

Hold on

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

November 7, 2010

What did the father say to his six-year-old daughter just as he let go of the handlebars on her two-wheeler and set her off on her own?

Hold on!

What did the guy on the back of the toboggan yell to his mates as he pushed them off the crest of the steep hill?

Hold on!

What did the quarterback say as he handed the football to his running back in the fourth quarter of a close game?

Hold on!

What did the wife whisper in the ear of her husband as he lay on the bed in the ER?

Hold on!

What did the apostle Paul say to the young Christians in Thessalonica?

Hold on!

What did pastor Tim say to the Christians gathered for worship on a November morning at the First Congregational United Church of Christ?

Hold on!

Hold on! Hold on, because it's possible to lose your grip. Hold on, because it's possible to lose your faith.

I do believe it is possible to lose your faith, even a faith that was once strong and vibrant, because faith is a choice. Faith is an ongoing choice, a choice remade day by day by day, a choice made and remade to put your trust in God's wisdom and strength instead of your own, a choice made and remade to follow in the way Jesus leads instead of in ways that may appear easier or more attractive or more popular. So you can lose your faith, if you turn your back to God, if you turn away from Jesus to follow instead a path of your own choosing.

You can lose your faith, but be clear, you cannot lose God's love!

There is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord ...

Not even our own unfaithfulness.

Wow! Wow is right! This is good news. This is the Good News, that God is good, that God is faithful, that God will be faithful because that is who God is, because that is God's choice. And we won't change it whatever we do. And we won't lose it whatever we choose. But, hold on! Hold on, because it is possible to lose your faith.

It is possible to lose your faith through neglect. Your faith may simply fade away or waste away, through neglect or disuse. Just as your body needs good nutrition and regular exercise to remain healthy and strong, so your spirit needs to be fed and exercised regularly to remain healthy and strong. Faith requires the daily disciplines of prayer and study, worship and service.

If you are not careful, if you are not diligent in taking good care of your faith, you may wake up one day to discover that it's gone. Or maybe you won't wake up, maybe you won't notice, because you haven't been paying attention, because your faith has already been long gone.

But hold on! Don't let your faith be lost through neglect! Renew your faith day by day, week by week, so it will be there when you need it, so it will be there when we need you.

It's possible to lose your faith as a result of a crisis or tragedy, as a result of disappointment or loss, maybe one big loss or maybe a series of little disappointments. Bitter experience may convince you that God isn't there or that God doesn't care, at least that God doesn't care about you. Bitter experience may even convince you that it's your fault, that you don't deserve any better, that you are not worthy of a blessed life, that you are not worthy of God's love. And so your faith may be lost, in anger or frustration, or in despair.

But hold on! Put your trust in God's goodness! Don't let the ups and downs of circumstance blind you to the truth. God has told us that we will struggle and suffer as Jesus did until the day when we are raised to life as Jesus was, until the day when God makes all things new. Learn what Job learned, that having God is enough, that just having God is more than enough, that just having God is ... everything.

You. Lord, are all I have, and you give my all I need ...

It's possible you could be talked out of your faith, reasoned out of your faith, pressured out of your faith. Things that are not true can sometimes appear very reasonable, depending on who is saying it and when and under what circumstances. It is hard to disagree with people who are smart and successful and well-liked, but faith isn't about being smart and successful and well-liked. It is hard to go against the tide of popular opinion, but genuine faith is rarely popular.

But hold on! The proof, as they say, is in the pudding. Don't just listen to what they say, look at what they are. What is true proves itself in courage and compassion, in unselfishness and self-sacrifice, in patience and endurance and in love. Where true love is, there you will find the truth. There you will find something worth believing. And God is love!

It may even be possible to grow out of your faith. You used to have faith, but now you've grown up. Now you've grown beyond it. Now you've outgrown your need for it.

Absolutely! You are an adult now, and you should think and feel and act like an adult. The problem is not that you've outgrown your faith, but that your faith didn't grow up with you! I read an article recently that suggested that most Christians leave off active instruction in their faith at about the fifth grade. But a fifth grade faith just won't do for an adult life, will it?

I am so proud of our Kerygma Bible study students. They are studying the Bible as adults, in an adult way, with adult minds and adult questions. Sure it's easy to lose your faith if your faith is wimpy and childish and insubstantial. So grow up! Let your faith grow up! Put some substance into your faith! Make it something you can hold on to!

Hold on!

I am. I am holding on. I have never lost my faith. Not so far. My faith has been challenged. I have had doubts. I have sometimes not given my faith the attention or exercise it requires. I have been dismayed and demoralized and discouraged at times, but I have not lost my faith. Not so far.

If I were ever to lose my faith, I would be miserable! I would be miserable!

Now, understand that when I say I would be miserable, I don't mean that I would be very unhappy, though that well could be true. There are lots of people with no faith that appear quite happy and indeed may be quite happy.

No, when I say I would be miserable, I mean I would be miserable! My life would be pitiful, pointless, pathetic ... miserable. Because God intends for me, and for you, not just to live for ourselves, but to live for each other, with each other. God intends for us to be engaged with each other, to have eyes and ears and hearts open to the pain of our neighbors and the pain of the world.

God intends us to live for a purpose beyond ourselves, to live in a way that brings glory to God and healing and joy to our neighbors. A selfish, self-centered, self-seeking, self-gratifying, God-less life is a miserable life! It is a pointless life, a life with no point! What do you gain if you win the whole world, but lose your soul?

Maybe you don't think so. Maybe you think you're doing just fine without any faith. And maybe you are.

But are we? Are we doing just fine without your faith? Is the world doing just fine without your faith? Did you ever think that taking good care of your faith might not just be important for you, but for me too? For all of us too? Without you, we are less than God intends us to be. Without you, the world is lacking whatever it is God has put in you to give to us.

So hold on! Hold on to your faith. Hold on to the truths you have been taught. May the courage God gives you be unfailing! May the hope God gives you be unbending!

And may God strengthen you to do and to say always what is good ... for your sake ... for our sake ... for the sake of God's glory.