

Faith in the Making

Praying it, talking it and living it

Lyndall Bywater

Foreword by Danielle Strickland

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Foreword

I'm about twelve years old and a few of my friends are huddled around the turntable in my bedroom listening to the greatest-hits record and belting out the lyrics of our favourite song, 'Holding Out for a Hero'. We join with full gusto the dynamic voice of Bonnie Tyler, singing together at the top of our lungs with joy and abandon.

It felt innocent enough at the time, but I'm afraid that song might have been more dangerous than it appeared. I learned, like so many of us, that there is someone *else* who is stronger, better and more capable to do what should be done. A hero. This root belief, taught through our culture, turns us all into helpless spectators of our own lives. The idea that there is someone else better, faster and stronger coming to help almost always leaves us watching terrible things happen to people in this weary world instead of pitching in to help.

What are we doing while young children are bought and sold like cattle on the fastest-growing crime circuit called human trafficking? We are waiting for a hero.

What are we doing about extreme poverty that leaves hundreds of thousands of people dead in its ugly, evil wake? We are holding out for a hero.

What are we doing about the millions of people trapped in fatalism and religious systems leading them to accept their god-ordained fates of exploitation and poverty? We are, as I belted out with my young girlfriends, holding out for a hero.

Even more sinister than making us passive in the face of the injustices that threaten our globe, this idea of heroism can make

us feel like we have no part to play in the world. We feel small and insignificant in the face of danger or obstacles. When we encounter pain or difficulties we sit it out, because there must be someone else coming. Many of our own destinies are dormant, because we are still holding out for a type of hero that has to be strong and has to be tough and has to be someone other than us.

This is why I love this book, not to mention the woman who wrote it. God introduces us to heroes of the faith – men and women that we like to put on pedestals and cast as amazing people who were stronger and more able than us. When we think of them that way we miss the whole point about why God chose them. But when we take a closer look, which is what this book invites you to do, it helps us understand something that will change everything. These heroes of biblical proportions, they were normal people. Living in their own time and place in history, they were the average Joes. They really were. You can tell by the way they got it wrong so many times, and complained and were confused and doubted and feared and were cowardly at key moments – cringeworthy cowardice at really important moments.

And it wasn't a mistake. God wasn't surprised that the hero he had chosen ended up being, well, simply human. The reason God tells the whole truth when he had these stories written is that God's word about heroes is so different from any other word we've heard about heroes before; so different from the superhero brand of 'salvation' that ranges from stage crusaders to type-A business leaders, megachurch pastors with super-shiny teeth and non-profit leaders with capes, saving the world. In other words, we've learned that heroes are people who aren't like the rest of us.

What we have believed about heroes is wrong. Simply fantasy. Heroes are real people who do real things in real life that change things. I believe in heroes. The woman who wrote this book is one of mine. What's coming in the following pages is an exploration of living a heroic life in real time. We have never needed heroes more

than right now. The world is desperate for people who will give what they have and who they are for the benefit of others. What is most remarkable about this book is that it's an exploration that leads to an invitation. It's simple really. I'm not holding out for a hero anymore. I get it now. A hero is not someone coming to rescue me. A hero is someone who responds to God's invitation to use what they have and who they are to help someone else.

For everyone reading this book, of course, that's you. You are the hero. You are the one the whole world, and definitely your neighbour, your child or your community, is holding out for. You don't have to be strong or smart, because the invitation comes from the only true and perfect hero, who is smarter and stronger and wiser and bigger than any of us could even imagine.

God is recruiting a team of heroes to brave the ordinary elements of our lives to live for something greater than ourselves. And that is heroic. You'll discover in this book the recipe of living a life beyond the status quo. These words will awaken a deep hunger already inside you to live the life you've always dreamed was possible if you were stronger and faster and younger. Whatever you've been waiting for, most likely the cause of the hesitancy is rooted somewhere in the notion that the hero you seek is outside of you – when, as Lyndall herself discovered, it has been inside you the whole time.

