

TREASURES
OF
FAITH

LIVING BOLDLY IN VIEW OF
G O D ' S P R O M I S E S

TREASURES
OF
FAITH

CHUCK and SHARON
B E T T E R S

R&R

P U B L I S H I N G

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To our children and grandchildren,
our precious spiritual legacy and joy of our lives.

*Sons are a heritage from the Lord,
children a reward from him.
Like arrows in the hands of a warrior
are sons born in one's youth.*
(Psalm 127:3–4)

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And what more shall we say? We do not have space to tell about all those friends and family who urged us by their prayers and notes to persevere—to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. *To Him be all the glory!*

INTRODUCTION

“Is God really sovereign? Can I trust Him now . . . even in this?”

The steady, virulent progress of the malignant brain tumor gave real urgency to these questions for David. The disease had progressed relentlessly; a cure seemed unlikely. David knew he didn't have much time. He wanted his last few days on earth to count, to reflect a heart in tune with God's purposes. David wanted to know—he *needed* to know—if this painful death was really from God's hand. Would God care for his young wife and three children after he was gone? Would He really walk with them through the valley of the shadow of death? David needed to trust God, but how could he? *How could he?*

We understand David's questions. When our son Mark and his friend Kelly were killed in a car accident on July 6, 1993, our own struggle to survive nearly consumed us. Slowly and surely, however, God reminded us that just surviving is not enough. We needed a purpose, a reason to keep moving forward, or we were never going to make it. But, like David, we were weary, uncertain of whether we could really trust the God who was calling us to persevere.

Our search for answers led us to the book of Hebrews. This book of the Bible was most likely originally a series of short sermons written for people just like us—people tempted to give up their faith in the face of great hardship. These Hebrews, Jewish Christians for the most part who lived during the first century, were persecuted and afraid and discouraged. Some had already abandoned the faith and had returned to their former lifestyles; others were sorely tempted to do so.

Could God, through their faith, redeem their pain and give it meaning? Could that pain actually help them to encourage others in their faith or to help draw unbelievers to the heart of God (2 Corinthians 2:15–17)?

Indeed it could—but how? *By faith.* Where does that kind of faith come from? *From God.* He is the One who controls every detail of our lives; He is the One who loved us more than His own life. Such a faith can gently whisper “God does all things well” even when the heart cries out “Where are you, God? *Where are you?*”

How do we cultivate this kind of faith? The answer to that question, dear friend, is what this book is all about. It is a topic addressed by Hebrews 11 in vivid and poignant detail.

We need a faith that is real, that is alive, a faith that holds up in the nitty-gritty problems and sorrows of everyday life. Such a faith is not some abstract concept but a shining and useful tool in our hands. The Hebrew believers needed desperately to remember that God had made a “covenant,” a binding promise. God had promised to strengthen His people, to love them, to be with them, to redeem them. Like us, sometimes they forgot that God *keeps* His promises.

God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill? (Numbers 23:19)

The author of Hebrews, in chapter 11, reminds us that since God kept His promises of the past, we can also trust Him to keep His promises for the present and for the future. In Hebrews 11 we are given a priceless vision of what God has already accomplished through the covenant and through the faithful men and women who trusted Him. We are also given an encouraging glimpse of what lies ahead for us because of that same covenant, a vision that gives our lives and work here

on earth new meaning. Spurred on by this vision we can persevere, by faith, no matter what our circumstances may be.

How did the people portrayed here in this amazing chapter of Hebrews demonstrate such a life-transforming faith in God? And what do they have to teach us?

Many of the portraits in this “spiritual family album” are a little tarnished, with histories that are often quite colorful and, in some cases, even sordid. In looking at them, we sometimes felt, uncomfortably, that we were looking into a mirror. The weakness, the sin, the selfishness we saw in them we also saw only too well in ourselves. Yet in spite of their failings, God remained strong in upholding these flawed men and women, and this greatly encouraged us. Upon closer inspection, we also began to see the signs of God’s faithfulness to His people, as marked by the seminal events in their lives, where God’s great grace and strength somehow shone brightly through their weakness (Romans 8:28–29). You will see with us how God moved in and through these “ordinary” lives, and you will discover that our God can transform *any* life into a life of faith—even yours.

