**How To Get Through What You’re Going Through: #2 Surrender**

**Series Big Idea:** During the toughest, most tragic moments of our lives, God is with us, God loves us, and God wants to use our most trying struggles to develop a living faith within us that can withstand any circumstance.

**Message Big Idea**: When our faith is tested, and God seems silent, rather than chasing down another way to peace, trust that the one who has been faithful will, once again, be faithful to the end.

**Scripture**: Exodus 32

**Sometimes you just want something to hold on to.** Have you ever felt that way? Like you just need something to hold on to?

*(Tell your own personal story of a Haunted House experience and/or consider using the edit of this humorous Ellen Video – See google teaching media folder. A second intro option using the children’s book, “We’re Going On A Bearh Hunt” is at the end of this document)*

I’ll never forget the last time I went to a Haunted House. I was in high school and a group of my friends wanted to go to this 3-story Haunted House. I remember dreading it while at the same time curious about what it would be like. Bottom line…it was awful. I remember all of my friends huddled together, clutching each other, just trying to get through this thing. It didn’t matter if you were holding on to a guy, a girl, someone you liked or someone you barely knew – you just needed to hold on to someone so that you could get through it.

At one point we had to walk down a narrow hallway filled with open doors. It seemed like right when you thought someone would jump out, no one did. And right when you let your guard down – BAM! Out jumped someone (or something!) from a doorway. The worst came at the very end of the hall. I don’t even remember what it was, but I jumped higher and screamed louder than I ever thought I could. I reached out and grabbed my friend’s arm. Holding on tightly, I said, “Oh my gosh, Matt, I’m so glad it’s you.” And then I’ll never forget what happened next. With a low whisper, a voice came from right next to me saying, “I’m not Matt.” Woah!!! Talk about jumping out of my skin. I actually began hitting the guy screaming, “Get away from me!” until I found Matt and my friends who, thankfully, were just as scared as I was.

**Sometimes you just want something to hold on to.** All I wanted was to get through that Haunted House, to get through what I was going through. And I would have grabbed on to anything or anyone that would have helped me get through that experience quicker.

**Series Recap**

Last week we talked about three stages of faith that followers of Jesus move through.

**“Confident Faith”** is the first stage, and it feels great. This stage can last for a quite a while, and in this phase - faith is pretty simple –

* **prayer** seems to really **make a difference**
* **obedience** results in **tangible blessings**
* **joy** seems to **come naturally**.

However, no matter how long this season of “Confident Faith” lasts, at some point we’ll find ourselves in a season we’ll call **“Challenged Faith”.**  Suddenly, everything that seemed to work in the “Confident Faith” stage just doesn’t seem to work anymore.

* We feel like God **doesn’t** **hear our prayers**.
* Obedience **doesn’t** seem to be getting us anywhere.
* **Doubts** increase - **questions** emerge

We long for the days when our faith seemed **new, fresh, and unstoppable**.

It’s a little bit like when you first become a **Chicago Cub fan.** You’re optimistic. You don the Cubbie blue with pride and confidence. You really believe this **IS** the year. -- And then the seasons starts . . .

In this “Challenged Faith” phase, we have several options. The hope is that we will move forward to a **“Living Faith**.” A “Living Faith” is one that doesn’t have all the answers, it may not look pretty and shiny, but it is **real**, it’s **tested**, and it’s **true**. Most of us want this kind of faith. But here’s the deal… the only way to grow a “Living Faith” is to journey through the “Challenged Faith” phase. And we take this journey over and over again.

So in this series our focus is on the journey through “Challenged Faith.”

* How do I get through what I’m going through?
* How will I respond to pain and tough times?

**Narrative Recap: The Exodus**

We’re taking a close look at the Israelites…the people of God who lived long before Jesus was born. God set them apart from the very beginning for a unique blessing and mission in this world.

God led them out of slavery in Egypt and promised to lead them to their own land. In a lot of ways, those first few days of freedom must have felt like that “**Confident Faith”** phase.

