



Into the Light

All things are possible with God

September—October 2010

It Takes Faith

By Bob Van Domelen

“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” Hebrews 11.1

A good man and a faithful correspondent recently closed his letter with a request that I consider writing the main article for this newsletter on faith.

Specifically, he asked “How those of us on the inside can acknowledge our challenges, setbacks, attacks to our faith, to have them recognized, validated, and then how to take the next step of overcoming them.”

He went on to ask “How to have faith and to go on being who we are in spite of whom others say we are and in spite of our environment.” I know, he really asked two questions.

If I wanted to be a wimp, I could have ignored the first question and concentrated on the second. But when I thought about the great examples of people walking in faith, it seemed to me that faith got them *through* the challenges and setbacks. Faith is not some highway bypass for the purpose of avoiding downtown traffic congestion.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. (Ephesians 2:8)

We ask for faith, maybe even beg for it, but unlike other tangible gifts, faith doesn’t just appear one morning sitting on our nightstand with a note attached. Yet God has both planted the seed within us and positioned it for growth.

Faith is being sure of what we hope for

As a boy, I attended a parochial school. Before each athletic event we prayed God would be on our side and help bring us to victory. Of course, the opposition was also a parochial school and probably said the same prayer. I don’t recall thinking God had turned his back on us in our defeats, but I suspect some of my classmates might have wondered what went wrong.

A prayer for an athletic victory is not an example of how faith works, yet we often hear phrases like “claiming the victory” or “name it and claim it” in our churches and in our prayer groups. Failure to claim something is considered a sign of weak or non-existent faith. In short, it is our fault if what we pray for doesn’t come to pass.

My friend mentions very real and legitimate situations he and all in prison face. Each day sex offenders wonder if they will survive the threats of other inmates who consider them less than worthy of life. Each day these individuals wonder why prayers for a parole are denied, why family members turn their backs on them, or why they have lost

the familiar environment in which to worship that was theirs outside of prison walls. They sometimes feel that the forgiveness given others through a public confession of sin is not theirs because their sin is the worst sin, the sin that cannot be forgiven *though we both are not true*. Besides, public confession would be a huge risk in many institutions where sex offenders pray instead for anonymity.

Legitimate prayers. Certainly much more sincere and significant than praying for the outcome of an athletic event. Somehow, this faith God has given doesn’t make much sense when nothing changes and the outcome falls far short of the prayer’s intention. But it should be pointed out that inmates have no lock on problems associated with faith. All people find themselves confronted with the same questions if they are honest with themselves.

Recognized and Validated

I am pretty certain that we all recognize the challenges and setbacks others have—how can we not unless we live in a world of total self-focus. Granted, most of the outside world has little idea of what prison life is *really* like, but there are some who do. Anyone in prison or connected with someone in prison hears stories, knows of situations that should never happen but do, and has encountered the “system.”

Recognition that something is bad doesn’t take much, but validation does because when the concern is about a wrong, the word implies an agreement that the wrong needs to be righted. I can validate my friend’s concerns but I am somewhat powerless to personally change them. I say somewhat powerless because I *can* and *do* pray for him. Is that faith? Does anything change?

Certain of what we do not see

If I said I prayed that he would sense God’s loving presence when things were tough, would you consider that a cop-out? Shouldn’t I be asking for an end to the injustices, a parole, or at least a transfer to a lower level institution? I do pray for those things, but I can be sure that asking God to make my friend aware of His presence *will* happen, not because I ask but because God promised He would never leave us. God’s word told me that; preachers preach that; and I believe that! From where I stand, that’s faith.

What of the stuff I deal with?

Overcoming the issues we face (both from within ourselves and from those around us) is a series of choices. I have learned that as I strengthen my walk with God, I make fewer unhealthy choices. Where once I thought I had no choice but to choose sin, I now recognize God’s grace to

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avoid it. I wish I could say I always choose God, but I can't. At the same time, the sins of my past, the sins that led to abusing have not been options and that's a good thing.

An increased awareness of God and a deeper desire to serve God completely do not, unfortunately, guarantee that I won't have to deal with the negativity created by others. Those who would call me names or consider me the same man I was 25 years ago will continue to do so until something *in them* changes.

²Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2-4)

Over the years, I have been blessed by the witness of hundreds of sex offenders who have not only endured difficult things but have grown despite those situations. I did nothing to change their lives but I watched the changes as they came to life in the letters these people wrote.

How others see you or me is theirs to decide. Not one of them, however, will be standing with us when we face God nor will we be standing with them. In the end, I am reminded of those to whom Jesus said "I knew you not." They were not bad people but I wonder if their faith somehow been replaced by simply doing good things?

Faith is not a place or the seeking of a favorable outcome. It is a relationship with God. Though we might stumble to define it, it is the cement that bonds us with our Creator. And in the end, I want to say as Paul said to Timothy, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." (2 Timothy 4:7) □

Bits & Pieces

The following are all from letters I have received in recent months. A theme that runs through most of them is FAITH.

I thank God I only got 15 years. I also thank God I didn't get what I deserved. The saddest part about the rest of the guys in here is their lack of remorse. They are sorry they got caught up not sorry about what they were doing.

(Regarding "Prayer or Promise?" – July *Into the Light*)

The main article stated that prison time is only a comma in life particularly how our family relates to us while we are in prison. As I look back on when I got out the first time, I don't think I realized that or was even prepared for that.

Sometimes I almost feel like quitting the work of my program when I see men who seem like they are making such good progress towards real recovery just slip completely back into depression, denial, or the false life of sin and shame. It is only by the grace of God that I am reminded of my own lifelong struggle and am again humbled by his hands and recognize that it is only by His Spirit that any of us can change at all.

It has been discussed that while I have spent most of my life going around, under, or over issues in my life, it is now time to get through them.

My question is how do I help people deal with my situation? I can't seem to find the wording. The few churches in my

own community I have written never wrote back. I am no longer a monster but these draconian laws and the media will always see me as one.

I am kind of in a dry spot in my spiritual walk. I'm assuming it's because a lot of things have been going on lately and my eyes have been more on those things rather than on Christ. A time of quiet reflection and meditation is what I truly need.

I have no job, no place to live, and no money when I get out. I do, however, have a strong will and God is with me. Whatever job I have to take, I will and I won't be picky about a place to live because for the last eight years I have lived on a bunk with all my belongings fitting into a box.

Since I have been in jail, I feel closer to God than I ever have. My faith in God has grown stronger each day and I give every day and complete control of my life to God. It is definitely something I should have done before.

I can't live and face my days in prison without Jesus. Turning to something false offers no solution or hope. If Jesus is truly what I need (and I believe he is), then what the Bible says about God is true. And since that's the case, God knows and understands when and why I feel down or discouraged. He offers a depth of power, grace, and support for me to tap into that is sufficient for my needs, no matter how extreme. Only I can choose to accept it, believe it, and tap into it by asking God for every moment I need it.

After years on improving and becoming more informed, educated, and dedicated to change while in prison, I see where now I'm becoming discouraged, bitter, resentful, and angry at the system. It's how it is and while I do and will try to work on it, I find it difficult to simply accept this and be content. Rest assured, I will hang in there.

Prison has been a very active journey full of God's love and guidance. He knew where I need it to be and when I need it to be there. For the first time in my life, I let God take control of everything and you know what? It never got screwed up like all of the times I thought I was in control of my life. I have been out of the program for seven months now, still have biweekly group maintenance meetings, and I'm still growing every day. I thank God for the friends I have in here. I am no longer afraid to share my thoughts and feelings with them and they helped me when I come to a steep climb in my life.

My prison time has been walking on eggshells. I am always looking around and keeping one eye open while I am asleep. Yes, I have had the bad days and did not know what to do. I learned to live with fear but I also learned am never alone. God has always been with me.

I don't think of mortality as some might—at least I don't think I do. I'll be in my mid to early 90s when I max out and they'll have to let me go. If the Lord left it up to me I'd be gone in a heartbeat. But if he asked "Will you stay for me?" I would.

I do feel that so many sex offenders are dealing with fear because they feel all society has turned their backs on them. Many have no hope and, as a result, quit dealing with issues in their lives that would lead to healing. Somehow they need to develop a self-love based on a love that's offered them through the Holy Spirit pointing us to Christ.

