

## Faith In Crisis Roundtable

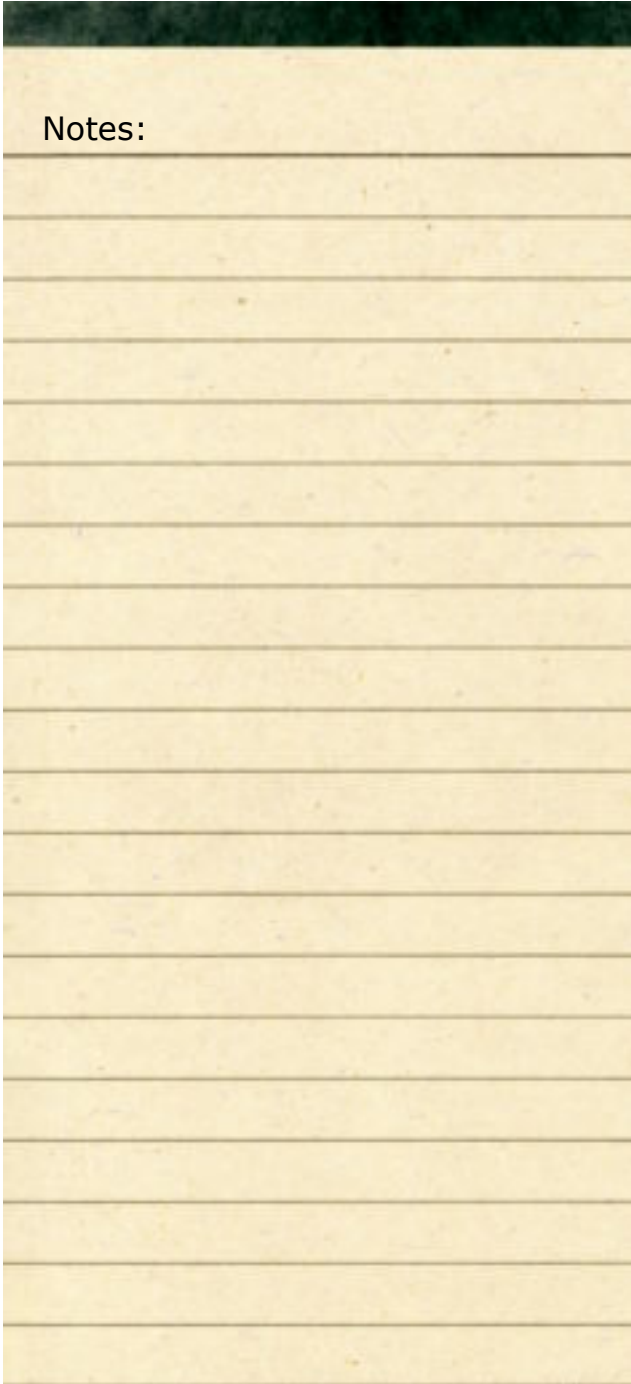
**Mart:** Okay, I've got my counselor. I've got my college president with a lot of years in the pastorate too, right, in pastoral work. I want to ask you a question. Since it's just the three of us, what if I told you, counselor, pastor, that I have an important role in a religious organization, a Christian organization. And it's hard to say, but I've lost my faith. In the middle of it all, I've lost hope. I'm supposed to believe. What do I do, pastor? What do I do, counselor?

**Larry:** I would be so intrigued. I would want to know what's going on inside of you. The word *rebuke* wouldn't occur to me. The word *witnessing* wouldn't occur to me. The word *explore* would occur to me. I'd like to know what's going on, because I'd resonate with the struggle with faith.

**Mart:** What would a pastor say?

**Joe:** Well, as a pastor I'd want you to tell me your story. I'd like to have you tell me when you did have faith and what that meant to you. Then I would want to hear the story of why that faith has somehow been shaken. I'd have to say, though, I wouldn't despair for you because I would believe that while you're letting go of God, I would remind you that God is not letting go of you. And that ultimately in the end I would believe in you and I would believe that your historic faith would reemerge again, because I do think there are times when we're so taken with the details and the lack of answers and the pain in our heart that God seems not

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only removed but kind of our enemy, and then he brings us home again.