* Look what God has done!
* We’ve been rescued!
* Freedom!

Last week we learned that God didn’t take the direct route out of Egypt, instead he lead them into the desert. And suddenly freedom didn’t feel so much like freedom. They wondered if they would have been better off as slaves. After all, even slavery is better than starvation, right? So the “people of God” began to question God. They started to doubt him and complain!

Those questions and doubts stayed with them as their leader, Moses, led them to the bottom of a mountain. Little did they realize that things were about to go from bad to worse. Moses goes up the mountain to meet with God – something good for a leader to do. But little did they know, he would be gone for 40 days and 40 nights.

* He’s on the mountain -- they’re in the valley.
* He’s hearing from God -- they’re hearing nothing.
* He’s holding the 10 Commandments - and they’re holding nothing.

And **sometimes you just want something to hold on to.**

**Word: Exodus 32:1-5**

So what did they do? If you turn in your Bible or Bible app to Exodus 32, you’ll see what happened:

***When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, “Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.”*** *(Exodus 32:1)*

**Sometimes you just want something to hold on to**, right? So Aaron asks the people to take off the gold that they are wearing – earrings, bracelets, necklaces – and bring them to him. Then he takes these items and forms an idol in the shape of a calf made out of gold. And as he does this, he says:

***“These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”*** *(Exodus 32:4)*

Then, as if that wasn’t enough, Aaron announces, *(On Screen: Exodus 32:5***) “Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord.”**And the next day the Israelites ate and drank and partied like it was 1999…1999BC, I guess.

Now, if you’ve ever heard this story, you may be thinking, “Why would Aaron suddenly think a golden calf is a god?” But before we write him off as a lunatic, there’s something we need to pay attention to. Remember, after forming the golden calf, Aaron proudly announces, **“Tomorrow will be a festival to the Lord!”** *--* A “festival to the **Lord**”? -- What is going on here?

Well, many biblical historians have noted that the choice of a calf is not some arbitrary idea. A calf was a common image used in worship throughout the ancient world. When making an image of a god it was believed that the calf was a part of the throne or pedestal where a god would sit. So the calf wasn’t necessarily a god itself, it was a throne **for** a god.

* So while we see Aaron grabbing hold of the golden calf saying, *“These are your gods who brought you up out of Egypt…”*
* We **also** see him proclaiming a “*festival to the Lord”* – the **one true God**.

Aaron **holds on to a golden calf while still proclaiming his faith in God**.

But Maybe Aaron is a lot more like us than we realize.

Let me ask you, when you go through a season of **“Challenged Faith”** is your tendency to reject God altogether?

* Do you completely **dismiss God**?
* Do you think, **“I got this one, God…step aside?”**

I doubt that’s what you do. That’s not my reaction. And it’s not the reaction of most people I know. Most of us would continue to say we believe in God. -- But don’t we also feel like we need **something to hold onto?**

The Israelites weren’t looking for a substitute for God; they just wanted something to **add on to God.**

* They were tired of the silence.
* Tired of feeling alone in the valley.

They were looking for something they could hold onto that would help them get through what they were going through.

But isn’t that what we do to help deaden the pain of our suffering? We don’t grab onto gold cows, but we may hold onto…

* …a **bottle**, hoping the buzz will numb the pain.
* …or **sexual encounters** – real or digital, to feel good for just a moment.
* …or our **job** – overworking because it’s something we do well.

Most of us are not so bold as to say, “Forget you God!” -- We just want **something to hold on to**.

* Something more concrete.
* Something we hope will help us get through what we’re going through.

**Moving to Chicago**

(Phases of faith model on screen) When you came in today, you were given a torn piece of paper. Take a moment and write down one or two aspects of your life that are just plain hard right now.

* What is causing you pain?
* What is **challenging your faith**?
* When you saw the title of this series . . . What is it that you are going through?

Take a moment and write a word or draw a symbol to represent it.

