

How do you live authentically faithful to Jesus despite all that life throws your way?

STORY 1: A couple of weeks ago, I had a conversation with a pastor friend who is doing ministry in a secular environment. It's very hard soil. He was at a place struggling with doubt. He asked me, "Do you ever *not* believe the things you preach?" Ok, jumping in, are we? But what a great, honest, real, *raw* question—and a scary one, too. Aren't pastors supposed to be full of faith? Full of confidence? On fire for the Lord?!

"Do you ever *not* believe the things you preach?" he asked. My response? "Sometimes it certainly feels that way."

Often times in those moments, I find myself asking, "**How do I live authentically faithful in the midst of my doubt?**"

STORY 2: More seriously, how does faithfulness come about when the occasions of life shake you? When I was in tenth grade, my world was turned upside down. My dad was a minister, so I'm a PK. Our church had three services. In the season right before Christmas, on a Sunday morning, in between the 1st service and the 2nd service, my dad was fired without cause and a church split ensued. Our family was hurt, I lost my friends, and even though I acted tough then, it impacted me more than I realized. **How do you live authentically faithful when life throws something like that your way?**

STORY 3: Or what about temptation? To be honest, I have two major issues in my life right now. These two things are my Achilles' heel to living the kind of life God has for me. Two problems. PROBLEM #1: I do things I'm not supposed to do. And PROBLEM #2: I don't do the things I know I should do! Anybody else? **How do you live authentically faithful when temptation comes your way to, in whatever area of life, do what you know you shouldn't and to not do what you know you should?**

Have you ever been in a place like any of those, struggling with what faithfulness looks like? Maybe with temptation? Maybe with horrible circumstances? Maybe with doubt? Or maybe it's none of those. Maybe it's with the people who have hurt or betrayed you? Maybe it's in your marriage, the person you're not married to, maybe it's in relation to your life group, maybe it's regarding your sexuality, your singleness, discerning God's call on your life, or how to take on the final years of life with grace—the list could go on.

How do you live authentically faithful?

I can imagine Paul thinking the same question as he begins to wrap up his letter to the Corinthians. *Gosh what's going to help them? What's going to get them back on track? What's going to right the ship?* They have been severely *unfaithful* in their own lives. Not judging—just calling a spade a spade. Division. Not living into God's vision for sexual flourishing. Suing one another. Drunkenness. Drunkenness at the Lord's table. Measuring one another based on what each person's spiritual gift is. You name it, it's there.

So, what does Paul do? Three words: **MEMORY, MESSAGE, MEANING.**

First word: **MEMORY.**

Look at what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:1-2: “Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.” Paul says he wants to *remind* the Corinthians of the *gospel* (more on that in a moment). Let’s focus on the reminding part of this for a second. Paul wants to jog their memory of God’s past faithfulness to them. He wants to transport the un-rememberable past to the perceivable now.

I cannot tell you how important memory and remembrance have been for my own spiritual vitality. Remember how a few moments ago, I was talking about my long struggle with doubt and my friend asking me about that? He was like, “What helped you through that time?” There were a lot of things—too many to talk about here—but one of them was simply my commitment to remembrance and memory.

What do I mean? When I was going through that period of my life, I kept saying to myself, “Emerson, do not let your present self’s uncertainty betray your past self’s confidence.”

I kept saying to myself, “Recall those God-moments in your past. You’ve written them down. Read what your past self wrote about them. Are you going to betray the old you? Or do you trust that the old you might have experienced something real and your present circumstances are just clouding your experience of them now?”

For Paul, faithful living consists of memory & remembrance. He points out three things to remember. This is something you **received** (it’s not something you earned or thought your way to; this is something given freely). This is something you **stand** in (this is your *status*). This is something you’re **saved** by (this gospel is your salvation; it’s bringing you home). Paul is saying, “THIS IS YOUR REALITY. That is, unless you believed in vain.”

And I just have to say...this reality is amazing.

Imagine with me for a second if you and I were to sit down and get coffee. *Thanks for buying. You shouldn’t have! You’re too kind.* Now, let’s say in our conversation, I started gossiping to you about someone I know and how they get drunk all the time and are sexually promiscuous and do a bunch of other things like the Corinthians were doing. Would you think that person was *standing* in the gospel? The reality is because the gospel is not something earned, it’s received, because it’s something you stand in, not something you hopscotch to and from, and because it’s a force acting upon you bringing you to salvation, not something you work for or win, that person is still IN.

Do they need to set a Care Appointment? Sure. Has their unfaithfulness loosened Christ’s hold on their life? No.

The challenge here is to *use memory for transformation*, to not allow our gospel *status* to leave us with excuses to live untransformed, as with the Corinthians.

There’s a guy named Martin Laird who has a book called *Into the Silent Land* in which he tells a story of being out on long walks and frequently passing another walker who always had four dogs with him. He says these were amazing dogs, fast and full of energy. They ran all around, out into the open fields abounding in their freedom—all except one dog. One of the dogs, unleashed, never ran all that far away. He only ran in tight little circles behind and off to the side of his owner.

