

RISKING FAITH

DR. STEVE STEPHENS

A 40-Day Journey
into the Mystery
of God



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Risking Faith: A Forty-Day Journey into the Mystery of God

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**DEDICATION: | TO ALL THOSE MEN AND WOMEN WHO HAVE BRAVELY
GONE BEFORE, SETTING A SHINING EXAMPLE OF WHAT
RISKING FAITH IS ALL ABOUT.**

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I WAS A RELUCTANT CHRISTIAN.

When I was six I felt as though God tricked me into accepting Jesus into my heart. I was so mad, I swore just like Uncle Harry. My uncle Harry used to swear at people who talked about anything Christian. He had been raised as a strict Seventh-Day Adventist, and something had happened when he was a teenager that made him hate Christians. If anybody asked him about it, he would just swear. I liked Uncle Harry. He had cool tattoos and rolled his own cigarettes. I might not have agreed with Uncle Harry, but he was always honest and you knew where he stood. I never told him I liked to pray, read my Bible, and go to church. I was afraid he'd swear at me.

I can't imagine a life without God. He gives everything meaning and hope and excitement. Uncle Harry made me sad because after he had his first heart attack he got real scared of dying. Since he believed this world is all there is, he didn't have any hope. When he had his second heart attack he died.

Uncle Harry wasn't a Christian, but there were certain things he believed in that I agreed with. After all, a lot of Christians embarrass me; some just tick me off. Yet this doesn't mean there aren't rational and compassionate Christians in the world. There are just a lot of the obnoxious kind, and they seem to get the most press.

I once had a pastor who said, “Don’t let my bad example keep you from a good God.” I liked Pastor Fischer. He was kind and listened a lot and loved everybody. Uncle Harry would have liked him. Pastor Fischer would have put his arm around Uncle Harry and said, “Don’t be afraid. God loves you.” Uncle Harry would have sworn a whole lot, but that wouldn’t have stopped Pastor Fischer.

Even as a young child I knew that God loved me, but I didn’t want to be a Christian. I wanted to please God, but Christians and churches freaked me out. So I made a deal with God. I told him that if he would only give me a “five-minute warning” before I was going to die, I would gladly accept him into my heart. In the meantime I would do my best to say my prayers, obey my parents, and not smoke cool, hand-rolled cigarettes like Uncle Harry. I thought God and I had a pretty good deal. I kept my end of the deal, and I thought he would do the same.

About a year later I awoke suddenly in the middle of the night and sat up in terror. I heard a large plane bearing down on our house. It got louder and closer. The noise was deafening. Soon this plane would crash into my bedroom and it would all be over. God was giving me my “five-minute warning.” I quickly slipped out from under my covers, knelt beside my bed, and asked Jesus to forgive my sins. Then I crawled back into bed and waited for the crash.

At that moment the plane flew over my house and faded into the distance. I was alive and I was so mad. On top of that, I was a Christian and I was stuck. It took me a year to forgive God for that one.

Sometimes I still feel uncomfortable with the word *Christian*. It was once an enlightened word, representing something deep and noble and extremely good. But lately it has become terribly tainted.

It's sad that when people think about Christians, they don't think positive things. In fact, they often think just the opposite.

Over the years I have tried to be a different type of Christian from those I saw around me as a child. I decided I wouldn't follow the status quo of the ordinary Christian. I would chart my own course, taking nothing for granted. I would ask a thousand questions, with only my Bible as my compass and my heart as my guide. I have made a lot of mistakes, taken many wrong turns, sinned, said stupid things, hurt others, been judgmental, been hypocritical, been selfish, been dishonest, had a bad attitude, and done a hundred other things that weren't very healthy. Through it all, however, I've loved God and tried to walk with him. On my journey, I've attempted to follow Jesus, not churches or clichés or theologies or popular authors—every one of which disappoints me. Jesus has never disappointed me.

