

## Chapter 1

# LIVING FAITH

### FAITH PRINCIPLE #1

BIBLICAL FAITH IS BELIEVING THAT GOD EXISTS AND THAT  
HE REWARDS THOSE WHO SEEK HIM.

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.

By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. (*Hebrews 11:1–3*)

## THE LONG ROAD HOME—SHARON BIAS

In a home filled with the terror of an alcoholic and abusive father, a place where there was little food and even less laughter, my mother would sometimes speak to me about Jesus. Alone in my bedroom, with tears streaming down my cheeks, I gave my heart to Christ. In those difficult years, I would often promise Jesus that, when I grew up, I would work hard and make enough money to help children who were too poor to buy clothes and food, I would abolish all alcohol, and I would make it so that daddies were never allowed to hit mommies.

Sometimes, when it seemed I was the particular target of Dad's rage, I thought that maybe Jesus was as angry with me as my father was. Why else was life so hard? How could a loving God allow fathers to hurt their children? Terror and resentment eventually replaced my childlike love for Jesus. As an adult, I looked for security in marriage and children and, after my daughter's birth, I finally felt like I was in control of my life. The birth of my gravely ill son, Dean, however, changed all that. Dean was born with lymphangioma. This disease disfigured his face and led to numerous complications, including constant infections, fevers, an obstructed airway, and fourteen surgeries. My husband, unable to accept our "imperfect" child, deserted us. After three years of hearing doctors tell me they could not diagnose my child's problem, I knew that time was running out. In desperation, I contacted a children's hospital and was referred to Dr. C. Everett Koop. After just one hour with him, I understood my child's rare birth defect. Dr. Koop also made it clear to me that the treatment process would be long, expensive, and difficult. At the time, all I could think was: "How much harder can this get?"

Even as I tried to deal with Dean's poor health and uncertain future, I struggled to support my small family; I often wondered how we would eat from week to week, how I would pay for Dean's mounting medical bills. After years of pain and misery, I could bear the strain no longer. I wanted to end my life. The long years of unresolved anger, fear, and depression had finally pulled me into deep despair and thoughts of suicide.

Then, from somewhere deep inside me, I remembered my mother telling me about Jesus. I began to pray, "Lord, if you're really there, if you really do love me, please help me. I'm so tired. I just can't do this anymore." Suddenly, I felt the weight of all my troubles lift as the love of Christ surrounded me. For the first time in my life, I experienced real hope.

Though none of my circumstances had changed, I knew that God had met with me in a supernatural way. Soon after

## *Living Faith*

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that, Dr. Koop asked me several pointed questions about my faith, and he went on to share with me how I could know Jesus was with me during these difficult days. Thus, it was through my son's illness that the Holy Spirit brought me back to Jesus and through my son's caring physician that I would begin to learn how to live for Christ.

On another day, Dr. Koop showed me a room full of sick infants. I was horrified to learn that children with similar diseases were being put to death by abortion. I soon realized that God had sent Dr. Koop to prepare me for a special mercy ministry. Shortly after that discussion with Dr. Koop, I eagerly accepted the challenge to help start a Crisis Pregnancy Center. At the time, I did not know I would one day serve as its Executive Director. I often think about my childhood dreams of helping unloved and hurting children and their mothers when I see the women and children whose needs are being met through this ministry.

If the Lord had not given me the life I had as a child, would I still have the compassion I feel for others today? If the Lord had not given me a critically ill son, would I even be walking with Christ today? Would I still cry at the sight of a handicapped or sick child? And if He had not led me to meet Dr. Koop, who taught me about Jesus and His love for children, would I now be ministering to hurting people experiencing crisis pregnancies? Would I have had the privilege of seeing even my own father receive Jesus into his heart just before his death?

Years of heartache taught me much about myself and about my Savior that I would never have learned otherwise. How thankful I am that He did not give up on me even during the time I gave up on Him.

*Sharon Bias*

## WHERE IS GOD NOW?

Do you sometimes wish your life were like a videotape so that you could fast-forward over difficult circumstances or rewind back to times of joy and contentment? If so, you will be able to relate to the following people:

John and Tracey would never experience the joy of seeing their daughter, Josie, smile or grow up. For reasons known only to God, Josie was stillborn two weeks before her due date. The doctors later explained, "We have found no reason for this death. Your daughter was perfectly healthy." The bereaved mother could only ask herself bitterly, "Well, if that's true, then why isn't Josie here with us? Lord, this all seems so mean and senseless to me. My husband and I are trying to love and follow you, but I'm not sure I know who you are anymore. Why did you give us this child only to take her away before we even got to know her? I don't want to feel this way . . . *but how am I ever going to trust you again?*"

Joe and Priscilla had reached every goal in their marriage . . . except one. When would God give them a child? After years of infertility treatments and repeated miscarriages, they were tempted to believe that God was displeased with them. Did they need more faith? Was there hidden sin in their lives? When, if ever, would God give them a child?

