

When Faith Feels FRAGILE



Help for the Wary,
Weak, and Wandering

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Part 1



All About Faith

Take the Offer

The crowd was eager with expectation. Many had traveled from around the globe to be renewed and encouraged in their faith, and they hoped that their prominent speaker wouldn't disappoint. But what they heard must have come as something of a surprise. "Our faith is weak," the speaker confessed, "our faith is shaky."¹

These words weren't intended as a criticism or a put-down. Instead, they were meant to acknowledge and confirm what many in that crowd were likely thinking, or even fearing, to assure them that it was okay if their faith felt fragile, and that they weren't alone.

The speaker that day was no less than Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the Catholic Archbishop of New York, and his audience happened to be three hundred and fifty of the nearly two million young people who converged on Madrid, Spain, for

World Youth Day in 2011. But Dolan's words could have been meant for anyone. Perhaps they resonate with you.

Feeling that our faith is fragile is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, to accept our faith's weakness is a good step toward our faith becoming stronger. Even Mother Teresa struggled with her faith. In a letter to a friend, during a dark and difficult moment, she could admit: "I have no faith. I don't believe."² If Mother Teresa wasn't exempt from such feelings, we probably won't be either. Yet Mother Teresa is now well on her way to being declared a saint. This can give us great encouragement that there's hope for our faith too.

If your faith feels fragile, don't despair. It happens to just about everyone at some point, for any number of reasons. More often than not, it springs from a combination of factors.

First, there's all the "cultural static" we have to contend with. The world shouts at us, "Look at me! Buy me! Sleep with me!" and we can't seem to hear anything else—especially God, who typically speaks in whispers. Information overload from every conceivable form of media makes us hesitant to add other voices to the mix, including God's, which gets drowned out. Responsibilities with work, family, and other day-to-day activities distract and exhaust us so much that making time for matters of faith seems like a luxury, or something to put off for a day when we're less stressed. We don't intend to push God away; he simply drops off the radar screen. And when he's out of sight, he's out of mind.

Perhaps our faith feels fragile because it hasn't been fed. We're not entirely starving, but we're malnourished. Our formal religious education might have ended years ago, and it may have been very good. But even so, it was likely intended for

kids, and it hasn't always prepared us to face the ups and down of adulthood. We seek guidance on how our faith might impact relationships, work, parenting, finances, our losses and hurts. At times, we may have found ourselves turning to self-help books, talk shows, the gym, or therapists to find answers, and we wonder where our faith factors in.

Pain can weaken faith too. Without exception, life beats us up. Hearts get broken; dreams are shattered. Relationships and parenting are a struggle, as is keeping bread on the table. Growing older can be painful, scary, and lonely. Dear ones die, leaving an empty space only they can fill. We experience such things, or see their impact on those close to us, and our faith's foundations can get shaken.

It could be that Church members haven't exactly manifested the love of Christ to us. Upon learning that I'm a priest, one woman's words to me were: "Are you judgmental?" I was a bit taken aback at the time but came to appreciate that judgmentalism is what she'd come to expect from clergy. She's not alone. Many have experienced Church as hypocritical, cold, uncaring, untrustworthy, boring, or more concerned with money or rules than with matters of the Spirit. The sad fact is that a number of good people today prefer to describe themselves as "spiritual" rather than "religious" because they've found organized religion to be a turnoff.

We probably know people who've stopped going to Mass altogether, and from all outward appearances they seem to be doing just fine. Perhaps we've seen a billboard at Christmastime proclaiming something like, "Why believe in God? Just be good for goodness' sake!" and it made us pause for a moment. But at the end of the day, that's not for us. Our faith may feel fragile, but it's still important to us. Deep inside we know that

something vital and precious would be lost if we let go of our faith. We want to have faith. At the very least, we want to want to have faith!

And let's face it: it's not always easy to have faith. After all, it requires us to believe in a God we can't even see. God so often seems to hide himself that we can wonder if there's even a God who's hiding. We can sympathize with the young woman who, when completing the "religion" section of her social media profile, wrote: "Unsure, but willing to entertain offers."

The good news is God has an offer to make. He's holding out his hand to us even now. Faith does require action on our part, to be sure. But at the end of the day, faith is God's gift. We just have to take it.

This book is about accepting God's offer of faith. Together we'll explore what faith is and consider ways we can open ourselves to this gift and hold it close to our hearts. It will take effort, that's for certain. But then that's true of anything worthwhile. As we make that effort, we might offer an honest prayer: "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mk 9:24 *RSV*). That's a prayer from the Bible, by the way. And it's one that God is more than happy to answer.

