family in Georgia while our oldest son and I stayed behind. We were sound asleep after a long day of golfing in near 100-degree temperatures when I suddenly woke up in a cold sweat. The room appeared to be spinning. I tried to get up but each attempt made me feel sick to my stomach. To make matters worse, my brain felt like it was moving around inside my head and my eyes seemed to be dancing. I had lost all perspective of direction and I was scared. I thought, *Am I dying? Should I call for help?*

I tried to cry out to my son, who was sleeping in his bedroom, but my voice wouldn't carry. Every time I tried to reach for the phone, I felt like the ceiling was attacking me.

Eventually, I mustered the determination to turn, grab the phone and dial 911. By the time the paramedics arrived, I was so disoriented that they had to wake my son to unlock the front door because I couldn't move from the bed. They immediately strapped me to a gurney and whisked me away to the hospital. When I got there, the doctors administered intravenous fluids to hydrate me. They diagnosed me with a severe case of vertigo due to dehydration.

The high temperatures during our golf outing earlier that day left me exhausted by the end of the round. I'd also been drinking diet soda all day instead of water, which caused me to become extremely dehydrated. That night, I experienced vertigo because of it. The best way I can describe this condition is that your brain and eyes have a functional disconnect and your brain is unable to process what your eyes are seeing.

You may have never had physical vertigo; but I believe most of us experience “spiritual vertigo,” a phrase I first heard from *New York Times* best-selling author Tim Keller, the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City.<sup>1</sup> During spiritual vertigo, we become spiritually disoriented. We know what the Bible teaches, but what we see, hear or experience does not match what our faith tells us should be true.

As a result, we begin to live in a world of doubt. We know God is sovereign, loving and gracious. We hear sermons and read books about being a giant killer, a lion tamer, and more than a conqueror in Christ. However, we cannot bring ourselves to believe it. How can we have courageous faith when the everyday challenges and disappointments of life make us dizzy with doubt?

Doubt-filled faith is extremely prevalent in society today. It is estimated that only 13 percent of the millennial generation (those born between 1982 and 2002) consider any type of spirituality to be important in their lives.<sup>2</sup> Author John Dickerson reports that they drop out and don't return because they simply do not believe anymore.<sup>3</sup>

The younger generation is not the only one struggling. Thom Rainer, president and CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources, claims that the number one reason for declining church

attendance is not that people are dropping out altogether, but that they are going less often.<sup>4</sup>

This is a symptom of a larger problem. There is a disconnect between what we have been taught about God and the life we are experiencing. We are led to believe that, if we receive Christ, all will be well and God will bless us. He will calm every storm, make us successful, and give us wonderful marriages and godly children. In essence, Christ will overcome every one of our problems, Christians will love us and receive us into their world, and we will be eternally happy. But when we begin to follow Christ, we find a different reality.

We still suffer hardships and we don't always see the blessing. We still have marital and family difficulties. We still fall into temptation. We suddenly find out that what we were taught to believe doesn't match what we are experiencing. As a result, we suffer from spiritual vertigo. Moreover, we become so accustomed to our condition that we adjust our lives to mediocre faith.

We are individually challenged to become a courageous hero who does great things for God; however, few of us believe we can be that person. We may want to do great things for God, but we do not see Him intervening in our everyday lives. We want to believe that He cares, but we just don't see the evidence. How can we step out with courageous faith if we feel He has let us down in the past?

How do we reconcile life and faith? How do we win over our doubts? How do we move forward with God when we feel like He will not come through for us? I wrote this book with a desire to help you work through these doubts and begin exercising courageous faith in your life.



*Overcoming Spiritual Vertigo* consists of four sections. The first defines faith and why it often conflicts with our life experiences. We will learn that what we see, hear and experience encompass *part* of the truth, but not the *whole* truth.

The second section addresses struggles in our personal faith. Here, we will discover how to overcome our primary challenges in that journey. The third section shows how to apply lessons from the first two and explains how to transfer our faith into lion-chasing, giant-killing courage. The final section will help you navigate your faith journey with clarity and boldness.

As you reflect on your life with God, I hope you will see how much He blesses you and realize that your faith is built to go the distance and accomplish great things in His name.

# **Part 1**

## The Challenge We Face

# 1

## Regaining Our Spiritual Balance

*Future courage is based on our  
ability to cope with present realities.*

Chris was a dedicated Christian and church leader. He willingly served the Lord by going on hospital visits, ministering to widows and supporting his pastor in moving the church forward. He spent many nights away from his family, visiting people who were sick or grieving the loss of a loved one. Chris also made great efforts to be the kind of husband and father that would be pleasing to God.

Fast forward one year—Chris is disillusioned with his faith and church life. During his most dedicated year of service, his wife had serious knee surgery, placing her on crutches for several weeks. He found himself being breadwinner, dad, nurse and part-time mom. Adding to that, his father had a stroke and suffered terrible mental difficulties. The year ended with Chris placing his father in a nursing facility because his violent outbursts became too much for home care. The man he called “Dad” was no longer the same man who had raised him.

His father had just passed away when Chris came to me for guidance. He was discouraged and admitted he doubted his faith. His reasoning was simple, one most of us can identify

with. He said, “I felt I was doing the right things. I was a leader in the church and a good husband and father. I just can’t believe a loving, heavenly Father would allow my dad to suffer as he did.” I listened as Chris told his story. At the end of our conversation, he summed up his feelings by saying, “He may be a loving Father, but I feel like I treat my kids a lot better than He treats His.” Chris was experiencing spiritual vertigo. His faith couldn’t process what he was seeing, hearing or experiencing.