To know God intimately is not a purely intellectual pursuit. A truth about the Lord is not really ours until God works it into our daily life.

I don't know how it is with you, but it took me a long time to realize that at least some of these problems in my life were of my own making. For instance, I thought that it was my duty to try to solve other people's problems, arbitrate their disputes, and show them how to live their lives. I was hurt when they rejected my unsolicited advice. I finally learned that you cannot help people unless they really need help, are willing to be helped, want you to help them, and ask you to help them. Even then, you can only help them to help themselves.

If we did expect everything to be given to us that we ask for from God, then God would be a thing to be used. Instead, God is our father. He cares about us, his children. We have to trust in him that he knows what is best for us. He does it through love, but we also need to love God back.

Looking forward to an end product is recognizing the light at the end of the tunnel isn't a train.

There is a great ministry here in that some of the leadership are allowed to spend time with those inmates that are dying—and we have quite a few. It's nice not to die alone.

I am learning to discipline my flesh and make positive choices in my life. I hold high expectations for myself because the fact is, I can. I can live a life that is productive and healthy in society. I can make good decisions. I can honor God in all I do. I can have dignity, honor, and integrity in society. A saying we use goes "In order to achieve the goal of no more victims, I must first learn the basic self-management skills and apply them to my life."

I heard someone say "Let us put down our source of criticism, judgment, condemnation, and take care of our brother. Just think, what if love prevailed among church congregations that when people entered they could sense they were accepted? A returning RSO should be able to sit anywhere but could not another sit beside him to support him?"

Regarding your Scripture selection on forgiveness, the biggest thing I find is that there are some people who I really believe I've forgiven. When I see or hear them, however, I feel like I'm ready to start breathing fire again.

The truth is, when a really challenging episode occurs, we are least able to pray for ourselves. That's when we need to call on others to help carry the load.

Nothing is more important for me, for my sanity, for my faith, and for my recovery than to recognize that, if things are not in my control, there is nothing I can do about it.

Offer hospitality to your cellie and don't complain when he doesn't return it in kind. Use whatever God has given you be willing to share it with him and let your life speak God's word and grace more than your mouth. And keep your foot locker locked.



Our Prayer Corner

Prayer is an incredible gift we can give one another, for there is no better thing than to lift our lives, hopes, and dreams to the altar of the Lord.

Let us pray . . .

- First and always foremost, for our victims, that each day for them is a new day, a day without fear, and a day of healing.
- For those who seek faith, that they will believe that God *does* answer their prayers.
- For churches, that they somehow find ways to minister to *both* victims of sexual assault and their offenders.
- For those who feel hopeless, that they find God's peace and love in their circumstances and that their hearts feel and believe in the good around them.
- For all with age-inappropriate attractions who have not acted on those attractions, that they are able to find the support and encouragement needed to deal with those attractions.
- For those whose victims are family members, that each day is a reminder to pray for them and ask God to heal the wounds of betrayal.
- For positive outreach, that groups like the Support Group and PAN are able to find ways to help.
- For communities, that they seek intelligent rather than emotional answers to issues related to sex offender housing.
- For Bob and Cathie, that they continue to live each day with the same trust and faith in God that they've had from the start.
- For this ministry, that Broken Yoke Ministries continues to be blessed with the financial support needed to meet basic expenses like this newsletter.
- Finally, for those who are still abusing and are reading this newsletter because God made that possible, that they will do whatever it takes to stop the cycle of abuse and harm caused to their victims.

All things are possible with God!

This newsletter is made possible by the donations of its readers and would cease to exist without that support. Please consider a tax-exempt donation to Broken Yoke Ministries, PO Box 5824, De Pere, WI 54115-5824. And if you cannot contribute, please pray!

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A Little Humor . . .

When the store manager returned from lunch, he noticed his clerk's hand was bandaged, but before he could ask about the bandage, the clerk had some very good news for him.

"Guess what, sir?" the clerk said. "I finally sold that terrible, ugly suit we've had so long!"

"That's great!" the manager cried, "I thought we'd never get rid of it! That had to be the ugliest suit we've ever had! But tell me... why is your hand bandaged?"

The clerk replied. "After I sold the guy that suit, his seeing-eye dog bit me."