Join me on this fascinating and exciting adventure of faith. Please don't follow me, for I will surely let you down. I used to have a lot of great answers, but many of them now sound hollow. Yet this is not a bad thing. In fact, it's wonderful. For in place of my cut-and-dried, follow-the-numbers, basically boring faith, I currently see glimpses of glory, which blind and baffle me but leave me energized and desperately yearning for more. So please join me as a fellow traveler and walk beside me as we . . .

- + look at God's creation
- + listen for God's voice
- + study God's Word
- + feel God's heartbeat
- + celebrate God's goodness
- + embrace God's lessons

- + wonder at God's mysteries
- + accept God's ways
- + dance with God's grace
- + love with God's passion

This journey of risking faith is not easy or predictable. If you come with expectations, you will be disappointed. It is full of twists and turns. You never know for sure what is around the next corner. On some days you will laugh with a freedom you never thought possible. On other days you will stand in mind-stretching awe as you peek over the edge of infinity. This journey is not for the faint of heart or for rigid conformists. It is only for those who dream of another world with a provocative, exciting, soul-shaking, absolutely real, passionate, mysterious faith.

This journey to discover the interaction of the physical and spiritual universe is amazing. The journey may also be challenging and lonely, but you will not be alone. Teresa of Avila wrote, "The feeling remains that God is on the journey too." Teresa of Avila is correct: God is with us. Yet we must step out in faith, for he is not always obvious. Sometimes he is a mere sparkle of light or a whisper on the wind or a tug of the heart. God will always defy expectation and explanation, but he will always be there. So step out and risk, and let the adventure begin.

01 | SAIL BEYOND

*“The Christian faith is the most exciting
drama that ever staggered the imagination.”*

—DOROTHY SAYERS

DAY 1

BEYOND THE EDGE

When we've settled into prosperity and comfort for a little while we get complacent.—CHIP INGRAM

OKAY, LET'S BE HONEST.

I like adventures, but they've got to be "safe" adventures like Disneyland or Hawaii or Mexico. Real adventures into risky or unknown places make me nervous. I know it sounds shallow, but real adventures make me worry.

What will I eat?

Where will I sleep?

Will it be clean there?

Will I stay healthy?

What if there's an emergency?

How long will I be stuck on the airplane getting to my destination?

The bottom line is this: A real adventure with a real risk lies just beyond my comfort zone. I hate to admit it, but I like my easy, comfortable life, where I have little to worry about, where things are secure, safe, and predictable.

My friend Martin says I should go to India with him to work in

an orphanage. My heart goes out to these poor, neglected children who don't have the advantages of children in this country. But I'm already helping to support three orphan children in Guatemala. Another friend, Julius, tells me that God wants me to go to Uganda for ten days. I've heard about amazing and exciting things that are happening in this part of Africa, but I've already sent two checks to that organization. What more do they want? Besides, God hasn't told me to go to either of these places. After all, they are so far away and foreign. And am I sure that these places are safe? There are just too many risks and uncertainties.

Yet deep in my soul something is stirring—something that calls me to an adventure in spite of my anxiety. It paints pictures in my brain of the extraordinary. It tugs and pulls me out of my comfort zone. I desperately want to embrace this adventure, but at the same time, I fight and resist it.

I'm simultaneously excited and terrified.

Yet I don't want an ordinary faith! Ordinary faith isn't worth it. It's average, boring, tolerable, so-so. I don't want an ordinary marriage or an ordinary job or an ordinary life. Why in the world would I accept an ordinary faith? *Ordinary* and *faith* should be mortal enemies, fighting to stay as far as possible from each other. In reality, an ordinary faith may be no faith at all. It is nothing like the faith depicted in the Bible or in the early church.

True faith is something completely incredible and extraordinary. So what has happened to our faith? What has happened to *my* faith? Its heart and soul are lost and its lifeblood drained. But I've stuffed its body with straw and propped it in the corner, pretending with all earnestness and determination that it's still alive.