I'm so happy I stopped spectating and joined the heroic team of ordinary radicals changing the world by defying the status quo and spreading goodness with our everyday lives. What Lyndall offers us is not just well-written words, although this book is beautifully written. She offers us a life example of someone ordinary and spectacular at the same time. Her life is a powerful invitation to a preposterous plan of holy mischief that will impact the world with God's goodness through your life.

If ever I go bungee jumping again, I'm taking Lyndall with me. But if that can't happen, this book will be my reminder of the leap of faith we are currently taking together. I hope you'll join us.

Danielle Strickland

Introduction

‘Just keep stepping backwards,’ he said. ‘You’ll be fine.’

I said various unkind things in my head, and took a tiny, terrified step backwards.

‘That’s it! Just a couple more steps like that and you’ll be on your way.’

The ‘he’ in question was my abseiling instructor, and the ‘on your way’ in question was the descent of a 50-foot cliff. Suffice it to say, many more minutes and many more dark thoughts passed before I finally made it over the edge.

It might surprise you to know, then, that that abseiling adventure was one of the most amazing experiences of my life. Once I had conquered the tricky bit, where you go from being vertical at the top to being horizontal on the way down, I thoroughly enjoyed the sensation of dangling in mid-air, with nothing but a rope at my belt, a sheer cliff face at my feet and a patient instructor at my side.

Scroll forward a year or so and you will find a 14-year-old me standing in the warm, shallow waters of a Greek beach, being strapped into a harness which will, in due course, be attached to a parachute and tethered to the back of a speedboat. That speedboat is about to make its way around the bay, with me streaming out behind it, somewhere up in the sky. At this point, you might conclude that either I had rather cruel parents or I had always harboured a secret longing to fly. I am happy to say it was the latter. Whether dangling from a rope against a cliff face, parascending over the Aegean Sea or being hurled through the air by a particularly ambitious rollercoaster,

I have always loved the sensation of defying gravity. I should perhaps mention at this point that I am blind, and my friends and family often tell me that this might just be a contributing factor in my ability to stand terrifying heights and gut-rearranging drops. They're probably right. Be it my blindness or just the wiring in my brain, I have always loved finding myself in places it shouldn't be possible to be.

In contrast to the abseiling and parascending, I remember finding Christianity a rather pedestrian business when I was a child. My family have always gone to church, and I loved it. I never had one of those teenaged rebellions where you flatly refuse to get out of bed on a Sunday morning, and I never doubted that Christianity was true. I chose to follow Jesus from my earliest days in Sunday school, and I have never once regretted or reneged on that choice. I loved the values, I learned the rules and I lived out the practices to the best of my ability. It was wholesome, but if I'm honest it was also boring, most of the time. The Christians around me were pragmatic, down-to-earth people who loved Jesus and lived faithful lives, but something in me railed against this grounded approach to faith. After all, I wanted to be able to fly.

The take off, when it eventually came, happened at university. I had joined an interdenominational student group, and our leaders suggested that we study the 'heroes of faith' in Hebrews 11. I began the term convinced that this would be another of those worthy self-improvement programmes, where you are gently shamed into shape by a carefully selected parade of superheroes who've all made an excellent job of doing life with God. Instead, I finished the term having met with a bunch of completely normal people who soared their way to impossible things because they lost sight of their own limitations and got caught up in the bigness of God.

The stories in Hebrews 11 seemed to point to a kind of Christianity which was less about rules and values and more about possibilities for changing the world. While I'd always understood that being a Christian would mean I could do good to those around me – maybe

even tell them about Jesus one day – I had never understood that it could mean the things of God’s kingdom starting to happen in the place where I lived. The idea consumed me, and it has never left me. The code and the values still matter to me, but what gets me out of bed in the morning is the passionate belief that there is so much more to this life than I have yet seen – so much more of God’s kingdom to come, not just at the end of time but right now.

