

Chapter 1

Faith

On paper, faith appears to be such a simple concept. When you put your faith into something or someone, you're essentially choosing to trust in this person, place, or thing. Simple, right? In the dictionary, the word *faith* is classified as a noun. On paper, the word *faith* certainly acts as a noun. At first glance, we see just another word in our vocabulary. But be careful not to overlook this five-letter word, because, although simplicity may be our first impression, in life and in a relationship with Christ, the concept of faith is transformed into something we can't even fathom.

Faith placed in Jesus Christ cannot be correctly defined by one word. When I think of faith in relation to almighty God, I know that I could never label it as one specific thing; this is because it grows and develops continually, just as my relationship with him does. Faith is not only the foundation of my belief; it is the very essence of my love for my savior and my redeemer. It is the reason why I am the woman I am today, and it is the inspiration behind my desire to live out my life rooted in his guidance and, ultimately, for his glory. In good times and struggles, I choose to bloom where I'm planted on the path he has intended for me.

On that note, it would appear as though I have everything figured out. Well, that is a nice thought and all, but I don't believe a time will come when I truly have *everything* all figured out. First of all, I'm not God, and, second of all, I have a sin nature. What can I say? I'm human. Imperfection is part of my DNA, so I'm not even going to strive for that ridiculous ambition. Truthfully, this is a mind-set that has only recently been restored to my daily

life and my walk with God. Like anybody, I have a past. And although it was a bit of a roller-coaster ride filled with many bumps and bruises, it got me to where I am today. It has also helped to restore this faithful mind-set that I mistakenly let slip through my fingers while wandering a path outside God's original plan for my life.

If we're going to dive into that, I should probably start at the very beginning. Anyone who knows me also knows that I absolutely love classic Disney movies. Therefore, it only makes sense for one my favorite quotes about faith to be from one of my favorite Disney movies, *The Rescuers*.

Faith is a bluebird we see from afar. It's for real and as sure as the first evening star, you can't touch it, or buy it, or wrap it up tight, but it's there just the same, making things turn out right.

There's something about this statement that is so beautiful and so inspirational, yet sincere at the same the time. Who knew that Rufus, the orphanage house cat, could be so full of wisdom?

I was five years old when I accepted Christ into my heart and my life. Some may consider that a little young to expect a Rufus level of understanding, but I disagree. It is the same pure faith and dependence on God I had at five that I am now striving for at twenty-four. I've always wished that I had kept this great of a grasp on the concept of faith throughout the teen years of my relationship with Christ.

While the five-year-old me did have that wholesome "childlike faith" Jesus always talked about with his disciples during his time here on earth, I'm not sure if the teenage me had quite the same pure faith.

“At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” (Matthew 18:1–5, NIV)

If faith is like the flame of a candle, I involuntarily allowed mine to dim over time. Of course, I could not see this in the moment; nor did I realize all the growth that still needed to take place in my heart and my mind before once again, like an innocent child, I could properly appreciate my relationship with Christ. This is easier said than done, but true comfort is found in this affirmation of Christ: “I can do all this through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:13, NIV).

The realization and acknowledgment of this dimming of faith served as the wake-up call I desperately needed. My heart was desperately crying out for help before my mind even realized what was happening. The fact of the matter is that Philippians 4:13 rings true for every single human being in existence. People *can* do all things through Christ, if they are willing to have faith and give their lives completely over to him. In my own personal experience, I have found that by turning to God as my source for strength, I am also healing any existing dimming that may have taken place in my relationship with him and I am preventing any future dimming from even occurring.

The method used to bring about this realization differs from individual to individual because each person’s relationship with God is unique. For some,

a simple nudge is all it takes to wake up to the reality of their situation. For others, it can require a dramatic turn of events. Regardless of the category you fall into, you can be sure that God will make every effort to get you back on the right path. The parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15:4–7 (NIV) reassures us of this fact.

“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

There comes a time in every person’s walk with God when the temptation to wander can feel impossible to resist. This is just a reality of life here on earth. Sometimes we’re lost and don’t even realize it. Hence the need for those ripples God will create in each of our lives to get us back on track to follow his will.