**Mart:** Okay. Now for disclosure's sake, that's not where I am, even though I have struggled with my faith over the years and there are areas of my life that I find it very difficult to deal with. But I've tried to create a scenario that I think is true of many people today who are in situations where they're afraid to admit the doubts they have about God.

**Larry:** And that would be the major thing I'd want to ask if you were really telling a true story. I'd want to ask who have you talked with about this—where have you felt the freedom.

**Mart:** Who can I talk to?

**Larry:** Who can you talk to? Why haven't you been able to? What would happen if you were to share that struggle? Would you get preached at? Or would you be . . . would you want to have someone listen to your story? What would happen there?

**Joe:** I do think that a real part of crisis is that sense of aloneness. In Psalm 73, the psalmist in his struggle says, "If I spoke this to the congregation, I would be rejected by the congregation." So . . .

**Larry:** He was the worship leader.

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**Joe:** Yeah, and he was the worship leader, exactly. So that is a very important part of it; like I can't admit this to anybody, but I'm dying inside. And it would seem to me like the church, if I can bring the pastoral sense to this, the church needs to get over this sense of immediate rebuke. It seems to me like the church needs to cultivate within it this context of openness. And at least that starts with the pastor, who in his own preaching and conversations admits his own struggles and his own failures and opens up an environment where we can be honest with each other.

**Mart:** But the other side is that the pastor or the head of a religious organization can't be a person without faith. I mean if you're going through this enormous sense of despair, of disillusionment, of not knowing—you can no longer hold that position. What about a pastor's wife? What about the children who've been raised in a home where Mom and Dad had deep convictions about God? Can they admit what's going on inside?

**Larry:** I had a friend who called me a while ago and said, "You're going to be in a certain city where my son lives. He's in his late thirties, and he just declared himself an atheist."

**Mart:** The son did?

**Larry:** The son did, and had been raised in a Christian home,

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had gone to a Christian college, was in ministry activities. I met with him. And he said to me that for me to tell my parents that I had lost my faith was more difficult than had I had to say to my parents I'm homosexual. And I wonder, Joe, when you are preaching—when you look out on your congregation—how aware were you that people were not just listening to be strengthened on their happy journey but that there were some people who were really wondering if there's even a God, let alone do I know him and is my faith working. Is that something that pastors are aware of as they're looking out on a thousand people or a hundred people or ten thousand people?

**Joe:** Depends on how close they've been to their people. I mean a pastor who's been close to the people who are struggling becomes very much aware of that. And I think as a pastor, in your preaching and teaching, you need to recognize that at times in a sermon you need to say, "I realize there are some of us here today who've grown up in the faith but today are asking the question: Is there really a God?" . . . That creates the openness, doesn't it? Just to make that kind of a statement.

**Mart:** And do you have to assume that because I'm wondering how many people within a church congregation would ever dare admit it to anyone?

**Larry:** I don't . . . one of the struggles I have with my own attendance at church, just speaking very personally, I walk into

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church services often at a bad place and sometimes . . .

**Mart:** What do you mean in a bad place?

**Larry:** Oh, doubting things, worrying about things.

**Mart:** You yourself?

**Larry:** I myself. And when we get the happy praise music, I'd want to leave and go to Starbucks. I just don't want to hear it. I want there be a place where I can lament. I want there to be a place for struggle. I would like to be known in my church as somebody who doesn't have it together. But church just requires such an image of having it together so often that sometimes I just don't want to go to church, because I can't be me. I've got to put on the Larry Crabb face; and I don't like doing that 'cause Larry Crabb struggles. Sometimes with my faith there are times I've contemplated atheism—as recently as the past year—and had to ask: Why do I still believe this stuff? And if I have a life verse, I think it's 2 Timothy 3:14, where Paul says, "Continue in what you've learned and have become convinced of." And I ask myself: What have I really become convinced of? I have a granddaughter, 11-year-old Josie. Two weeks ago she said to me under a late-night conversation (she was staying at our house for the night) and she said, "Poppop, I know Islam and Hinduism are false religions. How do I know Christianity isn't a false religion?" And that challenged me. I thought, *Have I become*

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*absolutely convinced?* And I wrestled with that. I preached to a college chapel the next day about that—or a couple days later.

**Joe:** Yeah, and I think working with students, Larry, in this moment where they've left home and kind of out on their own, and you do. I can remember my own struggles with . . . I was if I can be born at a Muslim family . . .