US president Abraham Lincoln and his wife Mary had a long-held ambition to visit Scotland. Some years after her husband’s assassination, Mary finally got to do the tour she’d always wanted to do. When she’d completed it, she said, ‘Beautiful, glorious Scotland has spoilt me for every other country.’ That was my experience of reading Hebrews 11. It felt like a tour around a country I’d always wanted to visit, and when I’d finally done it, I was spoilt for anything less. The life I had been living, and the limits I had been living within, suddenly didn’t feel like life any more. As I dug deep into those stories of the heroes, during that year at university, I became hungry for something more than just living well for Jesus. I started to want to see what might be possible if I let God take me beyond myself.

And then, somewhere in the middle of our ‘heroes’ series, a man called Thomas Hamilton walked into a primary school in Dunblane, in ‘beautiful, glorious Scotland’, and shot dead 16 pupils and a teacher. It was one of the worst mass murders in Britain’s history, and it shook me to the core. How could any world be broken enough for that kind of thing to happen? How could any man be broken enough to choose to slaughter children?

As I wrestled with the questions, I suddenly found Hebrews 11 had taken on a whole new meaning for me. If this was the kind of world where someone could wander into a school at 9.35 am on a Wednesday morning, massacre 17 people, injure 15 more and then kill himself, it was a world that needed some serious heroes. I watched people on the news trying to make sense of it all, and I prayed as best I could for those families who had had their little ones torn away

from them. Bit by bit I understood that this shattered world of ours needs people who can see beyond the shards of despair and defeat to a different reality. It needs people who have the compassion to sit with those in pain, and the courage to stand up and lead the way to a place where hope puts us all back together again.

There's a reason why children love to read fantasy fiction. It's because it speaks of the possibility of other exciting worlds right alongside us in our everyday lives. Whether it's C.S. Lewis' Narnia, a magical kingdom just the other side of a wardrobe, or Philippa Pearce's midnight garden, where Tom finds a whole other time and place full of fun and beauty, or J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, where children suddenly find they have a role in overthrowing evil and changing their world for the better, authors have long known that children have a natural affinity for the idea that this reality isn't all there is. Children have no problem believing in other worlds and other realities, living easily with one foot in a different dimension.

Somehow we tend to lose that art as we get grips with adulthood. We assume all those fantasy worlds were childish nonsense and we settle down to accepting that the sum total of reality is what we can see and understand. Yet it's that obsession with other realities which the writer to the Hebrews commends, over and over again. Most of the heroes mentioned could have been accused of being at best naive and at worst delusional because of the seemingly impossible realities they believed in: Noah lived in a desert but believed in a flood; Abraham and Sarah had no children of their own, yet they believed that their descendants would spread out all over the world; Moses' people had been subjugated in slavery for 400 years, yet he believed they could be set free and sent home to their promised land. With the value of hindsight, it all looks pretty doable to us, but in their day these men and women could have been accused of living in a fantasy world.

And that's what the writer to the Hebrews calls living 'by faith'.

Faith means so many different things to so many different people. Faith is the thread which runs through all those hero stories, and it's the thread which the writer to the Hebrews invites us to grab hold of and weave into our own lives. Yet, for many of us, it's a word we shy away from. If you're anything like me, then faith falls into the same category as words like 'diet' and 'savings' – words that simultaneously inspire me and make me feel slightly guilty. Then again, you may be someone for whom the very word 'faith' triggers fear and a sense of failure, because it has been used too often as a stick to beat you with. If you were ever told that you weren't healed because you lacked faith, or that you went into debt because you didn't believe hard enough, then the very concept of 'faith' may be terrifying. Before we go any further then, we should establish some basics about faith.

The first verse of Hebrews 11 gives a definition of faith which launches us straight up into the wide open blue sky of limitless possibility:

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

HEBREWS 11:1

According to this definition, faith has something of the 'beyond' about it. You've probably heard it said that faith isn't faith if you're believing in something you already know to be possible. If you're aiming for something doable, something you can see and reach in your own strength, then what you're employing is skill, strategy, strength and even courage, but not faith. Faith only comes into play when we leap off the end of what we know to be achievable. It was in those packed meetings in that overheated church hall every Sunday night that I realised I had been longing to go beyond – beyond the sensible, doable Christianity I'd been living – to a place of risk and absolute reliance on God. And it was sitting in front of my TV in my cluttered university bedroom, crying my eyes out over the Dunblane massacre, that I realised I needed to go beyond my comfortable,

bless-me-now Christianity, to a place where my faith might actually help other people find new realities. I didn't want to know what the world would be like if I practised a doable kind of Christianity; I wanted to know what the world would be like if I jumped off the end of my own greatest efforts and catapulted myself into gravity-defying dreams of the impossible.