Contrast Chris’ story with an inspiring book, *In a Pit with a Lion on a Snowy Day*. In it, author Mark Batterson uses Second Samuel 23:20, one of the most obscure Bible passages, to challenge his readers to exercise great courage:<sup>1</sup> “Then Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, the son of a valiant man of Kabzeel, who had done mighty deeds, killed the two sons of Ariel of Moab. He also went down and killed a lion in the middle of a pit on a snowy day.”

Batterson sets the scene, describing Benaiah’s confrontation with a five hundred-pound lion. Instead of running from it, Benaiah stares the lion down, causing it to run away. When the lion falls into a pit, Benaiah jumps down and kills it in terrifying hand-to-paw combat. It’s a great read.

We often think courage is the metaphorical ability to chase lions and kill giants, but it also takes an enormous amount of courage to face the everyday challenges, hurts and disappointments in life. When we experience spiritual vertigo and become disillusioned with God, we are certain to face the future without faith.

We need courage to confront the unknown, move forward when faced with an opportunity, keep going when discouraged, and believe in the midst of suffering and loss. But where do we

find this courage when our faith is struggling? Just as I needed water to help combat physical vertigo, we need spiritual fuel to overcome spiritual vertigo.

We find it in our relationship with Christ. I'm not saying that only believers possess courage. People often perform heroic acts without any faith in God. Our nation's history is filled with heroes from armed forces, law enforcement and first responders. They risk their lives every day to protect us. Even the entrepreneur possesses great courage, risking all to start a business or ministry.

This type of courage is based on our own resources—our abilities. What happens when we face insurmountable odds? What happens when life's challenges look like a five hundred-pound lion? What happens when we face illness, failure or loss of a loved one? What happens when we witness our parents losing their health or their minds? We are usually knocked off our spiritual balance. We simply will not boldly trust God with our future when we're unsure if He will come through for us.

Instead, we wonder, "Does God really care? Is He a loving, heavenly Father? Is He really there for me? If I truly give my life to Him, am I sure He will come through for me?" We think, "I cannot completely trust God because God might let me down."

When experiences challenge our faith, it is difficult to think about starting a new ministry, going out on the mission field, launching a new business or taking a public stand against injustice.

Our problem of spiritual vertigo is rooted not just in our beliefs about God, but in our beliefs in how God relates to us. How do you see God? What do you expect from Him?

## Where Do We Begin?

### **The Starting Point: Our Salvation Experience**

Our view of how God relates to us is first found in how we perceive our salvation experience. If we see our salvation as a miracle of God, we are on the right track. We may think, “Of course I believe my salvation is a miracle; I’m a sinner saved by grace.” But what’s your response when you hear that a prisoner who has committed heinous crimes has received Christ and changed his life? Do you doubt his experience? Do you think, “A man like that never changes? I wouldn’t want him around my family.” If so, it tells me that in some small way, you feel you deserve salvation. After all, you came from a good family, you grew up in church, and you haven’t committed any horrible crimes or served prison time. You may not think you saved yourself, but being a good person doesn’t hurt your chance of salvation either. In essence, you feel we use our own resources and good deeds to save ourselves.

On the other hand, you may think, “Praise God for the prisoner’s salvation! I was a sinner myself and I don’t know why God saved me. If anyone could look inside my mind, I would be seen as the worst of sinners. I have only God to thank and I feel overwhelmed by His grace.”

Our attitude about our own salvation experience reveals much about how our faith operates. If we trust in our own resources and works for salvation, the greater the chances are that we believe the same way for our Christian walk. When we face a challenge that is beyond our resources, it throws us off our spiritual equilibrium. Then we wonder how we end up in our present circumstances and question why God doesn’t intervene.

## Our Expectations of God

How do you perceive your relationship with God? What are the roles? Who is the boss?

In their book *Cat and Dog Theology*, Bob Sjogren and Gerald Robison share an illustration that goes something like this: We all treat God the way cats and dogs treat us. When we get home from work or school, our dog greets us with great enthusiasm. Maybe he has a toy in his mouth, his tail is wagging and he is beside himself with excitement. Your cat, in contrast, does not greet you at all. He sits on the couch or runs from you, and dares you to touch him. It is almost as if you must earn the right to pet him or get his attention.

The theology is simple. A dog thinks, “Wow! This person loves me, feeds me and takes care of me—he must be God!” The cat thinks, “This person loves me, feeds me and takes care of me—I must be God!”<sup>2</sup>

Some of us live our lives to serve God; others live as though God is here to serve us. How we see our relationship with Him greatly affects our expectations of Him and that impacts our faith and our ability to trust Him.

Philip Crosby insightfully stated, “Quality is meeting expectations.”<sup>3</sup> Where a person’s opinions are concerned, I think that has some truth. For example, a new, cafeteria-style barbecue place in Orlando recently generated a lot of buzz. Many people urged me to try it out, claiming it was the best barbecue they’d ever tasted. So when my wife and I took their advice, we had high expectations of the food quality. We also weren’t disappointed when we saw the line out of the door and had to pick up our food at the serving line, because we knew what to expect. The brisket was recommended and it was great; but we

also ordered pork, which wasn't anything special. What would have happened if we'd expected a high-end restaurant with table service? Would our experience have been different if we had not ordered the brisket? The restaurant probably wouldn't have met our expectations and, consequently, we would have been disappointed in the quality.