Though an active, committed Christian since her teens, Margie, a young woman whom we love as though she were our own daughter, had just begun to understand that her heavenly Father loved her unconditionally and would never treat her the way her physically and emotionally abusive earthly father had. She, in turn, rejoiced in being God's beloved daughter; Margie loved God, and she longed to pass that love on to her children. Yet, for reasons that are still a mystery, almost four-year-old Eric woke up from an extended coma with irreversible brain damage. Eric is now totally handicapped; he sits in a wheelchair, and any indication that he is aware of his cir-

cumstances is rare. When Margie learned we were writing this book, she came to us. “I want to be faithful to God, but I don’t understand His ways and I don’t feel His love in this situation. Walking in obedience is so hard when I know there will be no happy endings for my family on this earth. Tell me how to keep walking by faith when life is excruciating. Please, no clichés or ‘surefire recipes.’ ”

Each one of these struggling believers is a present-day hero of faith. Blindsided by traumatic circumstances, they strive to honor God despite their pain. It would be easy to make this book one more “How to Have Joy in the Journey” manual for Christians. Instead, in light of the God-given determination of our friends to know God intimately and to walk by faith even when life is hard, we knew we had to share honestly from our own difficult journey.

## A MARK FROM GOD

God specializes in conforming us into the image of His Son (Romans 8:29). In order to do this, He invades our lives in ways that change us forever. We will look back on some of these encounters as fond memories, such as the time we came to know Jesus, the day we married the man or woman God brought into our lives, or the moment we experienced the glorious miracle of childbirth. Like Moses, whose face shone brilliantly after just such an encounter (2 Corinthians 3:7), we also know that, from that moment on, our lives will never be the same.

At other times these invasions are more sobering and painful. Thus, we are not surprised by the anguished cries of the many people who have come to us for comfort and counsel. We know all too well the anxiety caused by too many bills and not enough money, the crushing disappointment of severe church conflict, and the terror that goes with the words,

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“You have advanced breast cancer.” Each of these life-changing events in our own lives, both the bitter and the sweet, has left an indelible pattern, a kind of “scorch mark,” upon our souls. Through it all, however, God gently and firmly led us into a deeper intimacy with Him. Even so, none of these experiences could have prepared us for the death, on July 6, 1993, of our sixteen-year-old son, Mark, and his friend Kelly in a car accident.

At times like these, the crushing pain we suffer leads us to cry out, “God is Sovereign—but can we trust Him?” In the crucible of suffering, what we believe about God takes on critical importance. What is our reaction when God doesn’t resolve our problem, when He doesn’t keep His promises the way we thought He would or reconcile our marriages even when we’ve completed every assignment in the marriage manual? Such disappointments will quickly reveal whether our faith is based on an intimate, trusting relationship with God or merely on the blessings He so generously gives us.

Suffering drives believers to God, but what is it that we want from Him? Do we settle for pat, simplistic, “theologically correct” answers, or do we hunger for a living knowledge of our heavenly Father? Do we demand tidy formulas that explain everything to our satisfaction, or do we submit ourselves to the One whose thoughts and ways are far above ours? Do we simply want to feel better, or do we ask God to equip us to persevere with joy and to encourage and strengthen others in their struggles? Is it possible to experience joy when each new day brings another reminder that we live in a broken and suffering world?

In our own personal search for answers, we soon learned that many of the Christian world’s recipes for living and clichés for dealing with pain are nothing more than man-centered formulas rather than true biblical counsel. Instead of encouraging us to live *sola Scriptura* (by Scripture alone), they promote

“sola bootstrappa” striving. Such striving may give some momentary relief, but eventually it comes up empty unless it is driven by a vision of God’s character and ultimate purposes. What we believe about God is what provides the basis for our worldview, the window through which we view every event in our lives and which determines our responses. Understanding God’s ultimate purpose helps us see the trials in our lives, and the scorch marks they leave behind, as one of His ways to separate us from our love affair with this world and focus our attention on His eternal perspective. It is not enough to know God’s ultimate purpose, however. We must also know *Him*.

## KNOWING GOD

Prior to our own painful experiences, we thought we did know God. For years we taught that God is the healer of broken hearts and brings beauty from ashes. We faithfully taught that if we did what was right and godly no matter how we felt, good feelings would follow. In the hours and months after our son’s death, we doubted all of it. Our minds echoed with the self-incriminating scream, “Liar!” We were deaf to God’s voice, and our eyes were blind to His gracious, unconditional love. Mark’s death seemed to smash our life-vision, and we no longer cared about God’s ultimate purposes. We just wanted our son back.

Ever so slowly and gently God began to restore our spiritual hearing and eyesight through His Word and through the testimony of those who came before us. In addition, we are observing this same tender and long-suffering God gently but firmly move our friends from misery to experiencing His mercy and then toward ministering to others. Please know that restoration does not mean we have a bounce in our step when we visit the cemetery. God’s grace is not an anesthetic.