Get Some R and R

While sitting in my room at a resort hotel, flipping through the hotel chain's promotional magazine, I was struck by the language used to describe what was offered at their establishments. Words like *healing*, *harmony*, *purification*, *wholeness*, *peace*, *renewal*, *bliss*, and *nourishment* jumped off the page at me. It was even claimed that my spirit would be *inspired* and my soul would be *warmed*.

After reading the magazine, I started seeing this language everywhere. The hotel bathroom's dry skin cream was "renewing body lotion." The complimentary needle and thread was a "restoring kit." The tag on the bottled water encouraged me to "make my body happy." And the café downstairs promised that their coffee would "rejuvenate (my) spirit and refresh (my) outlook"—which is a lot of pressure to put on a cup of coffee!

Maybe this is just marketing jargon used around resorts and spas. Or perhaps all the talk about healing, restoration, wholeness, happiness, and peace is a reflection of a very real longing we all have: a longing not just for a little rest and relaxation but for something deeper, something that strikes at the very center of who we are as human beings—a longing to be healed of our wounds, to have our brokenness made whole, to discover lasting peace and abiding joy; a longing for something we were made for but somehow lost.

Such longings can't be satisfied by a visit to a resort, as nice as that might be. Only Jesus can provide us with the rest and refreshment we seek, as he himself says: "Come to me, all you grown weary and burdened, and I will *refresh* you. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble hearted, and you will find *rest* for your souls; for my yoke is easy, and my burden light" (Mt 11:28–30, *Alba House*).

Jesus is speaking of the blessings we receive through living a life of faith in him. His words are comforting and soothing, to be sure. At the same time, they're also somewhat challenging because it's easier to associate rest and refreshment with resorts than it is with a "yoke." When I think of a yoke, the first image that comes to mind is that of sweaty oxen laboring to pull a plow across a muddy field—not a very refreshing or restful picture! Therefore, we might ask: Just what does Jesus mean by his "yoke," and how can it be restful or refreshing?

To answer this question, we need to understand that most of the first-century men and women who first heard Jesus' words imagined God to be distant, unknowable, and impersonal, and had been taught that following him required keeping hundreds of very specific commandments called the "yoke of the Law." Keeping these cumbersome rules was a heavy burden

to bear and must have been physically, emotionally, and spiritually exhausting.

Two thousand years later, things haven't changed too much. People still believe God to be distant, impersonal, or uncaring. Perhaps we ourselves think that way at times. Thankfully, Jesus' words can appeal to us just as much as they inspired people back then. You see, the yoke Jesus invites us to wear isn't a burdensome list of rules handed down by an inaccessible God. Instead, the yoke Jesus refers to is Jesus himself! Jesus invites us to yoke ourselves to him through a life of faith. By following and trusting him through all the twists and turns that life may throw at us, and by embracing his wisdom and teaching, we'll find the rest and refreshment that he promises and that we long for.

This doesn't mean that our life will become like an extended resort stay. When he spoke of rest and refreshment, Jesus didn't promise to take away our burdens. What he does do is help us carry them. By yoking ourselves to him, our burdens will become lighter because he'll help us bear the load. In a sense, Jesus has already taken the load from us. On the cross he took upon himself all of the suffering and agony of a broken humanity that we all might be redeemed and healed. Today he invites us to add our burden to that load, so that it will be his strength, and not ours, that will bear it up.

Think of it this way: a yoke joins a pair of oxen together and makes them a team. When our lives are yoked with Jesus in faith, we're teamed with him. He'll pull our load alongside us, giving us strength and courage to carry on when we might otherwise feel like giving up. He'll give our lives direction and purpose, steering us in the right direction when we, if left on our own, wouldn't know if we should turn to the right or to the

left. He'll teach us along the way as well, helping us to see our lives and our world as he sees them, and revealing God's hand in situations in which we might not have seen it before. And Jesus will be our constant traveling companion, staying by our side in good times and bad, during seasons of sorrow and joy, and being our truest friend when life gets lonely and other friends just can't be found.

So what about resorts? Many lovely things might be found there, there's no doubt about that! But we could spend an entire lifetime, traveling from one exotic location to another, being pampered in every conceivable way, and still not find that rest and refreshment we're looking for in the depths of our souls. Only Jesus can offer that.

"Come here," resorts invite us, as they entice us with an illusion of the "good life." Jesus says to us instead, "Come to me," with the promise of a life that is truly good, and a rest, and a refreshment unlike anything this world is able to give. That's the gift, and the benefit, of faith.