On each page of this family album, you will also see the inexorable power and grace of God as He fulfills the promises of His eternal covenant of redemption. You will catch a glimpse of God’s unfolding purposes for His church. God interacts with struggling believers to build into them the faith He wants them to have. In this way we are enabled to build His kingdom, to encourage others, and to pass on a legacy of faith to coming generations.

These heroes of faith rose to prominence at pivotal moments in the sovereign purposes of God, but not without great personal struggle and doubt. We examine here their failures in order to reveal more fully the grace that moved them to victory, and some of our interpretations may stretch or surprise some readers. We urge you to dig deeper into the Scriptures to examine the pearls of grace in these remarkable lives—

these people who are our own weak, flawed, and sinful brothers and sisters but who ultimately became victorious heroes of faith.

Each chapter begins with a personal testimony from an ordinary person whom we consider to be a contemporary hero of faith. Some of the names and specific details have been altered just enough to protect confidentiality, but the stories are wholly true. Each chapter also presents a “Faith Principle” that emphasizes a particular aspect or benefit of faith. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of the Old Testament person(s) who best illustrates that principle. Throughout each chapter are suggestions on how to practically live out these principles, and each chapter also concludes with a “Digging Deeper” section, six days of daily devotions for further study.

This book is appropriate for individual or group study (a Leader’s Guide is available). As you read, keep your Bible open to the texts listed at the beginning of each chapter. The writer of Hebrews assumed a knowledge of Old Testament history among his readers, and you will understand and appreciate each faith story better if you read the Old Testament passages listed at the beginning of each chapter.

Our dear friend David had questioned whether God could be trusted through his pain. God’s answer, as promised in the sure word of Scripture, was emphatically yes. *God can be trusted*—a truth experienced as David journeyed toward his heavenly home, and a reality now fully confirmed in the glorious presence of his ascended Lord. You too will see, through this study of Hebrews 11, that God is faithful and that He can do amazing things with a yielded heart and life. What does it mean to trust God? Will *you* trust Him? Your life will reflect your answer to these questions. We trust that the message of Hebrews 11 presented here will encourage you to share your faith with others and to run with perseverance the course He has marked out for you.

Faith does not become “living faith” until it is no longer a dry concept but a tool in your hands, one glistening with your own sweat, your own tears and, yes, even your own blood. The author of Hebrews reminds us again and again that by faith God can accomplish His great purposes through men and women who suffer, who stumble, who fail, through men and women like us, through men and women like you. *By faith* such lives become precious gems set in the crown of His great and glorious covenant. Abraham learned this, and Joseph, and Moses, and Rahab, and Samson. Come share in their encouraging journey—and ours.

Chuck and Sharon Bettors

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

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,

“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.

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:

Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

The writer to the Hebrews points to creation as evidence that the Creator exists: “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” (v. 3). In other words, creation testifies to all humankind that God exists, and the visible creation depends on the invisible Creator. The knowledge that God is sovereign and in control of everything is one of the pivotal building blocks of faith.

BIBLICAL FAITH IS BELIEVING THAT GOD REWARDS THOSE WHO SEEK HIM

Believing God exists and is in control of all things is not enough. Believing God is in control sometimes deepens our pain unless we also believe that God keeps His promises (i.e., that “he rewards those who earnestly seek him” [v. 6]). Faith gives us eyes to see what is invisible to others. Where others see only suffering, faith enables us to see God’s hand drawing us to Himself. Our friend Josephine expressed her commitment to this kind of faith in a note to several trusted friends.

My husband has fallen into a grievous sin; an addiction to pornography. Such an addiction can wreak destruction on a family. He has made a confession to me and our pastor and Session. He is repentant and is on the road to recovery. I am in the process of dealing with forgiveness and the restoration of our marriage. . . . I don’t want all of this to be in vain. I know God promises to make beauty from ashes. He must have something for us to do for others through this crisis.

... My hope for myself is that one day I will be “clothed with strength and dignity”; I will “laugh at the days to come.” I will speak “with wisdom,” and have “faithful instruction” on my tongue (Proverbs 31:25–26).

The Westminster Shorter Catechism teaches us that “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” Such a God is someone Josephine can trust to keep His promises.