One day, Martin asked, “Why does your dog do that? Why does it run in little circles instead of running with the others?”

The owner replied that before he acquired the dog, it had lived practically its whole life in a cage and could only exercise by running in circles. For this dog, to run meant to run in tight, little circles.

He says, “This event has always stayed with me because it’s a powerful metaphor for the human condition. For indeed we are free...but the memory of the cage remains. And so we run in tight, little circles even while immersed in open fields of grace and freedom.”

What Paul is doing here for the Corinthians and what he’s doing for us is trying to SHAKE US out of our cages! Paul’s saying to the Corinthians, “Why are you living like you’re still a Corinthian!? You’ve been set free! You’re not caged in by the Enemy any longer! Don’t you know this? Don’t you remember?”

He’s saying the same thing to us. He’s saying, “Why run in the tight, little circles of your past life, when Christ has opened up immense fields of grace and freedom?”

Here’s the reality: you’ve been set free by the gospel. Don’t let the memory of your cage keep you from living the life God has called you into.

How do you live authentically faithful? You’ve got to have **MEMORY** of your gospel reality.

Second word: **MESSAGE**.

How do you live authentically faithful? Paul says you need the actual *message* of the gospel.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

Paul here is literally laying out the gospel message for the Corinthians, which means he’s doing it for us, too. And trust me, we need this reminder.

A couple weeks ago, we held our Welcome to the Creek class. A man came up to me and asked me question. He asked, “*What is the gospel?*”

I don’t know what you know about me. I grew up a preacher’s kid. My dad gave me Bible trivia questions on car trips to the beach. My mom would pray with me while taking me to school. My parents made me learn the Greek alphabet when I was like 5 or 6 years old (because the New Testament was written in Greek).

I also don’t know what you know about being a pastor. I went to undergraduate and graduate school. I studied, read, and learned. I had a little weekend ministry—all that stuff.

So when this guy came up and asked that question, “What is the gospel?” as a pastor, I was like, “This is what I’ve been training for! Finally, my moment has come! Hand me the mic!”

And you know what happened? I went blank! Honestly, I was anticipating the standard, “Hi, how are you? How’s it going? Where are you from? Are you a native Hooiser?” But I got was, “What is the gospel?”

You know where I went to get the answer? Theology books? No, CHAT-GPT. I asked:

- What is the gospel?
- What is the Greek word for gospel and what does it mean in two sentences?
- Then I asked it this. (See the online sermon to view this question and the answers to the other questions.)

Ok, for real though: what does Paul say about the gospel?

He says: **CHRIST; DIED; FOR OUR SINS; BURIED; RAISED; ACCORDING TO THE SCRIPTURES**

CHRIST: The gospel begins with Jesus. Jesus is God in the flesh, which means that the gospel deals with a personal God, not a gaseous, impersonal, secular entity called, “The Universe,” or the Hindu’s spiritual “atman” or universal soul. This is a personal, loving God who reigns as Lord over the entire cosmos.

DIED: Jesus actually died and stayed dead. He didn’t fall asleep. This wasn’t a trick. His body started to decay. His body started breaking down. Jesus literally died.

FOR OUR SINS: There is no forgiveness without someone paying a price. Either the person needing forgiveness pays a price or the person forgiving pays the price. In our case, the Forgiver, Jesus, paid the price. If you’re Jewish or Muslim, you must pay the price. The Christian gospel is that Jesus took your sin and guilt and the wrath of God so you might be forgiven.

BURIED: His body was taken off the cross, wrapped in linen, put in a tomb for three days, and guarded by a battalion of Roman soldiers.

RAISED: The Holy Spirit raised Jesus from the dead. Actually. Physically.

ACCORDING TO THE SCRIPTURES: This fulfilled the whole story of the Bible. In Genesis, God created a good world, but that world was tainted when Sin came into the picture through the first Adam and Eve. From that point, God implemented a plan to right all wrongs, not just for humans, but for all of creation. It all needed fixing. So God chose a man, Abram to be the vessel for this fixer-upper project. The plan was for Abram to father a great nation (Israel) and for Israel to be the people from whom a Messiah would come who would save people from their sins. Out of this nation, from the line of David, a Savior was born: Jesus, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary. One day, he will return to judge the living and the dead, to bring to completion what started in his body. What God did for Jesus, Jesus will do for you, and for all of creation. This means the gospel is both *historical* and *cosmic* and it is *real* whether you like it or not. It’s not private, it’s cosmic.

CHRIST. DIED. BURIED. RAISED. FORGIVENESS. ACCORDING TO THE SCRIPTURES.

I wonder though: is the gospel good enough for us? Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says,

The gospel is too readily heard and taken for granted, as though it contained no unsettling news and no unwelcome threat. What began as news in the gospel is easily assumed, slotted, and conveniently dismissed. We depart having heard, but without noticing the urge to transformation

that is not readily compatible with our comfortable believing that asks little and receives less. The gospel is thus a truth widely held, but a truth greatly reduced.

Maybe we're too used to it. Too accustomed to the word. Too familiar with the language for it to have resonance. It's old hat. Doesn't matter (which of course we'd never say, but our lives do!)