We could use this same example at church. What if you see a church that appears to be formal and traditional but when you attend, you discover it's very contemporary? They might have the best music and teaching but if it's not what you expect, you may perceive it as low quality.

Unfortunately, the same can be true of our attitude about God. If we expect Him to be fatherly to us, if we expect life to go easy, if we feel we deserve God's blessings, if we think He is here to serve us, if we believe He has made promises He has not kept, then we will often be disappointed with God. We may reason, "If God is all-loving and all-powerful, shouldn't He treat me like I treat my children? Shouldn't He answer my prayers, bless me financially and keep me well?" This example of faith believes that if what we see, hear and experience is not what we expect from God, we cannot fully place our faith in Him. When our expectations are inaccurate and unrealistic, we will constantly battle spiritual vertigo.

You may have heard the saying, "You think the world revolves around you!" If you are like me, you're tired of that phrase. It's condescending and basically accuses someone of total self-centeredness. Most of us realize the world doesn't revolve around us, but we often subconsciously think God's world does.

Centuries ago, scientists believed that the earth was the center of the universe and all life revolved around it. Today we



know the sun, not the earth, is at the center of our solar system. To operate properly, all the planets must revolve around the sun. If that stopped, all life would be in chaos. Planets and other heavenly bodies would collide into one another. Others would float off into oblivion. All life on earth would either freeze or be incinerated by heat. If life revolved around earth, the same would happen. The earth's gravitational pull is not sufficient to keep the solar system in order.

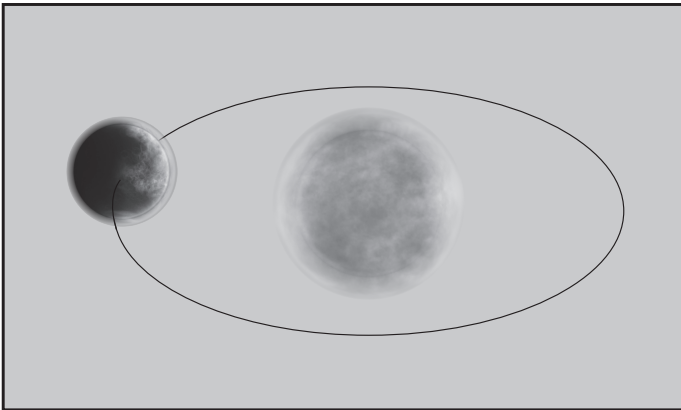


Fig. 1.

Let's imagine we are earth in this illustration<sup>4</sup> and Christ is the sun. As long as our lives are Christ centered, there is order and stability. Once life begins to revolve around us, disorder and chaos erupt.

Many modern churches and cultures lead us to believe that we are at the center. Churches often teach about positive self-esteem and your importance to God. (*You are* important to Him.) They teach that had you been the only sinner, Christ would still die for you. Since that is true, the assumption is

that God's world must revolve around you—your needs, your prayers, your purpose in life.

Modern Western culture also teaches you to believe in yourself. Parents' lives often revolve around their children, making kids kings in many families. As a result, we often grow up as the center of attention. We reason (subconsciously) that since God loves us and is like our earthly parents, His world must revolve around us. As a result, we don't understand why He doesn't come through for us.

As important as we are to Him, God revolves around Himself. You are also not His only child. I am not His only child. As we pray, God is working in the lives of many other believers and nonbelievers, in different circumstances, for the best possible outcome that will bring Him glory. The Bible teaches us, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

We are here to bring Him glory. We are here to serve Him. We must step out in humility and remember that God is not on trial for His performance. He loves us and because of that, all the blessings we receive come from His grace. We are not natural children of God. We were adopted into His family because Christ died on the cross for us. "For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'" (8:15).

If we believe God's world revolves around us, disappointment is inevitable. We will have expectations that God may not meet. Please realize some expectations are good when they are based on faith in what His Word teaches. When God makes a promise

to us, it is an act of faith to expect Him to keep it. However, there are many expectations that are built on assumption and perceived promises that are not biblically based. We will discuss this in more detail in a later chapter.

What do we do? How do we apply our salvation experience to our everyday walk?

When we perceive God revolving around us, we become disappointed and often disillusioned with life. We reason that since God has not come through as we expected, trusting Him will cause failure, disappointment and embarrassment. We cannot be bold in our faith when we might fail.

### **What's My Next Step?**

A few years ago, I went through a difficult time in life. Our church was in the process of building a new worship center and we were trying to raise \$12 million in a capital stewardship campaign. We were also having some staff problems at the church. In the midst of all this, the worst thing of all happened—my wife was diagnosed with breast cancer.

I know the Bible teaches that God will never give you more than you can handle, but I felt I was past my limit. I always believed God gave me a high capacity for handling stress, but nothing of this magnitude had ever happened to me before. I was suffering through a bout of spiritual vertigo. I needed faith, courage and direction in my life.

It was through this need that I stumbled across a little book by C.J. Mahaney entitled *Living the Cross Centered Life*.<sup>5</sup> That book ministered to me much like I hope this book does for you. I found my salvation experience at the cross. It is also the place where I continue to find spiritual maturity and encouragement.

Jesus dying on the cross brought us freedom and forgiveness of sin.

Colossians 2:13–14 reads, “When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.”