Some days God's restoration simply means we are able to crawl to the bathroom to face the start of a new day. We are learning that is enough.

### CAN GOD BE TRUSTED?

Especially significant in our personal journey has been God's gentle but firm exhortation, written to discouraged Christians and recorded for us in the letter to the Hebrews. Because of their conversion from Judaism to Christianity these new believers were ostracized and rejected by their families. Suddenly people who were accustomed to strong family roots had no familiar family structures and faced social, political, and economic persecution. They started their Christian journey with great joy, but serving God in their culture had become terribly difficult. The purpose of the letter to the Hebrews is to exhort these young believers to stay the course, to persevere, and to minister to others as they traveled the paths marked out for them by God.

In response to the Hebrews' feeling that God does not hear their prayers for relief, the writer reminds them that God speaks to their needs in a most personal way:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. (Hebrews 1:1-2)

Without mentioning their specific sufferings, the writer proclaims that the One they embrace as Messiah is the exact representation of God's glory and sustains all things by His powerful word (v. 3). Implied is the question, "If our Messiah sustains all things, can He not sustain you?" Through his reg-



ular use of the Old Testament as his textbook and his steadfast reliance on the sufficiency of Christ, the author of Hebrews reminds these new believers of the truth that stands in stark contrast to their feelings.

Their eyes are fixed on the darkness of the present. In response, their teacher urges them to confidently cultivate intimacy with God. They must understand the sufficiency of what Christ accomplished in their behalf and the truth of God's promises so that He may "unbolt" them from the cares of this present world by focusing their eyes on their future with Him in eternity. Because of the finished work of Christ, he implores them to experience faith-based living rather than self-sufficient striving. After constructing a firm theological foundation for walking by faith in this broken world, the writer defines faith.

## WHAT FAITH IS NOT

It's easy to respond to the anguished cry of a soul by saying, "Just have faith." But what is faith? If we define faith incorrectly, we will be wrong about many other spiritual truths that rest on it, particularly obedience and suffering. It helps to establish what faith is by first understanding what it is not.

Biblical faith is *not*:

- ◆ Dormant energy waiting to be activated by some mysterious incantation.
- ◆ A way of twisting God's arm to get what we want from Him.
- ◆ Intellectual assent to man-made creeds or "articles of faith."
- ◆ Complicated and incomprehensible theories about God.
- ◆ A guarantee of a comfortable, stress-free life.

## TREASURES OF FAITH

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The underlying fallacy in all of these concepts is the focus on ourselves, on what we can get, and on how we can control our destinies. The writer of Hebrews points out that, in contrast to these false notions about faith, those who trust God often must walk a difficult road and sometimes seem to receive only evil in this life. Some men and women of faith

. . . were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. (Hebrews 11:35b–38)

Living in a broken world guarantees that everyone will experience difficulty on some level. Some suffering may be due to faithlessness and disobedience, but much of it comes as a result of having faith rather than a lack of it. This should not surprise us. When we suffer for the faith, we are following the journey of Jesus, the perfect model of faith. Jesus “endured the cross, scorning its shame,” for our sakes. We have no reason to expect anything different. Other suffering comes upon us not because of our faith but for no apparent reason at all. Just having faith does not insulate us from sickness, pain, sorrow, and death.

Even those who appear spiritually strong may succumb to faulty thinking—the mistaken belief that by trying harder, believing more, or finding the right spiritual formula, we’ll be able to make the pain go away. Chuck learned how his apparent ability to remove pain from his family’s life had helped shape his relationship with God.

At a very early age I concluded that as long as I was in charge of circumstances, I could control my happiness. Whether a ministerial crisis, an emotional depression, or the doctor's diagnosis that my wife had advanced breast cancer, my response would be, "I can fix this!" But when I held the lifeless body of our son, Mark, in my arms, I knew fully I was not in control of my circumstances . . . and I was scared.

A skewed definition of faith subtly implies that "me plus God" equals a majority, when the proper equation is "God plus no one is the majority." The resolution of any difficult circumstance is an undeserved gift from Him. We must be wary of any definition of faith that implies that we have control over God's responses to our circumstances.

## WHAT BIBLICAL FAITH IS

Hebrews 11:1 gives us a simple yet profound definition of faith: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." What were the people mentioned in Hebrews 11 hoping for and what were they certain of? What was visible to them that was invisible to others?

The inhabitants of God's Hall of Faith listed in Hebrews 11 were certain of what they could not see: *God*. They were sure of what they hoped for: *God could and would keep His promises*. As a result, they ultimately obeyed God, and God in turn commended them for their faithfulness.

## BIBLICAL FAITH IS BELIEVING THAT GOD EXISTS

What these people believed about God is made even clearer in verse 6: