

KEEP GOING



KEEP GOING

OVERCOMING DOUBTS
ABOUT YOUR FAITH

NEIL MARTIN


P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

© 2008 by Neil Martin

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865–0817.

Originally published in the United Kingdom by Prototype Publications, 2006.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Martin, Neil, 1973-

Keep going : overcoming doubts about your faith / Neil Martin.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 978-1-59638-087-5 (pbk.)

I. Faith. I. Title.

BT771.3.M37 2008

239—dc22

2008004782

For Ruth, without whose encouragement I would never have begun this project, and without whose insight and patience I would never have finished it.

And for our goddaughter Elsie who lived so briefly but, under God, achieved so much. Until we meet again . . .



Contents

Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction	1

1. Should We Expect to Struggle with the Christian Faith? 3
2. Tackling Struggles with Belief in God 43
3. Tackling Struggles with the Authenticity of the Bible 101
4. Tackling Struggles with Sovereignty, Responsibility, and Divine Justice 147
5. Tackling Struggles with Lack of Assurance 217
6. Overcoming Struggles in Christ 247

Bibliography	271
Index of Scripture	283
Index of Subjects and Names	289



Preface

ON THE TWELFTH of March 1998—a couple of months before my twenty-fifth birthday—I was sitting at my desk in the design studio where I work in London when I felt a sharp pain in my right shoulder. I stood up and tried to stretch it off but it got worse. I could feel things moving around inside my chest in a way that they definitely shouldn't. I was experiencing what doctors call a spontaneous pneumothorax—in other words, a collapsed lung.

Incidents like this are pretty rare—apparently, young, relatively sporty males with asthma are the main group at risk. The treatment involves a blue-light trip to the nearest ER where they stick a big needle in your chest to reinflate your lung, and then a few weeks of rest and recuperation at home. Somewhere in this process, however, things took a wrong turn with me. I developed a throat infection and then flu-like symptoms: physical weakness, hot flushes, and muscular shaking. The doctors did everything they could to help me overcome this, but without success. Exercise made things worse, and as the weeks and months passed, I lost weight and muscle bulk. My collapsed lung was giving way to something more disturbing—Chronic Fatigue Syndrome—and the battle to overcome it has been the big story of the last eight years of my life.

Although I don't come from a Christian home, I've been a believer since the age of 14 when I heard about Jesus at my church youth group. And looking back now on these years

PREFACE

of illness, I can see it has been an amazing time of proving out the solidity of this relationship with God. Unable to walk more than a few steps at a time, I was forced to return to my parents' home, and the challenge of staying positive, understanding the illness, and ultimately working out how to beat it, was only made possible by his reliability. In earlier years, during college and as a young professional, I'd spent a lot of time doubting and struggling with my faith, and now God gave me the opportunity to work out whether it really made sense in theory and in practice. I did a lot of reading and tried to teach myself how to communicate the Bible to others. And slowly and surely as my strength returned, I began finding answers to my questions.

By the summer of 2000 I was well enough to return to London, and to gradually embark on the long road back to work. It was an amazing time—slowly rediscovering old joys like painting, and evenings out, and fellowship at church—and ultimately meeting my future wife, Ruth. But I also remember it for one particular conversation. One Sunday afternoon, I was having lunch at Ruth's house and met a Christian guy about my age who opened up very candidly on the subject of doubt. He had problems with God's existence, problems with the reliability of the Bible, problems with God's sovereignty and human responsibility, problems with assurance—problems all over the map. And I remember thinking, "This guy reminds me of me! He's got no idea whether it's normal for a Christian to feel like this, and he doesn't have the time or the energy to stand back from it all and work it out for himself." We talked about some of the things I'd discovered during my illness and I tried, in my usual chaotic way, to make a note to pray for him. And that was that.

The next summer, my health took a turn for the worse. The problem with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome is that no one really knows the right way to treat it. Having got myself back to

PREFACE

work, my doctor and I felt pretty confident the worst was over but, as it turned out, I was going too far too fast. In September 2001 I suffered a major relapse. Once again I was back at home with my parents, unable to walk more than a few steps. The whole process we'd gone through the first time would have to be repeated.

And that was when I remembered that conversation I had with the guy who was wrestling with doubt. I knew I needed to think of something useful to do with my time to keep from going crazy, and I couldn't stand another two and a half years of reading. So I thought, "Maybe if you can't face reading any more books, why not try writing one?"

Four years later, I'm happy and very thankful to say that things are improving immensely. I'm back in London, back at work (still with the same firm!), and Ruth and I are expecting our first baby.

I finished the book in the end too. And here it is.