**Larry:** Would you be Muslim?

**Joe:** And would I be as adamant about Islam as I am about my faith in Jesus Christ and His Word? I'm interested in your struggle, which all of us . . .

**Larry:** I don't really have any struggles. *(Laughter.)*

**Joe:** With that, like becoming fully convinced. Does that grow out of intellectual wrestling or a crisis wrestling? And the reason I ask that is I find that while there are people who wrestle intellectually, most often our struggles with faith come from moments of crisis, moments of shock like: If God is good, how could He do this?

**Mart:** When there's a great loss.

**Joe:** Yes, loss.

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**Mart:** Or shame.

**Joe:** Or even a global crisis like 9/11. You know, one of the hardest things I had to do was to answer people who would say: If there is a God . . .

**Larry:** Why?

**Joe:** . . . and if your God is a loving God, how could He ever permit this kind of a thing to happen?

**Larry:** And we need to acknowledge those are hard questions.

**Joe:** Very hard questions.

**Larry:** And atheism has some apparent legitimacy in responding to those. And it's not that easy to come back with cliché Christian stuff, if you will, and deeply believe it. Yeah, I think that . . . when I think about the struggles that I have with my faith, I've read books on apologetics, and I still do, where the intellectual arguments for why you believe in Christianity versus this belief, they have their place, and they have their strong place, but that's not what gets me all the way.

**Joe:** I think that one thing I have to be sensitive to—being in pastoral work and now working with students in a college—is that people look to you like you have all the answers. And if I

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have all the answers, faith is unnecessary. Faith steps in when the answers are no longer there; and it's not that faith is a jump of just parking my brain at the door. In the midst of crisis, we'll all put our faith somewhere. I put my faith in my own self, in my own instincts, what I think. Put faith in a book. Put faith in a friend. Or I will choose to put faith in God. And so I think it's very important for me anyway, in working with people in crisis, is to not act like I have all the answers.

**Mart:** Okay, so then if you're both acknowledging your own struggle as I acknowledge my struggle, let's say that I'm the person. I'm despairing. I don't know what to believe. I don't know if I believe what I thought I did, and now I've got a counselor who's struggling, I've got a pastor who admits that he doesn't have it all together. Why would I come as a student in your school to you to say, "I'm struggling. I'm scared"?

**Joe:** Well, I do think there is a place in leadership, whether counselor or pastor, teacher, whatever, where we have moved through our struggles, and where we have found a sense of confidence in faith.

**Mart:** So what would you offer me? What would you hope that, as a pastoral-type presence, what would you hope you could give me?

**Joe:** Well, I would certainly be free to share my struggles, but I

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would also want to share what I have found in the midst of that struggle—what my faith has brought to me. And I would want to say, and this is a very gentle kind of a moment because I don't just immediately want to hit them with, "Believe in God, and you'll be alright," but I would want to take them to the Word of God. I find personally in my times of doubt and struggle that the psalms are wonderful for me because the psalmist is going through struggles. And as he sets those up, he resolves them in who God is. And I think one thing about faith for me is not always coming to understand why God does, but who God is, and that ultimately God is a wise and good and perfect God who will bring everything to ultimate good and resolution. So it's trust in His character and then believing that later He will interpret for me the facts that have fallen apart in my life.

**Larry:** Joe, if I were coming to you and letting you know a year ago that I was in the middle of some real doubting times, and you said all that, I probably wouldn't be interested.

**Joe:** You might be if I'd listened to you and become a co-journey person with you, and if you're saying, "Joe, how do you deal with these things?" so it's not me preaching to you. It's me sharing with you how I had found hope in God and in His Word. I think if we're talking to people who have put their faith and trust in Christ, we have some really great equipment. We have the indwelling Holy Spirit who's not going to let us go and is energized by His Word. And He will speak to us and He will

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comfort us. He is that very present help in the time of trouble. And I think I would urge people: Just don't let go of God yet. Don't let go of God, whatever's going on. Just because if you let go of him, what do you have at the end of it all? And that would be my heart. Now maybe I wouldn't be wise enough to navigate that well, but I would just want to say: Don't let go of God.

**Mart:** Okay, now let me turn the tables here on Larry. Okay, Larry, you've been honest. None of us are without our struggles. But I come to you now; I say, "You're a counselor. I'm losing hope. I don't know what to believe." What would you do? What would you hope you could give me?

