

FAITH UNDER FIRE

A six-week Bible Study

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How the Saints Are So Much like Us

1. Starry Skies: Abraham – Hebrews 11:8-10

An entrepreneur had a very big promise in his heart, and very little to show for it.

2. Passionate Pleas: Hannah – 1 Samuel 1:13-18

A mother's desire was passed over for years, leaving her heartbroken.

3. Surrounded City: Jehoshaphat – 2 Chronicles 20:5-9

A desperate king leads his city in the most non-conventional way imaginable.

4. Brave Builders: Nehemiah – Nehemiah 4:1-6

A servant is called to set down his serving tray and lead.

5. Shipwrecked Sailors: Paul – Acts 27:9-12

A prisoner defies the expectations of his captors.

6. In The Garden: Jesus – Matthew 26:36-41

One person teaches us that fire is a chance to hold faith's hand and walk on.

“In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith-of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire-may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” 1 Peter 1:6-7

Faith Under Fire Study 1: *Starry Skies*

by Lt. Ashley Koebel

The Story

Sarah smiled. She was thinking about her husband. Sarah knew him as the strong, brave, wise leader he was in his community, but she also recalled his most frightened moments. She thought of their many travels together. Her smile turned to a frown momentarily. In Egypt, Abraham had been so afraid that Pharaoh would take his beautiful wife from him that he made her tell everyone they were brother and sister. He was not so brave then. It had angered her, but how could she be angry when she saw how truly worried he was. Of course, then there was the drama of the pharaoh taking Sarah into his house. But, Abraham's God made it very clear to the whole house that Sarah was already taken. Her frown burst into a smile again. She always knew that God had a special relationship with her husband, but it was in those moments that she remembered that God had a special relationship with her too.

That was so long ago. Abraham wouldn't have to worry about lying to anyone anymore. He did not have to worry because God had proven his care for their little family, and he did not have to worry because Sarah's wrinkles meant no young pharaoh would ever try to take her again. She chuckled under her breath. It was a good-natured laugh. Sarah loved to laugh. God told them to name their son laughter. It was another reason Sarah knew that God had a special affection for her and not just Abraham.

She thought back to that day God had told her they would have a son. She probably would have bowed to the ground and said, "so may it be," ... if she had been forty years younger! But, she was old, and one thing she had learned with each year and each new wrinkle is that old women cannot do the same thing young women do. She had laughed. God did not seem angry, but He asked Abraham why she laughed. It made Sarah think. Did she believe God to do the impossible?

Sarah stiffened at her loom. All these thoughts had been running through her mind, and she had no idea how long she had been under that hot sun, at the loom. She felt queasy. Abraham often left home for days, and she missed him when he was gone, but such was the life of a shepherd. He and his hired shepherds would set up the tents and then take the sheep to graze in the area while the women were left behind to make the tent a home. It was not easy work, especially not in that heat. Sarah knew her husband worked hard to raise the sheep, and she was his match at home. Her hands were the fastest at weaving. She often did several tasks at once. Things had been getting more difficult now, and her hands were moving noticeably slower but her mind was as sharp it had always been. Her hand touched her stomach. What was that she felt? Was she sick?

The Scripture

Hebrews 11:8-10

8 It was by faith that Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to another land that God would give him as his inheritance. He went without knowing where he was going. 9 And even when he reached the land God promised him, he lived there by faith-for he was like a foreigner, living in tents. And so did Isaac and Jacob, who inherited the same promise. 10 Abraham was confidently looking forward to a city with eternal foundations, a city designed and built by God.

Entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurs are admired in our society. Well, successful entrepreneurs are admired. Entrepreneurs and risk-takers who do not have any success to show for their risks are viewed with caution. Abraham was an entrepreneur, and he was not what might be considered a “successful” entrepreneur. Read the scripture again. “It was by faith that Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to another land *that God would give him as an inheritance.*” Abraham left in faith, to lead the life of a wandering shepherd. Did he make money? Yes he did. Did his little group of shepherds grow into an army of men and women? Yes they did. But, Abraham had put all of his hopes into this “inheritance” that God was going to give him, and though he had been successful in acquiring money and befriending the people of the land there was one thing that he did not have. That one thing was an inheritor. He did not have a child to carry on all of the work he had done.