Wimbledon, January 2006



Acknowledgments

BEFORE GETTING STARTED on my extensive list of thank-yous, I want to begin by thanking God for his abundant care for me in providing this project. During the last eight years of battling Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, this task has truly been a “stream in the desert.” Without it I feel sure I would have succumbed to depression, but with it, God has answered my prayers for strength to face and overcome the illness. I have already benefited far more than I deserve from the process of writing. If anyone else is helped by the finished product, then to him be the glory.

To those who have helped me with their encouragement, support, and critical input through the process, thanks are due first and foremost to my wife, Ruth, who believed in the project from the outset and whose unfailing enthusiasm for the content contributed so much to its germination and final form.

My parents, Chris and Val Martin (and their dog Daisy!), deserve special thanks for their kindness and patience in sharing their home with me through the first five years of the illness. Most of the “hard yards” were completed under their roof, and their continued appetite for reading and re-reading successive revisions of the text has been invaluable.

I am grateful to Peter Ackroyd for his encouragement and guidance during the early months of the project, and

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

to Ben Jones, Briony Martin, Jamie MacNaughton, Richard Perkins, and Dr. Willie Philip for their considerable input during the research phase. Willie in particular has been a stalwart supporter without whose friendship, advice, encouragement, and dependability this project would not have progressed beyond the first draft. Professor Robert Kane from the University of Texas encouraged my interest in Sir Karl Popper's neglected paper on free will and determinism: "Of Clouds and Clocks."

Particular thanks are due to the many friends who volunteered to read through early drafts of the manuscript. Liz Barnard, Chris Berkeley, Helen Carter, Robin Cooper, Sophie Duncan, Steve Jeffrey, Bob Mallet, Reuben Mann, Alastair Mills, Duane Olivier, Phoebe Reid, and Ben Woodd have all made valuable contributions.

Nigel Lee manfully ploughed through an early draft and, together with Richard Coekin, his plain-speaking feedback contributed considerably to the quality of the finished text. Elspeth Taylor offered invaluable advice on the art of editing and guided me through the process with great kindness and patience.

Richard Cunningham, Richard Coekin, Willie Philip, Robin Sydserrff and Lizzie Smallwood all sacrificed valuable time to read and comment on the completed manuscript. Alan South, Mat Hunter, and Suzy Stone from IDEO in London went well beyond the call of duty to keep my job open for me during the illness and to create space for the completion of the manuscript.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to John Frame, whose willingness to read the manuscript, and then to stand as an advocate for it with publishers, will remain for me an example of humility and godliness to aspire to. Marvin Padgett at P&R encouraged me enormously with his enthusiasm for the project, his concern for the needs of strug-

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

gling Christians, and his willingness to embrace a book that attempts to reflect the Bible's comprehensive response. Rebecca Anderson provided invaluable and timely support with the production of the finished indices. Eric Anest and the editorial team at P&R have been a pleasure to work with and have added considerably to the quality of the finished product.



Introduction

Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24)

THE LONGER I SPEND getting to know other Christians, the more I'm convinced that there are many people in our churches who wrestle with basic questions about their faith—people who have put their trust in Jesus but who still find settled and steady conviction hard to come by.

I am one of those strugglers and perhaps you are too, though the areas in which we struggle may differ. Some of us struggle to feel assured that we're really believers, some of us struggle with biblical doctrines like divine sovereignty and human accountability. Some of us struggle with questions about the authenticity of the Bible, some of us struggle with the possibility that God may not exist at all.

Whether or not we're struggling at the moment—and even if we're not yet Christians and we're only investigating—it's important to grasp the fact that struggles like this happen. Without this knowledge our expectations about the Christian life can end up miss-set. But by facing the reality of struggles in the Christian life, and tackling the questions that stand behind them, our faith can be deepened and our fellowship with other Christians enriched.

INTRODUCTION

Part of the problem with struggles like this is that, historically, Christians haven't been very good at dealing with them. In fact, like most religious organizations, it's an unwritten rule in many churches that nobody questions the basics. And this is a shame, not only because the basics of Christian belief are actually extremely well supported, but also because unwritten rules like this cause considerable distress to strugglers. Our collective unwillingness to deal with basic questions about Christianity leaves us wondering whether intellectual struggles are really part of normal Christian living in the first place and unaware of the wealth of biblical resources that are available to help us fight back.

So how should we respond to this situation? Should struggles like this be expected in the Christian life? And, if so, how should we deal with them?

These are the two questions we'll be looking at in this book. In chapter 1 we will consider what the Bible has to say about the place of struggles in Christian experience and then, in the remaining chapters, we'll see how this biblical material can be used as a weapon to tackle some of the most common and important examples. In the process I hope we will discover that there are great grounds for encouragement—for those who are not yet sure, to dive in; and for those who struggle with doubt, to Keep Going!