Faith has become far too convenient and comfortable. I sip it in the morning with my coffee and lounge with it in the evening as I

nod off to sleep. I have taken something dynamically supernatural and turned it into something dull and natural. What should be the life-giving core of my existence has become nothing more than an optional add-on. I use it only when I need it or when I feel desperate. Otherwise it's stored away on a closet shelf, collecting dust. I have reconfigured my faith equation into something between obligation, social club, hobby, and life insurance policy.

In this technology-driven, materialistic culture, I'm afraid I have left God out of my faith. Or maybe I have just made him ordinary—stripping him of his mystery and majesty, his awesomeness and absolute power. I have become distracted and oftentimes even hypnotized by the noise and energy and glitter of this world. I act as if this is all there is, becoming attached to and passionate about what I do and what I own.

How could I have forgotten that God is the source of all I need, and that faith is the most amazing, fulfilling adventure I could ever embark upon? A. W. Tozer reminds us in *The Pursuit of God*, “If we truly want to follow God we must seek to be otherworldly.”

As I ponder Tozer's quote, I wonder what it really means to be “otherworldly.” I live and breathe and work in this world. It's my home. It's where my life happens. This world delights and disgusts me. It's where I raise a family, watch TV, make a living, pull weeds, visit my friends, go to church. This world is everything I know.

But John warned, “Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for . . . this world is fading away” (1 John 2:15, 17). It's fading away; time is fading away; I'm fading away. Sometimes this thought scares me. When I was a teenager, this kept me awake in the dark of the night, when everything was quiet and I felt most alone. This fear can still haunt me when I think of what I might be losing.

But what if I'm not losing anything that's really worthwhile? What if being otherworldly means gaining all that is ultimately worthwhile? Maybe to be otherworldly means to think beyond all we see and understand and experience. Maybe it means that we'd better not get too comfortable here or start to think this world can offer more than it really can. Maybe it means being willing to take risks and go beyond the limits of this world and all we are familiar with. Maybe that's when life really begins.



People thought he was crazy.

But Bill did it anyway.

In June of 2002 Bill Elliott, a forty-one-year-old writer and therapist, traveled 6,497 miles away from home deep into the Judean desert of Israel. Bill wanted to escape the comforts and distractions of the safe life. He wanted to be otherworldly. He wanted to journey beyond an ordinary faith and fall into the face of God.

Moses went up to the mountain for forty days and nights to hear God's voice. Elijah traveled forty days and nights through the southern wilderness near Mount Sinai to find God. Jesus was led by God into the Judean wilderness for forty days and nights to be tempted by Satan.

Therefore Bill decided to spend forty days and nights alone on an isolated plateau overlooking the Dead Sea. This was Bill's "lonesome, individual adventure" toward an extraordinary faith. Bill yearned to deepen his spiritual awareness. So he set up his ten-year-old green and white six-foot-by-six-foot dome tent and filled it with four hundred pounds of gear and water. Then Bill waited for God.

This place was not comfortable, but God was worth it. Bill made himself uncomfortable so that his mind and spirit could be sharper. He was surrounded by challenges: intense heat of 125 degrees, deep loneliness, eerie silence, prolonged boredom, general exhaustion. And then there were the animals—scorpions, snakes, mosquitoes, yellow jackets, and flies by the hundreds.

In *Falling into the Face of God*, Bill wrote that he went to the desert to confront God, to meet his “God-edge” and go beyond it.

“We all have an edge. A place we won’t go near or look beyond. Or don’t want to look into. Or admit is there,” he wrote. Most of us stay away from our edges. I know I do. I like to rest safely and comfortably in the middle, where there is little danger or risk—or life. But faith blossoms on the edge. For the edge reminds me that I’m not in control—God is.

To journey near the edge is itself an adventure. Most of us are like J. R. R. Tolkien’s description of hobbits: “They never had any adventures or did anything unexpected.” Yet with the proper challenge, Bilbo Baggins moved toward the edge and beyond. As a result, he discovered how small and limited and ordinary his world had been.

I think most of us have fallen asleep and grown complacent far from our edge. But being comfortable is dangerous! For comfort leads to mediocrity, and mediocrity leads to nothing.

