

Maturing in Faith

“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.....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.” Hebrews 11:1 and 6

Faith is the absolute necessity of both the beginning and the continuing of our relationship with God. As oxygen is to our physical life, so faith is to our life in Christ. Faith is far from a rigid, static belief system, it is a growing, learning and maturing process that continues until we meet the Lord in glory. Paul spoke of this learning of faith in the life of Timothy:-

“But as for you continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”
2 Timothy 3:14,15

This process of growth and maturity in our faith does not usually occur painlessly and indeed often happens as a result of severe trials and testing. Midlife, with all its pressures and transitions, can sometimes provoke a crisis of faith, which may be pivotal to continuing to walk with God fruitfully and to finish well. We are all aware of those, who even after many years following Christ have, apparently out of the blue, fallen spectacularly and walked away from their faith. Some just seem to drift or to plateau, losing their zeal for the Lord as a result of sheer exhaustion, overwork or neglect of their faith. For others it is trying to cope today relying on a faith that might have served in our teens and twenties but will not sustain us in the complexities of the second half of life.

“The crisis and the issues faced can either lead us toward God to discover genuine faith or a faith which is more mature or it can lead to disorientation, confusion, disillusionment and at its worst doubt, which unresolved can lead to unbelief and walking away from God.”
(Horsfall 2016)

Faith is so fundamental to our Christian life that the bible often refers to Christians as ‘believers’ especially in the New Testament. But the word faith may be used loosely and in a variety of contexts so that it can lose its biblical meaning. Vine’s Expository Dictionary describes faith in God (pistis) in this way:-

- A firm conviction, producing a full acknowledgement of God’s revelation or truth.
- A personal surrender to Him (John 1:12)
- A conduct inspired by such surrender (2 Corinthians 5:7)

This stands in contrast to belief which consists of an opinion held in good faith but without necessary reference to its proof. Romans 4:20,21 gives the example of Abraham’s faith, that he believed God’s promises but that his faith rested on God, Himself, because he was fully persuaded that God had the power to do what He had promised.

Another word for faith is used as in Hebrews 11:1, (hupostasis), which carries the meaning of faith as a title deed, giving us a guarantee of the reality of what we believe. It is this

quality of confidence that faith gives that allows us to stand and endure or to undertake what God asks of us (Hebrews 3:14).

There are a number of synonyms for faith frequently used in the scriptures – belief, trust, confidence, assurance, conviction and persuaded. Each one conveys the concept that faith is not just mere credence of a belief system or body of truth but the bedrock of our reliance on God as revealed in His Word.

The New Bible Dictionary gives a very good overview of faith throughout the scriptures which is worth a read but the final paragraph gives a flavour of the kind of faith we are thinking about:-

“Faith is one of the most important concepts of the whole New Testament. Everywhere it is required and its importance insisted upon. Faith means abandoning all trust in one’s own resources. Faith means casting oneself, unreservedly on the mercy of God. Faith means laying hold on the promises of God in Christ, relying entirely on the finished work of Christ for salvation and on the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit of God for daily strength. Faith implies reliance on God and full obedience to God.”

Having seen the vital role of faith in our relationship with God we need to look at how that faith begins, grows, develops and matures throughout our lives. James W. Fowler writes on this subject in his book “Faith Development and Pastoral Care”. The following notes are taken primarily from his writing.

Preliminary Assumptions

- That we are created with the potential for a relationship with God “Thou has made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee”
St. Augustine
- That although we have this potential, the events and experiences of life can result in resistance to God, or we may misuse our freedom or others misuse their freedom in ways that thwart or distort that direction towards God.
- The context for the development of faith is a community with shared social meanings.
- Faith develops gradually from no consciousness of dependence on God to a critically reflective stage of the mature adult.

He describes three aspects of personal faith development:-

1. Knowing (belief)
2. Valuing (commitment/devotion)
3. Meaning (the underlying narrative of our lives)

Stages and seasons of faith development

The outline is based on the eight stages of psycho-social human development expounded by Erik Erikson in the 1950s, but these stages are related here to faith development.

Infancy – Primal faith

Unconscious total dependence for all needs to be met by parents or carers.

(Mark 10:14-15 Jesus uses the example of little children to teach that dependence is the quality of faith needed to enter the Kingdom of God.)

Pre-school - Intuitive/ Protective faith

The child at this stage is naturally egocentric and impulsive in their behaviour experiencing both power and powerlessness. They deeply rely on parents for both safety and security. Their imagination is not disciplined by logic. They appreciate stories that represent powers of good and evil in an unambiguous fashion. The child's impulsive behaviour requires a "culture of parenting" that structures their environment and provides both dependable boundaries while allowing appropriate autonomy and experimentation.

Primary school age – Mythical/Literal faith

At this stage patterns of thinking and valuing open up the way for a new stage of faith. This is the age when children begin to realise that Santa Claus does not deliver their Christmas presents. Logical thinking begins to shape the meanings and interpretations of life's experiences. There is an ability to distinguish between fantasy and facts based on proof and experience. They become able to take in the perspectives of others not just their own. This stage still depends on narrative and story as the principal means of constructing, conserving and sharing meaning; hence the frequent use of story in Sunday school teaching.