Start Your Journey

It is a miracle that Abraham was willing to set out to claim an unknown land for his family. It was a bigger miracle that he went to claim an unknown land without anyone to pass it onto. It is a miracle of faith. What we learn about faith from Abraham is that faith requires a first step. We have to start the journey of faith somewhere. Maybe God has called you to do some mighty act for Him. Following Him starts by taking that first step. The first steps are never easy. It would take years for Abraham to build up courage and develop trust in His God. Not by any mighty act of Abraham, but by the grace of God did Abraham inherit the promised land. If Abraham had never taken that first step, he would have never been able to see God’s grace

What is your first step?

Start Your Journey.

It was by faith that Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to another land that God would give him as his inheritance. He went without knowing where he was going. Hebrews 11:8

Faith Under Fire Study 2: *Passionate Pleas*

by Lt. Ashley Koebel

The Story

Aaron threw himself into Hannah's arms, and she bounced him up onto her hip. The boy had the innocent face of a chubby little angel. It was a picture-perfect moment. And yet, it was not. Hannah's joy was overcome with a quick glance from across the room. Peninnah's eyes burned a hole into Hannah. "You have my husband. Would you steal my children too?"

Hannah longed for a child. She needed to pass on her family's name, her husband's name and her faith to a new generation. When her husband, Elkanah, realized Hannah could not have children, he also married Peninnah. That was how it worked back then. A woman without children was considered cursed, but a man even more. And so, traditionally, a man would marry another woman to have children for him. It is true that some traditions are better forgotten. Elkanah favored Hannah, but that did not help her loneliness. To make matters worse, this was the most painful time of the year for Hannah.

Hannah set Aaron down. Unaware of the intensity of the adults around him, Aaron ran to kiss his mother before bounding out the door to his father. Peninnah's eyes traced his steps out the front door. She glanced back at Hannah, and then turned away to follow her son. With just that little look, Hannah came undone. Going to Shiloh, to visit the Tabernacle of God each year had given her such wonderful memories as a child. Now, she dreaded it.

The Tabernacle was this grand, ancient tent. It was beautifully crafted and ornate. Hannah's grandmother had told her that this tent was made by Moses, in the wilderness. God traveled with His people in this tent. The people had seen fire at night and a cloud by day, over that tent. Even today, now in the Promised Land, God remained with His people. Every year, families from all over would come to visit and to worship their God through sacrifice.

She remembered following her father to the tabernacle entrance as a little girl, and then clinging to her mother's leg as her father went in to make the sacrifice. The smoke would flare up past the deep blue sides of the courtyard curtains. First a little white smoke and then a flash of fire and a pillar of gray smoke followed. Every year this amazed Hannah and it brought her comfort. It meant all was forgiven. It meant that her father was faithful. It meant safety and peace.

As an adult, each time Hannah went she hoped, that year, some small child of her own would be clinging to her leg. Each year that did not happen, her heart broke a little more. Making matters worse, Peninnah became especially brutal this time of year. Her words, spoken and unspoken, burned into Hannah's soul. Each and every year, at some point in this supposedly joyful time, Hannah would find herself weeping in her tent, unable to control the pain. Today, she decided to do something different.

Holding back tears, Hannah slipped out the back of their tent and made her way to the Tabernacle. It was quiet. It had been so full of life earlier, but that same sacred feeling she always had here did not go away. She still felt His presence. Smoke continued to rise from the courtyard, and she touched the blue curtain that surrounded the tabernacle, keeping her from going further in. She could not keep her composure anymore and her body began to crumple. Her tears became sobs and those sobs became gasps and soon Hannah was wailing. "God, I can't go on." Her mouth moved but no words came out. She continued one of the most heartfelt prayers of her life, with only her lips moving. Suddenly, Hannah felt a hand firmly grasp her left shoulder.

She turned around to see an old priest. He had been watching from the temple entrance. "Put away your wine, woman," he growled with a worn voice. Continuing to shake, Hannah said, "I am not drunk, but my spirit is crushed. I have brought my request to God." The priest's grip loosened and his brow softened. In a gravelly but now compassionate tone, the priest said five words to Hannah that she would cling to for months to come. "May God grant your request."

The Scripture

1 Samuel 1:13-18

¹³ Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk ¹⁴ and said to her, "How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine. ¹⁵ "Not so, my lord," Hannah replied, "I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord. ¹⁶ Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief." ¹⁷ Eli answered, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him." ¹⁸ She said, "May your servant find favor in your eyes." Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.