And it was as I started living that way that I learned the other crucial ingredient of faith. It has something of the 'beyond' about it, but it also has something of the 'beside' about it.

If you've ever stepped out in faith, you won't need me to tell you that it can be an unpredictable business. Sometimes it goes the way we want, and we find ourselves face-to-face with the thing we'd hoped for. But sometimes the wind of God's purposes blows us on to a whole new course, setting us down in a landscape which we haven't foreseen, and which, if we're honest, we don't want to see. To go beyond our own limits is to fly by God's instruments, not our own.

Looking back now, I can see countless snapshots of myself over the years, baffled by faith leaps which left me staggering instead of soaring. Yet as I scan those memories, I can also remember the intense feeling of God's nearness: pacing the university campus, putting off doing something I was dreading; lying in a hospital bed after a traumatic accident; grieving so many friends who died, despite our faith-filled prayers; waiting for the miracle which never came – each situation so painful and bewildering, yet each one crackling with the sense of God's nearness. In this I am blessed. Many people rarely sense the closeness of God, either in their best or worst times. For me it has been the comforting reminder that we are never asked to take our faith leaps alone. There is one who leaps with us, and who remains by our side, whether we soar, bounce or crash-land.

Faith comes from God, and it has two hallmarks: it holds tight to hope and it draws near to a friend. The Hebrews 11 heroes were all

hoping for something. Faith is holding tight to what we hope for. No matter how many times the world says, 'This is reality and this is all there is', faith says: 'I'm holding tight to my belief that there is more to come.' When so-called reality says despair is the end of the story, faith says that there can be light and hope again. When so-called reality says that things can't be changed, faith says that things can be made new. Living by faith means holding on to that better, brighter, hope-filled reality and shaping your life around it.

But the Hebrews 11 heroes also had a friendship. The God who sparks faith in us isn't some talisman or good-luck charm; he is a friend. He doesn't want to give us superpowers; he wants to keep us company. Yes, we may well see miracles and wonders along the way, but what he most wants is for us to draw near. He wants us to stop keeping him at arm's length, and let him sweep us up in an embrace of love. After all, when you really know you're loved, a whole heap of things become possible that just weren't possible before.

The 'beyond' and the 'beside', the hope and the friendship, go together. Big hopes and dreams are wonderful things to have, and some of the most inspiring characters in history have been people who achieved things which seemed impossible, but a hope without a friend is exhausting and ultimately futile. William Wilberforce had a dream to see slavery made illegal in England, and though most people thought it impossible, he achieved a miraculous victory. Yet this courageous human-rights activist knew that he needed to draw near to God in friendship just as much as he needed to pursue his impossible dream. As he wrote in *Real Christianity*:

It makes no sense to take the name of Christian and not cling to Christ. Jesus is not some magic charm to wear like a piece of jewelry we think will give us good luck. He is the Lord. His name is to be written on our hearts in such a powerful way that it creates within us a profound experience of His peace and a heart that is filled with His praise.

Abraham dreamed of settling his people in a new land; Moses dreamed of leading his enslaved people to freedom. Big hopes, indeed. Yet these men weren't known as 'God's heroic hoppers' or 'God's impossible dreamers'; they were both known by the name 'friend of God'. It was the friendship which gave them the strength to pursue the dreams.