There is a strong sense of justice based on equality and fairness. They will use bargaining to gain the cooperation of others (observe any playground game). This is then played out in their construction of what God is like in his dealings with the world. God is seen as a stern and powerful, but just parent or ruler. God rewards people when they do right; God punishes people when they do wrong. It is part of their cause and effect narrative.

The child's behaviour and responses are motivated by its needs, wishes and interests. The world and other people are viewed through the filter of having their needs, desires and interests met, which means that they can become calculating and manipulative to accomplish that end. Thus the need for discipline in a loving environment and a relationship of trust to guide and to reflect on their motivations.

Adolescence – Synthetic/conventional faith

The adolescent begins to form the capacity for abstract thinking and the manipulation of concepts, which has implications for faith. They begin to realise that other people have their own perspectives and positions and more important that they have views about *them*. For the first time, they develop deep relationships with non-family members. They see themselves "mirrored" in their communications and exchanges with peers (enter Facebook, Instagram, Twitter etc.). At this time the adolescent is beginning to form their self- image, and, whether right or wrong, basing it on how they think others see them, which can result in an "identity crisis".

Young people are acutely attuned to the evaluations, expectations and responses of a circle of significant others in their lives including peers, parents, teachers etc. as well as the influence of social media and street culture. There may be a huge struggle to unite their inner values, beliefs and allegiances with the many external impressions and influences on them at this time in forming their sense of identity. Values, commitments and relationships are seen as central to identity and self-worth, so when these depend on the approval and affirmation of these significant others, they experience the “tyranny of the they”

The sense of identity being so embedded in their social ties can cause the young person to feel that “I am my relationships” and “I am my roles” to the extent that if any of their key relationships fail or their central roles are lost they can be at risk. They have a great need for inclusion, which also means that conflict within their significant relationships or community can be difficult and threatening.

N.B. Fowler makes a helpful observation at this point. He says that there is nothing automatic about transition from one stage of development to another. That features of the Mythical/Literal stage of the primary school child may also be seen in the adolescent or even in adults. Other stages can occur much later for some people and are not dictated by chronology. It is not about the content of a person’s faith but the development which may be affected by different conditions and life experiences. In short, some people, for various reasons get stuck in their faith development although other elements of their development continue. For example, someone may be an intelligent, successful, socially well-adjusted adult but have a view of God which has moved little beyond seeing Him as the stern parent rewarding when they do right and punishing them when they do wrong.

Young adult – Individuative/reflective faith

This can be a time of painful disruption when familiar and deeply held beliefs, values and world view must be critically examined. Just as the young adult seeks to define who they are apart from their previous dependence on others, they also need to establish what they really believe, to affirm their own beliefs, values and convictions. They need to go beyond the expectations of others, especially the authority figures in their lives, and gain faith that is their own.

The danger may be that if there is a strong internal voice of an authority figure, especially if they are loved and respected and the young person is fearful of losing their approval, that they assume a kind of double life seeking to maintain the approval of the one, while living differently when not under their gaze.

Although there needs to be a critical examination of one’s heritage beliefs and values, a clarified identity and chosen affiliations there is a danger of this individuation becoming an individualism that is self-dependant and overconfident to the extent that it is shaken when things get out of control or leads to loneliness and vulnerability.

Midlife – Conjunctive faith

The confident clarity and boundaries of faith, which at previous stages we worked so hard to achieve must be relinquished to move on. In the transition to conjunctive faith one begins

to make peace with the tension arising from the fact that truth must be approached from a number of different directions and angles of vision. Our life experiences cause us to face paradoxes in our understanding of God, His character and attributes. We have to learn to live with unresolved tensions and apparent contradictions.

“The heart of adult faith development is expressed in an invitation to move beyond pre-critical expressions of Christian faith, through a dark night type experience, and into a post-critical faith.” (Jamieson)

Midlife can be a time of rich meaning when we become more receptive, more willing to be seeking God and waiting on Him. We can learn to be less tribal and more inclusive; to hold deep convictions but be less defensive. We can become more able to dialogue with those from other traditions, whilst maintaining confidence and depth in our own traditions and truth.

“Christian midlife transition involves questioning received certainties, old structures and set patterns. Christianity comprises a core of non-negotiable tenets of faith. At midlife we realise how additional habits, practices and assumptions may gradually have attached themselves to underlying truths, like barnacles to the hull of a ship. Our task is to discern what needs to be maintained and cherished, so our voyage of faith is not hampered as we travel into uncharted waters ahead.” (McGuinness p79)

Midlife and Beyond – Universalizing faith

Fowler would suggest that the marks of faith development and maturity at this stage are represented by growth in:-

- Christlikeness demonstrated by a self-sacrificial love for others.
- Love for our enemies, who must be loved radically and redemptively.
- Growing opposition to all that is evil in our own hearts and in society.
- Love and inclusion for the outsider and standing against social injustice.
- Manifesting the fruit of the Spirit
- Seeking to be part of what God is doing to extend His Kingdom
- Seeking to be a transforming and challenging presence among the people of God
- Grounded in God, open, non-defensive, desiring God’s will and His plans

If this sounds too much like utter perfection, he does point out that we are all fallen creatures with blind spots, inconsistencies and distorted capacities for relating to other people.

The Journey we are on

In his book “Working from a place of rest” Horsfall uses the metaphor of a journey to trace our walk with Christ throughout life and our dynamic, evolving relationship with God. He suggests that this journey is composed of three different strands which are entwined together:-

1. **The Discipleship Journey** – this is the journey of obedience and faith that impinges directly on our outward life. We are called to follow Jesus as our Lord and master, putting him first in our lives, to walk in his footsteps, to obey his teaching, to seek to serve him and to go into the world to help fulfil his Great Commission.
2. **The Transformational Journey** – This journey will impact our inner lives as we seek to grow and become more like Christ. This journey involves the renewal and transformation of our minds, hearts and attitudes so that the life of Christ is formed in us and then expressed through us to those around.
3. **The Journey through life** – The two previous journeys take place within the context of this journey and is set amid the particular season and stage of life that we are in at the time.

“It is important to recognise and take note of the interconnectedness of our faith journey with the season of life we are in, for they have an impact on each other. Each stage of life brings its own opportunities and also its unique set of challenges. When we see our lives as a sacred journey, it transforms the way we look at what happens to us and how we respond to the circumstances we face.” (Horsfall p28)

Horsfall also uses the stages of life model to look at the particular challenges and potential of each stage and although it is similar to Fowler’s work, he does relate it to some more personal life issues that might help us.

Young adult 18-22 years

This is the transition from adolescence to adulthood. It will probably involve leaving home, going to university or some other form of vocational training. This is a time of seeking to discover the young person’s own value system, gifts and calling, which ultimately helps to shape their identity and the roles that they assume. It is important to belong to a group and to have a network of friends.

This may be a barren time spiritually for some, who either discover that they do not have a real faith of their own or who abandon faith in order to experiment with the secular lifestyle. But for those with faith, it can be a time of growth in discipleship. They may take every opportunity to serve God in the C.U., their church, on summer camps or short term mission trips abroad.

Belonging to a community of faith is important, but having a mentor and good role models can be valuable in deepening their personal growth in faith, which is often uncritically held and largely untested as this stage.

Adulthood 22-40 years

This is a time of growing independence, a time of establishing personal values and beliefs. This is also the season of life when major life choices are made such as career, long term relationships, possibly resulting in marriage and parenthood. There is a need to seek God for guidance in making these important decisions that affect the rest of one’s life. Also for the help to grow out of self-centred living to begin thinking of the needs of others.

This is a season of life that brings many challenges and demands from many different directions but the real challenge is to discover how to live out our faith with integrity. Some of those challenges include what it means to have a Christian marriage, how to bring up children in the faith and for those who remain single, how to maintain sexual purity and to trust God for their relationships.

The demands of work and the demands of family life may be added to by the demands of church life and possibly leadership roles in the church. Balancing all of these responsibilities is not easy and the danger arises when it is at the cost of our own walk with God.

Middle Age 40-65 years

Horsfall describes this as the most dramatic period in both human development and spiritual growth. It is often a time of appraisal of my life so far, which may be triggered by events:-

- Children leaving home
- Own parents ageing
- Some experience greater financial independence
- There may be a new lease of life with the “empty nest”
- A sense of “mid-life crisis” may ensue

This time in our lives can be very significant spiritually, in seeking a deeper, more meaningful walk with God and of desiring our lives to be transformed by Him. Of coming to terms with the past and refocussing for the future with renewed commitment and vision.

But for others, who may have become weary and overburdened by work, leadership responsibilities, family concerns or serious illness, it may be a time when questions of faith begin to arise. They may be expressed as intellectual questions or unanswered prayers but often these doubts are associated with, disappointments, shattered dreams, or unfulfilled expectations in life. “This can lead to a period of spiritual deconstruction, to a ‘dark night of the soul’, until faith is reformulated and constructed in a new way that makes greater sense.” (Horsfall). If help is not sought to come through such a time, faith may be stalled and in time abandoned.

Elderhood 65 years and beyond

In the past this time would have been synonymous with retirement, but as people are generally living longer the work life has now extended. But whenever ‘work’ ceases it usually means a reconstructing of life due to the changes and transitions that have to be made. Some of the challenges that may be faced are:-

- Loss of things that once defined us
- Loss of structure and sense of purpose
- Accepting physical decline and increasing limitations
- Dealing with bereavement and grief
- Needing to be cared for or caring for a spouse due to illness or infirmity
- Facing the realisation of own mortality

Spiritually the early years of this period can provide more time and new opportunities for ministry and service as well as continued personal growth. This is a time to be able to care for others, to listen to them with wisdom, insight and understanding and to pray for them.

Later years will bring more changes of ageing, but God can use this time of sufferings and losses to cause us to continue to grow in our faith and intimacy with Him. Finally facing death is an act of faith and provides an opportunity to reconcile with others and ourselves.

“Finally, it is helpful to recognise that, as we go through life, a process of convergence often takes place. We grow in understanding of ourselves and of other people; we more accurately identify our gifts and calling; we feel less need to prove ourselves by what we do or achieve; we know what we are good at and what we are not. Thus, our being (who we are) and our doing (what God has made us for) gradually come together in greater harmony than ever before, so that from midlife onwards we can enter the most fruitful years of our lives.”(Horsfall p32)

Having looked at some of the challenges and opportunities for growth and development of our faith at the different stages and seasons of life, it may be helpful to explore the doubts and problems that can occur at a later stage, that have their origins in a person coming to believe and in continuing to believe. Doubt i.e. faith in two minds, is not of itself unbelief, but if left unaddressed may result in unbelief.

“Many people doubt because they have left out something important in the way they have come to believe. Believe in God for the wrong reasons or for no reason at all.”
(Guinness 1976)

Seven families of doubt – From Os Guinness’s book “Doubt”

- 1. Forgetting to remember** – The awareness of our need and the dilemma that we are in without God is the first level of understanding in coming to faith. If there is any deficiency in this understanding or if over time we forget what God has done for us then the Christian life becomes a matter of ‘doing’ and ‘serving’ but from a position of self-sufficiency. In time this may become too hard or too costly and doubt becomes the respectable retreat from faith. Faith remembers and gives thanks, unbelief has a short ungrateful memory.
- 2. Faith out of focus** – This is doubt resulting from a faulty view of God. The believer’s wrong idea of God comes between them and trusting Him. Trusting God is to ‘let God be God’ and putting into practice all that we say about God in theory, so that who God is and what He has done makes a difference in every part of our lives. What we really believe about God will be revealed when we are under pressure and life is not going as we would like it to. If our picture of God is wrong then what is possible for God to do or to be in our lives is altered and doubt may soon follow.
- 3. No reason why not** – doubt from weak foundations. This is a deficiency in understanding why Christianity is true. It is equally important to know *what* we believe and *why* we believe it. Having moved from realising our dilemma without God to recognising that the Gospel is true and the answer to our dilemma, the next question to be addressed should be how do I know that God’s revelation is true? If

this question is not answered, then even an apparently strong faith will have a weak foundation. When difficult questions come along, when there is opposition or suffering their faith may collapse because it was believed without sufficient reason why. This is not uncommon in a believer, during the second half of life, whose faith has not grown or matured since student days.

4. **An unsigned contract** – doubt from lack of commitment. A searcher becomes a believer when he chooses and commits himself to the consequences of his choice. A commitment made with understanding transforms mere beliefs into solid convictions. The good news of the Christian gospel is a covenant agreement, a contract which God offers to us. The gift of the Holy Spirit is the seal of His part of the contract; by committing ourselves to Him we put our name to it too. Our signature, a commitment of faith, on the contract makes it valid and binding, otherwise it is just a piece of paper. Healthy faith that has no personal commitment is a contradiction in terms. This lack of conviction and commitment can be hidden when the apparent believer is in a strong community of faith or has ‘grown into faith’ in a Christian family but when away from such support systems and under pressure the lack of commitment will grow into uncertainty and eventually into doubt.
5. **No sign of life** – doubt from lack of growth. Where there is life we expect to find growth and fruit, so when these outward signs are not present, how do we know that new life is real? All of us develop a worldview in order to give us a framework of meaning and a coherent way of ordering our lives and experiences. Life is faith’s reality test. If our worldview is based on faith it must answer the new challenges that we face every moment and be able to handle them and assimilate them into our worldview. If faith rises to the challenge it will grow and mature but if not it will weaken, become unreal and move towards doubt. People don’t so much lose their faith as cease to use their faith and fall into stagnation, indecision and drift. Faith grows strong in believing but atrophies if out of use.
6. **Coup d’Etat from within** – doubt from unruly emotions. “The problem is not that reason attacks faith but that the emotions overwhelm reason as well as faith, and it is impossible for reason to dissuade them.....vivid imagination, changing moods, erratic feelings and intense reactions rise up and overpower the understanding of faith.” Although emotions are important, for the believer the place of our emotions should be secondary to the understanding and belief of truth. This is because our emotions are the part of us which is most vulnerable to outside influences and therefore most liable to manipulation. Our emotions are strong, highly influential and powerful persuaders and hence their danger, since however firm our faith and strong our wills there is no guarantee against doubt making inroads into faith through our emotions – exhaustion, loneliness, prolonged illness, accident, bereavement, anger, jealousy etc. all give emotions opportunity to doubt. Imagination creates its own reality, for example how many times have you heard a fellow believer say that they are leaving the church because of something a fellow believer has said to them. The incident may seem trivial to us but the resulting

emotional reaction has created the opportunity for doubt to make it seem justifiable to them.

- 7. Scars from an old wound** – doubt from fearing to believe. This form of doubt has psychological origins. The person knows he needs the truth in question, he can see the difference it would make, he can even see that it is true and he is quite able to believe it. The problem is that the very process of believing puts pressure on an old psychological wound that is still too sensitive to bear it, so that doubt gives the excuse to avoid the risk. They prefer the safety of doubt to the risk of disappointment. This means that although they have come to believe in Christ and have a deep conviction of faith, there is still one place sealed off, one place where healing is not allowed, the one place where they shy away from complete openness. This particular doubt can mean that the experience and the hurt it has caused has been made into an absolute. So the working absolute of life is not God but the bad experience, which colours the rest of life. This doubt can degenerate into a self-pitying rationalisation and a cover for a festering wound. Trusting God would remove the right to the grievance and the self-pity and so is avoided. The doubt is caused, not by the initial wound, which is objective and real, but by the way it is regarded and the place it has been given.

When we think of what the bible says about faith it is often the letter to the Hebrews that comes to mind and especially chapter 11 of the letter. This letter was written to Christians from a Jewish background, of whom some may have been second generation believers by the time of writing. They were in some danger of returning to their Jewish heritage with its rituals and traditions and so the whole letter is written to re-emphasise the superiority of Christ and of His work of salvation on our behalf and that Christianity has superseded all other beliefs and religions, including Judaism. In order to encourage his readers not to fall away but to press on in their faith, the writer intersperses at points in the letter seven exhortations or warnings, which still have relevance for us today.

- 2:1-4** “We must pay more careful attention therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.” This is the danger of neglect or plateauing in our faith. This is not a dramatic issue, it just happens by default, when other things crowd in and we lose the intentionality of seeking to grow in our faith and obey what we already know.
- 3:7-19** “Do not harden your hearts.” v8 “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.” v12. This warning relates to the deceitfulness of sin, the danger of disobedience that when repeated causes a desensitisation and a hardness of heart towards God, which over time will result in unbelief. It is exactly because sin is deceitful that there is a communal responsibility as well as an individual responsibility and a need to encourage one another daily v13.
- 5:11-6:12** “....you are slow to learn.....though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk not solid food!” v11-12. This is a warning against falling away due to immaturity in faith and a failure to grow up in Christ because we are not feeding on

his word. When testing comes, if the foundations are weak, there is a danger of not being able to stand.

4. **10:23-25** “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” It is ironic that at the time of writing, due to the current Covid-19 virus pandemic, we are not able to fulfil this function face to face and are very aware how much we do need each other. As humans we are social beings anyway, but as believers we really do need each other to worship God together, to pray, and fellowship as a family. We need each other “to spur one another on to love and good deeds.” We were never meant to go it alone.
5. **10:32-39** “So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere....” The writer reminds these believers of all the suffering and persecution that they had endured in the past because they had turned to Christ. He comments on how they had persevered with joy because of their hope of heaven and pleads with them now not to throw away their confidence (faith) but to maintain this eternal perspective. He understands the temptation to take themselves out of the firing line but encourages them not to shrink back but to continue to believe and be saved.
6. **12:1-29** Run with perseverance and finish well. There are lots of don'ts in this section:-
 - Don't give up when going through hardships and suffering
 - Don't compare with others – run the race God has given you to run
 - Don't get entangled with sin that will hinder your walk with God
 - Don't take your eyes off Jesus but learn from his example
 - Don't grow weary and lose heart
 - Don't forget that God disciplines us because He loves us like a Father
 - Don't become bitter, but sort out your relationship problems with others
 - Don't get involved in immoral behaviour
 - Don't refuse to listen to God or to obey Him
 - Don't forget to be grateful and to worship God with reverence and awe
7. **13:1-19** Pleasing God in all we do. There are lots of dos in this section:-
 - Keep on loving each other as brothers
 - Remember strangers and those in prison
 - Honour marriage and avoid immorality
 - Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content
 - Trust God for all our needs; He will never forsake us
 - Let your hearts be strengthened by God's grace
 - Worship God with our lives as well as our lips
 - Be responsive to good leadership
 - Pray for your leaders

The writer to the Hebrews expressed these dangers and warnings because, as ever, the scriptures deal with real life and do not shy away from dealing with the issues that we all face. Many believers find that, in a paradoxical way, our faith may come under more pressure and go through more struggles at midlife and beyond than in the first half of our lives. What might be some of these challenges to our faith at midlife:-

The Struggle for control – this is the struggle to come to terms with God’s sovereignty. It is the battle between His plan and ours that can rage in our soul. Rohr reminds us that at some point there will be a situation in our lives that we cannot fix, control, explain, change or even understand.....some event, person, death, idea or relationship will enter your life that you simply cannot deal with using your present skill set, your acquired knowledge, or your strong will power. Rohr says that this experience serves to get us out of the “driver’s seat” and causes us to give up control to God.

Paul Tripp explains “One of the most dangerous delusions for each of us is the delusion of our own sovereignty. And one of the most dangerous idols is the idol of control. If we spend our days trying to establish our sovereignty and our control, then we have not learned to rest in the Lord’s control.....The problem is that in midlife our plans and His plans tend to collide” (2004)

In our younger days, we may have thought that if we did the right thing, if we prayed hard enough and had enough faith then God would get on board with our plans. We see our plan as logical, reasonable and the obvious answer to our need. C.S. Lewis commented on such a situation saying that to us God’s order looks like disorder and his wisdom looks like foolishness. God’s lovingkindness often seems to be anything but loving, and definitely not kind. All of this has to do with one humbling thing that we all have to admit: as sinners, we want our own way. It is hard to rest in the rulership of the King when our hearts and minds are so preoccupied with the success of our own little kingdoms.