The Serenity Prayer

Read the Serenity Prayer and think about it.

"Lord, grant me...
the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things that I can, and
the wisdom to know the difference."

Many a person in recovery has had these words upon their lips. The truth is that recovery is needed by everyone. You who "once were lost" and "now are found," you cannot keep living the same way! Some things will need to change. Some things cannot change, and we pray to God for the serenity to accept those things, but never forget that some things need to change.

Change Something

Year after year, Hannah endured the same thing at each pilgrimage to the Tabernacle at Shiloh. Year after year she was reminded that she was without children, and year after year she was taunted by the same woman. Year after dreary year, she would run to her tent to cry until it was time to leave. And then... one year, she ran to a different tent. Rather than returning to her place of safety, she went on a leap of faith and as a lone woman, she walked to the tent she was not allowed in. She stood there and she prayed. That year, she approached her problem differently. That year was to change her life and the course of a nation as God would allow Hannah to carry Samuel, who would one day be a great prophet and judge in Israel.

Last month, we looked at the story of Abraham and we asked ourselves what our “first step” may be, as we start the journey of faith. This week, let’s think about what we need to change. For you to continue your journey of faith, something needs to change.

What will that change be?

Something Needs to Change

17 Eli answered, “Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.” 18 She said, “May your servant find favor in your eyes.” Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast. 1 Samuel 1:17-18

Faith Under Fire Study 3: Surrounded City

by Lt. Ashley Koebel

The Story

Quiet murmurs were heard around the room. A nobleman standing near the back was whispering about his days in the war. In another part of the room, a revered advisor of the king stood speechless. Every now and again an indiscriminate gasp eked through his open mouth. A priest stood near the center of the room. His eyes met no one else's. It was difficult to determine whether the hardness in his face was resolution or detached compliance. In the epicenter of the noise sat a king. His arms rested on his throne, and his chin sunk into his left hand. It seemed that he could not hear the flurry of words and looks about him.

When Jehoshaphat put his mind to something, he was going to do it. No nobleman or councilor or even servant was silly enough to question him. He had made many drastic decisions before, but this one was new. Their little country was surrounded. Jehoshaphat had called all the people in the land to fast and pray. They had for days, and now it was time to make a decision.

Jehoshaphat squinted his eyes and imagined his father. His father had once been so strong, powerful and wise. The last years of his life, he stayed at home, suffering from some strange ailment of his feet. Jehoshaphat remembered this old man standing at a similar meeting. In this meeting, his father, King Asa, had declared that all idols throughout the land should be brought down. This was not a popular decision. When hard times came, many felt it was Baal who alone could provide. Some had even seen success. The nations around them had good crops. Surely Baal specialized in harvest. Would an almighty God really care if His people only asked Baal for help with his specialty? King Asa ensured that every shrine was torn down. Though it created many enemies for him, especially from the farmers who relied on Baal during harvest, King Asa did not lose his resolve.

Jehoshaphat remembered how things had changed with age. A king has many enemies and is in constant fear for his life and his family's. Somehow, it seemed the pressure had got to the king and he cracked. It was like a disease took him over. Later, an army from the north came against Israel. In hopes ridding his fear, Jehoshaphat's father took all of the golden treasures out of the temple and gave them as a gift to Syria. Syria, in response, offered some of their soldiers. Judah won the battle, but Jehoshaphat watched painfully as his father lost his personal war. In his old age his feet became diseased, but Jehoshaphat could not help but think that the disease was not really in his feet, but in his heart.

Jehoshaphat opened his eyes fully as he stood. The sudden commotion commanded the attention of all in the room. "My father destroyed the idols in this land. You remember well the resistance from the people. When I became king, my first task was to finish what he started. All the high places came down. I will not back down from what we started. What God started with King Asa, may He finish with Jehoshaphat." Jehoshaphat held out his hand for his staff, and a servant rushed it to him. "The only King we will approach for help is God."

Then, Jehoshaphat dressed himself in his very best and diplomatic robes, walking to the temple. He was going to ask for defense from the most powerful King he knew, and no one else.

The Scripture

2 Chronicles 20:5-9(NIV)

Then Jehoshaphat stood up in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem at the temple of the Lord in the front of the new courtyard and said:

“Lord, the God of our ancestors, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you. Our God, did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend? They have lived in it and have built in it a sanctuary for your Name, saying, ‘If calamity comes upon us, whether the sword of judgment, or plague or famine, we will stand in your presence before this temple that bears your Name and will cry out to you in our distress, and you will hear us and save us.