**Larry:** Let me tell you the first thing that I would think. I would think that you're one of the few people that have a chance to develop a legitimate faith, as opposed to a contrived faith.

**Mart:** What do you mean by that?

**Larry:** Because I don't believe that people who develop the kind of faith that sustains them in the worst of crises, in the worst of God letting them down, in the worst of God disappointing them, in the worst of their internal stuff which they can't get rid of—the people that develop a legitimate faith are the ones who have rejected denial, are the ones who are willing to go into the struggle. And I would encourage the struggle. I would encourage the struggle to say that this is an opportunity, an

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incredible opportunity to come to what is deepest within you. Because I would believe with Joe that if the Holy Spirit is a real person—and I believe He is—and if He’s indwelling this individual, then I would believe that the deeper the honesty, the deeper the reality of the struggle, the closer you’re going to get to the opportunity for the Spirit to do His thing, if you will. So I would not want to minimize the struggle. I’d amplify it. I’d go down to the depths of it in point one. Point two is, I would start looking at—you asked if I’m helped with my struggles with intellectual issues and the answer is partly, but more deeply is, I look to the relational issues: Who have I seen in my life who has gone through incredible doubts and struggles and horrible times, and they’ve come out with a faith that has not been a pretense? It’s not been contrived. It’s been alive and vibrant or at least sustaining in the middle of the difficult things. When Paul said, “Continue with what you have become convinced of,” you know what his next line is? “Because you know who you’ve learned it from.” And when I think of my father who lost my mother to Alzheimer’s for seven years, I watched my dad saying: “Is there a God?” I watched my dad say, “This Book, I don’t think I can read it anymore.” This is my father who taught me the faith. And he’s in his eighties and ready to give it up, and he never did because he stayed with it. And his sentence to me, his favorite verse, was: “To whom else shall we go?” There’s no other opportunity to find hope; and sure it’s a risk to believe in it. I’m not sure if we’re going to get to intellectual certainty, but in the middle of doubt and in the middle of looking at relationships where people’s faith

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have survived the worst, then something in me finds comfort. And that's the direction I'd want to go if you were talking about your struggles.

**Joe:** Larry, how hard is it though for someone in the midst of deep crisis to welcome an opportunity to deepen their faith? Now if I were to say to someone: This is a great opportunity for you . . .

**Larry:** But I would never say that. I would never say, "This is an opportunity to deepen your faith." I would want to believe that. I would believe that, but I wouldn't tell that person that. My initial response would be to resonate with them in their struggles and to go with them to the depths of their struggles, because what so often happens in a counseling situation—particularly with a Christian psychologist—is there is an urge to sugarcoat it a little bit and not to go all the way. It doesn't happen until about five or ten sessions in that you get the truth; and I want to stay with it until they're all the way down.

**Joe:** By the way, I do think crisis does grow our faith. You know I'm not pushing back on that. In fact, it's a building block. If in my life I can go through a crisis and find that God was sufficient and supported me and that I made it through the whitewater with Him, then the next time I hit a crisis, I've got something. I can reflect back. And I think of stories in Scripture of like Joseph and Job, and where God was present, and again I go back. I just

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think that at the end of the day faith is a choice. And sometimes we pray that prayer in the Bible: Lord, I believe, but God help my unbelief 'cause I'm really struggling here. Or a lot of people around you, like Job's wife, "Curse God and die." You know you're going to hear that from people. You're going to hear it from your own heart, aren't you? But can you ever get with Job, and say, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him"? It's a great challenge, but I guarantee you: Everybody who has put their faith there ultimately has looked back and has been glad that they have trusted in their God.

**Mart:** You know as we've been talking about this, Joe, I get the pastoral approach and the counselor, and one of the things that seems to be important is that we be able to look at a crisis of faith in different perspectives. Larry, do you see a range of events or circumstances that could contribute to a person's doubts?