How do you live authentically faithful? Paul says you've got to have **MEMORY** of your gospel reality. Paul says you need the actual **MESSAGE** of the gospel.

Now, here's the third word: **MEANING**. Paul wants you to know what the gospel means for your life.

It means three things: First, the gospel means *humility*. Paul says, "For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (1 Corinthians 15:9). Paul's like, "I don't deserve the grace of Jesus! I don't deserve His gospel! Are you kidding me!?" But, the gospel also means *exaltation*. The gospel exalts you to the heavens. Paul goes on in verse 10: "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect." "But by the grace of God..." Paul is saying, despite his "not deserving to be called an apostle," here he is—chosen, accepted, redeemed, made new. Exalted. Finally, it means *purpose*. Again from Paul in verse 10: "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me." Here Paul says, "I have significance. I have meaning. The gospel gave me gospel work!"

How does this help us live authentically faithful?

I remember sitting in front of a crucifix at a Jesuit retreat center and learning the gospel afresh: that God knows me and sees me and loves me. I felt humbled: it changed how I saw others. I felt exalted: it changed how I saw myself. I felt purposed: it changed how I went about my life. My faith was renewed.

Think on gospel humility with me. It helps because when in the throes of relational turmoil we know to say, "Maybe I've contributed in some way." Or in periods of doubt, we know to say, "Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief!" Or at the moment of temptation, we are able to say, "Lord, I cannot overcome this on my own!" The gospel is profoundly humbling, and that humility impacts every area of life.

Think next about gospel exaltation. It helps because it means that you have a rock-solid identity. It means your significance isn't based on what other people say or think about you. When you go into work and you don't get that promotion, it's ultimately okay because you are so dearly loved by the Creator of the universe. Or when you're without a Valentine, you know that your Heavenly Father loves and desires a relationship with you. Or when you feel guilty and ashamed and the Enemy says, "This gal is a total screw up," you can know "Maybe I am, but I'm a screw up who is still adored by the King of Kings." That exaltation impacts every area of life.

Lastly, think about gospel purpose. It helps because it means that ultimate significance is infused in everything you do. How much waywardness in the spiritual life is birthed out of a lack of purpose? But with purpose, you can do the small, the mundane, the everyday with renewed faithfulness and vigor!

So, the gospel means humility, exaltation, and purpose. Just like for Paul. Just like for the Corinthians.

How do you live authentically faithful? Paul says you've got to have **MEMORY** of your gospel reality. Paul says you need the actual **MESSAGE** of the gospel. And you need the **MEANING** to of the gospel for your life. **MEMORY**, **MESSAGE**, and **MEANING**.

So, where does this leave us?

John Ortberg tells the story of a pretty famous photo by Eric Enstrom. In this photo we see an old, white-haired man, with gnarled hands. His life looks simple and humble with just a loaf of bread and a big book that it looks like he's spent some time in because the glasses are sitting right there on top. Doesn't he look so authentic and earnest in prayer?

What's crazy is how we tend to compare our insides to other people's outsides, right? We look at a photo like this and, at least for me, I think, "Man, that's not my reality. I'll never be faithful like that. Always abounding in prayer. Always abounding in the work of the Lord." I think, "Man, I wish I could be faithful like that."

It turns out the story of the people involved is quite different than what meets the eye. The man in the photo is Charles Wilden. Not much is known about him, but he had a difficult life. He was described as a ne'er-do-well. Apparently, he didn't have a great work ethic. He was a peddler, trying to sell boot-scrapers door to door, and lived in a sod hut. He had drinking problems and the only official documentation left from his life is a certificate of divorce that he got right around when that picture was taken of him.

In fact, his wife became so upset with him that, later on, when the picture became famous and one of the relatives hung the picture in the house, the wife was very upset about that, saying, "I don't want to have to go in there and look at that guy's face!"

It turns out that the big, thick book in the photo that looks like a Bible, is supposed to look like a Bible, is, in fact NOT a Bible. It is, in fact, a dictionary.

So, Ortberg says, what you're looking at when you look at that very pious-looking picture is a divorced, low-work-ethic, pretty low-functioning, high family conflict guy with a drinking problem whose hands are clasped over a dictionary.

And the name/title of the photo? It's called "Grace."

Why do I share that? Because many times in life I feel like I feel like a Charles Wilden. When I feel like a Charles Wilden, my obedience to Jesus begins to waver. Faith in God becomes more difficult. Temptation becomes stronger. My fuse for health in relationships gets shorter.

But this photo reminds me that even when I feel like Charles, like the title of the photo, because of the gospel, GRACE is written over my life, despite how I feel.

And I suppose I share that because I feel like that's just something you should know. Faithfulness is a messy thing. It's hard. Often times you go through life feeling like Charles yourself—faithfulness can begin to waver, temptation gets stronger, your relational health fuse can get shorter. You need to know that because of the gospel, GRACE is written over your life.

So, live out of that grace. Call back to memory your gospel standing. Call back to memory the gospel message. Call back to memory the gospel meaning. Let God's faithfulness to you, be the catalyst for your faithfulness to God.