

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty” – Revelation 1:8. I believe in God the Father Almighty.

Mark Wodzinski was baptized last year, I told my granddaughters about it. Mark's wife, Kerri, teaches kindergarten in our BVCP, and my older granddaughter was in her class. She asked me, “Why do people get baptized?” I said, “To show everyone that they believe in Jesus.” From the backseat of my car came two young voices saying without prompting, “I believe in Jesus.”

It is tempting for some people to say, “That's sweet, but what do a five-year old and a four-year old know about believing in God?” In one sense I suppose the answer is, “Not much.” We all agree that the faith of a 5-year old will need nurturing if it is to be remain intact and growing when the person is 50. What is that journey from 5 to 50 like?

It is like a trip I once made to Washington D. C. I had an 8:30 a.m. meeting in Crystal City, an urban complex just south of D. C. I left at 5:30 to avoid traffic. Familiar road signs and landmarks flew by. I hardly noticed. I had done it so many times before. It would be routine until I got to the National Mall.

I chose to avoid the I-95 tunnel in Baltimore and use the Harbor Tunnel. There the routine came to a screeching halt, because traffic came to a screeching halt about a mile from the tunnel. I looked up and a sign said: Last Exit Before Tunnel. I had to make a decision. Do I inch along I-895 or do I drive across Baltimore and exit the city by Camden Yards? I had gone that way many times, but not recently. Did I turn left at Howard St. or Green St.? I'd have to figure it out when I got there. And when I got to the Washington Beltway, do I go east to the Baltimore-Washington Parkway or down Rt. 29 to the White House or around the Beltway west of D. C.? And now the clock was beginning to tick urgently.

That's what the faith journey from 5 to 50 is like. You are going merrily along, going to church, learning the Bible, singing the songs, saying the Apostles' Creed, going on short-term mission trips, etc., and without warning life blindsides your faith with unexpected threats: a dad who disappoints, the death of a friend, a new idea, hypocrisy, peer pressure – it could be anything. You realize that your picture of God has no place for what you just experienced. What do you do?

It is a delicate moment. In a split second you might say, “I don't believe in God.” or, “Where is God in this?” or “How shallow my faith has been! Will this event destroy my faith or deepen it?” We need to prepare ourselves for those unexpected moments when life threatens our faith. Let's start at the deep end of the pool.

Testing Faith

It is hard to take the New Testament straight. We prefer to pick and choose the parts we like and ignore or explain away the parts we don't like. It won't do, you know. Both the parts we like and the parts we don't reflect God's wisdom for His Church. Here is one of those hard parts. 1 Peter 1:7: **Now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith . . . may be proved genuine.**

It doesn't cost us much to stand here and say together, “I believe in God the Father Almighty” and sincerely mean it and go away and never think a thought about what difference it might make in our choices and values. Then, life jolts us with an

experience that makes our faith seem like a house of cards. Those moments when without warning life blindsides your faith with unexpected threats are meant to refine your faith not destroy it.

I'd like to introduce you to four common experiences that can call into question your faith in God the Father Almighty. We find them all in the New Testament. They have the smell of reality about them. Let's have a look.

Empty Faith, Enticing World

The first common experience is when you feel like a hypocrite. Your belief in God seems empty. You are just going through the motions. James 2:19 couldn't agree more: **You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.** Here's how Jesus put the same concern in Mark 7:6: **“These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”**

I have a question for you. Can you think of any action you have done in the past week or the past month just because you are a follower of Christ? Jesus and James expressed great concern about people who talk about their faith, but give no evidence in their behavior that being a Christian actually matters in their lives. C. S. Lewis wrote this about faith: “You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life or death . . . Only a real risk tests the reality of a belief.” (C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 21) Let me mention two behaviors that give that kind of evidence. Both involve risks that test the reality of your faith.

One is worshiping here every Sunday that work or sickness doesn't prevent it. And you say, “Wait a minute! Just being here and going through the motions are what make me feel like a hypocrite. How does that test the reality of my faith?” Well, think for a minute. Social pressures used to make people go to church. In our culture social pressures take you away from church. They are the single greatest cause of spiritual stagnation. Every time you come here, it is an act of faith in Christ. Your faith begins to put on muscle, when you resist pressure from the world around you to stay away, and you come anyway.

