

Getting Real with God

Discussion with Richard, Jo and Sarah

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What does faith mean for you?

Jo: Hi, I'm Jo Chamberlain and you are listening to *Messages of hope*. Today we're having a conversation about faith and what it looks like in the everyday moments of life.

Today I have with me Sarah and Richard who will share their stories about what faith means for them.

Jo: So, Sarah, is there a moment in time that you can pick that you became more aware of your faith?

Sarah: That's been a bit of a struggle for me because I haven't had a big God moment. I always hear about how people have come to their faith from some magical moment, and I never had it. But in hindsight, looking back, I can see there have been things that God has done for me. So, they might not look like a big moment to anybody else, but there's been moments where God has put things in place to shape me to be where I am today.

Particularly, I've suffered from depression for years, and I've had some other struggles. And it's been probably when I'm at my lowest I've needed that faith; I've needed to hold onto something. And that's what's got me through that. So, yeah, that's where I can see that God was there and stepped in and helped me through particular situations to ensure that I'm still here today.

Jo: I can relate to that. And I think it was probably around that time of my teenage life where I was trying to understand my own identity and trying to find out my self-worth, because the world told me that I wasn't good enough and the world told me that 'I tolerate you,' but that's about it.

And so I kind of leaned into my understanding of who God was. And I leaned into my understanding of God by my side. And, you know, scripture tells me that God loves me, he adores me, he desires me. And so, for a teenager to have somebody tell you that, to have somebody to know that there's somebody present in your life who cares about you like that, that was my significance.

I grew up in a Christian home. We didn't really talk about God. Like we did the Bible studies, we did the devotions, we did the family time where we read the Bible together, but I don't think we really kind of talked about who God was for us. So, it was really my own self discovery of 'who are you, God?'

And he was pretty clear in telling me who he was. He was pretty clear in telling me he cared for me, he was beside me.

I remember one moment, as a teenager, where I got to a point where my own self-worth was so low I was contemplating ending my life. I was contemplating: 'this is too hard.' But the other part of me goes, 'there's somebody who cares about me.' Like it was this God by my side moment that said, 'don't do it Joanne, because I love you. Don't do it, Joanne, because I have a purpose for you. I have a future planned out for you. I have a future mapped out for you.'

And that was important for me at that time to go, 'okay, I'm going through this now. But God's walking beside me to get me through it.' And so that was actually really important to me as a teenager, knowing that somebody was with me.

Jo: But Richard, I'd really love to know your story too.

Richard: I suppose it's probably not as dramatic, but it's wonderful when God does show up in those moments, especially in loneliness and depression and the like, to hear those wonderful promises of God – he loves us.

I think, yeah, growing up with that and hearing that certainly made an impact in my life.

But it was actually when I was in Year 10 that my dad actually went through quite a dramatic experience, where he went from dairy farmer, walked everywhere on the farm, in a matter of five days, was fighting for his life in intensive care. And pretty much, the doctors had no idea what to do, they were throwing everything at him. And went into brain surgery and was highly unlikely... I suppose they were expecting that he was probably never gonna recover. They gave him two chances of life support. So, all we really had to do was surrender into praying. But yeah, there were lots of moments through his journey. He was never meant walk again or talk again. And he did in different ways.

And the impact that God had on him. There was one moment where we were actually encouraged on the Friday night before he went in for surgery just to say goodbye. So, I remember walking in and the nurse was telling us, 'look, he doesn't know what he's saying because he is completely unconscious, but he's in pain. So just be mindful that he might be yelling and shouting things, but just don't see that as your dad.' But I remember walking around the corner and the things he kept saying over and over again was the Lord's Prayer, and also Psalm 23: 'even though we walk through the valley of shadow of darkness...' And he wanted to be with Jesus. Thankfully, Jesus, allowed him to come back and be with us, and he's still alive today. So that made a profound impact on me personally, to then refresh that faith.

Jo: But what if we don't get those big moments? Do we need them in order to develop our faith?

Richard: I suppose being a pastor, people can have an idea that we don't struggle with our faith, but we do.

And we still question God at times especially because we're in worlds where we are seeing people sometimes at their lowest and at their hardest. And also, sometimes when they've actually had those mountaintop experiences and you see the miracles and things happen which you can't make sense of at the time.

So, it is a privilege, but it also can mess with your own faith at times. And you think, 'where's my moments?' But to actually rest in different moments in our Christian journey to come back to, can actually help and provide comfort.

I had a lady walk in the other day and just ask questions. She'd only just recently become a Christian and had left the occult and it was quite a dramatic thing. She was kind of

going, 'but I want to know more. Like how do I keep getting this high or this moment from God or this validation, et cetera, et cetera.' But it actually came down to a point where we actually looked and said, well, there's actually nothing you can do that can ever make God love you more or love you less, or engineer any moments or whatever else, because he already does. There's nothing that can separate you. God's still faithful and God's still at work. He doesn't ever give up, cos he can't. It's just not his nature. *He's* the one that's faithful. So even though we might struggle with different times and think, 'God, where are you?'