**Larry:** Oh, there's a ton of them. I think if you had to take all the variety of situations that can lead to the struggle of faith, it really comes down to a set of expectations that God didn't fulfill. I'm talking to one person who's a friend of mine with homosexual struggles. He's been praying about it for years: "God, why don't you get rid of this? I don't want to have these attractions, and you failed me here." I'm talking to another person, a woman who is in the middle of profound depression—suicidal depression, and this is current—and her response is: "I feel like God has either abandoned me, or He's never existed in the first place, because

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the emotions that I'm feeling are so incompatible with what I thought a Christian was supposed to feel." And so, because we have a certain set of expectations as to what is supposed to be our experience if we're Jesus followers, when that gets contradicted by deep depression, by perverted sexual images, by the death of a loved one—I remember somebody else who was praying fervently for her mother in the middle of a cancer battle and was just claiming victory, that kind of a thing, and her mother died. And her response was: "This is the God that lets my mother die at a fairly young age; I have no interest in Him. He must not exist, or He must not be the God I want"—so those are the kinds of things. But the core issue in my mind from so many people is: "I had certain expectations that have not been fulfilled. Therefore is the whole thing a sham?"

**Mart:** Okay, are the issues always those thoughts or those emotions? What about trauma? What about disease?

**Larry:** Oh, it's the same category. I had cancer 11, 12 years ago, and one of the most difficult things that happened after I obviously survived the cancer surgery and came within 6 hours of death, a woman came to me after we got the final results and the specialists did all the tests and said, "You're okay. We got it all." And this woman came to me, and said, "I knew you'd be better because I prayed about it." I wanted to scream: "Did you pray for Francis Schaeffer too? He had cancer, and he died." What are your expectations of prayer? So, when crises happen—whether

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it's illness or death or financial reverse or whatever—we assume God has not been faithful. I just can't stand it when preachers talk about, you know, you lose one job you're going to get a better one. It just doesn't work that way.

**Mart:** Okay, and is it possible that the feelings, the doubts, are actually more of a function of something physical that's happened—chemical, hormonal—than a spiritual issue? And, Joe, as a pastor, as a leader, a spiritual leader of students, could you acknowledge that it's more than just a moral or a spiritual choice?

**Joe:** Of course, however, figuring that out is a challenge, you know, where I think we have to go back to a basic reality. We are all fallen people. We are all broken people, and we live in a fallen world, and there are going to be train wrecks in this world. This is not a perfect world, and sometimes those train wrecks are physical. Sometimes they're emotional. Sometimes they're relational. The issue is: How do I live in a broken, fallen world as a broken, fallen person? And to realize that if I can hardly get that figured out, what a challenge it is for God to navigate His good will in the midst of a broken, fallen world and His—by the way, I'm really glad, as one thing I really have faith in is this is not the only world we have, and I'm very thankful for that, but this is the world we live in and I think that's the struggle. To believe, to make the choice to believe that God is working in an imperfect world on an imperfect person, and ultimately He will bring it to a resolution that will be right and good. And, if I can just go back to

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church world, I think how challenging it is to have someone give a testimony as to how God has delivered them from whatever while I still struggle, and somehow we have to address . . .

**Mart:** How painful that can be.

**Joe:** Yeah, because God's not a cookie cutter God. God's going to work with me differently than he's going to work with Larry.

**Larry:** Or else Joe would have gotten up and given his testimony in church in the middle of his stuff.

**Joe:** Yeah, thank you very much. Exactly. I'm struggling, you know, but I haven't let go.

**Larry:** Yeah. You raised the issue of physiological kinds of things, and I would argue too that I can think of two examples right now in my world of relationships where people have been required to go on certain medication for physical concerns, and the medication has had some profound side effects of depression and other struggles that has made their faith battle even worse. And when the medication was shifted, their faith battle became a little less of an issue. So, yeah, there are organic kinds of issues.

**Mart:** And it can go both ways?

**Larry:** It can go both ways, absolutely.

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**Mart:** People can be helped by appropriate medications.

**Larry:** Of course. And this one particular person, when he changed medication, he did a whole lot better, so I have no problem with that. But I would never want to argue that medication is the whole of an issue. It's a part of it, but there's always going to be the internal existential kind of a struggle: Why do I really believe? After my granddaughter said, "How do we know Christianity isn't one more false religion?" I didn't sleep that night, because I found myself saying, "Yeah, I do believe it, but do I believe all this stuff because I make a living at it?" I write Christian books. If I declared myself an atheist, I'd be out of a job, and is that why I believe? Is that why I'm convinced, because it works culturally and financially for me? And I really had to wrestle with why do I really believe Christianity; and that brought me into touch with a lot of my current doubts, not historical doubts that have been resolved, but current doubts because I live in the tension between doubt and faith.