Choices

A teenager discovers that she is pregnant. A young woman struggles to find her place in the world of business. An executive is given the option of promotion, with the cost of his integrity. A homeless youth must decide how to survive on the street. These are pivotal points that many of us have faced or will face.

There are many choices that we must make, each day. The most drastic decisions, the most pivotal points in our lives tend to come without trumpets or any music. They come quietly and unexpectedly.

There are those who make a choice to win the battle, and there are those who make a choice to win the war. The question is not, “what will the result of my choice be?” The question is rather, “who will I be as a result of my choice?” Will my faith in God stand in this trial, or will it waiver?

Stand Up

In the end, what do you have? You only have your integrity. Nothing else belongs to you. The only war that we should be waging is the inner-war to trust in God, in spite of the problems around us. Trust the One who will not fail you. Stand up, even if it means losing a battle, you must win the war.

He said: “Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in Judah and Jerusalem! This is what the Lord says to you: ‘Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God’s. 2 Chronicles 20:15

Faith Under Fire Study 4: *Brave Builder*

by Lt. Ashley Koebel

The Story

Nehemiah stood for a moment and thought. The parchment in his hand was worn. The day had been long and hot, and Nehemiah kept setting his heart on the same story. It was the story that began this adventure. It happened only months ago. He could remember it as if he was still there. He had been worlds away from where he was now. He had been standing in a different country, in a different part of the world, with a very different job than he had now.

In the palace preparation room, Nehemiah stood straightening his robes, and calming his nerves. His job was regarded as extremely high risk. He had to be a man trusted by the king. That meant nerves of steel at all times. Nehemiah's job was to protect the king from any poisonous assassination attempts. His job included purchasing the best wines, preparing the king's cup in utter secrecy and then tasting the wine in front of the king. If an assassination attempt had been made, it was not the king's life that would be taken, but the cup-bearer. On that day, as Nehemiah handed the cup to the king after sipping, the king caught his eyes. Nehemiah was shocked to see a look of concerned compassion cross the king's face.

That was it. That was the story of how Nehemiah got here. Thanks to that moment, Nehemiah was now standing here, in this little city, in this war-torn country, holding onto the parchment. The little parchment was a letter from the King. As long as Nehemiah had this letter, no one could stop his work, or the work of the builders. That day that started it all, that day that the king had compassion in his eye was that was the day that God made a way.

Though living in Susa, Nehemiah had remained interested and faithfully loyal to his home country, Judah. He had heard all about the troubles that were there. He had known the situation was desperate, but he had always hoped that it was livable. He had always hoped that there was still some national pride. Until the day that he was visited by a brother from Judah, he had remained faithful to that hope. Judah, he soon learned, was in shambles. There was no pride anywhere. Nehemiah was devastated by the news.

For some reason, at work that day, the king cared enough to notice Nehemiah's silence and to ask. For some reason the king chose to allow Nehemiah to return home to care for the city and for his people. For some reason the king had given guards, building materials, and a promise of safety. Nehemiah knew the reason, and that was why he would rest his heart on the story. It was why he would remember the story again and again, and why he would tell the story to anyone that would listen.

God had made a way for Nehemiah to return home. With a new sense of life and purpose, Nehemiah had set his heart to one thing only: follow God's lead to repair the broken wall of his once great home. Playing with the parchment in his hand, Nehemiah looked either direction down the wall that now was becoming a reality. This small city had set their hearts on something great, and for some Reason, it was happening.

The Scripture

Nehemiah 4:1-6(NIV)

4 When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, 2 and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, "What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble-burned as they are?"

3 Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, "What they are building—even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!"

4 Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. 5 Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders.

6 So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.

For Some Reason

Tune into any of the great reality competition shows, and you'll hear these words: "I want this more than anything." Another phrase that comes out a lot is, "this would mean everything to me." We set our hearts on many things. There tends to be this belief that if you want something bad enough, and you set your heart on it, you'll have it.

It's just not true.

The truth is that things tend to happen for some Reason. Setting our hearts to things is absolutely necessary. In fact, if we want to achieve anything, we will have to set our heart on it. But, setting our heart on something is not enough. Anyone who has had their heart broken by a set-back knows this. Things happen for some Reason.