Even Jesus cried out on the cross and said, 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' You know? And there's some pretty emotional things there. God still shows up. God did all that cos he loves us and he wants us to have a relationship be in love.

Jo: Sarah, you had a question.

Sarah: I am still in the journey. I'm still struggling with, it's not 'where's God when I'm struggling with stuff?' Cos, I know he's there. When you're right in that pivotal moment of crisis, I hear people talking of you just hand things over to God. It's that whole, it's easier said than done thing. I'm struggling with that, and I don't know how to do that.

Jo: Yeah, I think there is that element of trust. There is that element of just letting go and believing even if you haven't quite got the concept. Knowing God's there with you.

We had somebody from our community that recently just reached out to us and told us about her own grief story. And she was questioning that concept of 'where was God in that moment where somebody had died and a family was without their mother?' Had God abandoned that family? But there was a vision that was shared with her about Jesus alongside grieving with them. And that was a powerful thing for her to have that understanding or belief that Jesus was there weeping with this family. It couldn't be fixed. this person couldn't come back to life. But Jesus was there in their grief, sitting in it. And for her, that was a comfort. That was something that actually held her together in those sad moments, and she still holds onto that today of Jesus walking alongside in the grief, the sadness.

Being Real with God

Richard: I think a lot of it's just about being real. We live in such a world that we think we have to pretend to be this, that, or the other, or we have to manufacture things or we have to be this or happy, or whatever it might be. And I think the first step, like you were mentioning, Sarah, it's being real with ourselves. And whatever question or whatever's on our heart, we don't have to pretend with God. Cos God already knows and he's not gonna be scared off from you, and he's not gonna be afraid of you, and he's not gonna think less of you, because he just loves you. And you might not get the mountaintop experiences, but God's heart breaks when your heart breaks. He rejoices when you rejoice. And I think that's the wonderful thing of actually being a person and being in God, that you go through all these rollercoasters of things, of emotions and things.

We'd probably love life to be perfect, and in an AI world, you know, what's the perfect life? But none of us probably live that. But I don't think we really want to either. Like it's a robotic world that has no highs, lows. And I know that might sound hard if you're going through a tough time at the moment, but to hear that God is actually in the ditch with you or in those moments, God works through even just the plain conversation, or a listening ear from someone beside you. And he shows up in those ways, whether we realise it or not. So even if the outcome is not great, there's still hope to know that God is with us to grow our

faith. So, who knows how God is using all sorts of things to grow us or to grow others or grow your family member but I think it's actually about being real and we don't have to pretend with God even if we're not feeling anything, God's still there.

Jo: I love that idea of being real with God. I love that idea of not having to pretend or putting on a facade. If I'm angry at God, I can tell him that. If I don't know if I've got the right words, there's a verse in the Bible that talks about the Holy Spirit intercedes for us, even with groans and sighs that words can't express. I love that one because I could just sigh and God knows my heart. I don't have to try and explain myself to God. But I can come to him with his loving arms around me saying, 'I love you first'. And then you know, I can ask for forgiveness, and he can give me that peace of forgiveness, knowing he says: 'I know you're stuffed up, but now I'm giving you another chance.'

Richard: Especially when we hear and see the story of Jesus, and what Jesus has done for us and continues to do for us, and show up for us and that great love he has. People ask, 'where's God?' Well, God's actually hanging on a cross and died for us, and then has given us eternal life to be with God.

And I think sometimes we do lean into the idea of an absent God or a Father Christmas God or whatever God we wanna put on things and say, 'well, where's God?' That's actually not who God is. God is actually a compassionate God in Jesus and loves us and sees us as real and is walking the journey with us. And I think if more people can hear that kind of a message of just the love of God, he cares and he wants to give us faith to trust in him, because I think when we do, and we surrender or however you wanna describe it or receive it, follow it, it's an amazing gift. So, it doesn't mean that life's gonna work out all perfect, it could even be harder sometimes. But to know that God is walking that journey with us and to just fall into that is a wonderful thing to have in our lives.

A faith that's real

Jo: Richard, you have such a passionate vision of who God is. Do you think that for those who haven't encountered God yet, how do you rationalise is it something I've made up or is it real?

Richard: That's where you go back to it's the greatest story ever told and will still continue to be so. And that's in God's word and the stories that that have happened and occurred in the Bible and that God tells us about - they're not just historical things, they're actually real living stories for us to hear today. So many accounts of people who have questioned God or doubted God and gone, 'all stuff this, I'm gonna read the Bible and prove these Christians wrong,' ended up becoming Christian themselves.