Another behavior is prayer. Praying daily is evidence of a living faith. Plenty of pressures discourage prayer. You are too busy. You don't feel like it. You don't know how to do it. You pray anyway, if you believe in God the Father Almighty.

Another common experience that can call into question your faith in God the Father Almighty is our enticing world. The test of our faith here is whether it will be neutered or destroyed by **the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things** – Mark 4:19. The Apostle Paul wrote one heartbreaking line that bears witness to the power of the world to destroy faith. 2 Timothy 4:9: **Demas, because he has loved this world, has deserted me.** One of the reasons you may feel like a hypocrite is because worry, money, and stuff have bewitched you. They are sucking your faith dry.

Do you remember Romans 12:2? **Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world.** It means simply and powerfully: resist anything in this world that pushes you away from Christ and His Church. If drinking alcohol pushes you away, say, “Lord, I belong to you,” and forsake it. If working for the Company pushes you away, say, “Lord, I belong to you,” and look for another job. If your best friends push you away from Christ and His Church, say, “Lord, I belong to you,” and find new friends. If you believe in God

the Father Almighty, identify where you are at risk and learn to resist it.

Doubt and Endurance

Another common experience that can call into question your faith in God the Father Almighty is doubt. The test here is whether doubts will destroy our faith. Before you let that happen look at one of the most encouraging exchanges in the Bible. You find it in Mark 9:22. A father had brought his Son to Jesus for help. The boy engaged in self-destructive behavior. He tried repeatedly to kill himself by throwing himself into fire and water. The father's desperate plea for Jesus to help went like this: **"But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."** (Mark 9:22)

Jesus' unsentimental reply was, **"If you can"? Everything is possible for him who believes."** (Mark 9:23) The father's equally unsentimental answer deserves a wide and thoughtful hearing in our skeptical age. Mark 9:24: **"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief."** C. S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*: "Now that I am a Christian I do have moods in which the whole thing looks very improbable: but when I was an atheist I had moods in which Christianity looked terribly probable." (*Mere Christianity*, ch. 11, pp 123-124)

If something causes you to doubt, the doubt is dangerous. It is also an irritant that God uses to stir your faith out of its stupor and bring it up to date. There is a satisfactory answer to every doubt you ever have. If you believe in God the Father Almighty, you can trust Him to be patient with your doubts and relieve them after they have done their refining work.

A final, common experience that can call into question your faith in God the Father Almighty is the temptation to give up. The test is whether your faith can endure repeated attacks. Jesus in Mark 13:13 states the test this way: **"He who stands firm to the end will be saved."** In Mark 13:22 Jesus cautioned us that it can be hard to stand firm to the end. **"False Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect – if that were possible."**

In Matthew 24:12,13 Jesus warned His followers of another obstacle to standing firm to the end. **"Because of the increase of wickedness the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved."** The world that entices us away from Christ and His Church can also intimidate us away from Christ and His Church.

Coaching Tips

Let me offer you some ways of coping with these challenges to our faith.

A. Don't think faith under pressure is unusual. The Apostle Peter's counsel to his flock is spot on. **Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.** (1 Peter 4:12) Untested faith is childish faith. God wants you to grow up, and so He tests your faith.

B. Welcome pressure on your faith. We go back to where we started: **all kinds of trials . . . have come so that your faith . . . may be proved genuine.** Think of it as an irritant, which God uses to turn your faith into a pearl of great price.

C. Seek prayer and counsel when your faith is under pressure. The worse thing you can do when your faith is under pressure is to draw conclusions about God from your experience, and the next worse thing you can do is not to tell anyone about the crisis in your faith. We need each other's encouragement in a world that is going crazy.

I believe in God the Father Almighty. That binds our conscience, and that is what we confess before God and the Church and the world. We can do no other. It is also our gift to our civilization. All across Europe and North America the light of faith and reason is going out. Despair is eating away, termite-like, the soul of Western Civilization. It is not the first time, and each time before the Church has stood against the darkness with both faith and reason. So, hold fast your confession **in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe.** (Philippians 2:15)