**Mart:** So what is a professional in your . . .

**Larry:** You know, I don't feel like a professional most of the time. I really doubt Dr. Crabb stuff. I wonder why the word *doctor* is there half the time.

**Mart:** So, Larry, as a counselor of your profession, what do you

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have to offer? What, when somebody comes to you in a crisis of faith, what would you hope to be able to offer them?

**Larry:** Integrity, authenticity, honesty. Because I believe if Christianity is true, it will emerge as the truth with an honest approach to life, if it really is true. If it's not true, I want to dump it.

**Mart:** Are you having to offer anything different than a pastor of a campus or of a church?

**Larry:** I would think we'd be offering the same basic thing. I still believe in the Bible. I believe there's a God. I believe in an indwelling Holy Spirit. I believe that when I'm preaching the Word of God, when I'm pulpit supply, when I'm teaching conferences, there's something in me that comes alive because I'm immersed in the truth of it all. But I have to be very aware that I don't depend on the spiritual adrenalin that comes just when I'm preaching the Scriptures. But I've got to be aware that there's got to be a reality that lasts at two in the morning when I'm waking up with all sorts of struggles. I don't want to just define my faith when I'm "performing."

**Joe:** Now, do you think that we can't get . . . and it is important from my perspective that we remember that there is power in the Word of God. That God meets us in His Word to help us and to bring healing to us, maybe not immediately. Now I'm not like

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the “take two Psalm 34s and call me in the morning” kind of guy, but I always personally move in my struggles into God’s Word. And I find it to be a help and sometimes even a quick healing for my heart. And so in my working with people, I believe that the Word of God is sufficient and it is empowered by the Holy Spirit to bring comfort and help and sometimes just to carry us along. You know, to give us hope for today. There’s a great . . . What’s that great hymn? “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.” Hope for today. That line in that great hymn “strength for day and bright hope for tomorrow,” sometimes it’s just that on a daily basis that God dishes out to us.

**Larry:** And I would push alongside, not up against what you said, by saying this: That, yeah, the Word of God has power and, not but, the Word of God directs us into community. So it’s not just a question of spending time in the Word. The absence of that is a problem, but the Word of God directs us, it seems to me, to acknowledge my struggles with somebody. And I find my faith is most strengthened and I survive my worse periods of doubt by becoming incredibly real with another person, and that person will simply enter the reality of where I am. And when that happens, there’s something in me that says, you know, something settles down inside of me. Something settles down and says: I have met a friend who’s heard me where I am, and he still believes. Remember the line that Chuck Swindoll said years ago? When he said it, I didn’t like it; and then when it got true in my life, I liked it a lot. He said when he was working with somebody,

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he said in the middle of their doubts: “You’re not believing right now. Have the courage to borrow my faith.” And I didn’t like that when I heard it, but I’ve borrowed some other people’s faith along the way. I’ve borrowed John Owens’ faith. I’ve borrowed C. S. Lewis’ faith. I’ve borrowed my father’s faith. And so I think the relational context is crucial for this thing.

**Joe:** Absolutely. I fully believe in that, and sometimes it’s not having all the answers. I think that, since we believe in truth in God, we think we have to have all the answers for somebody. Sometimes it’s not even sharing anything more than just our presence and staying with them.

I remember a widow in one of the churches that I pastored whose husband had been lost in a very traumatic way. They never even found his body, so there was no closure for her and she just grieved on and on. One day she came to me and she said, “Pastor, today somebody walked up to me in the foyer and held me and didn’t say a thing. And then she said “it was like the arms of God around my life.” And I think sometimes just our presence, not our answers, just our presence as a believer as a great strength in our community.

**Larry:** Why do so many of the New Testament writers argue for perseverance? Because there really is an on-going struggle, and we’re not going to get to complete resolution until we’re home. I mean I’m 64-years-old and I’ve been a Christian now for 56 years, and I thought by now I would have total joy, total certainty,

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no struggle. I'm not even close. And I don't think I will be close until I get home; so the perseverance issue. I think it takes more faith to persevere than to resolve. And for me to continue in the faith when the struggles are deep, because I don't know where else to go, is because internally the Word of God does speak to me because relationships do speak to me. On that basis I do persevere. And that, I believe, is the essence of faith.

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