“Control is a big issue for most of us and what these experiences do is to humble us and make us more dependent on God” (Horsfall p86)

The Struggle with unanswered prayer – this is similar to the issue of control, but is more focussed on God Himself and therefore is potentially more undermining and destabilising to our faith. In pastoral situations it is obvious that seemingly unanswered prayers is one of the major challenges to faith for many believers.

There are two types of life experiences that are critical for Christians in this regard, one could be described as ‘acute’ and the other as ‘chronic’. The acute situation, for example, is the desperately sad and heart rending experience such as when a child is diagnosed with a brain tumour, when a young mother is dying of breast cancer, when a father or son is on a ventilator after a serious accident. Immediate family, friends and often whole church communities commit to prayer and possibly fasting for God to heal. We know that God can heal and we do not understand why God would not work in this situation for their good and for His glory. If He chooses not to bring healing, the effect on the faith of individuals and churches can be devastating and take a long time to recover from, if at all.

The chronic situation may go on for many years or indeed never be resolved. This is the young woman who desperately longs to be married, to be loved and desired by someone and cries to God for a husband. This is the couple who year after year have tried every course of action available and still remain childless. This is the parent who weeps for the prodigal child who is away from the Lord and possibly away from home and who pleads with God to bring them back. These situations are examples of those that not only test our faith but require often years of waiting and waiting is hard.

We can almost see our prayers as a way of bargaining with God; if we keep our part then God will be obliged to give us what we want; and why wouldn't He if He really loves us?

"We have lived for decades in the world of our needs, our wants and our dreams. For decades we have nurtured the illusion that if God really does love us, He will give these good things to us. We have convinced ourselves that if we obey, God will keep His part of the bargain and send good things our way." (Tripp 2004)

Elisabeth Elliot, a woman who suffered many losses, tragedies and troubles wrote as she looked back in later life:-

"God is God. If He is God, He is worthy of my worship and my service. I will find rest nowhere but in His will, and that will is infinitely, immeasurably, unspeakably beyond my largest notions of what He is up to."

(quote from "Through Gates of Splendour" cited in Keller 2013)

The Struggle with disappointment – It is not unusual at midlife to look back on our lives or perhaps at our present situation and to feel disappointment. It may be disappointment with God and what he has brought into our lives (or left out); it may be disappointment with others – the way we have been treated by fellow Christians or by church leaders; it may be disappointment with ourselves, with our lack of growth, our failures or the sins we have still been unable to conquer.

We may feel like the writer of Psalm 73:13 "Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure, in vain have I washed my hands in innocence." As he looked about him at those who had turned their back on God, scorned Him and did evil, yet seemed to live a prosperous life without struggles. He openly confesses that his feet had almost slipped, that his faith in a just and loving God was sorely on trial as he experienced envy of others, grievance and disappointment towards God.

Disappointment maybe shown in our attitudes such as cynicism about faith, bitterness toward others, anger and frustration at our circumstances. It may be revealed in questioning our belief in the scriptures and our trust in God's love and goodness as we judge God by our circumstances rather than seeing our circumstances as coming from the hand of a God who is sovereign, wise, good and loving. This will take its toll on personal devotions, worship and service. We may go through the motions but with little enthusiasm.

The Struggle with temptation - We are all aware that we are never beyond being vulnerable to temptation. It may be "the subtle migration of our affections" as Paul Tripp describes it

when something occupies the place in our heart that only God should possess. We have a devious enemy who will stop at nothing to subvert our discipleship, so we need to be alert.

In their book “Untamed – reactivating a missional form of discipleship” Alan and Debra Hirsch record a parable called “The cage of a thousand compromises” which illustrates the way that the Devil can create bargains with us that seem so reasonable, but cumulatively become our downfall. In essence, the parable tells the story of a hungry skylark in a Middle Eastern market, who is offered two juicy worms in exchange for one of her flight feathers by an unscrupulous trader. Day after day he drew her in by the offer of the worms for one feather. It didn’t seem such a hard bargain until one day after eating the worms she attempted to fly away, but instead she hit the ground with a thud, fat and featherless she was unable to fly away and was quickly scooped up by the smiling trader and placed within a cage, the cage of a thousand compromises. The parallel is with the believer, when their walk with God goes wrong because they have given up their freedom in Christ little by little and only end up in a cage of a thousand compromises. There are no short cuts to costly discipleship.

Another method that the enemy can use to shipwreck our faith and trust in God and His word is “cognitive dissonance”. This occurs when a person’s beliefs, knowledge and values clash with a choice, desire or behaviour that they want to pursue, but know deep down inside is sin and disobedience to the Lord. This inconsistency causes psychological discomfort so the mind adjusts to reduce the pain of the discrepancy. This allows the person to alter their ethics and values and to rationalise their behavioural choices. For the believer, when the appeal of the unethical behaviour appears to have great enough benefits, the only recourse can be to claim to have theological doubts or simply to walk away from their faith. The most common areas for such struggles are with issues related to sex, money or power.

“Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the Devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in your faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.” (1 Peter 5:8,9)

The Struggle with pain, suffering and adversity – this is perhaps the most universal cause of testing of our faith. We live in a world that is marred and damaged by the evil that entered at the fall. We live in a world in which bad things happen to good people and in which we all live with the physical effects of disease, decline and death. Pain, suffering and death was never how it was meant to be, but are the certainties of how life is. Faith does not mean believing that suffering is not a bad thing and to just take it on the chin. Suffering should be relieved and removed whenever and wherever we find it. As believers we have the hope of eternity where all pain, sorrow and suffering will finally be eliminated forever, but until that day we need to be able to trust God in the suffering and more than that, to allow Him to strengthen our faith through it. This will require us to live with the tension of holding two opposites at the same time; that pain and suffering are evil, yet are allowed by a God who is sovereign, wise, good and loving, to accomplish His purposes, for His glory and for our good. “Suffering is an evil that an all-wise, all-righteous, and all-loving God uses for eternal good.” (Tripp p184) See also Romans 5:1-5, James 1 and 1 Peter 1:3-9.

The Struggle with spiritual dryness – times of dryness, feeling in the dark, feeling abandoned by God or that we have lost our way so that we don't know what we believe any more are not uncommon. This experience may be due to exhaustion, ill health, grief or depression or it may just descend on us for no known reason.

“All of us have periods of darkness in our lives, moments of despair and doubt when we feel we might be losing our way. The crises of life touch us all and we might feel that we have been abandoned by God, and that we are on our own. It feels as if God has hidden His face from us” (Horsfall p97)

Russell Metcalfe describes this experience like the lights going out, the screens going black, the lines going dead and God not answering His phone and that no matter how hard we look there is no light at the end of the tunnel.

David knew this experience when he cried out to God in Psalm 13:1-2:-

“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?”

Job also went through a long season of deep darkness and confusion:-

“Have I not wept for those in trouble? Has my soul not grieved for the poor? Yet when I hoped for good evil came; when I looked for light darkness came.” Job 30:25-26

The Psalms are full of these honest cries to God in such times and the desire expressed in Psalm 18:28 “You, O Lord, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light.”

What will help us to grow and flourish in our faith

Recognise ‘who’ we are and ‘where’ we are – Julia McGuinness describes this as coming into the light:-

“The call to bring to light the essential person underneath our roles is a key midlife task on this walk of faith, and how we respond has long term consequencesMidlife offers the opportunity to face our real selves in the mirror, while we have time to respond creatively to what we see. Christian maturity involves letting in more light, as we face the call to live more authentically that presses upon us with greater urgency at midlife.”

Since the Garden of Eden we have all had a tendency to prefer to hide what we are really like than to face up to it, but like the man in James chapter 1 who looks at his face in the mirror and goes away, either to forget what he has seen or to seek to grow and change. This is an opportunity for us to seek God's help and to commit to growth and change.

This may have several aspects such as coming to terms with our past, where it is holding us back, reassessing our relationship with the Lord in the present, restoring zeal, vision and a perspective of faith that is more able to handle paradox and mystery. Sometimes God may be calling us to a complete change of direction and to step out in faith to follow Him.

Let God be god – “Voltaire once noted that God created us in His image and that we returned the favour.” (cited in Hirsch p38). Hirsch also explains that we have often sought to domesticate Jesus and make him a much more manageable, lower case “I” lord that comfortably legitimates our lifestyle. It may not be that we desire the Lord to identify with our life style but to conform to our theology.

“Until this point we have had God figured out. Theology has a way of packaging God so we can understand him easily. We feel we know God pretty well. What we have done is to put God in a box. At first, with a limited perspective on life, this seems fine, but then as we get older the vagaries of life and our watertight theology no longer seem to correlate.” (Horsfall p86)

John Stott concludes that the only way to mature in Christ is to have the blindfold taken from our eyes so that we could see Jesus in all his fullness. “Nothing is more important for mature Christian discipleship than a fresh, clear, true vision of the authentic Jesus.” (Stott p50)

“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable His judgements, and His paths beyond tracing out!
Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counsellor?
Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?
For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.
To Him be the glory forever. Amen.” Romans 11:33-36

As Horsfall would point out in light of this “Our theology shrinks, but our concept of God is expanded. We understand Him less, but know him better.”

Deepening our walk with God – This is the time of life when we may have to slow down the pace a little. When our walk with God becomes more about ‘being’ than ‘doing’. We need the time and space to grow in intimacy with God, to strengthen our relationship with Him and to be strengthened ourselves in the inner being. “I pray that out of His glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” Ephesians 3:16-17

We may regain an attitude of praise, worship and thanksgiving, which helps us to see all of life as God centred and to experience a deep gratitude to God for all His goodness and grace towards us. The Psalms are a wonderful storehouse of things to stimulate praise.

As well as serious bible study that gets to grips with the truth, both to feed our souls and to transform our lives, we need time in the scriptures to meditate, reflect, to speak to our hearts and to renew our minds. As we seek God in His word it encourages us to base our identity on Him, on who He is and all He has done for us. It allows God to be God, to recognise His sovereignty over our lives and to trust Him and love Him best.