It’s been four years since Lisa, the kids, and I moved from Naperville into the city to help start three new locations for Community. And I can honestly say that the move has been **one of the most amazing adventures** our family could have ever experience. I will also say it has been one of the hardest things we’ve ever done. Let me preface this by saying, we live in LP. So, how bad can it be, right?

But even so, it has been tough: Tough **financially**. When we moved we nearly doubled our housing expenses. We had to pay for the kids to go to school. I think I mentioned before that we had to add a line in our budget for parking tickets. Never had to do **that** before.

It has been tough **relationally**. We’ve made some great friends, but we also left people that we’d built relationships with for over 20 years. And while the north side of Chicago is not that far away, sometimes it feels like a **world** away. In some ways I think it would have been easier to move hundreds of miles away because then you feel like there is nothing you can do about the distance. But being this close, but yet far, I sometimes see stuff going on that I wish I was a part of, and while I know I made the choice to move, it feels like you’re close enough to where you could be included, but far enough to know that if I keep coming back we’ll ever get connected in our new community.

By far, the toughest part of the move has been **expectations**. My own more than anyone’s. At Community, we love for stuff to happen **fast** and happen in a **big** way. We want people to find their way back to God, and a lot of people in a short period of time. And while we have seen tremendous life change, and God is doing some amazing stuff in the city, it has been slower and more incremental than I ever thought it would be.

And so this has been a season of **challenged faith** for me. I’ve found myself asking God,

* Why is this so difficult?
* Why aren’t you blessing what we’re doing in a bigger and faster way?

And I’ve never said, “Forget you, God!” “I’m done!” “I don’t need you!” And if you asked me, “Do you want to let go of God?” I would say, “No.” But as I think about Aaron and the story of the Israelites, I do notice this…

When I am in seasons of “Challenged Faith,” My “**fall back”** - my “**go to”**, is work. That’s what I hold on to. I figure if I work harder and faster, then I’ll see the results, and ultimately feel better.

If you asked me, “Do you want to let go of God?” I would say, “No way,” but my actions often show that I need an add-on…something **else** to hold on to. And for me -- it’s work.

**What Are You Going Through?**

Take a look at the piece of paper in your hand. What are you going through?

Some of us are going through a **relational desert** right now – we feel very alone. There are hopes and dreams of dating and marrying. But right now, it feels as though God is totally silent on that topic.

Others of us have someone in our lives. We **may be married, but we’ve never felt more lonely or alone.**

Some of us are going through a **financial desert**. Going to the mailbox or opening your email is about as frightening as a bear hunt because the bills just keep piling up.

For others this has been a season of **tremendous disappointment** and unmet expectations. You had such high hopes. Big dreams. And they’re gone. And most of the time, it feels like God is gone too.

**Prayer**

Whatever it is your going through, I believe God brought you here today for you to hear what I’m about to say next. There are two suggestions I want to make for this season of “Challenged Faith.” But before I go there, I want to say something specifically to you and pray for you.

I can’t even imagine what you’re going through. I just want to say, “I’m sorry.” I’m really sorry that you have to go through whatever it is you are going through.

* I know it’s **hard**.
* I know it **feels impossible**.
* I can’t imagine how **much it hurts**.

Please know this - it was never God’s intention for you go though what you are going through. He didn’t want this for you. But God can use it. And he will use it to heal you and help others in ways you never imagined - if you will let him.

So before we talk about two suggestions for this season of “Challenged Faith,” I just want to pray for you.

*Father, many of us are going through our own desert experience. It’s lonely. It’s painful. It hurts. It’s scary. And so we cry out to you. God, I ask that you give us the courage not to rush to hold on to cheap substitutes or add-ons. Give us strength to be get through what we’re going through, to learn from it, grow from it, and know that even in our darkest moments of “Challenged Faith”, you are here with us, walking with us in our pain and hurt. Please let us know you are here. Please show up so that we can hold on to you. Amen.*

**Challenge: 2 Suggestions**

So, as I said, let’s wrap this up with two suggestions…

**First**, honestly ask yourself this: **“What do I need to let go of?”** “What substitutes have I been grabbing hold of in hopes of dulling the pain?” “What do I need to surrender?” Do an honest evaluation. It might be…

…a **relationship** that you are holding onto for your own gratification. You know it’s not mutual.