Love the Lord Your God: *Mark 12:30-31*

God had his hand in the building of this wall. I do not doubt that if the people had not worked at it with all their heart, it would not be achieved by them. It might have happened in some other way, but it would not have happened through the people. I don't know what you have been setting your heart to, but I'm sure there is something. If you want to achieve anything in this life, it's not enough to set your heart on it. Let's set our hearts on the things God has for us. Then, we might find that things just start falling into place for some Reason.

***So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height,
for the people worked with all their heart. Nehemiah 4:6***

Faith Under Fire Study 5: *Shipwrecked Sailors*

by Lt. Ashley Koebel

The Story

Julius' hands were tough, like splintered wood. He gripped the beam he was clinging to harder. Although it seemed impossible, he had been through much worse. Marching hours without break through the desert as a young man had made him resilient. He had been in as many battles and skirmishes as anyone could count. The cold winter nights when the Roman emperor Claudius had tried to invade Britain had been the worst. Being shipwrecked was unexpected, but not surprising. Even sailors will admit that they cannot predict the oceans. Paul did. Paul predicted the weather. He saw this coming. Paul was unlike any person Julius had ever met before.

Julius thought about Paul's final prayer. He had seemed so calm. He had predicted the shipwreck, had warned the ship's captain and owner about it, and no one had listened. Yet, when the sailors recognized that the ship was not holding anymore, and that their efforts to bail water were futile, Paul remained calm. He was a strong man though, and without fear this prisoner reminded the captain that he should have listened to his advice. After having said that, he encouraged the weary captain and the crew. "I urge you now to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only the ship." He explained that an angel of his God had given him that message. This time everyone listened.

Paul instructed the crew to eat for strength because they had not eaten in days, and he instructed the ship's captain to run the ship aground. Before eating, Paul had blessed the food. Even though many of the men were anxious to begin the process of running the ship aground, and finding pieces of wood or anything that would float, he wouldn't have it. The crew would pray, eat, and then run the ship aground. Everyone listened.

Finally, as Julius sank again into the trough of a wave, he felt his foot brush against something coarse. It was sand. Before Julius could steady his feet on the ground, the following wave lifted him high above the ground again, but he knew it would soon be over. Letting go of the wood, he began to swim to shore. His arms were weary, but his heart was amazed as he began to see each of the sailors, crew, and even the boat's prisoners wash up on the shore. No one had a scratch.

"Julius! Is that you?" A hand was extended to him and he grabbed a hold. "Paul, you were right. Each person was safe, not a single soul was lost." Julius could not hide his astonishment. Paul could have run. He was a prisoner under Julius' care, and he could have been free. Julius had been the one to convince the other soldiers to not kill the prisoners under their guard. He had wanted to save Paul, but he had not realized that Paul would be so honest. There was something different about him. It was enough to shipwreck a sailor.

The Scripture

Acts 27:9-12(NIV)

9 Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Day of Atonement. So Paul warned them, 10 "Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also." 11 But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship. 12 Since the harbor was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided that we should sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix and winter there. This was a harbor in Crete, facing both southwest and northwest.

13 When a gentle south wind began to blow, they saw their opportunity; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete. 14 Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the Northeaster, swept down from the island. 15 The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along.

When the Professionals Fail

Even professionals get it wrong. This could not be more true in the case of Paul's trans-Mediterranean journey. The sailors and ship's captain thought the journey was doable. They made these judgments based on their past experiences. They made these judgments based on their knowledge of the weather and of the boats capacities. They were wrong. It must have been awkward discovering that a prisoner knew more about the ocean than they did. The truth is that Paul did not have some super-human sailing ability. Paul had a connection with God. Not only did that connection give him the ability to predict the storm and impending doom of the ship, it also gave him the courage to remain faithful to his captor, even when he had a chance to escape.

Face Your Giant

What kind of witness do we give? As I reflect on the bravery and courage that Paul had, I wonder what the stronger witness to Julius was. Was it his prediction of the storm, or his loyalty to his word and to Julius? It's the little things that prove to be our biggest giants. Those are the giants that are truly God's specialty. The storm might seem like the biggest giant at first read, but I think choosing to stay with a captor rather than run for freedom was the real giant.

The truth is that whatever adversity may stand before us, with God, it is surmountable. The greater truth is that a small act of faithfulness might be bigger than our greatest giants. Again, with God it is still surmountable. With God you can face a storm, and with God you can also face your heart.

But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. Acts 27:22

Faith Under Fire Study 6: *In The Garden*

by Lt. Ashley Koebel

The Story

The olive trees were a welcome sight to see. The cool of the night enveloped him. It was refreshing. Peter stepped over the mangled root protruding from the ground to come beside his teacher. He gently placed a hand on his shoulder knowing this had been a difficult week. The men made eye-contact, and then Jesus placed his hand on Peter's, "thank you." Peter smiled, nodded and let go, slowing his pace to wait for his brother, Andrew.

These had been some exhausting days. There was not a solitary day with Jesus that had not been tiring for Peter and the disciples, but these days had been different. Where to begin? Some of the men said it began when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. You would think people would roll out the red carpet, but there was a massive mix of emotions. There were those who were ready to make him king, and those who were ready to have him killed. Two of the disciples had already reported receiving offers from religious leaders to trap Jesus. Jesus had a loyal following though. No one would ever betray him. At least, the thought was unthinkable.

To make Peter's mind a little more clouded, as usual, Jesus said some strange things tonight. If only he were more straightforward! He always spoke in parables. The disciples would try to understand, discuss and debate, and then Jesus would enlighten them later. During dinner earlier, Jesus had said something about betrayal. Peter was sure he was not speaking literally, but it was another one of his parables.

Peter would have to ponder what Jesus meant by that betrayal thing later. His teacher motioned to him. Jesus had already called over James and John. Peter met the three toward the front of their group. It almost went without saying that Jesus was going to call these three further. He had done it before. The other time had been miraculous. Peter wondered what was in store now.

James, John and Peter followed Jesus closely. They were all so exhausted. Jesus was exhausted too. Peter watched as Jesus' graceful demeanor was somewhat changed. That's what a lack of sleep and constant celebrity can do to you. Jesus foot brushed one of the many protruding olive tree roots. It was not enough to knock him over, but it was enough to throw his balance. Peter had seen Jesus trip before, he was with the guy 24-7. It was bound to happen. Each time Peter had seen it, Jesus had burst into convulsive laughter. Jesus didn't look like he was in the mood for laughing right now. Jesus turned and said the words the disciples could practically recite, "Sit here while I go over there and pray."

It always happened like this. The twelve went to a solitary place, the three when further, and finally Jesus went on his own to be with his Father. What had never happened before was this: Jesus said, *“My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”* Peter began to feel nervous. Peter had never believed that all of this craziness began when Jesus raised Lazarus. He completely believed it had all started when Jesus chose to leave the safe country-side and journey to Jerusalem. He had warned him not to, but Jesus said something about his Father. Why was Jesus here? Had he finally pushed himself too far? As Jesus walked away, Peter worried, but his eyes quickly became heavy and he closed them just for a minute.

The Scripture

Matthew 26:36-41(NIV)

36 Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” 37 He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. 38 Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

39 Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

40 Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. 41 “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

Going to the Garden

Most people try to make space between their troubles and themselves. It really is a survival tactic. If a threat is perceived, you either disarm the threat, or remove yourself from the situation. It makes perfect sense. It is usually the right thing to do. Going to the garden is usually a peaceful thing. What about when the garden is on fire?

Each of the stories in this Bible study series highlights the life and faith of particular characters. Abraham believed that God would give him a legacy. Hannah hoped enough to lay her heart out on the line and pray. Jehoshaphat believed God was the strongest ally he could have. Nehemiah left everything he knew because God put a vision in his heart. Paul, though a captive and a prisoner, chose to be faithful to a centurion that could not understand his faith. Each of these stories has fire in them. Each of these stories has faith.

Hold Faith's Hand

There have been times in life that I have felt my faith weaken. There have been times in life that I have seen the faith of others all but disappear. At least, that is how it feels, and that is how it appears. Jesus, in Gethsemane teaches us that faith is not about a feeling or an appearance. Real faith doesn't exist without fire. Real faith only exists when someone is willing to walk through the fire.

Life is generally good for me. I have no complaints, but I do have times that stretch me. I, like you, have experienced loss and grief I cannot explain. But, following the example of Jesus I hope and pray that together you and I will both hold Faith's hand and walk through the fire. Let us follow the lead of the saints who went before us. Fire is where our faith becomes real. Let us walk on.

“Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Matthew 26:41