THE PROMISE OF SALVATION

In addition to God’s many promises that are in the process of being fulfilled, His promise to provide salvation for His children has already been fulfilled through Christ. Because God has kept this, the greatest of all promises, we are able to enjoy all that God has supplied for us. God’s promise of salvation is the cornerstone of the “covenant of grace” (Hebrews 10:1–18). The writer of Hebrews declares,

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. (Hebrews 10:19–22)

We can hear the writer exclaiming, “Therefore, in light of this amazing truth about God’s grace, enjoy what God has provided for you!” Thus, we can:

- ◆ confidently pursue intimacy with our Heavenly Father (vv. 19–22),
- ◆ unswervingly believe the promises of God (v. 23),
- ◆ cultivate fellowship with other believers that encourages perseverance (vv. 24–25),
- ◆ choose to do what is right (vv. 26–31),
- ◆ remember God’s past faithfulness and the joy of ministry (vv. 32–34),
- ◆ persevere by keeping our eyes fixed on eternal values (vv. 35–39), and
- ◆ be assured that God will not always seem absent (v. 37).

Rather than responses born merely of obligation, these are responses based on God’s proclamation of who He is. It is a call to know God so well that we believe He is present and at work even when we cannot see Him.

Joan explains how God is enabling her to respond to His love in just this way:

“Broken” is a good way to describe my world. Alzheimer’s stole my husband’s mind. I finally gave in to what was inevitable and, with a shattered heart, I placed him in a nursing home. Within the same time frame I was terminated from a 14-year teaching position and also learned my daughter’s husband left her with two young girls to raise. God used all of this as a means to build within me His love and kingdom. Endless hours of studying the Scriptures changed and enabled me to focus on God’s many promises. I learned to praise God. In the context of 2 Corinthians 1:3–4, He gave me the privilege to “comfort those in any trouble [with Alzheimer’s] with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.” God has also given me a special Christian friend, the wife of my husband’s roommate. Since we share similar circumstances and

trust God for each day, we daily encourage each other as we “bear one another’s burdens.” How good God is!

God is teaching Joan to see His grace in a situation where others would see only darkness.

WHEN YOU CANNOT SEE HIS HAND

The writer of Hebrews quotes the prophet Habakkuk to remind us that faith is believing God even when we can neither see nor understand Him (Hebrews 10:38). Habakkuk records his confusion and dismay over God’s apparent abandonment of Israel and exultation of Israel’s enemy, Babylon. He cries out,

How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted. (Habakkuk 1:2–4)

God’s shocking reply confused Habakkuk even further. God intended to use Israel’s bitter enemies, the Babylonians, to bring judgment on His people. This caused the prophet to continue questioning God’s wisdom and love (Habakkuk 1:12–2:1), but God’s answer came swiftly. Babylon would eventually also be punished; in the meantime, the Israelites were to live by faith as they waited for God’s deliverance (Habakkuk 2:4). Although fearful of what awaited the Israelites, Habakkuk chose emotional, intimate worship in his response, declaring, “I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trem-

bled. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us . . . I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior” (Habakkuk 3:16–18).

Habakkuk exercised true faith by trusting God even when he could not see what God was doing. He trusted God to keep His promises regarding Babylon, Israel, and—something the prophet himself would never personally see—the full redemption of God’s people. Habakkuk’s beliefs about God’s character dramatically changed his reaction to his circumstances and gave him eyes that saw beyond the physical realm. His decision to wait by faith deepened his intimacy with God.

The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights. (Habakkuk 3:19)

Although the Hebrew Christians were not suffering because of their personal sin, the author of Hebrews borrows a direct quote from Habakkuk, where God says,

So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. For in just a very little while, “He who is coming will come and will not delay. But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.” *But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.* (Hebrews 10:35–39 [emphasis added])

A FAITH RESPONSE

In response to this, these young Hebrew believers might have said, “We know what you are saying is true, but you just

don't understand how hard this is. We need to hear from someone who has walked in similar circumstances.”

We understand this protest, and we have been so grateful for those bereaved parents who are farther ahead of us in this journey. Many have called back to us with the proclamation, “We know your struggle, but God is faithful. You can trust Him!” Similarly, the teacher of these young believers gave them examples of ordinary people who responded to extreme stress with extraordinary faith—people whose saving faith resulted in the eventual development of experiential faith. Faced with extraordinary testing, these people drew on a personal relationship with God that taught them He would do everything He promised. Their stories are valuable because the Old Testament hides nothing about their journeys. Throughout our study of Hebrews 11 we will watch as God progressively reveals His promises to:

- ◆ redeem His people,
- ◆ build a covenant family,
- ◆ give them His presence,
- ◆ make them a blessing to others,
- ◆ preserve their inheritance, and
- ◆ share with them His glory for all eternity.