As human beings, independence always possesses a certain quality that will appeal to each of us. The peak of this appeal most often surfaces during our teenage years when we’re just getting to know what being independent really means. Becoming old enough to get a driver’s license, starting to date, graduating high school, and moving on to college—the list of first-time experiences during adolescence goes on and on. But our desire for independence is like a roller coaster. Sometimes we have a strong desire for it, while at other times, we can take it or leave it.

During our search for independence, we sometimes lose track of what we originally began the search for in the first place: an independent spirit. We then begin searching for both an independent spirit and an independent mind. In the eyes of the world, self-sufficiency is a respectable trait for anyone to possess. However, having a self-sufficient mind is comparable to playing with fire, because emotions play such a prominent role in our judgment. Hence the need for God's unclouded judgment to deliver each of his lost sheep back to the straight and narrow path in life, where we can strive to fulfill the purpose he has intended for each of our lives.

The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why. (Mark Twain)

As human beings, we tend to be drama queens when dealing with stressful situations, especially those that flip our lives upside down. I'm not even going to try to deny this. I accepted my crown a long time ago and with as much dignity as a panic-stricken person is capable. Thankfully, we serve a perfect King who never panics, never makes a mistake, and only allows events in each of our lives to transpire for our benefit.

Who wouldn't want to serve a God like that, and do so with childlike faith? It all seems so simple as I write this, but the truth is, we are all living in a sinful world, complete with our very own individual sin natures. Though God is alive and well, temptation is too. As human beings, more often than not, we give in to the temptation laid at our feet—sometimes without even realizing it.

The temptation to depend on ourselves more than on God is a common misstep every person tends to make during his or her walk with Christ. When it comes to their faith, ego is a major stumbling block for a multitude of people, including me.

When things are going well, the human mind-set fools us into believing that we can do this or that entirely on our own. We become like the lost sheep in the parable in Luke 15:1–7, and we wander away from the guidance of our Shepherd. For some peculiar reason, we actually believe we can do *everything* all on our own. As we begin to grow as human beings, sometimes we tend to focus more of that attention on the physical side of our ourselves, thereby pushing the spiritual side farther down that list of priorities.

Notice, however, that the majority of us tend to stray only when things are going well in our lives. If strife or suffering enters the picture, we're typically right back with the flock again because we don't just seek guidance from our Shepherd, we require it too. Or we seek an answer from God to a question frequently asked during the hardships we face: *Why, God?*

I consider this question two-dimensional because it holds a lot of meaning, depending on how you ask it. There is the first-dimension aspect, where the question is asked with complete despair and self-pity. The focus is also completely based upon the desires of the person posing the question. Then, we have the second dimension, where the question is asked with a desire for wisdom so that the person can begin to understand the circumstances and, hopefully, fulfill the purpose God has intended for his or her life. You'll notice that the focus of this second dimension is removed from the person and placed on God instead. It is a desire to fully understand his will so that

honor and glory can be brought to God's plans rather than our own self-absorbed plans. (This is a topic discussed further in subsequent chapters.)

As I grew into my teens, I made the common mistake of shifting my relationship with God lower down on my list of priorities. A typical adolescent, my top priority became myself and my needs and desires, instead of God. The thing is, I went to church on Sundays, attended a girls' Bible study group every Tuesday night, and went to a Christian high school with multiple Bible classes and chapel sessions every week. This should be enough, right? What could possibly be missing from my weekly schedule?

The teenage me failed to realize that it wasn't my weekly schedule that came up empty, devoid of the most important activity required for a strong relationship with God. That was much too broad for my understanding at that time. What I didn't recognize was that it was my daily schedule that needed some attention—in the form of private time spent in his Word and devoted to prayer.

I busied myself with other activities that fed my worldly interests, such as school, friends, sports, and (of course) my cell phone. Believe it or not, I actually considered myself a strong Christian at the time. Maybe it was just a bad case of ignorance, but the fact of the matter is that by prioritizing meaningless and temporary objects and activities above God, I was failing to nurture the most important relationship in my life. This time, I was the sheep who strayed from the flock, complete with an overfed ego and all puffed up with my own confidence. My independence got the best of me when I was fifteen years old. Lucky for me, God intervened.