If hope without friendship exhausts us, then friendship without something to hope for causes us to stagnate. The Hebrews 11 heroes all caught the hope bug. They could all have stayed put and made do, but none of them did. They all set out to make a difference. Would God have loved them any less if they hadn't? Of course not. But I'm not sure it's possible to draw near to God in friendship without being infected with hope – hope for ourselves, but also hope for a world where things need putting right. To know the reality of this broken world and at the same time to know friendship with the God of hope: that's a combination which puts us in serious danger of becoming dreamers.

My third guide dog was a black Labrador called Croft, and he was somewhat prone to crises of confidence. When he was at the top of his game he was perhaps the most capable dog I ever had, but when he got an attack of the wobbles we'd have to stop and have a little reassuring chat. The truth is, he needed two things above everything else: he needed to be enthusiastic about the task in hand, and he needed to know I was there, cheering him on. As we made our way through the world together, I would often reflect on how similar we were. After all, those are the things I need too. I need enthusiasm, hope and vision; I need to know I'm living for something bigger and more significant than just getting by. And I need to know that God, the friend of my soul, is at my side, believing in me, walking with me and spurring me on. That pincer movement of hope and friendship will get me anywhere.

Throughout the course of this book, we will meet some of the characters from Hebrews 11. We will examine their hopes and

dreams, and we will take a peek into their friendships with God. At the end of each section, you will find a number of suggestions for ways in which you can pray, talk and live out the things you've read about. It is my prayer, as you read, that you too will get swept up in that divine pincer movement of hoping and loving, dreaming and trusting, and that you will discover your own unique brand of heroic faith.

1

Abel and Enoch

By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead. By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: 'He could not be found, because God had taken him away.' For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God.

HEBREWS 11:4-5

Faith ignited

Genesis 4:1-8

But Abel also brought an offering – fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favour on Abel and his offering...

GENESIS 4:4

I once fainted in a Mormon lady's doorway. She opened her front door, I started introducing myself, and the next thing I knew I was lying flat out in her hallway.

It happened during my university years, in those heady days when I was discovering a more 'on fire' kind of Christianity. I was a modern languages student, so had to spend a year abroad as part of my degree course, and the various universities available in France and

Switzerland had all said they thought it would be too complicated to host a blind student. Not daunted, I suggested to my bewildered tutors that I could spend a year church-planting with Operation Mobilisation in France, and to my surprise they said yes.

In those days, our favoured evangelism strategy was to go door to door selling Bibles, and that's how I ended up on the Mormon lady's doorstep. If faith is going beyond yourself and leaping into the impossible, then I was there! The Bible-selling and the conversations with total strangers were taking me so far out of my comfort zone that I was convinced some kind of exciting miracle must be just around the corner. Yet I learned another important lesson about faith that day, as I picked myself up and dusted myself down.

The lady was, of course, rather concerned about me, and insisted on inviting us in so she could give me a glass of water. All I wanted to do was go home. I was queasy, shaken and very embarrassed. But I knew a drink would probably be a good idea, so my friend and I took a seat at her kitchen table and spent half an hour chatting with her about life and Jesus, and before we left we prayed together.

I'd like to tell you that the chat and the prayer made it all worth it, and that I left feeling at peace, but that would be a lie. I cringed with embarrassment for days afterwards, and I had several furious conversations with God about just how much I disapproved of him letting me pass out in such awkward circumstances. He knew that would be one of my worst nightmares, and he could have prevented it. If he'd wanted us to sit at that lady's table and talk, he could have done it a million other ways. Why use me? Why make me so vulnerable? Why humiliate me?

I learned that day that if you ask God to make you an 'on fire' kind of Christian, he is very likely to use as his kindling something that is very dear to you; in my case, my pride.

In the introduction to Hebrews 11, before the writer gets going on those mini-biographies of the heroes, we get a glimpse of two people from the earliest days of Bible history. Abel and Enoch only get a few words each, but they seem to represent something foundational in this emerging architecture of faith, so we do well to notice them.

Cain and Abel are the first siblings mentioned in scripture, and they wasted no time getting the age-old tradition of sibling rivalry underway. Sadly, their rivalry had a dark and tragic ending. At a given moment in time, both brothers presented a sacrifice to God, each bringing something which represented the fruits of his labours: Cain some of his ripened produce, and Abel the fat from some of his newborn animals. We are told that God looked favourably on Abel and his offering, but not on Cain and his.