What is more, we will see God accomplish this through ordinary people who sometimes faltered in their pilgrimages. God gave these Old Testament believers eyes to see the reality of His promises: a better and lasting possession (Hebrews 10:34), a city with foundations (Hebrews 11:10), a country of their own (Hebrews 11:14), a better country—a heavenly one (Hebrews 11:16), a “better resurrection” (Hebrews 11:35), and numerous spiritual descendants even when there was no physical heir (Hebrews 11:12, 18, 21). God's promises gave them the courage to end their love affair with this world because they knew the best was yet to

come. Knowing this freed them to respond by faith to difficult circumstances.

Because they knew God intimately,

all these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (Hebrews 11:13–16)

And . . .

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. (v. 39–40)

But the stories of these men and women are not about how strong they were. Rather, their lives and experiences showcase the long-suffering, unconditional love of God. Biblical faith focuses on God's character and filters all of our circumstances through the prism of His sovereignty. We demonstrate biblical faith when we intentionally choose to surrender to God's sovereign control by allowing His plan for our lives—however different from our own plans His plan may be—in order to deepen our intimacy with Him. When we live by faith we trust that even the most difficult circumstances, though so often completely beyond our control, are still rich with possi-

bilities and opportunities. We can have hope instead of despair because our lives and circumstances are always under God's control.

LIVING BY FAITH

Judges 2:10–12 states that a whole generation of Israelites grew up who did not know God or what He had done for Israel. “Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals” (v. 11). The same statement defines our world today. Too many people do not believe God because they do not know Him, and their lives reflect that ignorance. Living by faith requires knowing God intimately. It is critical for believers to pass on the history of God's relationship to His people. Hebrews 11 is an overview of our spiritual heritage, giving an account of the way God raised up, nurtured, and preserved His kingdom through the lives of ordinary people. Intimacy with God and believing His promises gave these people eyes to see another country, another city. They knew they did not belong to this world, and so they lived as foreigners here. They were on a journey toward their eternal inheritance, and now they have reached their destination. They call back to us, through this passage, with the encouraging message: “Our God is *faithful*.”

Their examples of faith are a part of our heritage. We have found that, in our own difficult struggle with grief and loss, God's faithfulness to these men and women in Hebrews 11 helps us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus even when our present circumstances make our hearts tremble with fear and the enemy taunts us with the death of our son. We are often tempted to give in to our broken hearts and give up, feeling that the race marked out for us is just too hard. Then God reminds us of the legacy we want to leave our children, our grandchildren, and all those within our circle of influence.

What do our lives tell them about intimacy with God? And so, along with Habakkuk, we choose to believe God, and experiencing His faithfulness in our own journey drives us to call out to others:

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights. (Habakkuk 3:17–19)

DIGGING DEEPER

Day One

- ◆ What is a “worldview”? How does your worldview affect your behavior? How has your personal worldview affected your reaction to irritations today?

Day Two

- ◆ Read Hebrews 11:1–6 and write out a definition of faith based on this passage. How does your definition of faith shape your worldview?

Day Three

- ◆ Read Hebrews 11:32–40. Why is it wrong to imply that suffering is a result of little or weak faith?
- ◆ What has God promised His children (Hebrews 13:5–6). Do you believe this promise? Why or why not? How does trusting this promise influence your responses to the various circumstances in your life?

Day Four

- ◆ How do the authors define “scorch mark”?
- ◆ Explain how scorch marks are opportunities to trust God.
- ◆ Identify one scorch mark in your life. How did your view of God influence your response to that event?

Day Five

- ◆ Review Joan’s comments on pages 20–21. How did Joan’s practical actions reflect her worldview? Why did her actions help her surrender to God’s eternal purposes? How does her example help you focus on God’s character and promises in your present circumstances?

Day Six

- ◆ Review the exhortation of Hebrews 10:19–39. What practical step in this passage will require faith for you to take in your present circumstances? Be specific.