The apostle Paul wrote in Galatians 6:14, “But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

Theologian John Stott said, “The cross is the blazing fire at which the flame of our love is kindled, but we have to get near enough for its sparks to fall on us.”<sup>6</sup> C. J. Mahaney adds, “For me, grace is never more amazing than when I’m looking intensely at the cross, and I believe the same will be true for every child of God. There is nothing more overpowering and captivating to the soul than to climb Calvary’s mountain with childlike attentiveness and wonder, with all the distractions and wrong assumptions cleared away.”<sup>7</sup>

What then? After salvation, how do we find maturity and courage in the midst of trials? How do we live the Christian life? We find the answer in Colossians 2:6: “Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him.”

We received Christ by coming humbly before the cross. We offered no righteousness of our own. We simply threw ourselves at Jesus’ feet and cried out for forgiveness and salvation. We came with no personal agenda or resume. We repented, turned from our sin and began to follow a new Master.

As the old hymn says, “Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling.”<sup>8</sup>

We live the Christian life in the same way—at the foot of the cross. Each day that we humble ourselves before God, we cry out for His mercy. We honor Him as Lord. We revolve our lives around Him instead of hoping God will revolve around us. But how does the cross-centered life help us overcome spiritual vertigo?

First, living near the cross helps us experience a love relationship with Christ. Several years ago, I saw a painting of the crucifixion in the lobby of a church in Atlanta. The painting had three panels, each depicting one of the three who hung on the cross that day at Calvary: the thieves on each side and Christ in the middle. The picture was beautifully painted and large in its dimensions, but what was unusual about it was that there were no modesty towels. The depiction was graphic—the three men were totally naked. We were shocked to see it but one of my friends commented, “It makes you realize the shame and humiliation Jesus was willing to go through for us.”

The Bible teaches that on the cross, He despised the shame and humiliation for us. He courageously did what He had to do.

When we sing about the cross, read about the cross, live beneath the cross, doubt diminishes and we see afresh how much God really loves us. He loved us enough to send His Son for us. As we become grateful for what He has done, we can better trust Him with our futures. In other words, my faith can process my circumstance if I know God loves me, if I feel His warmth and care for me.

Second, the cross declares our worth. Although God revolves around Himself, this doesn’t diminish our value in Christ.

As the saying goes, two things ultimately declare the value of something: its owner and its worth. A few years ago, President John F. Kennedy's golf clubs sold for \$772,500.<sup>9</sup> Recently, Elvis Presley's Bible went for \$94,000 in the United Kingdom.<sup>10</sup> Those material items don't compare to the worth of a human life, especially in the eyes of God.

Before your birth, God counted you as valuable. "For You formed my inward parts. / You wove me in my mother's womb / I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; / Wonderful are Your works, / And my soul knows it very well. . . . How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! / How vast is the sum of them!" (Ps. 139:13, 14, 17).

God loved you and had wonderful and precious thoughts of you long before you were born. However, value, as we learned above, is determined not only by who owned an item, but by how much someone is willing to pay for it. William Temple said, "My worth is what I am worth to God and that is a marvelous great deal, for Christ died for me."<sup>11</sup>

Even while we were enemies of God, Jesus died for our sins. That is how much we are worth to God; and God sets the standard for value. Why should we drown in our insecurities? How can we think God does not care? How could we think He wants us to fail? God declared us worthy! Though our present circumstances don't make sense to us, we know He has a future for us if He believes we are worthy. Romans 5:10 states it this way, "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life."

Third, the cross clears our conscience. Jesus nailed our sin to the cross. "And He Himself bore our sins in His body on the

cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed” (1 Pet. 2:24). We should not bear feelings of guilt, thinking God could not possibly bless us.

The visible circumstances of life may make it appear that the deck is stacked against trusting God; but as a believer, you can rest in the fact that God is on your side. Romans 8:32 says, “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?” If God would give us Jesus to die on the cross, the rest is just a garnish to Him.

What if you gave your son to another family and, with tears and trembling when you hand your child over, they ask very humbly, “Can I have the stroller too?” As you look at them, you can tell they are worried about the stroller. They are overly concerned, fretting over the prospect of not getting the stroller. You might reply, “Well, of course, I am giving you my son—the stroller means nothing.” We fret over strollers. If God gave us His Son, I think He would throw in all that came with the Son.

Since Christ saved you and forgave you of all your sins at salvation, He wants you to walk with Him and receive all the blessings He has for you. No matter what you have done, He desires to forgive and restore you.

Fourth, the cross helps us place ourselves in proper fellowship with God. Proverbs 28:1 says, “The wicked flee when no one is pursuing, / But the righteous are bold as a lion.” Boldness refers to confident, courageous faith. When we are humbled at the cross, we realize that we are here to serve God, not here for God to serve us. We are already blessed beyond what we deserve. Our expectations of God become more biblically aligned and accurate. We become grateful for all He has given rather than

focusing on what we feel is missing. It is at that point we can build a relationship with God as Lord of our lives.

Our greatest challenge is the mystery of how God relates to us; therefore, the closer we are to Christ, the more we will understand His relationship to us and how He works in our hearts.

It is probably easier for us to identify with Chris' spiritual vertigo than with the lion chasing Benaiah. Like Chris, we suffer from doubt, disillusionment and even despair. We cannot see ourselves as heroic figures for God because we often lack the courage to face disappointments in our lives.