So often I go through the ordinary motions of life, and even the ordinary motions of faith, but it has all become common and routine and safe. I can do it with my eyes closed and my thoughts somewhere else. Faith has lost its practical, everyday significance, and thus its energy, ecstasy, and ability to excite. I’m afraid I’ve become dull and boring because I don’t understand what I have. Far from my edge, I have no opportunity to fall into the face of God.

As Annie Dillard, the Pulitzer prize–winning author, wrote, “Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke?” I’m sitting in the shadow of the sacred and strolling through the splendor of the supernatural without the slightest sense of what surrounds me.

Deep in my heart I know that something is missing and that this isn’t how it was meant to be. I know that God is the only one who can satisfy my soul. Yet more often than not, I’m like a sleepwalker who, being out of touch with reality, stumbles past my faith into a dark night that has nothing meaningful to offer. I sell my soul to my stuff and make this world my one and only home.

Now don’t get me wrong. I like my house, with its easy chair, television, and cozy fireplace. These things aren’t bad; they just don’t get me where I want to go. They give me roots when I need wings. They lull me into a false reality of safety and complacency, but this is the death of faith. And ultimately the death of me.

Faith is not a place; it is a journey—a risky journey that takes us beyond all we can see and hear and feel into a supernatural relationship with the maker and caretaker of the universe. God has planted eternity in our hearts, and we will never be satisfied with the natural or the ordinary. We were made for so much more. Jesus said, “My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life” (John 10:10). And this life comes through faith—the most extraordinary faith we can ever imagine.

God is always leading us somewhere. Every good journey involves a willingness to follow him into that somewhere. A willingness to take the risk, to throw off the bowline and sail from our protected harbors toward some unknown edge far away in the fog, beyond what is comfortable, convenient, or even conventional.

Each new day we stand precariously on the edge of the extraor-

dinary. Possibilities stretch out before us that are utterly amazing, but we're usually too afraid to look. Instead, we stand with our eyes squeezed shut, clinging with all our might to the solid ground upon which we're most comfortable.

This fear is paralyzing. It keeps us from living. Yet Søren Kierkegaard reminds us that "without risk there is no faith." An extraordinary faith loves risk, for in risk we learn to trust our God more deeply.

But trusting God as we avoid the edges is no trust at all. It is but an illusion built on sweet words and shallow serenity. Trust is only authentic when it is tested and tried. We're standing on the edge with our toes hanging over. If we truly want to experience this thing called faith, we have no choice but to jump.

As he reflects on his time in the desert, Bill Elliott wrote, "I am just a human being who prays for the guidance and courage to jump in, to go toward God." Bill went to the desert to face the fears that kept him from the edge.

But in the desert he learned to jump.

DAY 2

BEYOND FEAR

Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out
how far one can go.—T. S. ELIOT

HEIGHTS MAKE ME NERVOUS.

I'm not a fearful person. I can handle most situations. I grit my teeth and gut my way through them. Except when it comes to heights—heights terrify me. I get over twelve feet high on a ladder and my legs shake so much that the ladder is ready to collapse. My stomach tightens and I start to sweat. My mind races through every worst-case scenario and I freeze. I desperately want to be down with my feet on solid ground as quickly as possible.

I trust God, but I really don't like uncomfortable situations. A few months ago, however, some friends asked me to participate in an activity that would stretch my comfort zone. I immediately said yes, figuring this would be a fantastic opportunity to face my fears. But the closer I got to the date of the event, the more uncomfortable I became.

Why did I agree to such a stupid idea? I've got a very busy schedule, and I don't really have the time to deal with this right now. In

theory I believe that stretching oneself is a great idea. It's just the practical, personal application that I struggle with.

I sat on the ground in Mount Hood National Forest and looked high into the air at a log that stretched thirty feet between two trees. The guide said, "I want each of you to climb this tree and walk across that log up there." I stared at the log and then stared at the guide thinking, *This guy is crazy. There is no way I'm doing this.* Out on that log I'd have nothing to hold on to, nothing to help keep my balance. On top of that, it was at least a twenty-two-foot drop to the ground. I was sure I couldn't do it, and I begged God to either get me out of it or calm my fears.