* …it could be **sex**…or **pornography** your holding onto.
* …maybe you’re **drinking** to make the pain go away.
* …or your drug of choice may be **food**.
* …or **spending money** you don’t have.
* …or maybe it’s **work**! And while others applaud your success, you know you’re holding onto work as a way not to deal with other stuff.

You may never claim any one of those as your “god,” but is it what you hold onto to get through what you are going through. -- What do you need to let go of?

The universal sign of surrender is two open hands raised in the air. Go ahead and do this with me. Just put your hands in the air. Everyone. This is what surrender looks like. But before you can surrender, you have to let go of what you're holding on to. Will you surrender today? Will you let go to what you’re holding on to?

The **second** suggestion… Ask yourself, **“What do I need to hold on to?”** What’s amazing about God is that he will not leave us empty-handed. Once you let go of whatever you need to let go of, once you surrender, then you are left with two empty hands. Two hands ready to grab hold of 2 things…

With one hand, **Hold on to God’s Presence**. Psalm 23 says, **“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you are with me!”** God may have been on the mountain with Moses, but he was also with the people in the valley.

God wants to go through your valley with you. So with one hand grab a hold of God’s presence…

* grab a hold of a Bible reading plan,
* grab a hold of a long walk where you cry out to God,
* grab a hold of a worship song

Do whatever it takes to grab a hold of God’s presence during this season of “Challenged Faith.”

And with the other hand… **Hold on to God’s People.** When God established the church, he meant for it to be a group of people who really “get” each other and who can help get each other through anything.

One of the most encouraging aspects of our move to Chicago has been **our small group**. We have a group of couples who get together every Thursday night. We have dinner together – every one pitches in, then we discuss the Big Idea or some other book based on scripture. And what God is doing in that group is nothing short of astounding.

In just two years, we’ve seen 6 people choose to follow Jesus and get baptized with 3 more planning to go public in the next couple months. One marriage was in a shambles, and is now restored. One guy in our group, a year ago he was an atheist. He’s says he’s still not sure he buys all this stuff, but he told me the other day that he is convinced that living like Jesus lived is the best way to live. This group has been there for me in ways they will never realize!

Hold on to God’s people. It doesn’t mean we fix everything. But we are there.

* We will sit with you in it.
* We will walk along side each other every step of the way.

**We all need something to hold on to.** All of us. God is there and he’s ready to help us hold on to:

* His presence
* And His people

**Because we all need something to hold on to.**

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**ALTERNATE INTRODUCTION**

**Intro: Going on a Bear Hunt**

**Sometimes you just want something to hold on to.** Ever feel that way? Like you just need something to hold on to?

I loved reading to my kids when they were little, and my favorite book was **We’re Going on A Bear Hunt**. . . What a great story!

*“We’re going on a bear hunt. We’re gonna catch a big one. What a beautiful day. We’re not scared. Uh-oh. Grass! Long wavy grass. Can’t go over it. Can’t go under it. We gotta go through it. Swishy-Swashy. Swishy-Swashy. Swishy-swashy.*

And of course when I read it, I would ham it up to try to scare my kids so they would hold on to me as **tight** as they possibly could, just to get through the book.

This series, “How to Get Through What We’re Going Through” made me think of this book because whatever it is that you are going through, it’s probably similar to what the characters in this book experienced on their bear hunt:

* You can’t go **over** it.
* You can’t go **under** it.
* You just gotta go **through** it.

And I think we’re a lot like my kids, - We just need **something to hold onto** so we **can** get through whatever it is we’re going through.

I thought this clip from Ellen DeGeneres illustrates really well how sometimes we just need some**thing** or some**one** to hold onto in order to get through what we’re going through.

**(Ellen Clip)**