Much has been written about why only Abel's act of worship was acceptable to God, but the simplest explanation seems to be that it cost him something dear. Cain brought a respectable selection of good things, whereas Abel slaughtered several animals, cutting off any future value such precious assets might produce. Cain brought an offering, whereas Abel made a sacrifice.

Right at the start of this procession of heroes, we're face-to-face with a man who let his relationship with God cost him dearly. In a few verses, we'll be meeting with the dreamers – the people who were looking a long way beyond themselves and their current circumstances. We have no way of knowing whether Abel had that kind of vision. All we know is that he was a man who was prepared to lay down something precious for God. And if you know anything of shepherds or stockmen, you'll know those younglings would have been very precious to him indeed, not just as an economic asset but as something he loved and cared for.

Long before the hopes and dreams take shape, God asks us the simple question: 'Am I more important to you than the things you hold most dear?' Sometimes going 'beyond ourselves' in faith is

all about big, world-changing adventures, and then sometimes it's about the equally risky and impossible business of entrusting the most precious and vulnerable parts of our lives to God.

There has also been much speculation about how God signalled his approval of Abel's sacrifice. Did he use the weather or draw huge scorecards in the sky? For the time being, we'll have to settle for guesswork, and the best guess is that he used fire, since that is how he revealed himself on so many other occasions (in the burning bush, on Mount Carmel and in the upper room at Pentecost, to name but a few). As we set out on our journey to explore the workings of faith, I am halted in wonder at that image of the divine fire of God's presence consuming the painful, precious sacrifice of a humble cattle herder. Murdered by his jealous brother, Abel didn't get to live much beyond that day, but his story is still remembered and retold, thousands of years later, perhaps because it carries the most basic ingredients of that mystery we call 'faith'.

Twenty-three years after my brush with the Mormon lady's carpet, it still serves as a reminder and a challenge. The shame has finally worn off, but the tendency to try to preserve my pride at all costs is taking a little longer to eradicate. Yet, looking back, I have to admit that those agonising moments of surrender, of sacrificing my need to look good, have also been moments when the presence of God has set fire to me in a new way. Yes, it's been uncomfortable – even painful – but it has been worth it.

At this stage, it would be tempting to dig out a nice story of how letting God singe away my pride has made the world a better place, but I will resist the temptation. You see, Abel's story isn't remembered because his sacrifice had fabulously far-reaching consequences. It is remembered because he honoured God with the best he had, and that is where it all begins.

Praying it

Surrender isn't accomplished in one easy prayer time, or even one difficult prayer time. Surrender is something we keep coming back to; it's a habit and a life rhythm. This exercise is a practical way to remind yourself of Abel's truth: that God's presence burns brightest in us when we surrender the things we hold most dear.

Activity

Find a glass candleholder, and devise a way to write on it. You can either stick a piece of paper to it, or use glass pens or paints. Write on it two or three of the things you hold most dear in life. You might pick things that give you value and make you feel safe, such as pride, financial security, reputation, a habit of worrying or a need to be in control. Or you might pick things which are precious and which you find it hard to entrust to God's care, like your spouse, your family, your job or your role at church. Let the Holy Spirit steer you as you choose; remember, you can always add things later.

When you've written on your candleholder, put a candle in it and light it every time you sit down to pray. As you read the writing and watch the flame, let it remind you again of the need to put those precious things back into God's hands, so that he can burn all the more brightly through you.

Talking it

- Have you ever felt like God allowed something to happen to you which felt unfair?
- If Abel's sacrifice was something dear to him, what do you think the modern-day equivalent of Cain's offering might be?
- If sacrificing things we hold dear is difficult and sometimes painful, how can we make it easier for each other to do it? Are there aspects of our community life (in church, for instance) which make it harder to be vulnerable and surrender ourselves to God?