As we step to the cross, we become aware of how much God loves us, how much He cares and how powerful He really is. God relates to us through love and grace, which are a privilege and blessing, and not one's right. By placing our faith in what Christ did on the cross, we begin to regain our spiritual balance.

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## Discussion Questions

1. What are your expectations of God and your relationship with Him? Are these expectations of Him found in the Bible? Do you feel He has broken a promise to you? Are you expecting something from God that you aren't sure has been promised?
2. In what area of your life do you have trouble trusting God (e.g., finances, healing, relationships, career, family)?
3. How will you humble yourself to be more like the dog who sees God as the One he serves and not the cat who expects God to serve him?



## 2

### The Battle to Believe

**W**hen Linda walked into my office, I didn't know what to expect. She had previously written me a note questioning God and doubting her faith. The note, loaded with sarcasm, seemed somewhat cynical. I expected to meet a bitter, stern-faced woman ready to spew all her problems with God. To my surprise, Linda was a woman in her early forties with an upbeat and pleasant manner. However, as our conversation began, she emphatically shared that life had not been kind to her.

Her teenage son was physically challenged and her husband was an alcoholic. She had a friend in our church who was excited over an answered prayer that Linda considered trite. Her question was simple and fair: "Why does God care about answering prayers for church events or finding car keys but not have time to talk to me? I never remember having an answered prayer. Why should I trust Him anymore?"

Faith has a public relations problem. As that great theologian Archie Bunker once said, "Faith is believing what nobody would believe if it weren't in the Bible."<sup>1</sup> When tragedy occurs, a well-meaning friend may challenge you to "just believe" or "keep trusting God." You wonder if said friend has ever gone through any real problems.

Most of us can identify with the man who approached Jesus in Mark 9. “And Jesus said to him, ‘If You can? All things are possible to him who believes.’ Immediately the boy’s father cried out and said, ‘I do believe; help my unbelief’” (9:23–24). We vacillate between belief and unbelief every day.

At times, it seems that God’s help is arbitrary. Why does He answer the prayer of one couple, blessing them with a long-awaited child, while another couple prays for years and never conceives? Why does one man get a promotion at work and another—who is just as faithful—get laid off? Why do we feel that we have prayed and struggled in faith, only to be disappointed by God? Why is one person healed of disease while another suffers?

Most of us have struggled with these questions. I have in my own experience. My most dramatic answer to prayer came to me as a college student. When I was eighteen, I was diagnosed with diabetes. The early discovery of the disease was a blessing because I could treat it by simply changing my diet. For four years, I was able to keep my sugar level under control by watching what I ate.

Then I began to cheat on my diet and by the time I was twenty-two, my doctor told me I had to start taking insulin shots. Not good news. Yet I had no one to blame but myself. I asked God to forgive my lack of discipline and accepted the consequences. Despite the diagnosis, I had a strange and wonderful peace about the situation.

Before I began taking the insulin, I had to go back to the doctor’s office to take a three-hour test that would determine the level of insulin that I would need. The night before the appointment, I had a quiet, private prayer meeting with God. I was

not praying about my physical condition at the time, but simply praying about various things God was laying upon my heart.

As I was talking to God, He revealed to me that He did not want me to have diabetes. In response, I prayed that God would supernaturally heal me of the disease. I did not go to a faith healer or make a special deal with Him. I simply asked.

I knew from the moment I said “amen” that God had healed me. The next day, I kept my doctor appointment. After they drew blood for the test, I went to hang out at the Baptist Student Union building on the university campus. It never occurred to me that God had not performed the miracle. I was at total peace.

After about three hours, I went back to the doctor’s office. As I reached for the handle of the front door, the thought occurred to me, “What if I am not healed?” The momentary fear that startled my heart was not that I would have to take shots every day or perhaps die young. My fear was “if God has not healed me, what will it do to my faith?” I shook off the feeling of doubt and walked into the office. Immediately, my eyes met the nurse’s as she was passing through the hall. She came toward me and before I had a chance to ask, she exclaimed, “You don’t have it. I can’t explain it, but your diabetes is gone!” Since that day more than thirty-five years ago, I am still free of the disease.

Soon after my healing, my doctor diagnosed me with Graves’ Disease, a hyperactive thyroid condition. I don’t mean to sound greedy, but I prayed hard for another healing. I think I prayed with more faith than I did over the diabetes. However, today my thyroid issues remain.

What is the answer? Why did He heal me one time and not the next? How do we know when to take a step of faith?

Our difficulty may be that we don't understand faith as God defines it.

## What Is Faith?

In Scripture, we find a great and insightful book on faith entitled Hebrews, written to people immature in their faith and in danger of losing their passion for Christ. The writer warns his readers several times about drifting away from God.

“For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away *from it*” (2:1).

“DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME,

AS IN THE DAY OF TRIAL IN THE WILDERNESS” (3:8).

“Concerning him we have much to say, and *it is* hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing” (5:11).

Then, near the conclusion of the book, the writer issues a great challenge.

But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one. Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

For yet in a very little while, he who is coming will come, and will not delay. But My righteous one shall

live by faith; and if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him.

But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.

Now faith is the assurance of *things* hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval.

By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible. (Heb. 10:32-11:3)

Notice this passage reveals its subject matter early on in verse 35 with the word **confidence**. This word means “public courage.” The premise is that it takes faithful perseverance demonstrated by public courage to receive the blessing of God. We read in Hebrews 10:36, “For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.”