He didn't get me out of it. As I slowly climbed the tree, I could feel my heart pounding.

God, help me.

I kept moving upward until I reached the horizontal log.

God, give me strength.

I cautiously shifted my weight onto the log, still holding tightly to the tree.

God, give me courage.

I stood on the log, but I refused to look down. I knew I had to let go of the tree, but I couldn't. I clung to its trunk. It felt solid and safe. If I let go, I might fall.

God, give me faith.

I looked down and saw my buddy, who was holding on to a cable attached to my harness. If I fell, he would catch me.

Okay, God, I'm going to do this.

I loosened my grip, turned away from the security of the tree, and stepped out onto the log. With my eyes focused on the other tree thirty feet away and my arms stretched out for balance, I walked across the log. God calmed my fears and held my hand and

helped me do something I thought was impossible. It may sound like a little thing, but for me it was pretty big.

This world is filled with danger and risk. There is always something scary just around the corner, waiting to jump out and grab us. Yet this exercise taught me that I don't need to run or hide. I can actually lean into my fears. Look them in the eyes and smile. What are you afraid of?

- + failure?
- + discomfort?
- + rejection?
- + disappointment?
- + the unknown?

Fear is a part of life. When we run from our fears, we run from life. When we embrace them, we embrace life. This provides us with a new way of looking at the world and all it contains. To risk nothing is to refuse to learn and grow and to miss out on the best of love and life. To live is to risk. Any journey that leads to a place of value will have its risks. I want to leap into the adventure with a courage that outshines my fears.

The spiritual life is a journey beyond what is familiar and safe into the mysterious and sometimes scary world of the Spirit. It requires a willingness to say good-bye to the ordinary and sail beyond life as we know it toward a deeper, grander reality. This is the strange land of faith, where unspeakable beauty and unpredictable danger mingle in the miraculous.

I really want to experience authentic faith, but doing so means I must let go of my preconceived notions and expectations. I must launch into the deep, with my back to the shore, and trust that

God will use this journey to bring me closer to him. Don't get me wrong. What's on the shore is sometimes very good. But everything there—all I have learned and seen and believed—is only the beginning of the journey. This amazing, exciting, terrifying quest promises to stretch me to the very edge of who I am and what I know. My past has prepared me for this point in time. Now I must move beyond fear and rest in his promises to never let me down.

Are you ready to join me? Fear will offer you hundreds of logical and practical reasons *not* to take this journey. Why leave the safety and security of what you know for who-knows-what?

But what if safety and security are antithetical to extraordinary faith?

What if the supernatural universe is more real than all we can see and feel and understand?

What if Thomas à Kempis, a fourteenth-century German monk, was right when he said that we are never safe in this life?

What if the only way to be safe is to look beyond this life and trust the incomprehensible, the invisible, and the impossible?

If there were charts or formulas for this priceless, perilous journey, there would be no need for faith.

Habakkuk lived in Judah some six hundred years before Christ during a difficult time in the country's history. He was filled with questions and often cried out for answers. He wanted God to fix everything and return life to peace and affluence. But God had something else in mind. He took away Habakkuk's comfort and security, leading him to the very edge and forcing him to look beyond. Habakkuk wrote, "I trembled inside . . . my lips quivered with fear. My legs gave way beneath me, and I shook in terror" (Habakkuk 3:16).

In spite of his fears, Habakkuk stepped up to the challenge. He

did not flee or raise his fist in anger. Instead, he saw the obstacles before him as an opportunity to deepen his faith and draw closer to God. In fact, his final thoughts in the short book that bears his name, read: “The Sovereign LORD is my strength! He makes me as surefooted as a deer, able to tread upon the heights” (Habakkuk 3:19).

Thinking back on my walk twenty feet above the ground, I have to agree with Habakkuk. For even when I’m fearful, God can lead me upon the heights. He can lead me to the very edge and over it. He is my strength and comfort. No matter what.

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