Living it

Practise surrender

Abel brought his sacrifice willingly, without needing to be persuaded or cajoled by God. When you know what it is you have a tendency to hold too tightly, do things which help you to hold it more lightly. For instance, if it's popularity you're clinging to, practise saying or doing things which are good and right, but which might make you less popular. If you're worrying a lot about your children, get yourself into a habit of handing them over to God in prayer every time you think of them. If you're obsessing about money, loosen your grip by giving a bit of it away.

Practise worship

Abel brought his sacrifice because he believed God was worth every bit of the price it cost him. When surrender is painful, there's nothing that soothes that pain like focusing on the one we're surrendering to. Find a list of the names of God (there are plenty online), and choose one name each day. At the start of the day, read the Bible reference where that name appears, and then carry the name with you for the rest of the day. You can write it down and keep it in your pocket, if need be. Develop a habit of thinking about the name you're carrying, what it tells you about God, and how it can strengthen and reassure you as you go about your day.

Faith in company

Genesis 5:21–24

Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away.

GENESIS 5:24

There's a beautiful scene towards the beginning of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. It's not one of those scenes where armies march through majestic landscapes, or elves do acrobatics in the trees;

it's much more domesticated. Frodo is sitting with his three hobbit friends by the fire in his cosy new house, musing on the daunting journey he and Samwise are about to undertake, when Merry and Pippin interrupt him to inform him that they're planning to come along too. In response to Frodo's protestations, Merry simply says, 'You can trust us to stick to you through thick and thin – to the bitter end... but you cannot trust us to let you face trouble alone.' Having originally thought he'd have to complete the quest all by himself, Frodo suddenly realises that he will be surrounded by friends who've got his back, and that moment is every bit as powerful as all the impressive battles put together.

The Lord of the Rings is a trilogy, and this particular scene appears near the beginning, in the book called *The Fellowship of the Ring*. 'Fellowship' is one of those words which has become rather quaint and old-fashioned, yet I wonder whether that's because we have lost the art of it. We humans have a fatal addiction to self-sufficiency, and the pressures of modern life don't make it easy to kick that habit. Fellowship is to walk with others: to go at their pace; to value the company just as highly as the destination; to share life together, rather than just getting the job done. Fellowship is time-consuming and, since it involves companionship with others, frequently inconvenient and awkward. Yet every daunting quest is improved by a bit of fellowship.

Having honoured Abel, the writer to the Hebrews moves swiftly on to Enoch: a man who knew a thing or two about fellowship. The only things we know about him are that he walked with God and that he didn't die a natural death. Given the fact that we're still in the early chapters of Genesis here, the news that someone walked with God comes as something of a welcome relief. Adam and Eve had regularly walked with God in the garden of Eden (Genesis 3:8), but they jeopardised that fellowship through pride and disobedience, leaving God no option but to bar them from that paradise. We tend to assume therefore that they forfeited their rights to closeness with God, and that he stopped walking the earth with his creation, but

that's not true. God, it seems, has always been willing to walk with anyone who sincerely wants to walk with him.

Our self-sufficiency can cause us to get stuck in a destructive vicious circle. It starts with a belief that we are basically alone in life, and that we need to learn to look after ourselves. It then matures into the conviction that we need to make ourselves worthy by being successful – again, on our own. Then, when we fall short of that success, it hamstring us with the crippling conviction that our failures make us even more deserving of being left alone. Perhaps that's why Jesus spent three years walking the roads of Palestine with a bunch of distinctly imperfect disciples, because he wanted them to grasp the deep truth that God has not distanced himself from us. He is Immanuel, living proof that God is with us.

But without faith it is impossible to [walk with God and] please Him, for whoever comes [near] to God must [necessarily] believe that God exists and that He rewards those who [earnestly and diligently] seek Him.