Looking further to chapter 11, verse 6, we see the key to pleasing God, “And without faith it is impossible to please *Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and *that* He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.”

How do we please God? In this verse, we find three components:

1. Come to Christ.
2. Believe that He is.
3. Believe that He will reward. He will ultimately come through for us regardless of the present situation.

Faith is the key to pleasing God and, ultimately, the courage to trust to the end, so we need to understand what God says about faith. Back up to Hebrews 11:1–3, and we find the only

description of faith in Scripture, “Now faith is the **assurance** of *things hoped* for, the **conviction** of things **not seen**. For by it the men of old gained approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.”

This passage begins with the concept of faith. In the Hebrew language, faith has the idea of future hope. The New Testament authors often refer to having hope. This can be confusing until we realize biblical hope is different from our definition of hope.

Our idea of hope has a measure of uncertainty: “I hope it will rain.” “I hope I will get that promotion.” In the Bible, hope is not merely wishful thinking but the idea of embracing a future we know will come and looking forward to receiving it. The faithful heroes of the Old Testament in Hebrews 11 had hope. It was a faith for the future.

This moves us into the first part of our description of faith. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for.” Assurance is from the Greek word *hupostasis*,<sup>2</sup> meaning “substance or support.” The idea is we have something solid undergirding us; in this case, someone we can count on. In Mark 11:24 Jesus said, “Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be *granted* you.”

Here, the word “believe” means it is as good as if the prayer has already been answered. Literally, “believe that you have already received it.”<sup>3</sup> We find the same teaching in Hebrews 11:1. Then faith, first of all, means what we hope for in the future is as good as ours.

The second aspect of faith has to do with the unseen world. Faith is the conviction of things not seen. A “conviction” is a belief so deep that it alters our lives, leads our decisions and

compels us to sacrifice. We are called to have a conviction of the things not visible to our eyes. Hebrews 11:2–3 clarifies this: “For by it the men of old gained approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.”

There is a visible world seen with our physical eyes and there is an unseen, invisible world. The Bible speaks of the visible things being the temporary and the invisible being eternal. Second Corinthians 4:18 says, “Look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” Faith is the organ used for our spiritual sight. What we can see reveals some facts that are true in our lives. However, there are things we cannot see that are just as real and true.

In his book *God in the Dark*, Os Guinness says, “The known facts (what we see) are often against God, but that’s not all the facts.”<sup>4</sup> He goes on to say that what we see may be true, but it’s only part of the truth. There is a truth that we cannot see. Only God knows the whole truth.

It may be true that you are jobless. It may be true that you are forty and lonely. It may be true that you are suffering from cancer. But it’s not the whole truth. There is a future in an unseen world that only God knows. We can tap into this world of unseen truth by faith. Biblical faith is trust or confidence in God. We rely on God’s knowledge and trust in His loving concern for us. We push forward knowing that He will deliver in the end. We discover what we see, hear or experience cannot always be trusted. Only God and His Word possess the whole truth.

Third, faith involves objective belief in a person’s word. Hebrews 11:3 speaks of the world being formed by the word of

God. As we read Hebrews 11, we see Old Testament heroes trusting the word of God. Faith is not merely subjective because Scripture gives us objectivity and clarity.

Author and pastor Andy Stanley states, “Before we can act courageously, we must have clarity in a situation. If we are clear about the truth, we are then moved to action. We humans love ambiguity. We love to sit around and discuss ideas, solutions, and problems without reaching a conclusion. If we reach a conclusion, we feel we must act. If we have no clarity in a situation, then we feel justified over our inaction.”<sup>5</sup>

This plays strongly into the philosophy of relativism, that all truth is relative. Whatever is true for you is your truth and whatever is true for me is my truth. This leads to the modern idea of tolerance. The old definition of tolerance meant that you could believe whatever you chose.

You had a right to be wrong; but because someone cared about you, they tried to help you see the truth. Today’s definition of tolerance infers your truth is just as true as anyone else’s, leading us to conclude that truth is arbitrary and subjective, that there is no absolute truth.

The result of this relativism is a lack of clarity leading to a lack of passion and a tendency toward inaction. Why act courageously? Why step out on faith? Why take chances if there is no gain? The purpose isn’t worth the cost. We aren’t compelled to act because we lack clarity of truth. The Bible gives us the truth, however. It says in Hebrews 1 that God has spoken; and since He cannot lie, I believe, receive and act on His Word.

A good, concise definition of faith is simply taking God at His Word. His promises to us are to be our only expectations of God. At times, it’s hard to believe—it’s hard to see by



faith. When we lack understanding of faith, it cannot function properly.

### **Connecting the Dots: The Past**

Faith is the connection of two worlds—the past and the future. It looks at God’s past accomplishments and connects them to “biblical hope” for the future. God gave us the gift of faith, first received through His Word and then of course when we received Christ Himself into our lives. The Bible says in James 1:21, “In humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls” and in First Peter 1:23, “For you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, *that is*, through the living and enduring word of God.” We have the organ of spiritual eyesight to look ahead with reliance, trust and confidence.