And because you hear of the wonderful love of God. **The world it is a hard place, but faith is something quite simple in hearing the wonderful stories about God and who God is for us.**

The best thing that God does for us is he listens to us. He always listens to us. He's always there for us and always cares for us. And he calls us to listen. Sometimes we often think, 'what do I have to say? What can I do? And that kind of action.' **And yet all God is calling us to do really is to listen to each other.**

Jo: So, Sarah, what's your perspective on this? Can you see, even in prayer life, is it easy just to come to God with all of your worries, your frustrations?

Sarah: For me, absolutely. But I don't do it in the traditional sense of prayer. I just verbally let it all out. I just kind of talk as I would to you or anybody else. That's how I pray. God kind of gets everything from me, and it's good, it's bad, it's whatever I'm feeling at the time. And it's sometimes I'm thanking him for simple little things. Other times I'm probably begging for help with anything.

Jo: So this concept of a listening God is real for you?

Sarah: Absolutely. It doesn't mean he answers in the way I want him to. You know, there's no direct voice of, 'Hey, sure, I'll do that for you.'

Jo: But sometimes we don't even need the answers. Sometimes, it's just a matter of knowing that you're heard. Knowing that somebody actually cares about what you have to say. I think for me that's a comfort to know I don't have to have the answers, but I can trust in somebody who cares about them.

Sarah: I've always wanted a big God moment. But I think I've wanted that because every time I heard someone talk about a big God moment and how they came to faith, it sounded like their life was then perfect and their spiritual journey was perfect, and everything just was fantastic from then on.

But you never hear the after story from those people. You don't hear that, yes, they came to faith through this wonderful experience but you don't hear that six months later, they're still struggling with their addiction or their grief or whatever it was, but they do. And so, they might have had their moment that brought them to God, but they are still real, their issues are still real. And I wish we heard more of that too.

Finding Hope in Hard Times

Jo: Being a Christian is not being removed from the hard stuff of life. For me it just means that when I do go through the hard stuff, I've got hope. And that's really important to me, to go, yeah, crap happens, and yet can still have a smile on my face.

Richard: Yeah, to think that God is just a magic pill that you can take and then everything else is gonna be fine in your life, is actually doing God a bit of a disservice in just the great love that he has for us and how he carries us through.

Even there's so many stories of the disciples and there was a moment where they had a mountaintop experience with God and came down from that and they still kept stuffing up and all sorts of things, but I think that's when God really starts showing up, it's when we don't get the high moments because they are moments we think, 'oh, we've gotta keep doing something or pretending' or 'does God still love me?' or 'does God ever love me?' And to hear those times and time again that God does love you and is still with you on the journey often means a lot more in those times than the highs.

Sometimes I think we can be infatuated by those big faith moments, yet actually it's more the gradual of hearing and growing in that relationship with God is what he wants and then him sustaining through. And I think that's the wonderful thing about having a personal God, a God that loves you as a person. So even if it was only you, he'd still love. But then also then leads us to be in community, to bring us people around us to encourage us and support us. Cos we can't do this on our own. We certainly need God and God willing, we need others around us as well to encourage us on this journey.

Jo: One thing I found quite profound in the Bible is where who God calls. He didn't call the great leaders of the time. He didn't go to the great biblical scholars. He went to people like Moses who was poor of speech. He went to a little servant girl. He actually called on people who weren't very significant, but he saw their purpose, and he saw their worth, and they lived into what God called them to be. And I think for me, again, it goes back to you don't have to be perfect. You don't have to be this altogether person because God calls you from where you are. God invites you into a space from wherever you've come from, and you can grow into your identity just by knowing God and drawing closer.

Sharing about faith with non-Christian friends

Jo: What would you love your non-Christian friends to know about faith?

Sarah: That it's not perfect, that it changes, but it can be the best thing ever. And that it's okay to ask questions.

A lot of my non-Christian friends have this idea of what a Christian is. They think it's this perfect, law abiding citizen who does all this amazing charity work. And they don't understand that Christians are real people who struggle with the same issues that they do. And we question things all the time.

Jo: There are times where we just don't know if God's there. Not feeling God's presence doesn't mean he's not about you.

Richard, do you have anything that you'd love your non-Christian friends to know?

Richard: God is real, and it's not about measuring up or trying to be perfect. The famous verse of John 3:16, 'For God to love the world, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life.' But it's actually followed by the very next verse which God wants everyone to be saved - he didn't come to condemn the world or to judge the world, but he came to save the world through him.

And so, he's there for everyone and he starts wherever you are at. You might even be of a completely different faith and religion, God still loves you and still wants to give everything he has for you.

We don't have to be afraid of God. God's there for us, loves us and cares for us.

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