HEBREWS 11:6 (AMP)

This verse is often quoted in isolation, but in fact it is part of the Enoch story, and that makes a vast difference. When you hear the phrase 'without faith it is impossible to please God', it's easy to feel like you've failed before you've even begun. But when you know that the 'pleasing God' refers back to Enoch, then you can take courage from the way he did faith. If he had pleased God by being a high-flying success story, I'm sure the writer to the Hebrews would have told us. Instead, all we're told is that he pleased God by walking through life in his company. Later in the verse, we are reminded that God rewards those who seek him. Again, the use of the word 'reward' can set us back on the track of thinking we've got to prove ourselves somehow; yet the phrase simply means that if we look for God, we find him. If you get up in the morning and say, 'God, I'd like to walk with you today', then you are immediately in his company. He doesn't play hide-and-seek or wait to see if you're going to score

high on the 'being a good Christian' chart first; he is there with you, by his Spirit, enjoying your company.

The story is told of a little girl who was recounting to her parents the things she'd learned about Enoch in her Sunday school session. When it came to explaining how he'd left this mortal life, she scratched her head and thought for a bit, before declaring, 'What happened was that he kept going for walks with God, and one day they walked such a long way that God said it would be too far to go back to Enoch's house, so they might as well go to God's place instead.'

Maybe we'll never get to skip death by walking God home, like Enoch did, but I like to think that walking with God takes us further and further away from our old selves, and nearer and nearer to the hope and fulfilment which God has for us. Enoch's long walk with God took him, step by step, to a whole new life. We can end up making the business of transformation so complicated – believing that we need to undergo umpteen different types of self-improvement programme – yet the thing which transforms us most deeply and most completely is a step-by-step, day-by-day walk in the company of our creator.

This thing called faith has two choices right at its heart: the choice to go beyond ourselves by entrusting to God the things we hold most dear, and the choice to believe that God is the friend beside us who wants to walk with us. When we've made those choices – when we're trusting him and walking with him – then we've set faith in motion, and all sorts of things become possible.

Praying it

One of the last things Jesus said to his disciples was that he no longer called them servants, but friends. Being a servant of Jesus is a very good thing indeed, and it teaches us valuable lessons of humility and obedience, but if we stop there we miss out on the even richer experience of being Jesus' friends.

Activity

Write two lists, one with all the characteristics of a servant you can think of and one with all the characteristics of a friend. Then study them for a while. How do servants differ from friends? Are there things on your 'friend' list which aren't part of your relationship with Jesus yet? When you've given these questions some thought, take some time to pray and ask the Holy Spirit (the Spirit of Jesus) to teach you more about being his friend.

Talking it

- Can you think of a time when you thought you were going to be on your own, but God has surprised you by providing friends and fellowship?
- Do you find it easy to believe that God wants to walk with you? If not, what do you think stops you from believing it?
- How can we help one another not to drift off into self-sufficiency and stubborn independence? What can we do to help each other remember that God is always at our side?

Living it

Prayer-walk your neighbourhood

Why not go on a literal walk with God. Head out into your neighbourhood and walk the streets, asking God to show you things you might not normally notice. As you see and hear things, talk to him about them. You might also want to ask him to talk back to you, telling you the things he wants to do to bless your local community.

Practise the presence

Brother Lawrence was a 17th-century Carmelite monk who wrote a little book about walking with God. Its title is *Practising the Presence of God*, and even if you never read the book, that title carries a wealth of good advice. Our self-sufficient nature means we easily forget that we have a friend at our side, and the only way to solve that is to practise remembering he's there.

Activity

Each time you move to a new place or activity today, stop for a few seconds and deliberately think about the truth that God is with you. When you go into a different room, when you start a conversation, when you begin a task – think about what it means for God’s Spirit to be right there alongside your spirit. How might he change the atmosphere of the room you’ve entered? What might he want to say to the person you’re talking to? How might he help in the task you’re doing? Get used to including him as you go through your day.



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If faith is 'being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see', what does that look like in practice today? In a world that is largely unsure and uncertain, how do we gain our confidence?

Faith in the Making recognises the problem and seeks the answer in the list of faithful heroes found in Hebrews 11. This accessible devotional resource will inspire individuals and groups to live more confidently for God in today's world. Heroic faith is far more attainable than we often think!

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