Imagine yourself as an illustration of faith. Stretch out your arms. Picture yourself reaching toward the past with your left arm and reaching toward the future with your right. Faith stands in the middle, connecting the two. Os Guinness would say, “Faith’s calling is to live between times. Faith is in transit. It lives in an interim period. Behind faith is the great no longer. Ahead of it lies the great not yet.”<sup>6</sup>

How does the “great no longer” help our faith? We look to the past with gratitude. Hebrews 10:32 tells us to remember the former days. Hebrews 11 helps us remember what the heroes of the past accomplished. The saints of the Old Testament often began a prayer with praise and thanksgiving. They weren’t trying to flatter God but were building their faith for the task ahead through praise. The apostle Paul often began a letter with gratitude to God and to the people of the church.

“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world” (Rom. 1:8).

“I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus” (I Cor. 1:4).

“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you” (Phil. 1:3).

As we express gratefulness, we remember what God has done for us. This changes our attitude from entitlement to appreciation for what we have. Thanksgiving with humility combats the expectations we often place on God. It begins at the cross and should permeate our lives. Gratitude adjusts our faith to God’s reality. It leads us to see the world from God’s point of view.

I have heard it said we love 95 percent of things about our spouse but it’s the 5 percent that drives us crazy. Why? Because we concentrate on what they lack rather than focus on what we love. When I was a young pastor, I received some great lessons on gratitude that I applied to a difficult funeral situation.

Just weeks after I started pastoring my first church, we held vacation Bible school. Like similar VBS programs, we enrolled many local children who didn’t normally attend church. One of them was a five-year-old boy named Robin. A week after VBS, he and a friend were riding their tricycles on the sidewalk when a drunk driver veered off the road, hit Robin and killed him. Later, his parents told me how much Robin learned about Christ at VBS and how his heart was tender toward God.

A few days later, I had the task of preaching his funeral. I was twenty-six years old and this was only my third funeral. Talk about baptism by fire! What could I say from the pulpit that would bring comfort to his family? God brought to mind what I had learned a few years before about focus and thanksgiving. I

began the message asking the congregation how long they felt a person should live—should it be sixty, seventy, eighty years? The Bible mentions three score and ten being an exemplary time. That’s seventy years. In our minds, we felt Robin deserved to live out his seventy years. We concentrate on the sixty-five years we believe he lost and ask God, “Why?” Instead, I said, we needed to focus on the five years he had lived and the impact his love had on others. We should be grateful for the five years we had him. Our problem is the expectation of seventy years when God hasn’t guaranteed any amount of time.

Later, I was able to lead Robin’s parents, Grady and Phyllis, to faith in Christ. Robin was their only child and they had been told they could not have any more children. While all of that was true, it was not the *whole* truth. We prayed earnestly for the couple and God eventually blessed them with another son. The couple kept following Christ; and years later, Grady became ordained as a deacon in his church.

I mentioned previously that my wife, Pam, had been diagnosed with breast cancer. I remember vividly when and how I found out. We were on our way to her doctor for the result of the biopsy. She’d had scares before, so we were not overly worried. Earlier that morning, however, the doctor had called Pam to give her warning that the lump was indeed cancerous. On the road to his office, Pam broke the news to me. I was shocked. I couldn’t believe it. I wish I could tell you that I responded in complete trust and confidence in God. I did not.

After a few comforting comments to Pam, I spent ten minutes in seething silence. I was mad at God. After all, Pam and I had been following Christ all our lives. We led many to Christ, we sacrificially served, we tithed and so forth (you know—the

usual defense before God). We were in the worst, most stressful time at our church and now this.

As I turned into the parking lot of the doctor's office, God sent a sharp rebuke into my mind. It went something like, "You are not being grateful for what I have given. I gave you this great woman to be your wife for twenty-nine years. You do not deserve her. If I took her now, you would have had her for twenty-nine more years than you deserved." I focused on the future years I thought I might be cheated of instead of the twenty-nine years of blessing I already had. (God also added that I was being selfish.) Pam and I have been married for thirty-four years now and she is a breast cancer survivor. For this, I am grateful.

I'm not saying that we shouldn't suffer and grieve over loss, but gratitude goes miles in getting God off the hook for those maladies we blame on Him. Thanksgiving connects the dots to the future when we remember the great things God has done and we become excited about what He will do in the future. In Psalm 138, King David begins with thanksgiving.

"I will give You thanks with all my heart; / I will sing praises to You before the gods. / I will bow down toward Your holy temple / And give thanks to Your name for Your lovingkindness and Your truth; / For You have magnified Your word according to all Your name." Then in Psalm 138:3 he cites a result of his gratitude, "On the day I called, You answered me; / You made me bold with strength in my soul." It would seem his faith grew in verses seven and eight where he says, "Though I walk in the midst of trouble, You will revive me; / You will stretch forth Your hand against the wrath of my enemies, / And Your right hand will save me. / The LORD will accomplish what concerns

me; / Your lovingkindness, O LORD, is everlasting; / Do not forsake the works of Your hands."

David reminded himself of God's past blessings and it caused him to realize that what God had done in the past, He could do in the future. What are you grateful for?

- If you woke up this morning with more health than illness, you are more blessed than the six million who will not survive this week.
- If you have never experienced the danger of battle, the loneliness of imprisonment, the agony of torture or the pangs of starvation, you are ahead of 500 million people in the world.
- If you can attend a church meeting without fear of harassment, arrest, torture or death, you are more blessed than three billion people in the world.
- If you have food in the refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof overhead and a place to sleep, you are richer than 75 percent of people in this world.
- If you have money in the bank, in your wallet, and spare change in a dish someplace, you are among the top 8 percent of the world's wealthy.<sup>7</sup>

Why don't you stop reading and thank God for at least three things in your life?

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

As we look to the past with gratitude, it changes our perspective on God and how He relates to us. It changes how we see God. Do you blame Him for your problems? Do you see God as guilty or innocent of abandonment in your life? If your grateful heart leads you to see His love, you will also be determined to see His hand at work in your present situation.

Suppose someone was on trial for murder and all the evidence pointed to their guilt. Every lawyer would see it as an open-and-shut case and the accused as guilty.

However, you believe in the man's innocence and would work diligently to find out all the facts. No matter where the evidence pointed, you would work hard to find the stone that was unturned, the missing witness, the DNA left at the crime scene.

Here we find an insight to faith. Evidence may point away from God's involvement in our circumstances, but that's not *all* the evidence. We know God is loving, full of grace and truth, and can always be trusted. So when I believe God is innocent of letting me down, I will look for evidence that proves Him trustworthy. I trust Him even when all evidence is against Him. I will believe Him for the whole truth.

In Psalm 62, King David's son Absalom had taken over David's kingdom. He was on the run, living in caves with a few of his followers. His anguish must have been great. His son rebelled against him. The people of Israel rejected him. It would have been easy to think that God no longer wanted him, the life he knew was over, and he faced a future of a gypsy. In Psalm 62:1–2 he cried out, "My soul *waits* in silence for God only; / From Him is my salvation. / He only is my rock and my salvation, / My stronghold; I shall not be greatly shaken." David knew that God is good. The evidence may have been

against God, but David chose to wait for the whole truth. He proclaims in Psalm 62:7, “On God my salvation and my glory rest; / The rock of my strength, my refuge is in God.”

### **Connecting the Dots: The Future**

Again, gratitude helps put our lives in proper perspective. It replaces our sense of entitlement. If we don't deal with those feelings, we will eventually blame all of our problems on God.

So how do we reach forward with hope and confidence? The rest of this book explains the struggles we have in doing just that. Let me begin by sharing a basic, overruling concept:

The key to faith and all Christian life is to live under the active lordship of Christ.

First, let me remove confusion based on various opinions on when Christ became Lord.

We first receive Christ as Lord at our salvation experience. Romans 10:9–10 teaches “If you confess with your mouth Jesus *as* Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.” The word “Lord” means “master or ruler of my life.” The moment we received Christ, we repented of our sins and surrendered our will to His.

We are supernaturally born again and become followers of Christ. There is no salvation without lordship or following God. When we receive Christ, we give all we know about ourselves to all we know about Christ. The problem is we don't know very much. As we grow in Christ, God gradually reveals different areas of our lives in which we need to surrender. We then make decisions on whether to surrender that area to Christ or no

longer have Christ as active Lord of our lives. It's not that we lose our salvation if we say no, but we do lose His fellowship and peace.

Why is lordship crucial to our confidence in Christ? A sequence of events occurs in our lives, depending on who or what is ruling them.

1. We *choose* our master.
2. That master *controls* our lives.
3. We place our *confidence* in that master.<sup>8</sup>

One example of this is money. When we give money first place in our lives, it begins to control our decisions. Money becomes an idol to us. We then begin to think money can produce fulfillment, happiness and enjoyment in our lives—that money can deliver what we need and want. We believe it can be our rescuer. In essence, we place our confidence in it.

If we are going to place our confidence in God, we must place Him first in our lives. We must have Him as master of our hearts. The lordship of Christ is a foundational piece in “connecting the dots” of faith to the future. We are able to see that our relationship with Him is more important than any “thing” we want.

Our security is in Him. We can better see Him for who He is. The more we see, the more we can trust His character. We are not as tempted to blame Him for our troubles. We will not hold Him accountable for promises He has never made. We want His will done, not our own.

As we trust Him as Master, we begin to want what He wants for us. We begin to see the world through His eyes. When life does not go according to our expectations, we take comfort



in knowing that the most important thing in our life—our relationship with Christ—can never be taken.

Therefore, we have nothing to dread or fear. We can boldly trust Him as we place Him first. David concludes our thoughts in Psalm 62:8 by encouraging us, “Trust in Him at all times, O people; / Pour out your heart before Him; / God is a refuge for us.”

Is Christ Lord of your life? Who is your master? Some think if they follow Christ as Lord, then He replaces them on the throne of their lives. I think, however, we will discover that something else is already on the throne. It could be money, career, family, friends, even an addiction. But something else that we place first, that leads every decision, that gives us satisfaction, is already there.

That something is the voice deep within our soul that we allow to define who we are. If that voice is not God, then He must somehow fit into our plans, our priorities, and compete with our agendas. If He does not cooperate, we become disappointed with Him. That something else on our throne begins to control and enslave us. Jesus is the only person who will govern your life without enslaving you. He wants what’s best for you and wants you to become all you can be.

What we see, hear or experience may not change; but in order to overcome spiritual vertigo, we must change our faith. It must realize its true character. We need to connect the dots between the *no longer* and the *not yet* in order to see life from God’s perspective.

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## Discussion Questions

1. Review your thanksgiving list. Think about why you are grateful for these things and how God has blessed you.
2. Can you say that Christ is “active” Lord of your life? Are you ready to obey God no matter what you see, hear or experience?
3. Are you relying on anything besides a relationship with Christ to give your life meaning and satisfaction?
4. Why do you think you have trouble surrendering to God?