We may need to move from prayer that primarily is intercession and focussed on what we think we need, to pouring out our hearts to Him and allowing Him to work as He pleases. “Gradually there may come a sense that prayer is not so much about getting God to do our will as making ourselves available to do His will. We may begin to realise that it need not be

about words and making demands to God, but more to do with silence and offering situations to God for Him to do as He pleases.” (Horsfall p88)

Co-operating with God in suffering and adversity – None of us wants to go through times of suffering or adversity and indeed at such times all we can think about is relief and rescue from the pain and suffering. Although it doesn’t make it any easier, the scriptures make it very clear that suffering will come, that we shouldn’t be taken by surprise (1 Peter 4:12) and that in God’s hands He can use our suffering for our good and our growth.

“Though He brings grief, He will show compassion, so great is His unfailing love. For He does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men.” Lamentations 3:32-33

Jerry Bridges suggest three ways that we can co-operate with God:-

1. Submitting to God willingly and not trying to resist His gracious purposes. If we accept from His hand what we cannot change and seek to learn from what He is trying to teach us, even if we cannot see what He is doing. This will develop humble faith
2. Bring the Word of God to bear upon the situation. Ask god to show you helpful passages, then apply them to your circumstances to gain new insights. This is profitable as it changes how we experience God’s truth from head knowledge to heart knowledge.
3. God does not just want us to endure trials and adversity or just to experience comfort in them, He wants us to remember the lessons that we have learned and the disciplines God used to bring about growth in our faith. To profit we must remember.

Some of the more specific ways that God uses trials in our lives:-

Pruning – John 15:2 Pruning is important for fruit bearing, since if left unpruned there is unproductive growth but little fruit. God uses adversity to loosen our grip on those things that are not true fruit. He wants us to depend on Him, to desire His will and that which will count for eternity.

Holiness – Hebrews 12:10,11 God disciplines us for our good that we might share His holiness. Adversity reveals our sinful nature and that we are not the person we thought that we were. God wants us to hunger and thirst after righteousness, to be obedient to Him and to manifest the fruit of the Holy Spirit, but only with His discipline will our lives produce a harvest of righteousness.

Dependence- John 15:5 Although Jesus said without me you can do nothing, we still think that we can. God has to teach us through adversity to rely on Him instead of ourselves (2 Corinthians 1:8-9) and to rely on His grace in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

Perseverance – Romans 5:1-3 Perseverance is a character trait that allows us to pursue a goal in spite of obstacles and difficulties. God doesn’t want us just to bear up under adversity but to press forward in the face of it, to do His will and to finish well. Though it is developed in the crucible of adversity, it is energised by faith – it is God’s strength, not ours that enables us to persevere (Hebrews 10:35-36).

Service – The Lord also brings adversity into our lives to equip us for effective service (2 Corinthians 1:3-5). Everyone faces times of adversity and everyone needs a caring and compassionate friend to come along side to comfort and encourage during those times.

The fellowship of His sufferings - This is the privilege of entering into a special fellowship with other believers, who are also in the throes of adversity. Trials and afflictions have a levelling effect among believers, they bring down the barriers between us of appearing to be self-sufficient and bring us closer in worship, prayer and ministry.

Relationship with God – Through adversity we learn to submit to God’s sovereignty, to trust His wisdom and to experience the consolation of His love. Like Job we pass from knowing about God to knowing God Himself in an intimate way (Job 42:5). We are drawn into a deeper relationship with Him as we co-operate with what He is doing in our lives.

Our faith grows best within the community of other believers – These are some ways that we grow and contribute:-

- Loving each other as brothers and sisters (Hebrews 12:10)
- Spurring one another on to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24-25)
- Praying for each other (2 Corinthians 1:10-11 and Ephesians 6:17-18)
- Encouraging one another to live lives worthy of the Lord (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12)
- Challenging and supporting each other not to fall into sin (Hebrews 3:12-13)
- Providing a place to belong and to have a valued contribution (Romans 12:4-8)
- We need each other in the fight to share the Gospel (Philippians 1:27-28)

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Points to Ponder

1. How do you respond to the idea that faith grows and develops over the ages and stages of life? What change and development in your faith have you experienced from midlife onwards and what have been the primary instigators of change?
2. Think back to how you became a Christian and the early influences on your faith. What was helpful to your future faith development and what might have been a source of issues that you have had to deal with later in life?
3. The letter to the Hebrews was written to encourage believers, under pressure, to persevere in their faith. Do any of the exhortations in the letter speak to you either with regard to your own walk with the Lord or your communal life in the body of Christ?
4. Which of the 'struggles of faith' have been real for you? How have you handled them? What effect has this had on your faith?
5. How has your walk with God and your personal devotional life changed and developed in recent years?
6. Pain, suffering and adversity are one of the main areas of challenge to our faith. How has God used them in your life to help you grow in faith?
7. How has belonging to a body of fellow believers helped you to grow and mature in your faith? How can you be a source of comfort, encouragement and challenge to fellow believers in your situation?

